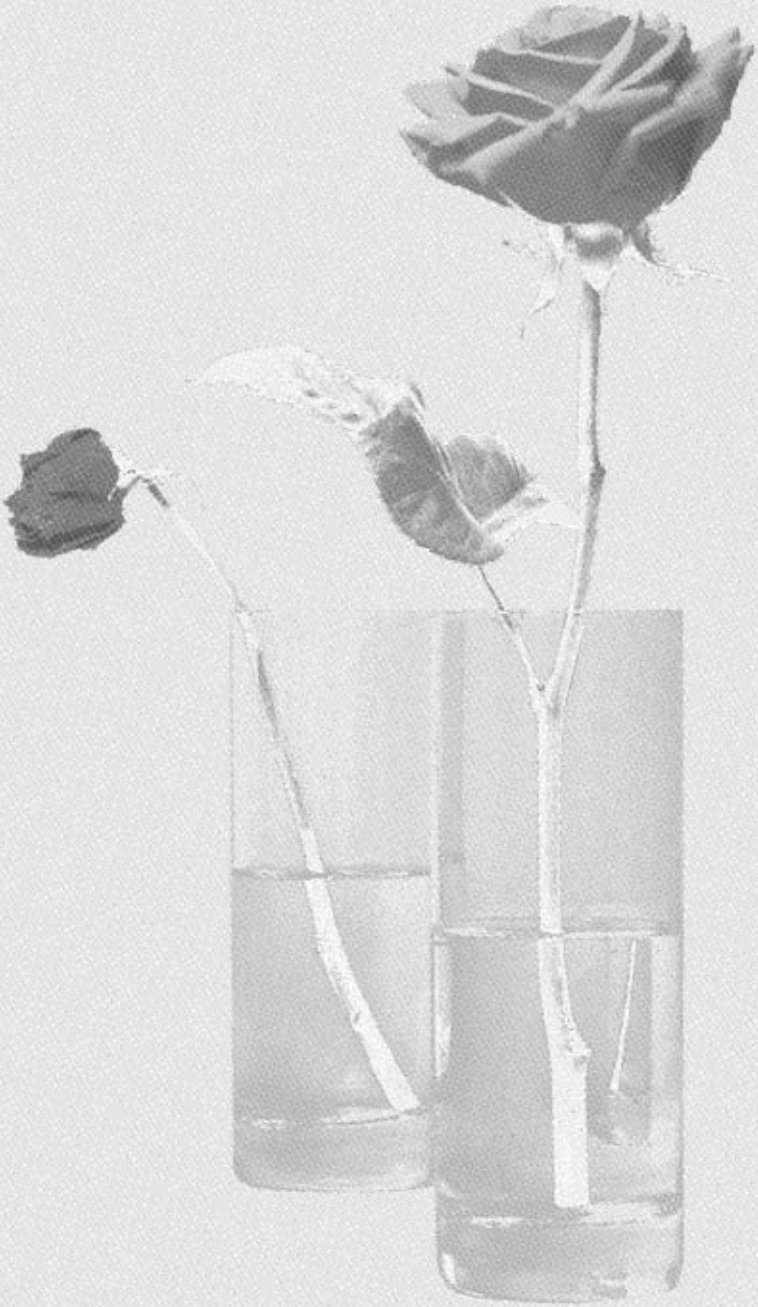
prism of reality



"... We now viewed them through a prism of reality."

-Ronald Reagan

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FROM OUR EDITOR

Dear Reader,

By now you must have noticed the monument: a rusted steel pyramid parked on the endless brick lawn of every bank tower. Its panels were salvaged from the hull of a missile cruiser; it bears the simple inscription: "1980"; and inside, preserved in a stoppered glass vial, is a plastinated piece of Ronald Reagan's mouth. You can't see it, you can never touch it; but, like the reassuring certainty of apocalypse, like the embalming fear that fueled the Cold War, you know the Inner Reagan is there—and he won't shut up. And what's worse: his platitudes are becoming truths—or else you might find him possible to ignore... Our common past recrystalizes into a present we are doomed to repeat, reiterated, reconstituted as if both new and eternal, filtered through the steely distortions of Reagan's reality prism.

A Prism of Reality: a self-evident visuality, a metaphor that insists on the truth of the image it produces. A prism of reality clarifies nothing; yet it emphasizes, insists, actualizes its metaphors. In these pages, we test the solidity of metaphor—of the "beyond"—of the inexplicable, the poetic: the zone where deconstruction shudders apart—and in these outlands lies a more resonant ontology, a theory of being in which we inhabit both sides of the limits of rational thinking.

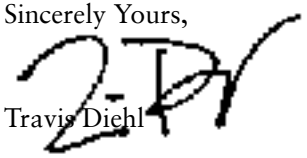
Nothing proves the dire consequences of metaphors better than the figurative policies of Reagan and the New Right, which, we must concede, have formed the reality of millions. If we can learn one thing from this, the golden age of neoconservative rhetoric, it is that great power lies in ambiguous certainty. Yet so few of today's artists believe the art they make—to say nothing of art in general. The reference takes the place of the manifesto, and shiftiness is virtue. In an era when, in art as in politics, all options are on the table, and one seems as good as the next: Where are the denials, the anti-'s, the manifestos, the poems? These certainties, pragmatic or otherwise, have become the domain of the Inner Reagan.

But let me be clear: I do not love Reagan the man, Reagan the politician, or Reagan the myth. Yet, if he did or didn't believe everything he said, he nonetheless claimed to. And this belief, or display of belief, shaped our

common world in a way art can only envy. Meanwhile, explanation and illustration alone have lost their ability to make the world real to us. An endless succession of facts become givens, more or less questioned—yet recede into the background, an indeterminate sheet of radiation, with an averaged-out, negligible effect. So why envy, imitate, analyze, or avoid the rhetoric of Reagan—when art too can deploy this kind of iron poetics? At the center of the effective artwork is an irreconcilable caesura, a breech in logic. Here the flux between the real and the empirical is not metabolized into its components but rather persists dynamically within the distribution of the sensible—one could even say, as reality. We watch with horror as facts are twisted to evil purposes. Luckily, this challenge is one we as artists are well equipped to face. For what is art if not the production of new and truer truths?

And so, we must face the Inner Reagan. We must take the advice of the enemy: "Don't be afraid to see what you see." Here are artists unafraid to leave logic behind, yet solid in this. We aim to raise the stakes of art and art discourse, addressing art as nothing more or less than constitutive of reality. This is the responsibility of today's art-workers; these are our materials, our gestures, our cinemas, our utopias; our metaphors. In these pages, we treat art not as an image of the world as it is or should be, but as the world itself—a self-evident visuality, de facto and absolute—the world through a prism of reality.

Sincerely Yours,



Travis Diehl

DISCOTOPIAS

Meghann McCrory and Michael Parker

Their investigations of utopian thought wound across time and space: Meghann McCrory to early Californian boosterism, Biblical paradise, and the 2010 Shanghai Expo; Michael Parker to the steam baths of Berlin; the commune at Auroville, India; and the last remaining Shaker settlement. Yet both ultimately arrived at a multifaceted, mirrored formal conceit: the disco ball. Michael's ongoing series of group steam baths at his studio employ a mirror-tiled, egg-shaped sauna, and a disco ball has served as a prop in several of Meghann's videos, lectures, and performances. But what does it all mean? Coincidence? Cosmic alignment? Why utopia now—and why is it so shiny? They met one night on a rooftop in Los Angeles's skid row to discuss these and other questions. An edited transcript follows.

Meghann: I want to make sure I get it right. Is it *Steam Egg* or *Steam Womb*?

Michael: You know, it's been an evolving title. I'd been thinking about it as a steam womb—that was its working title—and then I came up with all these other titles: *Back to the Future*, or... *The Shape*. But this winter and spring, everyone had been calling it the *Steam Egg*, so I went with it. Some people were calling it the *Disco Egg*, or the *Disco Steam Egg*... But I thought it was more "steam" than "disco" in its function.

M: When you built it, you thought of it as a platform for a social experience?

M: Yeah, but I would say that it exceeded my initial thought of what it could be. When I first started thinking about making a steam room, I was making all these documentaries. I was like, can you make a sculptural documentary? An architectural documentary? I started thinking about all these aspects of this sort of utopian tour that I did. Like in Berlin, I was amazed by the sauna culture. In India I was amazed—and grossed out—by this orb [the Matrimandir dome at the center of the Auroville commune] that took all this energy to build. And I'm also similarly grossed out by objects, and the ridiculousness of spending all this energy and resources. The other part is this coconut reference—this fertilized egg that can create a new life—it's gender androgynous, in the way that many plants are both male and female. And then, the Shaker stuff—the Shakers are these huge inventors. A Shaker woman invented the circular saw. A Shaker community invented the first clothes washing machine. They really believed that machines can help make life simpler, and easier, so you can concentrate more on the important stuff. And there's also this circle dancing, all this twirling and whirling and energy. I also literally couldn't build a square room without the fire marshal coming in. So if I made it egg shaped, they would think it was a sculpture and not a room.

M: So really the inspiration for the piece was getting around building codes.

M: Yeah, totally. Well, as an object, I'm skeptical of it.

M: I want to talk about the exterior of the *Steam Egg*. I've been interested in the material manifestations of utopia, and the way that it's represented, and these kinds of material themes that come up again and again—like domes, and circular rooms—things you associate with a different kind of architecture, a transcendent architecture, as opposed to a traditional rectilinear building understanding. These things pop up again and again, in Auroville and Epcot Center, and Buckminster Fuller. I'm curious why you made a disco ball steam egg.

M: So the other big part of it is this womb thing. So the history of utopia is like travel writing in a lot of ways. It literally means "no-place"; it was an impossible island. But with the Shakers their spiritual leader is a mother, Mother Ann Lee, and in Auroville they're always talking about The Mother—who was their spiritual leader, who jotted down the ideas for the Matrimandir on a napkin before she died... For me, the island metaphor stopped being as useful as the womb metaphor. So instead of going somewhere, you're insulating yourself from your surroundings.

M: The relationship between spirituality and utopia I think is really odd. Maybe it's a blind spot, but I don't associate them.

M: Why do you think you don't associate them?

M: I guess because in the genealogy of those utopian representations, I have focused on technology, and those kinds of representations that are seeking to better society through human ingenuity. As opposed to returning to something that is more spiritual, which you see in the utopian experiments of the '60s and '70s... People embracing meditation and Eastern thought. But I think of that more as religion.

M: I think that the Shakers are an interesting example. They are a religion.

M: And not just *a* religion, but they're Christian.

