

ARTPULSE

NO. 30 | VOL. 8 | YEAR 2018
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**On the Trail of the Unicorn:
Trying to Define Art**

The Paradox of Expressionism

Ragnar Kjartansson

Interviews

Arturo Duclos

Balint Zsako

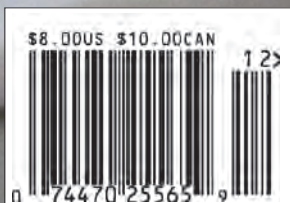
Pia MYrvoLD

Ramiro Lacayo Deshón

Dara Friedman

**The Prophetical Guide
In Conversation with Milton Glaser**

**Interview with
Antonis Pittas**



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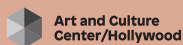
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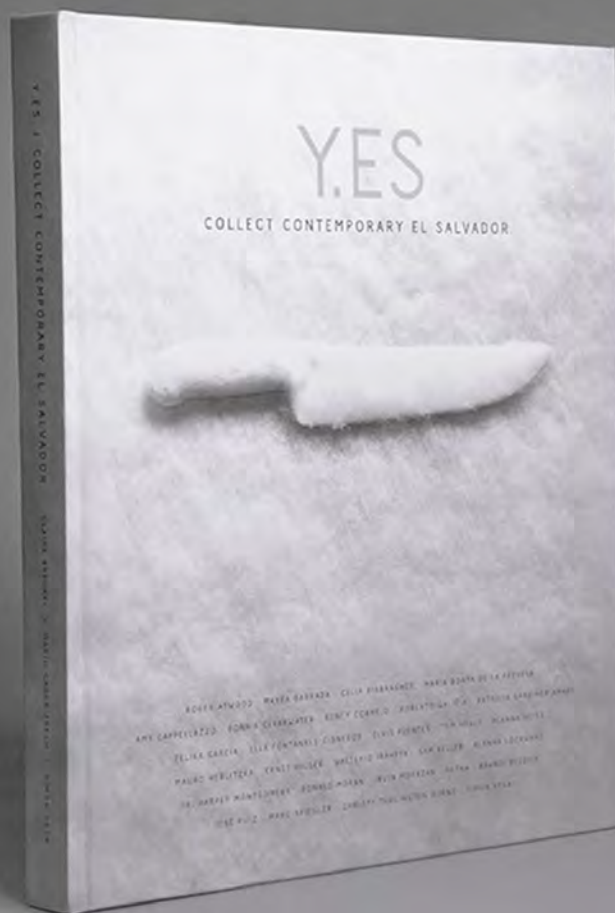
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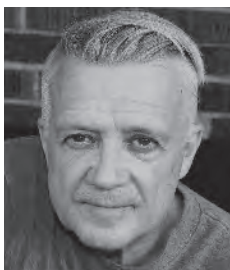
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Tim Hadfield, a British artist, educator and curator, is currently a professor of media arts at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh. He has exhibited widely in the United States, Europe and Asia. As a curator, he has presented exhibitions across the U.S. and internationally. In 2003, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and in 2010 co-founded the Sewickley Arts Initiative.



Michele Robecchi is a writer and curator based in London. A former managing editor of *Flash Art* (2001-2004) and senior editor at *Contemporary Magazine* (2005-2007), he is currently a visiting lecturer at Christie's Education and an editor at Phaidon Press, where he has edited monographs about Marina Abramović, Francis Alÿs, Jorge Pardo, Stephen Shore and Ai Weiwei.



Daniel Bonnell is an artist, writer and educator, as well as author of the book *Shadow Lessons*. The text chronicles an artist's unexpected journey into an inner-city, at-risk, high school culture. He has exhibited his art in a variety of venues, including St. Paul's Cathedral in London, St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. His eclectic studio instructors included painter Ed Ross, photographer Ansel Adams and designer Milton Glaser.



Daphne Vitali is a Greek-Italian art historian and curator. Since 2006, she has worked as a curator at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, where she has organized numerous group and solo exhibitions of Greek and international artists. She has published essays on contemporary art in various publications and international art periodicals, including *ARTPULSE*, *Kunstforum International* and *Mousse*, and has authored many artists' catalogues. She recently curated the exhibition "Uncinematic George Drivas" at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome in 2017.

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Cover page: Antonis Pittas, *we will do as we have decided*, 2013, marble, graphite, 193 pieces, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Studio Antonis Pittas, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam.