M: They are of a Christian persuasion. They speak about Jesus, yes. They were Quakers originally. Mother Ann Lee and the original Shakers realized that anyone has the potential to be close to God or to be godlike—but in the sense of a connected-to-the-earth kind of God. It's a kind of soft God, as opposed to a man-in-the-sky God. More like Buddha. One of the reasons they were hated is because they were giving women equal rights at a time when nowhere in society, and particularly Christian societies, were women equal to men. It really upset the paradigm of what human relations were. So I think that was their greatest utopian moment. But then some of the logistics—they said, let's just be brothers and sisters, and they renounced sexual desire, so that women wouldn't have to suffer through childbirth, so to speak.

M: But don't you think there was some Christian guilt involved? I mean it's a way

of absolving a whole society of original sin.

M: Well yeah. But in speaking with the Shakers, it wasn't about the Catholic guilt of sex—it was: "We want to be equal." In Dan Graham's *Rock My Religion* (1982-84), he really connects this Shaker history to the America of the '70s and this desire for communalism, which was a very sci-fi idea in 1790—that we're all equal, and so we're going to share property and we're going to share responsibility.

M: Well the Shakers may have been earlier, but the 19th century was such a rich time in American history for utopian thinking. There were a bunch of communal societies, some of them religious and some of them less so. Like Oneida. And Fanny Wright starting Nashoba. She was an abolitionist and a feminist, and also an atheist. She would buy slaves and bring them there, where they would learn to read and write and gain skills. But she was also becoming a really famous speaker and she was traveling to Europe, and she left her sister in charge of Nashoba and it fell into total disrepair and was a total utopian failure in the end. And the paternalism of the idea finally revealed itself, even if her intentions were good. But I do think of utopia as engaging with social institutions specifically. Maybe that's why I don't think of it as much in the sense of a tradition of spirituality.

M: I feel like even more radical than being a Shaker in 1790 was to declare publicly that you were an atheist. But to declare in a Christian society that, "I have God within me," as opposed to, "God is in the sky," is super crazy.

M: Well certainly. That's the political and philosophical crisis of the time. It's John Locke rooting political equality and democracy in God, because where do you root it? And no one can solve that problem. And I see a pattern there, as utopian experiments continue, of relocating that authority in technology, more than spirituality—that you might locate a politic in human ingenuity.

M: So there's this company called Infosys. It's the second-largest information technologies company in India, and it's the most sought-after place to work for young engineers. This company built this training campus in Mysore—super cutting edge, super sci-fi. It's a gated community, and you go and live there for six months right after college. Five or six thousand people at a time. It's immaculately clean. There's no trash. It's one of the most safely guarded places, much more guarded than any of the tourist sites or government buildings. In it there's a building that's all made of glass they call the Origami Building. The largest single building devoted to education in all of Asia is on this campus. There are no doors on many of these buildings, and if there is a door there's no lock on it. And there's a giant geodesic dome in the center, and inside are three movie theaters.

M: But how does something like Infosys relate to utopia?

M: For these people in their early twenties, it's a world that they fantasize about for years before they apply. Every meal is a five-star meal. There are seven different cafeterias where you can have food from all over the world. You have a maid.

Every need is taken care of. But you have this work to do. It's the most blueprint utopia-type place that I've ever been to.[1] But it's in the service of this mega-corporation. The only people who have the money to build something like this today are international corporations.

M: Right. With a singular purpose.

M: With a singular purpose, which is to be the most prestigious company, to get the best of the best...

M: I mean, we have such a strange, ambivalent relationship to ideas of utopia. It quickly becomes dystopia, as soon as control becomes too great.

M: Well that was my big fear when I made the *Egg*. I thought it wasn't going to be successful, because it has a purpose.

M: Well, as much as it did develop a social following, it did it organically, through people you knew. Social control has a bad rap. But on the other hand, if you do open it up entirely... I mean, if you were to put the *Steam Egg* in the middle of Pershing Square, what would happen?

M: It would have a different function...

M: But you're keeping it at a scale where it's manageable. And I think scale has always been a problem in utopia too.

M: Well an architectural thing that is going to be maybe utopian—it has to be really small so that it encourages a very temporal sense of freedom, so to speak, or self-awareness or self-criticality. This idea of self-criticality is not present in Auroville.

M: It's a curious thing. I mean Oneida made knives, and the Shakers made furniture, and they made a washing machine. Technology was accessible. But it's not like you could have a Shaker community that develops the new iPod. I wonder if that doesn't have a political implication about what it means to isolate from society. I'm talking about globalism, and Infosys—that kind of corporate development. Would a utopian impulse necessarily mean retreating to a mechanical world of washing your clothes with technology you can fix when it breaks? I mean, I can't fix my hard drive when it breaks. I've been thinking of this a lot in terms of being an artist, and being interested in intervening or commenting or being critical of technology, but the event horizon of technology advancement retreats to the point where there's no intervention possible.

M: Well that's what's so weird about the Republican Party this time around.

M: Right. They deny science that people accept—while at the same time embracing Twitter... A lot of science fiction assumes that technology will get rid of religion, that in the future, in the techno-utopia or techno-dystopia, those kinds of old primitive institutions fade away. But what's genius about the Hyperion series, by Dan Simmons—and it's far future, 50,000 years in the future, where people can warp through time and space, but the Catholic Church is still around—it has a partnership with these AIs to basically run the universe—he acknowledges that in the future, just because there's the Internet,

the Pope doesn't go away—the Pope gets a website.

M: Well to go back a little bit to the *Steam Egg*—the mirrors on the outside. My biggest fear was it was going to be super cheesy. There are very few sculptures that I like that use mirrors. But I just had to do it. Maybe for this reason. And I didn't know how to articulate it until after. But when you walk around the thing, because it's all these square flat planes, you can only see a reflection of yourself in maybe three or four mirrors, so you're only seeing a fraction of yourself—and as you walk around, as you move around the sculpture, you see in front of you and you see behind you, so you see the future and you see the past, but you can't see the present. But when you're on the inside of it, it's a completely opposite experience. The sound reverberates, and when there's steam you're sweating and you're bombarded by yourself—and not just yourself but the sweating bodies next to you. It's an environment that has a kind of "present effect" on you.

M: I think Lacan's idea of this break with the real comes up in your work a lot. He talks about these three stages: so there's the Real, when the baby doesn't even know that the baby is a baby; the Mirror Stage, which is the baby recognizing his face in the mirror, so it fractures the baby's reality; and the next stage is [the Symbolic Order], which is language, and basically the creation of desire—of trying to return to the real, to this place of pure need before the fracturing and the other and that kind of alienation and isolation. And I think that relates to other writers talking about the alienation that happens in society, and this idea of "something's missing."[2] We're trying to return to something that is lost. Which is such an archetypal theme all through religion, too—of the split from the one, the split from the unity, the fall from grace, getting kicked out of paradise. Paradise is about the past, and paradise is something that can be found or lost but not created. And utopia is something you can build or destroy, but it's not something you can find. It doesn't exist in the natural world. So paradise is sort of primitive, a pre-civilization kind of place, and utopia is a kind of uber-civilization—the absolute pinnacle of innovation and technology and achievement through human ingenuity. For me it's a really useful way of making a distinction between these things. Because some things can seem really utopian but I've started to think about them as more paradisiacal, and vice versa.

M: Do you think transcendence is paradisiacal or utopian?

M: I think it can be both, but I think it manifests in different ways. I think a utopian kind of transcendence would be, in a way, like Infosys—to transcend out of the tar paper shacks of modern globalized development into a techno-utopia. But spiritual transcendence I associate more with paradise—with returning to a place without desire, and a place of presentness. I've thought a lot about the fictional place of Paradise and what the human experience of being Adam and Eve must have felt like. There are a few key qualities of

Paradise. One is there's no work. There's no labor. Twelve different kinds of fruit are on the trees, all year long. You're not cultivating anything. There's no agriculture.

M: Labor is a part of utopia though.

M: Definitely. So utopia becomes about how to conceptualize labor.

M: You know the Shaker saying, "Hands to work, heart to God"?

M: Which is a very Protestant kind of understanding, for sure. Labor is always seen as a kind of necessary evil of civilization. If only we didn't have to labor. But you also didn't get to have sex in Paradise. There are no kids, and there are no more Adams and Eves. There's just the two of them. Forever. And there's also no desire. There's no wishing for the wish. There's no real; you are the real. You're the infant baby. You're pre-mirror stage. So that kind of spiritual transcendence, which I think of as meditation, is utopian in one sense but is more related to paradise. And you know, in Buddhism, desire is the ultimate obstacle to get past, or—

M: To transcend.

M: To transcend. Desire is the thing that keeps us rooted to the materiality of the world. And I think on a larger level, politically those ideas are very powerful. I mean I'm thinking of the way you described Infosys—these people being completely taken care of in terms of needs and desires and wants and being ferried through this system of economic production. They become the most efficient workers that you can possibly imagine. I mean you're Adam and Eve the engineers.

M: I mean, people fall in love there.

M: I'm sure that there's sex in Infosys. But I think that what's dangerous about those ideas too is that you gloss over the very real material inequalities of our world, in trying to escape them. Benjamin's articulation of that materiality I've always found really interesting because he very much embraces the imperfection of our actual world. It's not about transcending or perfecting, but it's about remaining very rooted in the fact that this board is broken or the gas light in the arcade is flickering—

M: Or that we can look over the edge of this building and find at least seven people sleeping in tents below the rooftop garden that we're in.

M: Exactly. Utopia is very seductive. As is paradise. But I think it can become a kind of soma. For ignoring the very gritty inequalities that do define our world. And also the grittiness of sex, of being a real body that sweats, that has material qualities. So the more I think about these things, the more I think that rooting a politic in materiality is very important, both in terms of ideas of social justice, but also in terms of embracing what we actually are as human beings—material beings connected to other material beings and our material reality. And I think there are implications for a kind of environmentalism. And maybe it bends back on itself to a kind of unity with the whole. That if we stop thinking of ourselves as something that can go into the glass dome and escape

whatever apocalypse we're brewing for ourselves...

M: Watch movies...

M: Right; if we resist going into the geodesic Bucky Fuller Infosys movie theater and remain rooted in the muddiness that is our reality...

M: I've seen a video of yours [*Disco Arboretum (or Looking For Paradise In All the Wrong Places)* (2009)] where you're walking through this forest carrying a disco ball.

M: That was shot at the Los Angeles County Arboretum. I'd been doing a lot of research about the development of California in the 19th century and how it related to ideas of paradise. In the 1600s, California was mapped as an island... And for the next 200 years they kept mapping it as an island, even after cartographers and travelers came back and said it really wasn't an island. Cartographers couldn't let go of this idea. And I think those archetypes are so strong that the story determines the map...

M: Like any good radical cartography.

M: Right. And I think that idea of California as a paradise was so fundamental to this cultural understanding of California, especially in the 19th century. They promoted California as this place where fruit grows twelve months out of the year—it's almost word for word how Genesis and people throughout the Middle Ages described Paradise.

M: But why the disco ball, exactly?

M: I started researching the history of disco balls, which actually go back to Venetian glass. People would use them as surveillance mechanisms in gardens. They were blown glass spheres. Which is why people still put those in their gardens...

M: I'm really into surveillance.

M: Well, that will have to be a different conversation. But yeah, it started as a surveillance device. Jazz was one of the first times that mirror balls were used in terms of a dance floor environment. And what I think is great about the disco ball is that it's the most lo-fi way of creating a light show. All you do is shine light at it, and it transforms a room. And it totally changes the social expectation of that room. Which I think makes it this really lo-fi magical object. Anyway, so the dance floor as a kind of transcendent space, of bodies, and movement, and being material, sweating, and not talking—it's a place without language, in a way. And, you know, it's the '70s, and it's embracing this kind of primitive dance tradition that I think can potentially achieve a kind of transcendence. I mean maybe it goes back to my roots as a raver when I was a teenager, and maybe my first micro-utopia was dancing for ten hours straight, and the kind of high that you can achieve with that level of dancing was pretty formative to me. And so I started using the disco ball as a kind of abbreviation for these transcendent, shiny, utopian kinds of environments or moments. One of my working theories is that—why is utopia shiny? Because it's always shiny. Utopia is never brick and mortar. I think that utopia does have to do with getting outside of the murkiness, the grittiness, the broken-

board tableness of our reality to a kind of polished, edgeless, infinite perfection. What could be more opposite than the human body than a mirror?

M: I've been thinking about building this glass meeting room in the sky sort of thing. I was talking to an architect friend about the feasibility of this, and the email he wrote me was discouraging—to the effect of, "You know, one of the main challenges is that if the glass cracks, it's done—there's a calamity. But if concrete cracks, it's just a crack."

M: But I think that's the very thing—I think the fact that glass is so hard to work with makes it this kind of holy grail of architecture. I think the impossibility of it is part of the seduction, the allure...

M: Okay, so if glass architecture is in some ways utopian, but the only people who can afford proper glass architecture today are corporations—the Apple Store is a main culprit of glass staircases—how do you make a glass architectural form that doesn't feel corporate?

M: I mean I think it's been totally instrumentalized. This goes back to modern architecture, this goes back to Le Corbusier, and to the Seagram Building. The Modernist architects saw glass as a transcendent form, and that was a technological moment. The original glass architecture of course was the Crystal Palace, at the Great Exhibition of 1851, in London. And what made it possible is that they were finally able to make iron rods that were consistent enough and huge panes of glass fast enough. They built the Crystal Palace I think in five months. And then it burned. There's a whole history of glass buildings burning, which is great, because that's one of the things that glass wasn't supposed to do.

M: The glass catches on fire...?

M: Well, glass buildings as it turns out are very expensive to heat. It's a terrible way to build, actually. Especially in England where it's cold, and they're growing palm trees inside, so what they have to have are these huge furnaces...

M: I read the article you wrote about the Shanghai Expo.[3]

M: It was a monstrosity, the Expo—this thing that's been translated from mid-19th century England to the ultimate pinnacle of globalization, China. I mean every iPod in the world is made in Shenzhen. They're taking this representation of progress that was developed in the West and making all these extraordinary architectural gestures. It's a big presentation, it's their coming out party, onto the platform of globalized capitalism. It was very seductive. And I did want to believe it. And it was interesting reading your impressions of Mumbai—but India and China are developing in such different ways.

M: China is top down—

M: Well, it's totalitarian.

M: —and India is the world's largest democracy.

M: Some people would argue that at least India is a democracy. But in China, you're never going to live in a tarpaper shack. I kept asking people that I met where the shacks are, the tent cities, that are always outside of every megacity in

the world. But there aren't tent cities. How is that possible? How has Shanghai doubled in population in the last fifteen years and no one's living in a shack? And the thing is, the government comes and they give you a key. You don't get to choose where you live, but you take your key. You don't have a choice. But you have concrete. I think this speaks to these ideas of technology and utopia and how we're managing in the throes of this modernity... I mean, is India a democracy? Does your vote matter if you're living in a tarpaper shack?

M: Here's the funny thing. The richer you are, the less you believe in democracy. The rich people don't vote in India, because votes can be bought so easily.

M: Well this is where all the money is for urban development. These are the grand experiments in urban planning that are happening in Shanghai and Shenzhen and all of the medium-sized cities in China. Cisco [Systems] had their own exhibit [at the Expo], and they developed something called a City in a Box, which is basically infrastructure plans, architectural plans—how to build a city for a million people almost overnight.[4] And they're selling these. Supposedly, India bought 300, and China's buying 500. I mean, talk about blueprint utopia. What does it mean to experiment with urban development at this scale? Think about something like Levittown, that kind of centralized planning happening at that scale. I hope those architects get it right.

M: Well why does a utopia have to be big? Can't it just be the three of us? Can't we say today we're going to go out and be utopian? We're going to have a utopian night?

M: But what would that mean?

M: We're going to be confident in being able to be freely agent beings. We're going to be supportive of each other's intellectual and personal growth and emotional growth. We're going to try to form by rigorous debate and conversation an honesty with ourselves, an honesty with each other…

M: See, I don't know if that's enough.

M: … A deeper sense of how we give and engage with the world around us.

M: But what is utopia? It's not just striving to make things better, right? There's something else. You wouldn't call the Civil Rights Movement utopian.

M: No, but I would say that there are moments within it where there's a wish for a wish. I think utopia is a temporal thing, that when you try to name—

M: Well that's what idealism truly is. People talk about this a lot with utopia, that as soon as it manifests, it no longer is. Because perfection can't actually exist except in the abstract. I mean there are so many working definitions of utopia. But it seems like yours is much more humanistic, and about social interaction.

M: I don't think utopia is possible. I mean I want to believe that it's possible.

M: But something can be utopian. Or there can be a quality—

M: Something can be utopian, and there can be a quality to a group of people who come together.

M: Well, the idea of a mass utopia has been out of fashion for a while. And people fetishize it, and I think it is becoming an artifact of history. At the same time, I think the reason we keep coming back to it is it does speak to this notion of striving and wanting and wishing that I think won't go away. That continues, no matter the technological circumstance. It's a very tender—I don't want to use the word naïve—but a kind of tender urge and striving that I think is very human, and speaks to the human experience of the want and the desire and the wishing—that maybe you can still find poetry in utopia somehow. And everything else has become very unpoetic.

M: I mean, trust me—that *Steam Egg* is not utopia. There are great moments, but it is not a full world. It's just a sliver. But I will say this one thing. I am now patent pending—I have a provisional patent, and the patent title is, "Bottom Entry Sauna, Steam Room, Steam Egg." So I do think a big part of the desire to apply for a patent is this notion of the impossibility and ridiculousness of progress, and this notion of invention, because the wording I have to use on the patent is that it's "new and novel" to have a bottom entry on a sauna—but it's based on the simple principle that heat rises.

Notes:

1 For a discussion of "blueprint" versus "iconoclastic" utopias, see Russell Jacoby's Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age.

2 A passage from Bertolt Brecht's play Mahagonny, most famously quoted by Ernst Bloch in conversation with Theodor Adorno; the two were debating the efficacy of utopian thought in 1964.

3 McCrory, Meghann. "Documenting Spectacle: An Artist's Notes on the Shanghai Expo," East of Borneo, *http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/37, accessed March 9, 2012.*

4 Boudreau, John. "Cisco Systems helps build prototype for instant 'City in a Box'," Los Angeles Times Online, *http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/09/business/la-fi-cisco-20100609, accessed March 9, 2012.*

DOUBTFUL MOTION: Gesture as Performance

Matt Siegle

A few years back, I heard a rumor: Steve Kado, a Canadian performance artist, had walked north from his home in Koreatown in Los Angeles to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia—a distance of thirty miles. In a city built for cars, walking such a distance is obviously an act of pure will. If his car was at the mechanic, surely he could have found a ride with a friend; if trying to escape the city's essential cliché, LA Metro public transportation is actually fairly functional. Several months later I heard another rumor: Kado also walked from Koreatown to the port of Long Beach, thirty miles to the south. Between these two performances, Kado somewhat astoundingly bisected the city along its longitudinal axis. This artwork no doubt recalls Bas Jan Ader's 1973 *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)*. Yet unlike Ader's thoroughly documented journey, the only trace of Kado's performance is hearsay. While the former leaves us with poetry—snippets of song lyrics delicately written onto each photograph, an oh-so-solitary figure wandering through the night—the latter's journey dries the mouth and brain with the thought of spending so much time on the dusty shoulder of San Fernando Road. Kado's walk seems inanely paced in comparison to constant iPhone-ing and much hyper-snappy contemporary video art, its willful slowness highlighting our daily high-speed jitter.

But upon further consideration, did his walks actually take place? A search for answers reveals only the difficulty of discussing Kado's project—not only because of its inherently slippery epistemology, but also because such a performance doesn't seem to fit into any established discourse. The truth of the rumor can never be pinned down. Then how to proceed when so thoroughly denied any agency as viewers? In this complete rejection of the experiential, the project's art-value must be understood semiotically within cultural and environmental context. Yet this is different from what might be described as "action" or "interventionist" performance—the former (most simply) seemingly reliant on process, and the latter leaving an evident physical or cultural disruption.

The answer can be found in gesture—a term used too loosely in art discourse. Painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, is most frequently described as "gestural"—but what does that mean? That the flick of a brush somehow corresponds to an inner emotional and psychological being? A painting is often constructed with hundreds or thousands of paint-movements; presumably not every mark can carry equal emotive urgency. Gesture, the symbolic movement that supposedly conveys interiority, instead borders on the mechanic, or worse yet, dead-ends in discussion of the non-representational. Through a closer examination of several classic performance works, I hope to reevaluate this term apart from the grandiose Modernist cliché.

Outside of art discourse, gesture is a symbolic or token motion intended to emphasize or affect: movement as metaphor. One accepts a bow to suggest honor, respect, humility, yet it is really through shared cultural context that leaning forward in the company of others means, "You are of greater power and esteem than I." Gesture must be corporeal: it is either carried out through physical movement, or is an intentional motion with an implied enactor. These movements always return to an original context and a performing body. Giorigo Agamben, in his short essay "Notes On Gesture," explains that "what characterizes gesture is that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting," returning to context as it "opens the sphere of ethos as the most fitting sphere of the human."[1] Gesture pokes at the codes of its surrounding environment, sourcing and grounding the enactor; the subsequent interpretation may call these very values into question.