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ARTPULSE is published four times per year

SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE:

\$30 USA / \$50 Mexico & Canada / \$60 International

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GENERAL INQUIRIES

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PUBLISHER

ARTPULSE LLC
P.O. Box 960008 Miami, FL 33296
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The Big Kahuna

BY MICHELE ROBECCHI



Over the course of his remarkable career, Damien Hirst, among other things, has collected art. The bulk of this collection, mostly made of swaps arranged with his fellow YBA associates, grew with time to include the work of household names he admired in his youth, emerging artists

he thought would have a bright future, along with a series of objects that testifies to his interest in science and death. (A part of this cabinet of curiosities was later exhibited at the Barbican Art Gallery in London's show "Magnificent Obsessions.")

How big Hirst's collection is and who or what exactly is in it is to these days a matter of speculation, but it was only in the cards that one day he would decide to do something with it. After all, Hirst had displayed from his earliest professional days a stunning business acumen—we are talking about the same artist who organized taxis to drive curators and collectors to see his college exhibitions, and that would later engage in all sorts of ventures, from running an art publishing house to opening a restaurant in Notting Hill.

Following an initial presentation of his collection at the Serpentine Galleries in 2006 and a failed bid for the Sackler building in Hyde Park (now ironically part of the Serpentine), Hirst eventually converted an old property he had in Vauxhall into a permanent venue for his art. The Victorian building—once a scenery-painting workshop for West End theaters—was tastefully restored by architect Peter St. John and opened around Frieze week in October 2015. The event predictably got a lot of media attention, but those who were expecting the latest extravaganza of a billionaire with a healthy ego and an insatiable appetite for publicity were to be disappointed. Unlike the Broads, Rubells, Sandretto Re Rebaudengos and Saatchis of our age, Hirst's space was not called "The Damien Hirst Museum" but the Newport Street Gallery, in reference to the place where it is located.

Even more surprisingly, the opening show wasn't a group exhibition with a bombastic title about the current and most provocative trends in art but a sober solo presentation of the late John Hoyland, a British color field pioneer whose groundbreaking work has once had to endure the scrutiny of famed realist sculptor Charles Wheeler over whether abstract artists can actually paint or not. Directed by his longtime friend and business partner Hugh Allan, the gallery also gave Hirst a way to resurrect his original idea of a restaurant, now called Pharmacy 2, as well as to open a shop selling a range of by-products, from wallpaper rolls to posters and limited-edition prints.

These are the areas of the building showing familiar pillars of Hirst's esthetics, like pills and butterflies, but the only places where his sensibility is visible. The following exhibitions of artists like Jeff Koons and Ashley Bickerton provided plenty of evidence of the ongoing dialogue between Hirst and the artists from the generation that preceded him and the interest they share in developing a personal visual vocabulary while incorporating recognizable elements of popular culture.



Dan Colen, *The Big Kahuna*, 2010–2017, concrete, steel flagpole, paint, American flag, aluminum, plastic beads, steel cable, dimensions variable. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates. Copyright Dan Colen and Victor Mara Ltd.

This is interestingly also true for the Newport Street Gallery's last effort, Dan Colen's solo show "Sweet Liberty." Augmented for the first time by works on loan in a wise attempt to add more dimension to their presentations, Colen's exhibition follows the circular narrative of the architecture with a site-specific installation featuring Kool-Aid Man, Roger Rabbit, Wile E. Coyote and a life-size replica of himself perforating the walls of the gallery in true cartoon fashion only to collapse at the very end. The work stems from a performance Colen did on opening night and resonates with a moving sculpture of Raja Gosnell's 2002 version of Scooby-Doo on the upper floor. The choice of Roger Rabbit and Scooby-Doo is not casual. Disney's Rabbit was the first serious attempt, discounting Micky Mouse's handshake with conductor Leopold Stokowski in *Fantasia*, to amalgamate real and animated characters—a successful concept that Hanna-Barbera subsequently reprised in Scooby-Doo.

Confronted with these sculptures, it is difficult not to think of how the transition from the bi-dimensional to the three-dimensional world turns these benevolent and friendly figures into disturbing entities. But the piece that best represents Colen's tackling of the machismo of the American way of life is undoubtedly *The Big Kahuna* (2010–17). Borrowing its title from a Hawaiian word used to describe a miracle worker (or most likely the name of the company in John Swanbeck's 1999 film adaptation of Roger Rueff's *Hospitality Suite*), the sculpture consists in a large American flag squashed by a cement block. It is only when you walk around the room that you realize that the block is actually the original support of the flag.