Within art, we can relocate the meaning of this term in performance work. It seems necessary to describe certain performative projects not as actions or interventions but as gestures. Born of the early demonstrations of Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, gesture is an embodied performance. It is vulnerable to and through interpretation, due to a diffused (and often removed) audience/performer relationship. Gesture-as-performance occurs outside of the traditional dialectic created by recital-style work. In his *Living Sculptures* (c. 1961), for example, Manzoni designated "audience" members as artwork by "performing" a signature on their body in a social setting. This can be positioned in contrast to early Fluxus and Situationist happenings, which emphasize the physical experience of a viewer vis-à-vis the actions of a performance. Gesture exists in spectrum with action, sliding between the interpretive and the experiential. Semiotically, this continuum may be mapped onto the axis between metaphor and metonym. As with these two linguistic terms, whether the author intends a didactic message or affective meaning determines the degree to which they relinquish interpretive control, and drives the method by which they deliver content.

Gesture performance can exist completely within documentation. Indeed, because it relies heavily on author-in-context for meaning, it is not easily recreated. Unlike that of action, the power of the gesture lives recursively—perhaps only so—through text, image, or word of mouth. This stands apart from an artwork which requires a viewer to traverse and interact with an environment, or in which movement depends on the subjective, in-the-moment choices of a performer. Agamben quite eloquently elaborates on the two-fold relation of gesture to the photograph, which underscores why gesture-as-performance-art can exist so fully in documentation:

> In fact, every image is animated by an antinomous polarity: on the one hand this is the reification and effacement of a gesture (the *imago* either as symbol or as the wax mask of the corpse); on the other it maintains the *dynamis* (as in Muybridge's split-second photographs, or in any photograph of a sporting event). The former corresponds to the memory of whose voluntary recall it takes possession; the latter to the image

> flashed in the epiphany of involuntary memory. And while the former dwells in magical isolation, the latter always refers beyond itself, towards a whole of which it is a part.[2]

Though Agamben later asserts this as a problem to be solved by film, this dialectic enriches our understanding of gesture-as-performance. Documentation immediately crystallizes the movement and environment in some manner of public-sphere museological display. A viewer's memories are actively concentrated toward the being of that gesture (and its context)—but as an ideal (*imago*), and not necessarily as the movement presented as such. We are given the incomplete narrative and its limits. At the same time, Agamben's *dynamis* allows an opening of meaning through extrapolation. Understanding thickens based on our own biases, opinions, and emotional makeup, but only as associated with the potential of what we see. It is this fuzziness of subjective interpretation that sets gesture apart from action. Gesture strives to provoke an indefinite viewer understanding. This could be considered a shortcoming; but as meaning builds in relationship to known, personal experience, the performance regains power. Because documentation affords gesture this isolation, its affect has the potential to surpass the demonstrative. Gesture may be more potent captured than experienced live.

Historically, action starts empty. Alan Kaprow specified that, within his *18 Happenings* (1959), "actions will mean nothing clearly formulable so far as the artist is concerned." The staged activity of the performer, through which "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible," becomes merely formal.[3] Kaprow's Happenings attempted to coerce the audience into losing their sense of viewership; to this purpose, the actions of the artwork were emptied of symbolic value.

Around the same time, the Viennese Actionists embraced ritual and violence as means of emotional extortion, but still eschewed symbolic value. In 1960s performances of *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, Hermann Nitsch shredded a lamb carcass on stage as a "manifest action (an 'aesthetic' substitute for a sacrificial act)." He aimed for audience catharsis:

> Through my artistic production . . . I take upon myself the apparently negative, unsavoury, perverse, obscene, the passion and the hysteria of the act of sacrifice so that YOU ARE spared the sullying, shaming descent into the extreme.[4]

In Nitsch's words, these staged actions were intended to be so full of primal (and ultimately accessible) passions that a viewer could be freed from the emotional hardships inflicted by the extreme violence of mid-century Europe.

It is tempting to think of Nitsch's sanguinary performances as gesture, but this overlooks his insistence on viewer involvement. Though the first few *aktions* had a passive audience, his performances grew larger and eventually included active participation, ultimately becoming an orchestrated action theatre. The artwork was conducted through a group of other actor-participants in symphonies of ceremonial activity—a Dionysian *gesamtkunstwerk* including music, dancing, fruits, and the smearing of blood. What differentiates this art-action from art-gesture is the emphasis on experience over interpreta-

tion. When a performer undertakes such gruesome tasks as an individual gesture, they strive for the symbolic translation concomitant with environmental context and, more loosely, viewership. Instead, Nitsch writes,

> The negative image of Dionysian debauchery, passion, ends in the masochistic excess of sacrifice. . . . The O.M. Theatre utilizes this phenomenon, and in this way achieves a regression within art, a break-through of the Dionysian. . . . The sensually real, sadomasochistic situation of tearing-up is identical with an extreme break-through of instincts.[5]

Orgien Mysterien Theatre was a Brechtian experience of theatre acts, a ritualistic catharsis for the viewer. In a sense, Nitsch's *gesamtkunstwerk* was not so far from Kaprow's professed fluidity between life and art, though in this case on an emotional level.

Undertaken a decade later, Czech "actionist" Jirí Kovanda's early works exemplify the gesture-as-performance. Merged into the public sphere, the art-value is only found within recording. These meditations on contact took place within the streets of late '70s Prague, and became so slight as to be completely unobservable except through text and photo documentation prepared by the artist. Most works are tautologically titled: *Untitled (On an escalator...turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing beside me...)* (3 September 1977). An earlier performance, *Untitled (Standing on Wenceslas Square with arms outstretched...)* (19 November 1976), locates Kovanda in the center of Prague's business district, arms spread full eagle, trying to block or simply touch passersby. In an interview with Slovak artist Július Koller, Kovanda described the goal of these works as:

> to examine and to experience relations and borders between people in public spaces, for example. Or my own position there in everyday situations. Or a position of an individual in a crowd. Among others.[6]

The muscle of this work lies in its double interpretation as both an immediate attempt for intimate contact with strangers and as an embodied gesture towards free will and movement. Kovanda has stated,

> The question is when communication takes place. I think it's at the moment when the thing is referred to as art. That means that if an action has an audience, it happens straight away. If no spectators have been invited, however, I think it doesn't take place until afterwards . . . when it's presented as art.[7]

The work *Untitled (Waiting for someone to call me...)* (18 November 1976) demonstrates that Kovanda's performances hinge on this crux—that is, on the gesture. In private, Kovanda sat beside a telephone and waited for someone to call. It is unclear if anyone was present for this performance (nor does it matter); likewise, it is uncertain if anyone knew to contact Kovanda at this given point in time. What now exists for the viewer is a photograph of the artist sitting solemnly beside the telephone, with text above reading "x x x/18. Listopadu 1976/Praha/ Cekám, až mi nekdo zavolá..." Whether someone did call remains inescapably ambiguous; accordingly, it follows to think of his behavior symbolically, as gesture.[8]

Presentation context is another distinguishing feature along the gesture/action

spectrum. Returning to Nitsch, his actions were clearly bracketed in mediated performativity even though they may have been loosely scripted and invited participation. Broadening the definition of gesture, we are looking for movements that express an idea, sentiment, or attitude. It seems that in order to find meaning in a gesture-movement, there must be some relationship to the earnest or sincere—some immediate proximity to the performer—even though it may be untrustworthy. So what then of gestures in a traditional performer/audience dialectic, where a viewer's attendance presupposes a blanket acceptance of staging?

Robert Ashley, seminal experimental composer and pioneer of opera-for-television (precursor to music television), accuses live staging of coddling spectators. A viewer comes to witness an artwork divorced from the genuine being of themselves or the performer, and as such their experience becomes mise-en-scène. Referring to the trend toward music recitals in the 1970s, he writes:

> That palpable but invisible wall between the entertainer and the audience is a fact of the recital. As a member of the audience you are a consumer and a consumer only. Take your seat. The musicians come on stage. Two or three pieces. Intermission. Two or three pieces. End. You are back out on the street having had an experience, which in most cases lasts only as long as the experience itself. This is a recital. It could have been juggling or a live porno act. Whatever it is, you are not a part of it. You have been a watcher. The recitalist hopes that you have been entertained. But you have not been included. You have simply been distracted from what is outside. . . . Because the composer does not have the idea of including the people who come while the music is being enacted. We have lost the idea of the rituals that remind the people who come that what is happening is only a small part, a "surfacing" of the continuing musicality of everyday life.[9]

Staging immediately nudges a performance toward a predetermined outcome, foreclosing a broader comprehension available through context, convenience, and similitude. A sign made by an actor may be interpreted as a gesture, but only in relationship to the fixed phrasing given within the experience. This forces a canned interpretation: viewers "learn" through mediated actions in an artificially contained environment. This does not carry meaning beyond the stage. True gesture relies on proximity within a (shared) public context, and a vulnerable interpretation based on metaphoric shiftiness. Such a position is weak—but this weakness gives gesture its power. It is exactly what defines gesture, a fleece for something too hard or soft to be spoken, executed in the same everyday reality that both the performer and witness share. Gesture can become a bridge to the truly unspeakable.

David Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* occupies precisely this position. During a blizzard in 1983, Hammons sold snowballs of varying sizes, priced accordingly, alongside other vendors in New York City's Cooper Square. This performance seems like a comment on the position of the artist himself within relations of class and race: an African-American man associating with low-brow street vendors rather than the luxury of the white-box

gallery, while perhaps also positioning art as a scam. Within the artwork, Hammons provided no clues as to whether he meant to provoke a consideration of race through his commodity's whiteness. He has famously denounced art audience viewership, insisting that these street sale performances were for the everyday viewer. Still, there is plenty of documentation of this performance; in these photographs, we now find art value through equal consideration of context and the suggested transaction (gesture again as hearsay). It is only because this artwork occurs for a presumably unaware public that his position is destabilized. Is he actually trying to make sales? Why would Hammons, with a respectable career and gallery, reduce himself to a joke? And what did that mean in 1983? Where Kaprow's aim was to blur the line between art and life for a viewer, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* collapsed artist and subject. In its art-value, Hammons's action becomes gesture—the symbolic activity nestled within the day-to-day hustle of New York vendors.

And so, returning to Agamben: the defining characteristic of gesture is "that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting."[10] For gesture in performance artwork, the goal is not structural production nor emotional charade.[11] Instead, Agamben describes these movements with two verbs (undertake, support) that connote accountability and responsibility. The relationship between the movement and the viewer is now greatly thickened, for the artist-as-subject is unavoidably linked to the former, and the public context becomes common ground. This heightens a sense of interpretable visual rhetoric, constructed by both artist and witness, within an uncontrolled yet shared sociological environment.

As disempowered viewers, considering Kado's walks is like chasing our own tails. No one witnessed either artwork as such, and they may or may not have happened. The only thing to grasp are the words by which we learn of his performance, and yet language in and of itself does not convey the truth. Meaning is completely insecure, but it is precisely at this epistemological crux that Kado entrusts us with the work's interpretation. This is a generous move on his part—one that speaks against a moment when every piece of information seems quantifiable and verifiable.

A little while after hearing of these walks, I saw Klara Liden's 2003 video *Paralyzed* at The Museum of Modern Art. The footage begins with a solitary figure seated on a daytime commuter train, quietly staring out the window. Someone is filming and their hand is unsteady, the footage unpolished and poorly lit. The subject is hooded in an olive green woodsman coat, wearing black tennis shoes and slightly baggy, torn jeans. A quick cut jumps to the bare trees and scaffolding ostensibly outside the train. The video returns to this mysterious figure, who now slowly stands with outstretched arms and awkwardly prances in a circle. We see other passengers for the first time.

The figure starts to dance a jig to the accompaniment of post-production drums and squawking (later identified as "Paralyzed" by '60s psychobilly artist The

Legendary Stardust Cowboy). The jacket comes off, revealing a loosely fitting pink blouse, auburn hair ponytailed beneath a short-billed cap, and a female body. It is Liden herself; she begins to swing from the bars of the train, rolls on the floor—all apparently of little concern to the other commuters. She tosses her shoes, and in a dead-bug freakout, she shimmies off her pants to uncover light blue basketball shorts. Liden climbs on top of the luggage racks, pulls herself through and over seat partitions. The camera blurs as the videographer follows her down the middle of the train. She attempts some clunky gymnastics, then leaps up and down the aisle, garnering only a few lethargic glances. She does The Worm. The video jumps to another quick shot of industrial landscape, then ends with an exterior view of the train at a station. Glimpsed through the windows, something is slightly different; Liden is wearing her shoes and hat again, and the interior of the train is now artificially lit.

Reviewing the video, it becomes clear that this seemingly continuous performance is actually three freak-outs subtly pieced together; the camera blur and second exterior shot transition between different sequences. But in each performance Liden is wearing the same thing: light pink top and light blue basketball shorts, in marked contrast to her genderless initial costume. Obviously antithetical to the performer's figure are the sluggish other train passengers, set in their cultural coding, and seemingly unaware of the artwork rolling down the aisle. As the projection dims, we stand in the museum watching.

Notes:

1 Agamben, Giorgio. Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience *(London: Verso, 1993), 140.*

2 Agamben, 139.

3 Kaprow, Allan. "Untitled Guidelines for Happenings (c. 1965)," in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, *ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 709- 714.*

4 Nitsch, Hermann. "The O.M. Theatre," in Orgien Mysterien Theatre/ Orgies Mysteries Theater *(Darmstadt: März Verlag, 1969), 35-40.*

5 Nitsch, "The Lamb Manifesto," in Orgien Mysterien Theatre/Orgies Mysteries Theater, *47-52.*

6 Kovanda, Jirí. Interview with Július Koller. Koller & Kovanda. *(New York: Ludlow 38 Kunstverein München Goethe Institut, 2009), 4.*

7 Kovanda, "Interview with Ján Mancuska," Frieze, *Issue 113, March 2008, http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/ jiri_kovanda/, accessed June 30, 2012.*

8 Soviet forces and troops from several other Warsaw Pact countries invaded the former Czechoslovakia in 1968, ending the liberalization efforts of the Prague Spring. The Prague Spring was an attempt to partially democratize the country and bring additional rights to its citizens, including loosened restrictions on speech and travel. If Kovanda's performance were intended as an action, the emphasis would be the shared tedium of time passing, easily recreated with simple instructions, two people, and two phones. He might have a crowd, an audience, in a formalized exhibition space.

9 Ashley, Robert. Outside of Time: Scores, Notes, Writings *(Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2009), 52-58.*

10 Agamben, 140.

11 Agamben illustrates this with the distinction between playwright (producing/doing) and actor (enacting/acting).

A PLACE FOR LIKE MINDS: James Benning in Conversation

with Chiara Giovando and Travis Diehl

To many, nothing could be further from politics than abstract art. But when structuralist filmmaker Ken Jacobs visited the California Institute of the Arts in 2010, his work seemed to present an unlikely alternative: radical politics embedded in abstract, experimental, even elitist imagery. His films stretch narrative logic beyond the breaking point, proposing a politicized cinematic space among the wreckage. Chiara Giovando and Travis Diehl sat down with filmmaker James Benning shortly after Ken's visit to discuss the possibilities offered by this way of working. An edited transcript follows.

James: The first work I saw [by Ken Jacobs] was *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969). He takes a short film from the silent era, and rephotographs it, and reinvestigates parts of the frame. It was one of the first films I saw that did that kind of thing. It makes you look at the frame, and the details of the frame.

Travis: I saw that film in a class, and people were totally bored. We had a choice between that and *Ziggy Stardust*, and for some reason people chose Ken Jacobs. But then nobody could watch it. It was oppressive, almost, how slowly it went... through every frame...

J: Well you have to take your time to learn something. We're not used to that. Even when he made it people weren't used to it, so it did that to audiences back then too. I found it very valuable. I mean the same thing with [Michael Snow's] *Wavelength* (1967); when people see that a lot of them are bored, they don't know how to interact with it, they don't become proactive with the film. They don't work hard. Both of those films ask you to really pay attention, and to remember things and compare them as they change, which is different to a very limited film vocabulary of narrative where the film comes off the screen to you and you don't do any work and it's entertaining. That's one of the problems of working in film as an artist. People think they should be entertained every time. I think that if they look differently, they will be entertained, but not in the sense of these conventions.

Chiara: That's starting to get to the question that I asked Jacobs [during his recent lecture at CalArts].

J: I remember it was a good question, but I can't remember it...

C: I actually remember his answer. But—the question was about...

T: This accusation often leveled at him: that his films are elitist, this sort of rarefied abstraction that you have to be [trained to understand]...

C: They're very beautiful, but at the same time there is this really clear radical polit-

ical message. My question had to do with if there is a way that these very abstract, rich, thick and often difficult-to-access cinematic spaces—are these actually potential sites for politics and for discussion of politics?

J: I remember when someone brought up this issue of it being elitist and he was proud to say that he's elitist. In a way, he's sortof making a quip about that. But at the same time—and I don't mean to put words in his mouth—but I think what he's meaning is that his work is very specialized to his ideas and to his thinking, and that may not be common thinking. So you can't expect it not to play hard out in an audience that may not be thinking like he is. I do think his films help teach you how to look and listen. And that that overcomes this elitist position. If you give, you learn from them. You don't have to know the exact language that he's beginning with; the films themselves teach that language. It's difficult, you might need to see a number of his films and stick with it and work hard to get to that position, but the work provides a solution to itself. And I think that's a political act.

I have friends that are very political, and make political work that's much more accessible, and they all argue with me, and stay with a position that "Oh, that's just elitist." But I don't think that's true. Because I think political films that use a kind of conventional language end up becoming self-satisfying, and since you don't have to work hard to understand them, you think you get it and then you move on and never think about it again. Whereas if the form is as radical as the politics, it makes you work hard, and by working hard, you don't just leave it behind. It changes you.

C: Almost as if the solution isn't the answer to a question, but rather teaching someone to ask a question in the first place.

J: That's absolutely it.

C: Do you think of your own work as putting people in a position to learn to look and see by actually constructing difficulties? Some kind of obstacle course?

J: Well I never thought of it in those terms, because as I worked I eased into these solutions myself. Very early in my work I switched to looking at things in a longer and more precise way, without understanding really what I was doing. And then I realized how uncomfortable it could make audiences, and that surprised me. That kind of uncomfortableness made me question my own practice. I didn't have this vocabulary to begin with either, but I became interested in these small changes of looking deeply and from actually doing the work I came to a conclusion that to learn one has to really pay attention. That's what I hope my films actually do. They make you pay attention, and you learn from paying attention. And the pleasure that comes from that—not in the sense of entertainment, but in the sense of looking deeper—makes you want to look deeper. So it can snowball into a way of understanding.

T: It seems like in your films but also in Ken Jacobs's, real time—just letting the camera roll—amounts to an experience of slowed time.

J: Jacobs himself references early cinema, and that was the spectacle of it—that it could bring places from around the world or a view of something that you couldn't see in your hometown into a room. These were simple things: a train coming into the station, somebody kissing... But you never experienced these things in real time with a frame around them in a dark room, so these early cinemas were actually these apparatuses that would allow you to look—sitting in a room and not turning your head and being focused on something.

T: But at the same time there's a connection to mechanization—early films of the railroad, the frames ticking by—so at the same time that the cinema allows you to look at things more closely, it's also training you to deal with more information faster.

J: That's true. But it also makes us focus. The very early films didn't deal with a film language and a narrative language and all that. It was really about something happening and you understanding what's happening. When I started making films like that, I didn't think of those early films at all. It was after years of doing it that I realized that it had been done before. It occurred to me that film grew up too quickly, it was narrativized too soon. The emphasis on the image was pushed to the background and the story was brought to the foreground, so all the language developed around storytelling rather than around understanding any kind of truth. They were creating all these fictions. And of course today Hollywood is all about this grand image, things flying, exploding, and nothing about truth at all. It's all about a weird fantasy world.

C: And it's so strange how even the news starts looking like that too.

J: In a way that's what was so brilliant about 9/11: creating these fantastic images that Hollywood made, real—I mean finally they were real. Absolutely brilliant.

T: Ken Jacobs also used dust from Ground Zero in a slide plate in his magic lantern presentation [*Nervous Magic Lantern*]. Sort of made that event real in a different way, through this completely abstract world.

J: He's always bringing politics back into the rigorous world he's created. But that's him, right? He's a very political guy. I like that, don't you? I mean the obvious politics is that his films are radical in a formal way, but then he sneaks in these political ideas, and this dust is probably the best example of that.

C: The *Nervous Magic Lantern* piece is maybe the best example of creating a political space through an experience, inviting an audience to have an experience that is in itself political. What are effective forms of politics at this point? A lot of the old ways seem ineffective right now, and I think there are a lot of young people who are struggling to find new ways to have political conversations.