Forever tied together through a battered and tangled flagpole, the ultimate symbol of freedom is hence crushed by the very same base that should keep it high and waving—a pretty powerful metaphor that the proximity of the controversially expensive and massively fortified future U.S. Embassy building in Nine Elms does very little to allay. ■

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Museums, Spectators and Participation

BY PACO BARRAGÁN



For more than two centuries since the Louvre went public, the museum has hardly changed.

I am shockingly aware that such a statement may sound like a provocation, as many respected professionals from the museum world and academia alike—Kenneth Hudson and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill among them—

think just the opposite: that “museums refuse to stand still” and that “change has been unprecedented and extreme.”

Imagine now the first peasants, pimps and prostitutes who visited on August 10, 1793, the day the Louvre first opened to the public, being catered around like ignorant cattle but fulfilling their inalienable revolutionary rights to the “ouvrages maintenant appartenants à la nation française”, while they stared in awe at voluptuous gods, satraps and nymphs. Fast-forward to today, we see visitors in the same Louvre running about freely and loudly while they try to crowd together in front of the *Mona Lisa* or MoMA’s *The Starry Night* by Van Gogh to take a *selfie* in the same superficial aesthetic mood as in the past.

Whilst awe has certainly given away to irreverence, the citizen-spectator continues to be no more than a passerby looking at the “top of the pops” and fatally assuming a passive condition in the face of what the ‘nanny museum’ has decided is convenient for you to see, and what Jean-Jacques David incisively labeled as a “vain assemblage of frivolous luxury objects that serve only to satisfy idle curiosity.”

The many adults and adolescents who don’t attend museums typically explain why with the same crushing unanimity: “They are boring!” And if we insist on a more elaborate answer, we hear something in the vein of: “They are not fun like, you know, a movie, a pop concert or a videogame.” And let’s not forget the too often pseudo-intellectual topics that are going to save the planet, boring exhibition displays on antiseptic “white walls,” bureaucratic style wall texts and credits, and the usually snotty, paternalist treatment of the visitor.

The shift from a *word-based* to an *image-based* society has created new audiences who demand a different museology: It’s not about *seeing* but about *participating*, not about the *intention* of the artist or institution but about one’s own individual *experience*. Our visitor now hails from a visual, pop, participative, short-attention-span, multitasking media culture.

Unlike Germany around 1900, where the art world argued about whether or not to collect contemporary art, and the equally fascinating debates in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, which focused on downplaying bourgeois ideology and the deification of the artwork, the American-Eurocentric art world has never had such heated discussions in its search for a different museum model.

As a natural result of this lack of criticality, I argue that in the early 21st century we’re still stuck with unradical museums, unradical collections, unradical exhibitions and unradical audiences.

THE MUSEUM AND ITS PARADOXES

The “enlightened” museum was borne out of an act of estrangement, and the “modern” museum suffered a second and additional act of iconoclasm. So paradox is its second skin. The unavoidable question is still then: Is the original context or framework necessary, or can we



Visitors crowd around of Vincent van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, at MoMA, New York. Photo: Paco Barragán.

experience art directly? We can agree with Peter Vergo, who argues that, for most visitors, works of art remain remarkably “taciturn objects.” And in this further quest for the past, the museum, as the child of imperialism, colonialism and neocapitalism, respectively, also raises contingent questions about culture, race, gender and class.

While the “universal survey museum” (Duncan and Wallach) still struggled with the enlightened idea of contextualization—think of the famous *Period Room* and *Stimmungsraum*—for modern and contemporary museums, this was no longer an issue. I have to admit that I was moved to tears when I recently found out that the Stedelijk Museum had a period room until 1973!

Based on German museum models experimented between 1875 and 1933 by professionals such as Wilhelm von Bode, Alexander Dorner, Karl Ernst Osthaus and Hugo von Tschudi, MoMA’s director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., successfully adapted and introduced the *weisse Wand*, or white wall. Wrongly translated, the anachronistic “white cube” display, which was born in the 1930s, became *the* standard in international modern and contemporary museology and has lasted ever since.

Today, the problem is that the formalist “white cube” model is not appropriate for the vast majority of museum visitors who aren’t experts and are unable to engage with art in a critical manner.

Albeit the 20th century democratic idea of the nation-state providing access to culture for all its citizens, this absence of mediation between the artwork and the public demands a notoriously higher competence from the spectator in order to fulfill a meaningful experience.

With wittiness, Eco signaled some years ago that, by lack of information, the encounter with the artwork-fetish only provided the spectator with a superficial aesthetic enjoyment.

Klaus Biesenbach said recently in an interview that people “take many pictures at MoMA every day” and that “that’s participation.”

It would be ironic to think that the evolution of the visitor, from the French Revolution to today, has ended up meaning taking a *selfie*. ■

Art | Basel Hong Kong

Photograph taken at Artistree

March 29–31, 2018



ON THE TRAIL OF THE UNICORN: TRYING TO DEFINE ART

BY JOHN VALENTINE

There have been many attempts to capture and analyze this elusive animal in the history of philosophical thought. Plato and Aristotle, for example, took the route of necessary and sufficient conditions. That is, they assumed that for any item correctly to be designated as art it had to be 1) an artifact, and 2) an imitation. Hence, their use of the term *mimesis*: art is essentially any humanly-made object that copies natural forms or those of the human world. Thus, these two characteristics were thought to be jointly necessary and sufficient to tell us what art is. This approach is over two thousand years old and still has its devotees in the contemporary art world.

The problem, of course, with this ancient definition is that societies have evolved and we now accept abstract and non-representational works as art. This ancient, two-place predicate is susceptible to many counter-examples. And so are various other two-place predicate attempts. Consider: art is 1) an artifact, 2) that is physically beautiful. But one sees immediately here that beauty is highly subjective and there can exist works of art that are not regarded as physically beautiful. Another attempt: art is 1) an artifact, 2) that is expressive of emotions. We find this approach in philosophers such as Leo Tolstoy and R.G. Collingwood. But, aside from the issue of exactly how an inanimate work of art can express emotions, we have the significant objection that not all works of art are meant to be expressive of emotions nor need they be taken that way by audiences. And finally, it has been suggested that art is 1) an artifact, that 2) is creative. The issue now, I think, is obvious. If “creative” means “unique/never experienced before,” then this unduly restricts the domain of art. And also, even with a weaker definition of “creative,” there are clearly many works in the art world that are commonly accepted as art but show no creativity whatsoever (knock-offs, etc.).

My brief survey of two-place predicate attempts to define art is not meant to be exhaustive. I have outlined some of the main contenders. However, a sea change took place in the 1960s. The philosopher Arthur Danto, following a line of thinking in Marcel Duchamp and Maurice Mandelbaum, wrote a famous article entitled “The Art World” in which he claimed that art is any object (artifact) presented to or found within the ‘atmosphere of theory’ in the contemporary art world. Noël Carroll formulated Danto’s approach to defining art in more rigorous terms: “X is a work of art if and only if (a) X has a subject (b) about which X projects an attitude or point of view (c) by means of rhetorical (usually metaphorical) ellipsis, (d) which ellipsis requires audience participation to fill in what is missing (interpretation), (e) where both the work and the interpretation require an art-historical context.”¹ This complicated-sounding formula is actually fairly straightforward.

It says that a work of art must have a subject (it must be about something) toward which the artist is expressing an attitude; the technique of expression involves ellipsis or some kind of shortening or coding of the subject and point of view; the shortening or coding requires that audiences produce an interpretation or theory of what is ‘being said’ in the work; and this latter task can only be accomplished in a given art-historical setting.

An example would be useful at this point. Consider Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Some critics have claimed that the urinal as presented in 1917 had a subject, namely the basic idea of art itself; that Duchamp was radically critiquing—in Dada-esque terms—prevalent ideas about art by means of the ellipsis or enigmatic quality of the urinal itself, which ellipsis virtually forced audiences to interpret the work in critical terms, and this interpretation could only be accomplished within the relevant art historical time period (the early days of Dada and the turn-of-the-century atmosphere of theories about art in the art world). If Danto is right about this, *Fountain* could not have been presented as a work of art in 1817 because the art world simply had no nest of incipient ideas at that time regarding readymade objects as art. And to try to define art by means of its formal qualities (line, shape, color, texture, etc.) allegedly is defeated by Danto’s so-called ‘visually-indistinguishable-pairs’ argument. Danto claims that, of two visually identical objects (for example, snow shovels), one would be art if it were presented within the art world, while the other would not be art if presented, say, at a hardware store. The only explanation for this, he says, is that the former shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm?*) is found and interpreted within the matrix of theories making up the art world, whereas the latter shovel lacks this crucial context and is not therefore art.