J: I don't mean this in a cynical way at all. Maybe it's too late, you know? Things are... There are so many evil people in the world and so many evil corporations, and so many people making decisions from

a point of greed, which I guess has been happening for many many years. And it's such a big machine now that I can see how young people could be completely apathetic, because it seems so impossible to fight against something so large. There are so many people in the world today that any kind of revolution pretty much guarantees that many people will die. We're dependent on these corporations to feed us now. We've lost our own autonomy. So if you collapse those things that are evil... We also rely on them.

C: Well not even evil, but by the standards of the system itself, not functional. The bank bailout, for example.

J: I mean they made evil decisions, and they made them from a point of greed, but they pretty much knew they had us by the throat. If they die, they just squeeze you harder. I don't know. I don't have solutions any more. At times I thought revolution was an idea, but I think it would just bring about disaster. So I don't know where to go with this world.

T: There was something exciting about Ken Jacobs making political work that still had an element of mystery, if you want to call it that, or these abstractions that are still political, which is an alternative to the documentary approach to politics in which you just point out all the wrongdoing—which people are getting pretty tired of.

C: And maybe that is where the solution lies. Maybe instead of saying this is all the wrongdoing, isn't it horrible, let's fix it—no: people have to think completely differently.

J: Well you know what the solution might be? It might be very simple: Don't be afraid to be a good person because you'll get screwed if you're the good person. I think if we would work from that position, everything would change very quickly. I mean that seems very utopian, but...

C: Hey, why not.

J: I mean if it seems so impossible to change anything, at least you can change yourself. I think you can feel good in it then, if all the actions you take are what you feel is positive, if you're not choosing things that are selfish, screw people over.

C: Ken Jacobs's answer to my question was, "I want to try to make a place where like minds can meet."

J: Yeah, well that's his elitist position again. But you don't know what mind you're going to meet. This great mathematician, [Paul] Erdos, was homeless, and he would seek out other mathematicians and he would knock on their door and they would answer, and he'd say, "Is your mind open?" And if they said yes, he'd walk in and he wouldn't leave until they wrote some mathematical theorum that was important. Sometimes it took a few days, sometimes it took a whole year. But he looked for minds that were open, that he already knew were thinking like him. But with cinema, it isn't that precise. Most of the time you'll show in places where there will be people with similar ideas, wanting to look at your films, but you may stumble into a room where not many people have seen your work before, and most of them might be frustrated by it,

but then there will be those whose minds are opened by it.

There are of course places for like minds. Jacobs has been a part of these kinds of places. Binghamton was one of them, and the Anthology [Film Archives] in New York. I myself don't think that helps, it just reenforces a cadre of ideas. When you open your ideas up to a larger variety of audience, it makes people understand your work in a way you never thought it could be understood, and it helps you grow too, so it isn't so inward.

When I first started working, though, I would lose seventy percent of the audience. They would just walk out. But in the early '70s, or mid '70s, audiences weren't used to it. Most of them were looking for narrative films...

C: I would think it would be worse now. It seems like there has been a loss of attention span.

J: Well, on an individual basis, you build your own audiences. So that helps. Now with the Internet there's so much written, so a lot of people approach my films having read a lot about them before they've seen them, so…

C: They're not shocked.

J: They don't have that initial shock, which is too bad.

C: I was wondering if that disrupts the growth process, makes your films less challenging.

J: Right. Because getting over the fence on your own is maybe more important than being helped over it.

DIAMOND DUST et al.: A Monologue on Materials

Georgia Kennedy

I was working on an ink drawing of pine tree forms using a tripod made out of toothpicks, in order to distance my hand from the page to make broader and more swath-like strokes, when my critic said, "One almost wants to just use the pine branch itself."

Why?

Well, if I'm already taking the trouble to distance my hand from the paper with a multi-pointed wooden stick, and in so doing I am attempting to capture the essence of the pine in a non-mirror, is perhaps the more complete thing to use the pine bristles themselves? If with this method I am attempting to convey pine through the mark, are the bristles more meaningful than a toothpick surrogate or a paintbrush?

Perhaps the pine branch is a tool that, in this case, unites a trifecta of idea, aesthetic, and material.

Materials are a means to an end in much contemporary artwork. Think Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007). Upon the opening of Hirst's "Beyond Belief" exhibition, Alan Riding pondered, "Is it beautiful? Compared with what? Like the crown jewels, it is what it is: a highly skilled exercise in extravagance."[1] So what were the diamonds, if not a means to an end?

On one hand, for Hirst's piece, only diamonds would work. It's all or nothing. But in an America drowning in recession, a West losing power to East, and an Earth ever scorned and pillaged...

What is, or should be, an artist's relationship to his material?

The Golden Spike

To mark the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads in Utah Territory in 1869, a 17.6 karat gold spike was driven through a laurel tie and into the ground with a silver ceremonial spike maul. Precious materials made "real" the significance and ceremoniousness of the occasion. The man who drove the spike missed at first. Immediately after the event was photographed, the Golden Spike and the laurel tie were removed and placed in a museum in California. An iron spike and regular tie replaced gold and laurel. The second wooden tie burned in a wildfire in the early 1900s and was replaced by another wooden tie. The whole area was ravaged during World War II for iron needed for weapons and aircraft. A metal composite spike replaced the iron spike at that time.

These are but a few turns in the extended history of the Golden Spike, but it is notable that materials had both a symbolic and a practical value—though the symbolic materials weren't "practical" enough and were immediately replaced—and that the railroad companies, with more pragmatic intentions,

were balancing symbolism and utility. The Golden Spike's dilution occurred, possibly, when:

1. people wanted to protect the expensive spike from looters;
2. safety regulations were considered, as gold is appreciated for its luster and transcendental quality, and iron for its strength;
3. global disaster/calamity arose; and
4. there was a material shortage.

Daniel 2:31-35

> 31 Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. 32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.[2]

In this passage from the Book of Daniel, the precious materials are present at first but are destroyed. The earthliest, deepest—rock—strikes and begins an enormity.

It is the rock "cut out, but not by human hands," the least refined substance, that topples the statue and "fill[s] the whole earth." The material foundation of the whole statue, which is artifice, an idol, was weak. In this vision it is the "sub-art" or pre-art material that forms the mountain. The precious materials on top cannot withstand the weight and strength of the rock.

This description implies that God or some force took what was once great and mighty and refined, made of rare materials, and shattered it, fragmented it, so that humans would clamor and fight for that which was precious, and inlay it, scrape it, collect and hoard it; for such materials are scarce and must be held close. These are the materials from which we form our images.

Vera Lutter, *Frankfurt Airport, VII: April 24, 2001*, 2001, unique silver gelatin print, 3 panels

A photographer sleeps inside her camera, like inside a lover.

In a Vera Lutter pinhole photograph, the image is taken from a gigantic camera she made by constructing or closing off a whole room: the camera is the negative, the image.

Perhaps attending closely to the material of a piece is a broad gesture aligned with asking, "Where did my meal come from? How does food grow? Should I grow my own?" (Yes. Yes you should.)

Muffin Bernstein, *Mirliton Mandala*, 2010, pigment print on canvas

New Orleans-based digital artist Muffin Bernstein grows a garden of indigenous and adopted South Louisiana plants, such as banana trees, satsuma trees, blueberry bushes, and mirliton.[3] Bernstein photographs and scans parts of the plants, flowers and fruits, as a record of each plant's production. She then digitally collages her photo fragments using 17th century Tibetan mandalas as a framework. Bernstein's plants are a natural fit, as Tibetan monks have long made ephemeral sacred circles out of flowers and plants. Within one mandala she uses, say, a satsuma slice for a disc shape, a seed for a crescent or teardrop shape, leaves and petals in arcs, stems in lines, and so on, until the whole growth cycle of a plant is embedded in the image. The Tibetan designs she studies not only incorporate plant matter, but their structure reverberates the radial symmetry and balance of the sacred geometric sequence that is a natural blueprint for outward growth—spirals, forks, stems, seeds, and centers found within cross sections of fruit-slices. Bernstein's source is as "earthly," as "deep," as "the rock cut out" to topple the statue in the Book of Daniel.

Though visually complex, the mandalas' return is simple. The plants of New Orleans—bananas, mirlitons, satsumas—give Bernstein life through actual nourishment, necessary food. And the harmony of the images radiates back out thanksgiving. Bernstein's materials teach. Her process teaches her, and she teaches her audience through her result. Her visually radiant images allow for fuller dimensionality than if her images were only made of color and shape fragments that resembled plant parts but were not representative of any known object.

Perhaps integrity of materials generates harmony.

Dario Robleto, *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, 2001-2002, hand-ground and powderized vinyl records, melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments, dirt, concert spotlight, female pelvis made from mother's Rock 'n' Roll 45 rpm records, male pelvis made from father's Rock 'n' Roll 33 rpm records

Dario Robleto's relationship to his materials is both loving and reductive, like cremation. Robleto transforms materials with extreme care, and there is a tension in his attention: he destroys things to preserve them. This is different from Bernstein's work; she is working with organic materials that naturally decompose rapidly, whereas Robleto is working with materials that, with simple care, can last a human lifetime or longer, such as vinyl records and ink on paper.

Robleto has recomposed all sorts of supposedly precious materials. When I heard him lecture on his exhibition "Chrysanthemum Anthems," the audience was appalled at his "destruction" of precious materials such as Civil War soldiers' letters home that Robleto had excavated from untapped attics. He claimed the artifacts not stored in museums made up about 95% of the existence of the stuff.

When asked how he felt about this destruction, Robleto responded that people don't actually care about these "artifacts" as much as you'd think. Wouldn't we have them behind glass and in airtight chambers, if so?

He formed paper pulp of the letters into wreaths modeled after the ones Civil War wives handmade together at churches and placed on their homes as messages of peace and hope for their soldiers' safe returns. Robleto talked about his sources with such respect, such care for the items, that there was a group "Aha!" as he spoke: his work exalted the soldiers' letters. Sure, some people could go back and read some letters that they excavated in other soldiers' wives' old homes. But would they? And doesn't Robleto's piece say the same thing, less specifically, but more sublimely?

What is it we would want with reading the letters?

In *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, Robleto's mother's 45 collection and father's 33 collection are not irreplacable; records are mass produced. The amount of "destruction" or processing of materials to go into, in this case, a twelve inch by nine inch by nine inch sculpture, is of a dizzying height (think of those records stacked up tall!); or, of a rapidly humbling, tumbling-to-the-ground release, of necessity. A rebirth. For the love of...

John Henry, *Stone Amphitheater*, c. 2001, stone

In Rappahannock County, Virginia, an eccentric man by the name of John Henry—a descendant of Patrick Henry and a DC lawyer who doesn't necessarily identify himself as an artist—has been working on an elaborate series of replica sheep shoals, stone foundations, perfect stone walls, a miniature Stonehenge complete with large post stones he had shipped from Southeast Asia, and an amphitheater carved out of his hillside. His property even features a moved mountain—earth that he had built up in a different spot relocated to where a mountain was more needed.

All of these hand constructions have occurred in the past ten years. All of Henry's excavations save for the mini-Stonehenge are built from the existing bedrock foundation of the Appalachian hills on his land. He hand-places all of the stones with the help of a few assistants, and no mortar is used—dry stone masonry only.

It seems that the more precious the material is, the less it's possible for an artist to manipulate the material by hand. It cost Hirst 23.6 million dollars to fabricate *For the Love of God*—for the platinum skull to be cast and for the diamonds to be acquired and set.[4] The Golden Spike was photographed and then placed in a museum. But Bernstein is out there with a trowel; Robleto is digging through attics...

Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007, platinum cast of a male human skull, diamonds, human teeth

"Mr. Hirst's London gallery, White Cube, thought it wise to address the issue, noting that the skull's diamonds 'are all ethically sourced, each with written guarantees in compliance with United Nations resolutions,'" reported Alan Riding in The New York Times. "Bentley & Skinner, the Mayfair jewelers that made the skull, added the assurance that the diamonds were 'conflict-free.'"[5]

In the case of Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull, acquisition of the material used exerts power and choice—certainly the opposite of the pragmatism in the story of the Golden Spike. But the skull was not meant to support a steam-powered locomotive. It was meant as an object of beauty to shock and incite. It also seems embarrassingly wasteful when one envisions the physical endeavor of mining for Hirst's *Love*; and Taoistly simple, considering diamonds outlast flesh. The earth rotates. We cycle through.

Is *For the Love of God* the best use of $23.6 million? Is "art" worth the diamonds? Is "God"? Is the work a gift to God? The White Cube exhibition that featured Hirst's *For the Love of God* was called "Beyond Belief."[6] Was Hirst playing God to try to honor God—for His "love"? Is Hirst implying that, per the work that went into a centuries-old cathedral or the Aztec Pyramid of the Sun, that art should be, literally, for God?

Does material connection, like painting pine trees with a pine bough, make us godlike? The traditional oil painter, like an alchemist, plays God in this way: shoots a rabbit to skin or acquires a hide, makes rabbit skin glue size to scrub into stretched linen, grinds his own pigments.

It's not that Hirst is disconnected from his material. He understood the implications of the material—in fact, those implications comprise the piece, which is why I first suggested the material was a means to an end. Yet there is no feeling on the part of the viewer that Hirst entered his material in the way Vera Lutter and perhaps John Henry have.

Hirst achieved a shock value, a majesty, that perhaps Robleto's or Bernstein's works, though visually vibrant, can never possess. But Bernstein's materials are life-generating, and Robleto's have the feeling of positive recomposition, rather than destruction. Hirst's work is both final-feeling and "unrepeatable"—unless in some infinite downward spiral, perhaps also a critique on the state of an art world, he made another diamond skull. Maybe that one would be *For the Love of Satan*.

Notes

1 Riding, Allan. "Alas, Poor Art Market: A Multimillion-Dollar Head Case," The New York Times Art & Design, *June 13, 2007.*

2 The Bible *(New International Version).*

3 Kennedy, Georgia. "New Orleans artist's garden of digital delights," Nola.com NolaVie, *August 6, 2011, http://www.nola.com/nolavie/index.ssf/2011/08/new_orleans_artists_garden_of.html, accessed May 28, 2012.*

4 Riding.

5 Riding.

6 Riding.

DIGITAL MEMORY PLAY:
The Wooster Group's Vieux Carré *at REDCAT, Los Angeles*

Travis Diehl

> WRITER: Instinct, it must have been [He starts typing.] directed me here, to the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, down country as a—river flows no plan. I couldn't have consciously, deliberately selected a better place than here to discover—to encounter—my true nature. Exposition! Shit!

The 1978 production of Tennessee Williams's *Vieux Carré* at the Nottingham Playhouse receded into a set draped high with sheets and shadows. The Wooster Group's 2010 performance is raw and angular—bare risers, cables and AV racks exposed, counterweighted flat screen monitors flown in and out of prominence—a hard-edged but no less total dissolution into memory and fantasy. In a fecund New Orleans flop house—the mold overtaking the planks, the other boarders dying of tuberculosis or loneliness, yet the air ripe with sexual awakening—a Writer comes of age.

The Wooster Group brings Williams's script (almost word for word) from its Depression-era setting into an indeterminate '90s, a contemporary lost decade. Techno bass oozes through the walls during scene changes; the New Orleans rain on the skylights is pixellated, projected downwards onto the bed, shimmering blue-green. A male stripper aims a television camera at the Writer as he slowly undresses. The Writer's erotic pantomime is layered onto a man's gyrating body in a video feed; superimposed, they touch. The play absorbs the viewer in the digital visions of the young Writer alone at his terminal, pecking out a few tentative words – fkfufkfkfkfufkfutktufku – then... losing himself... as porn vids dance across his screen like not-unwelcome memories. Creation eases into masturbation, accompanied by the hallucinatory creaks and groans of—what? an old boarding house swelling in the rain? the drugs taking hold? The viewer's focus drifts, melts, and is snapped back into place as the lights pulse, the monitors flicker, and flesh and blood actors rush the stage.

> JANE [*quickly*]: Do you know, I find myself drinking twice as much coffee here as I did in New York. For me the climate here is debilitating. Perhaps because of the dampness and the, and the—very low altitude, really there's no altitude at all, it's slightly under sea level. Have another cup with me?

If, as Norman Klein and other of its theorists argue, Los Angeles is the steel-and-glass city of perpetual techno-apocalypse, New Orleans is its sunken, iron-and-wood counterpart, a city built lower than its graves. Los Angeles tries to erase its past with each new strip mall or postmodernist civic center; in contrast, a mythological New Orleans seems to rise from its own ghosts, to revel in its past, in the sucking mud. It is the Wooster Group's great accomplishment, then, to produce a play laden with both *Blade Runner*-esque cyber-noir—the screens like doomsday ad blimps viewed through

ironwork skylights—and New Orleanian preternatural pathos, an atmosphere of dark growth. Jane, the New York "society girl" dying of leukemia, is not much helped by the climate. The Writer, on the other hand—cast into a murky-headed fantasy possible only in the rain and rot, the loneliness of Williams's French Quarter—becomes a strange blossom. Advertising his sexual awakening, his costume morphs from black pants and white tank top in the first scene to nothing but a jock strap and lavalier microphone in the third, then to blue track shorts, mod boots, and open bowling shirt by the second act: rave or carnivale garb.

> WRITER: . . . No. Wait. She . . . seemed to lift one hand very, very slightly. . . . An almost invisible gesture of . . . forgiveness? . . . through understanding? . . . before she [I] dissolved into sleep . . .

. . . and into a new life; the techno-cast rain overtakes the Writer and does not remit. Gradually, the Writer takes a more active role. (He is, after all, young Williams himself, back in the boarding house where he "sojourned" in 1938.) By the play's second act the Writer is absorbed—swimming in this electric water—preempting the other characters' speech, having surpassed them; authoring the scene's collapse. The Writer cringes, vertiginous. A young drifter in the courtyard plays jazz on his iPod. At the end of the play the Writer heads West (to Los Angeles?) with the handsome musician (whispers of "Sky, Sky..." from the sound system), the Writer the only of the boarders able to leave the Vieux Carré—in body if not in memory. He hesitates at the door suspended by pulleys in the darkness. He returns to his terminal. He types, "This house is empty now." A delirious chuckle; lights dim, monitors fade away.

GEORGE HERMS:
Xenophilia (Love of the Unknown)
at MOCA PDC, Los Angeles

Amy Howden-Chapman

Facing the decay of an erotic relationship, Theodore Adorno describes the pain of recognising the

> transience of one's own feeling . . . [and] the idea offered to us as solace that in a few years we shall not understand our passion, and will be able to meet the loved woman in company with nothing more than fleeting, astonished curiosity.[1]

George Herms's practice of preserving and representing the artifacts of his creative life, however degraded, seems like an attempt to halt the wilting of such affections while also struggling to overcome the transience of memory. Through his assemblages of faded everyday objects, Herms negotiates both aging and decay by maintaining the link between what culture once was and what it has become.

George Herms: Xenophilia (Love of the Unknown), on view at MOCA in Los Angeles, asserts that something old is not necessarily obsolete. In Herms's work, the original functions of his materials—the ladling of a spoon, the warmth once possessed by a scrap of blue velvet—are superseded by their formal qualities, as with two planes of metal rusted to complementary colors. These objects function as symbols of past cultural moments, such as 1950s domesticity and '60s counterculture. In the present show, this process of recombination and juxtaposition extends to other artists. This is done in typical Herms manner: an improvised chaos, a celebration of form, and an amazement at the debris of modern life.

The gallery space is densely filled. With the exception of a precise installation by Amanda Ross-Ho consisting of repurposed household and studio objects contained in an alcove, the physical boundaries between Herms's many pieces and those of the other artists are less than clear. At times the general sense of spontaneous collaboration seems forced, such as in *Untitled (Flower/bullet hole large single collaborative painting on canvas)* (2011), a smug and messy work by the New York cohort Dan Colen, Leo Fitzpatrick, Hanna Liden, Nate Lowman and Agathe Snow. As it tracks a trajectory of experimental practice from the 1950s through the present, the exhibition's strength lies in subtler sparks between adjacent works.

Kathryn Andrews's *Letter* (2011) is the most straightforward enactment of the connection between objects past and present. Andrews presents three opened envelopes in a long frame—each addressed to Herms, each from a different decade—accompanied by a chrome, three-seater bench. This common prop lends a calm gravity to the letters, now rarefied enough to be the subject of their own small cinematic scene. On the other side of the gallery, an assemblage work by Herms consists of hundreds of letters and other personal documents skewered on a ream of wire, fanned and cascading into the room. The letters Andrews chose are from 1976, 1981 and 1995; the

style of post-codes, stamps, and Herms's addresses all change over the years. Andrews's piece complements Herms's own mission of collecting artefacts of bygone days and presenting them side by side, showcasing the distinctive design of each era, and highlighting the fleeting nature of aesthetics.

Melodie Mousset's *Downward Dog* (2011) synthesises two sides of utopian thinking particular to Los Angeles in a single sculpture: a small mountain of ceramic folds describing a body in that bum-pointing-to-sky yoga position which signifies the adoption of eastern practice by so many westerners. The work's surface is stamped with geometric indentations taken from Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House, creating a perforated, lace-like effect. *Downward Dog* speaks to the different cultural ages of Los Angeles in which its architects, artists and gurus tried to create enduring cultural forms, however utopian or self-absorbed.