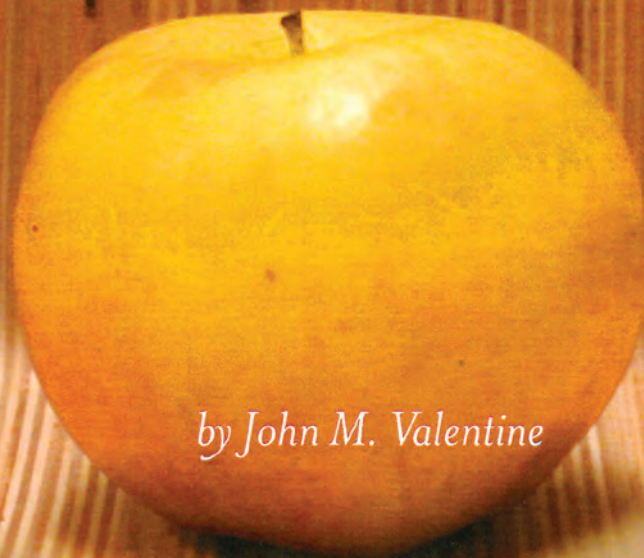
Danto’s theory was influenced by a statement Duchamp made concerning readymades: “No beauty, no ugliness, nothing particularly aesthetic about them.” Danto was also influenced by an argument put forward by the philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum to the effect that art could be defined, not by reference to physical characteristics of putative art objects, but by the ideational context in which they are found/presented.² These earlier ideas evolved into Danto’s full-blown definition of art, and also influenced George Dickie’s later approach to defining art.³ The ‘art world’ or ‘institutional’ definition is now widespread in many cultural and academic settings.

But there are problems here. Danto and Dickie do not tell us about how the art world originated historically. There’s an odd circularity in saying that an item can only be art in terms of its presence in a pre-existing art world when we don’t know with exactness the origin of that world. Which came first: putative art objects or the art world itself? Also, both philosophers are vague about defining the term ‘art world’

BEGINNING aESTHETiCS

an introduction to the philosophy of art

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by John M. Valentine

John Valentine. Beginning Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Pub Co. First published in 2001.

with precision, and whether there is only one art world or many (Danto was often accused of equating the ‘art world’ with ‘the world of art in New York City’). However, I think that to track down the unicorn of an adequate definition of art we will have to return to the issue of formalism and the formal properties of putative art objects.

First, however, a brief point about nomenclature. Most philosophers today believe that, whatever else art is, it must at least be an artifact (something made by humans). In the past decade or so, scientists have discovered the incredible abilities of many other animal species (see Vir-

ginia Morell’s excellent book *Animal Wise*). Among these abilities is the widespread appearance of an aesthetic sensibility and the likelihood that many animals can make art-objects, at least in a basic way. While these claims are still being debated, I shall choose to take the high road and substitute the neologism ‘sentifact’ for the old word ‘artifact.’ A sentifact is any object created by a sentient being. Thus, Koko’s gorilla paintings and the nests made by male Bower Birds (among other animal examples) would be sentifacts. But could they be art?

Let’s try to answer this by re-considering the issue of defining art



Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Fountain*, 1917, urinal signed R. Mutt. Published in *The Blind Man*, No. 2, page 4, New York, May 1917, Editors: Henri-Pierre Roche, Beatrice Wood, and Marcel Duchamp. Caption read: "Fountain by R. Mutt, Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS." Source: Wikimedia Commons.