With *A Selection of 400 Collages* (2009-11) Herms embraces a single medium in order to explore the endless variations possible when attempting to order aesthetic clutter. His glitzy collages include images of fast cars, silk swirls, watches and breaking waves. Advertising images are again re-purposed, subverting the desirability of the objects through abutment, as when diamonds curve into a cut-out section of coral. The collages, and by extension this collaborative retrospective, collate disparate visual elements in order to question the lasting worth assigned to materials, implicating fluctuations in the relative cultural value of objects.

Though the exhibition is billed as a solo show, Herms insisted that curator Neville Wakefield include younger artists—representatives of the unknown future. His decision reshaped the usual backward gaze of a retrospective into a selection of contemporary American practices. Herms seemingly prefers that his assemblage resonate with current work, for what could be worse than being unable to connect the production of a lifetime with the world in which one currently lives?

Note:

1 Adorno, Theodor W., "Messages in a Bottle," in Mapping Ideology, *ed. Slavoj Zizek (New York: Verso, 1994), 38.*

SIMON FUJIWARA'S
Welcome to the Hotel Munber
at the Power Plant, Toronto

Steve Kado

Simon Fujiwara's *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* was presented as a room-sized installation that restages a moment when the artist's parents (ostensibly) operated a hotel in Fascist Spain. This being not a replica but a rewrite, Fujiwara fills his model with elaborate gay in-jokes, if not actually framing his parents' relationship as gay romance then at least implying that "gayness" permeated the hotel, or that "gayness" was imposed upon it by the machismo of Franco's state. In so doing, Fujiwara maps the contradiction between the strident illegality of homosexuality under Franco and the homosocial adulation of masculine virility that pervaded official state culture.

The room is a dimly lit, wood paneled model of a saloon decorated with various Iberian tchotchkes, framed photos, barrels of spirits, wine flasks, etc. But more than physical objects, the room is crammed with double-entendres. A pair of cornucopia lie listlessly penetrating each other on a mantle, two wieners are skewered with the same sword, a mounted bull's head wears a framed text around its neck telling us that Franco had lost a testicle... and so on. The fact is, the conflation of homosexuality and fascism is a boring tale, a cliché, well worn into narratives of gay desire from Mishima to Tom of Finland. Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982) comes to mind—itself a kitsched-up adaptation of Genet. In *Querelle* there is a tenderness to the straits in which Genet's narrative finds itself, bent and bound to a theatrical form so restrictively artificial that "desire," such as it is, becomes something merely mechanical. And yet, confined to Fassbinder's gentle sadism, the distant and ironic artificiality of *Querelle*'s "theatricality" overwhelms the fragile structure of the narrative with a meta-humor of its own. There is an air of sadness to Fassbinder's desperately contrived take on Genet—an air perhaps heightened by our awareness that this was Fassbinder's last film.

Dying after the erection of *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* is not, I would suggest, a good way for Fujiwara to atone for this limp installation. A simple return to form would do. Fujiwara is more than capable of constructing durable and fascinating fictions. Especially when, as with Fassbinder, he lays on the theatre with a heavy trowel. In the performance *The Personal Effects of Theo Grünberg* (2010), for instance, he seems to ape the narrator of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, an unreliable biographer of a subject who exists as a thinly-veiled allegory for "modern Germany" as much as anything else. Without the scope, intelligence and depth of *Theo Grünberg*, *Hotel Munber* feels like paying a visit to the set for the Electric Six's "Gay Bar" video relocated to an exotic Iberian setting. And perhaps, without being given the option of experiencing the performance aspect, atmosphere is all we are to derive from this installation. We are left waiting for the actual work to show itself.[1]

Whether or not this represents a restaging or reversioning of his family history, as Fujiwara seems at pains to claim, is of

no interest. Regardless of its pretensions to personal accuracy, *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* remains entirely a Fujiwara construction. Its truth content stops there. In *Theo Grünberg*, Fujiwara claims to have made a trip to the Amazon to research his subject, who was at one time an explorer. The implausibility of such a trip actually having happened aside, it's hard to say whether one cares if he did or did not go to the Amazon. The story tells itself. This is fine. When the story is one of substance and when the thrills are not so dependent on the author's auratic connection to a solid "truth," then, to keep itself moving, the story needs all incidents to take the correct form. But when the story harps so loudly on the author's real life connection to the history being reimagined, those details cannot take their place in fiction and have to be interesting and true themselves. Perhaps if Fujiwara himself appeared and used the set for a performance, this insistence on the family narrative would make sense. However, as a mere installation, in the end we can gather only that Fujiwara is one of many gay men to have found the need to plow the furrow of fascism's luxurious masculinity for material, and so an opportunity to surprise and investigate within those strictures is lost. The result is more like Scott Thompson's "Buddy Cole in Prison" sketch from Kids in the Hall than Laibach.

It's not that homoeroticism is incompatible with giving authoritarianism its horrible due, but neither can the conflation of both be said to always succeed, least of all when the dictatorship is treated so cartoonishly. And ultimately, it is this, not the homoerotic rewriting, that renders Fujiwara's claim to be working with family truth irrelevant and hard to believe.

One is left with the impression that when, in some dazzling technological future, gay men are able to biologically reproduce, *Welcome to the Hotel Munber*'s sloppy double-entendres will look like a collection of hokey dad jokes—crappy puns that make driving the kids from soccer practice to the goddamn mall bearable (for dads).

Note:

1. To be clear here, the Power Plant in Toronto nowhere mentioned that Welcome to the Hotel Munber *was itself the set for a performance. I later discovered that (nearly) the entire Hotel Munber installation was transported to New York and comprised 1/3 of Fujiwara's contribution to the most recent Performa. Proposing 1/3 of 1/3 of a performance (1/9th of an actual work!) as an installation means that someone has some apologizing to do.*

BEING POSSESSED:
Roberto Cuoghi
at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Jon Rutzmoser

The same year that *The Exorcist* was released in the US (1973), arousing a deep and widespread fear of possession, Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi was born. Thirty-eight years later, for his first solo exhibition in the States, Cuoghi turns to the film's demon, Pazuzu, the hybrid human/animal Assyrian spirit of the wind, as a way of grounding his self-referential practice in the logic of possession.

The exhibition consists of several meticulously crafted *Untitled* self-portraits clustered more or less at eye level on the walls of the elliptical gallery, surrounding a five-foot tall double-sided Pazuzu statue. The mixed media drawings vary drastically in both form and style, yet they all depict the artist in the guise of another person. The images are caught between representing archetypal figures and retaining some semblance of the individual. In one portrait, a bodiless intellectual's head, watercolor and chalk on paper, is layered between Plexiglas and acetate. In a speech bubble, he channels Beuys's words, *zeige deine wunde* ("show your wound"), but adds a camouflaged 'r,' to compound a new phrase, *zeige deine wunder* ("show me, oh Lord, your revelation").[1] This 'r' possesses. *We* are this 'r,' this sound of a growl—in *The Exorcist*, the sound of Pazuzu inside Regan, his young female host, her eyes rolling back as she snarls, her throat bubbling as she speaks, "Keep away! Keep away! This […] is mine." It is unclear whether the word is "soul" or "hole" or "all." Pazuzu/Regan thrusts both of her hands between her legs, screaming, "Fuck me!" Simultaneously penetrating us with wound and revelation, spewing from Beuys through Cuoghi and Pazuzu/Regan then back again in every order, Cuoghi reveals to us that subjectivity consists of *multiple* possessions.

In another image, Cuoghi, with an effaced mouth, stares directly at us. A few lightly drawn, barely noticeable teeth poke through where his lips and gums should be. Other, actual teeth, clinically grouped like human or animal dental records, line the bottom of the frame. This erasure of the mouth and displacement of the teeth counter the "talking" portraits in the collection, while also referencing Deleuze's notion of becoming-animal-spirit. In his analysis of Bacon's paintings, Deleuze says that the open mouth "turns all meat into a head without a face. It is no longer a particular organ, but a hole," a soul, an all, "through which the entire body escapes and from which the flesh descends."[2] The lipless and gumless Cuoghi head flips Deleuze's analysis, demonstrating that the mouth need not be open to function. By virtue of the teeth meeting the flesh in this image, we understand all Cuoghi's self-portraits as Deleuzian heads, which not only index the process of Cuoghi becoming animal spirit, but invite us to do the same.

This leads us back to the Pazuzu centerpiece. The black marble sculpture is a smaller version of Cuoghi's 2008 *Pazuzu*, itself a twenty-foot-tall reproduction of an ancient six-inch-tall bronze figure.[3] The Hammer *Pazuzu,* however,

is doubled, each twin back-to-back, so that they "intertwine like an X, becoming one."[4] The piece acts as both a physical and conceptual X, where X is the universal stand-in for an unknown. Pazuzu possesses X. In his self-portraits, Cuoghi is becoming X. In the exhibit, we are invited to become X. Yet, as we enter the space, *Pazuzu* enters us, acting as both a sentinel and a catalyst for the artist's work and our viewing of it. We are thrust into a network of shared possessions and subject/object relations. Immersed in this network, we find value in the quest for material and immaterial predications. X marks the spot.

One of the few color images depicts a green Incredible Cuoghi-cum-Hulk-cum-Buddha standing fat in a plume of smoke. His left hand appears in two positions like a double-exposure: in one instance, he holds an empty birdcage; in the other, he raises his knuckled fist as a perch. Above it, we read: *no es jaula vacia es pajaro libre* ("it is not empty cage it is free bird"). The character looks towards his hand. We wonder what he knows, and where the free bird has gone. Is the fist a perch for landing? Is it a surface from which something departs? Perhaps the bird is contained within the giant hand, crushed? We are encouraged to conjure as many possibilities as there are Cuoghis. Moreover, we are confronted with the deferred logic of subjectivity itself. Are we caged vessels? Are we free to invite ourselves to land within ourselves? What has left us and what has been crushed? Whatever the answer, whatever the question, we accept the invitation to understand ourselves as animals possessing and freely possessed.

Notes:

1 Ali Subotnick, "Roberto Cuoghi - Exhibitions," Hammer Museum. Website, http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition_id/195, accessed December 29, 2011.

2 Gilles Deleuze, "Body, Meat, and Spirit, Becoming-Animal," Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation, *trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York: Continuum, 2004), 26.*

3 Cuoghi saw the original piece in the Louvre. His 2008 version was exhibited at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy.

4 Subotnick.

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