by way of formal qualities such as line, shape, color, texture, smell, and so on. Duchamp tells us there is "nothing particularly aesthetic" about readymades, but everything here depends on what he meant by the word 'aesthetic.' Indeed, he clarified this in an interview given in 1915: "If only America would realize that the art of Europe is finished—dead—and that America is the country of the art of the future...Look at the skyscrapers! Has Europe anything to show more beautiful than these?"⁴ In other words, Duchamp was bored with the old 19th Century Salon standards of beauty and aesthetics. But he apparently overlooked or ignored the root meaning of the Greek word *aisthētikos*, namely 'that which is perceived by the senses.' We may be able therefore to make a distinction between low-end sensory (or formal) qualities of an intentionally made object (the primordial aesthetics of the object, if you will) and higher-end aesthetic qualities, such as beauty, elegance, harmony, mystery, and so on. Higher-end aesthetic qualities are generally more complex than low-end ones and thus require some kind of critical interpretation, undoubtedly via a web of theories in the existing art world. With this distinction in mind we might offer the following definition of art: art is any intentionally made sentifact that has been produced as a candidate for low-end aesthetic notice. But something is still missing.

The missing ingredient is what I call a 'perceptual shift.' Let's first consider Jastrow's famous duck/rabbit image. Looked at from a certain perspective and with the concept of a duck in mind (either explicitly or implicitly), one sees a duck. Likewise, from a different perspective and with the concept of a rabbit in mind, one sees a rabbit. One can shift back and forth between the two images rather easily, but they cannot be seen simultaneously. We can apply this generic sort of perceptual shift to defining art. There's no better

example than a readymade. Viewed from a utilitarian perspective, *Fountain* is clearly a urinal. But viewed from the perspective of low-end aesthetic properties, *Fountain* can be shifted, as it were, to a candidate for aesthetic notice, wherein its functionality is kept in the background. When so shifted, we can say that we are perceiving *Fountain* as art simpliciter; that is, we are not asking about the critical meaning of the piece or whether it is good or bad art. Via the perceptual shift from function to form, we are saying that the piece is art in merely a low-end classification sense (art vs. non-art). Additionally, it should be noted that Duchamp also mentioned the possibility of 'reverse readymades': take a painting by Rembrandt and use it as an ironing board! Aside from the obvious absurdity of this, one can see how the perceptual shift can move fluidly from function to form, and back again to function.

Now we can put all these aspects together: art is any intentionally made sentifact that has been produced as a candidate for low-end aesthetic notice by means of a perceptual shift. Notice that this definition can be applied outside of any existing art world. It has the virtue of being phenomenologically foundational, and need not address the issue of whether or not the putative art object 'has a meaning' that must be interpreted within a nest of existing art world theories. Interpreting art is not the same as defining it in the low-end classification sense.

Although the 'sentifact theory' of art has other complexities, I shall briefly consider four major objections to it. The first is that the theory cannot account for performance or conceptual art where the idea behind the piece is crucial (consider the work of Joseph Beuys). But, as I've suggested, the low-end formal qualities of the art object are phenomenologically foundational; they are place-holders establishing the artness *as such* of the object. What the performance or conceptual work means, or what the artist is 'trying to say,' is a high-end critical function. It is not crucial in defining art, although it may be in terms of understanding it.

Secondly, one might argue that the sentifact theory is too broad; it would allow anything and everything to be art. But notice that the theory rules out naturally occurring objects for the status of art—they are not sentifacts. Thus, the theory preserves the semantic sortal distinction between art and non-art: if everything is art, nothing is. Also, art in the 21st century has become so diverse and multi-faceted that we need a very broad definition of it. The sentifact theory provides a non-circular and very broad definition. (An example of a circular and useless definition of art would be: "art is anything that artists say it is.")

Thirdly, one might wonder if ideas as such can be art. Are ideas intentionally made sentifacts that have been produced as candidates for low-end aesthetic notice by means of a perceptual shift? George Dickie has led the way here by arguing that artifacts do not have to be physical, they can be mental. (He gives the example of a poem as a non-physical artifact.) If this is true, then sentifacts can be mental. If a sufficiently intelligent sentient being (such as a human or other higher primate or male Bower Bird, etc.) is capable of making something like a concept or image emerge in its consciousness, then it might also be capable of doing a sort of intuitive perceptual shift where it is mentally considering only the imagined low-end aesthet-



Greg Eltringham, *Mission Accomplished*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 65 x 91. Photo: John McKinnon

ics of the concept or image. In the case of humans, for example, take the example of someone imagining the formal qualities of an Arabian stallion. What he or she is imagining is indeed a mental sentifact that satisfies the criteria of the sentifact definition of art. He or she creates the idea of the stallion, notices the imaginary formal qualities of the stallion in their ‘mind’s eye,’ and is shifting away from the horse as a functional or rideable object to the horse as aesthetic form. And we might note that Koko (the lowland gorilla) not only makes paintings, she also names them. One only has to read Virginia Morell’s book to see how we humans have vastly underestimated the capabilities of non-human animals due to our persistent speciesism.

The last objection I shall consider to the sentifact theory has to do with intentionally made sentifacts that are produced with only functionality in mind. Could they still be correctly designated as art? If the original maker of the sentifact does not do the perceptual shift from function to form, someone else could do it in their stead. I call this process ‘Duchampification.’ For example, Brillo Boxes at the grocery store could be re-purposed as art objects simpliciter if we titled and named them—either individually or collectively—and pointed or referred to their low-end formal aesthetic properties via the perceptual shift. This is somewhat similar to what Duchamp did with the transition from the urinal to *Fountain*; there could be an intentional re-making of the Boxes as candidates for aesthetic notice.

We can do this even if it was not done originally by the makers of the Boxes. This might also pertain to non-human animal cases where we are not sure if the animal in question has an aesthetic sensibility, but of course one must be careful about this assumption. Thus, an ant hill might be Duchampified just in case we believe that ants cannot do the requisite job required by the sentifact theory.

In conclusion, I believe the sentifact theory has some potential to be the lost unicorn in the search for art’s definition. It has the virtue of avoiding many of the pitfalls of ‘art world’ theories and in no way threatens future artistic creativity. It also provides some important necessary and sufficient conditions for defining art rather than saying art is an open concept (i.e., one with no definition) or art is “anything you want it to be.” Time will tell if we are coming closer to our rare and hard-to-find unicorn. ■

NOTES

1. Carroll, N. Cited in Stecker, R. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005, p. 94.
2. See Mandelbaum, M. “Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts,” in Neill, A. and Ridley, A. *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995.
3. See Dickie, G. *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytical Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
4. Duchamp, M. Cited in Danto, A. “Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defense of Contemporary Art.” *News, TOUT-FAIT: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*. 2000. Issue 3: 1-15.

THE PARADOX OF EXPRESSIONISM

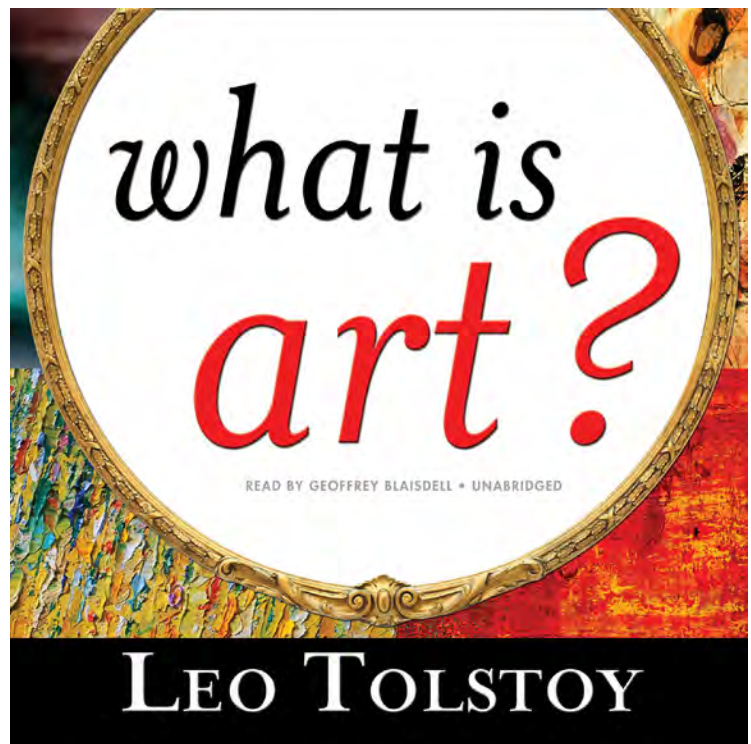
BY JOHN VALENTINE

For the purposes of this essay, I shall define expressionism—à la the Romantic movement of the 19th century—as the theory that one of the main functions of artworks, if not their very essence, is that they somehow ‘contain,’ ‘suggest,’ or ‘give voice to’ human feelings. I shall not be concerned with the theory that artworks do these things with regard to ideas. It seems clear that they do, however that involves a cognitive theory of art that I will address at another time.

For the sake of simplicity, we could use Leo Tolstoy’s definition of art as paradigmatic: “Art is a human activity consisting in this. That one man consciously, by means of external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.” (Tolstoy’s *What is Art?*) This is ostensibly a simple input/output theory. The artist puts feelings into a work of art and the audience receives these feelings as a sort of ‘infection’ or ‘contagion.’ It will not be relevant for my essay to debate whether we should take this ‘handing on of feelings’ in a strong or weak sense. That is, I will not be concerned with whether the artist is experiencing said feelings at the exact moment of creating the artwork or whether she is remembering earlier feelings and transposing them during later artistic creation. (It’s likely that Tolstoy held the weaker claim since the stronger is susceptible to many more obvious counter-examples.)

This being said, I believe there is a fundamental paradox involved with expressionism as the Romantics and Tolstoy understood it: the vast majority of artworks, it seems, are inanimate and are thus incapable of expressing feelings in any literal or straightforward way. I’m being deliberately simplistic here. Unless we are considering forms of artistic expression where the human face and/or body are depicted or Disneyesque analogues where mice and trees (et. al.) having human qualities are depicted—and there are undoubtedly similar exceptions—most works of art are ‘mute objects.’ They are not sentient and are thus incapable of expressing feelings. And yet, it is an undeniable phenomenological experience of critics and audiences alike that they continuously find whole ranges of feelings involved in their interactions with even the most abstract and non-objective art forms. How can this be explained?

One way is to take a causal approach. We might argue that a work of art can be said to be expressive of feelings if it causes audiences to feel what the artist felt (or weakly, if it causes audiences to have any feelings at all). This was Tolstoy’s view, but the problem



Leo Tolstoy. *What is Art?* Published by Blackstone Audiobooks, 2008.

here is that ‘X expresses feeling Y’ is not semantically or philosophically the same as ‘X causes feeling Y.’ They are independent claims. If, for example, a Requiem Mass by Bach causes one to feel solemn and sad, we may still be unclear as to how the Mass as such expresses these feelings. What did Bach do to make the music itself solemn and sad? Obviously, one might respond that the sadness is a function of tempo and key considerations: the Mass has a slow tempo and is played in a minor key, with the implication perhaps that sad people themselves act and speak in this manner. But this cannot be true across all cultures and there are many counter-examples, such as a jazz funeral that might feature faster music in a major key. So the causal approach does not seem to be one that can solve the fundamental paradox of expressionism.

Very briefly, two other approaches to the paradox. ‘X expresses feeling Y’ might mean that X describes or depicts someone feeling Y. I touched on this above. For instance, certain paintings, drawings, or illustrations may be said to express suffering if they actually depict someone who seems to be suffering (such as a painting of Christ’s crucifixion or Munch’s *The Scream*). This approach works in a few cases but its general applicability is in doubt because counter-examples are easy to imagine, such as emotive attributions to drip paintings. Additionally, ‘X expresses feeling Y’



Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, tempera and crayon on cardboard, 36" x 28.9." National Museum, Oslo, Norway. Donated by Olaf Schou, 1910. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

might mean that X treats something in a way that demonstrates Y. Thus, a sculpture may be said to express love if it was made in a loving fashion. The success of this approach seems to presuppose that the audience would have access to or some reliable evidence about the creative process, but often that is not the case. It is also possible that an artwork which was made in a loving fashion could still seem to express hate or almost any other emotion.

The American philosopher Robert Stecker has also articulated a theory of expressionism called hypothetical intentionalism:

Applied to music, the view now being proposed is that a musical passage is expressive of an emotion if the best hypothesis of an ideal listener is that the composer intended the emotion to be heard in

the music. (Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*)

Stecker's theory is suggestive and generalizable to other art genres, but problems remain. The first is that of the concept of an 'ideal listener' (or more generally, that of an 'ideal audience'). In theory, such a listener would be a properly backgrounded listener who is well-acquainted with the composer's works and musical time period, and who experiences the piece in the proper context. She would form the best hypothesis as to the composer's intended emotion based on formal and contextual evidence relating to the music. However, it is clearly possible to have two or more ideal listeners who completely disagree about intended emotions. Also, Stecker's theory doesn't address the issue of what it means to say



Summer Wheat, *Preacher*, 2010, acrylic and oil on canvas, 66" x 93." Courtesy of the artist.

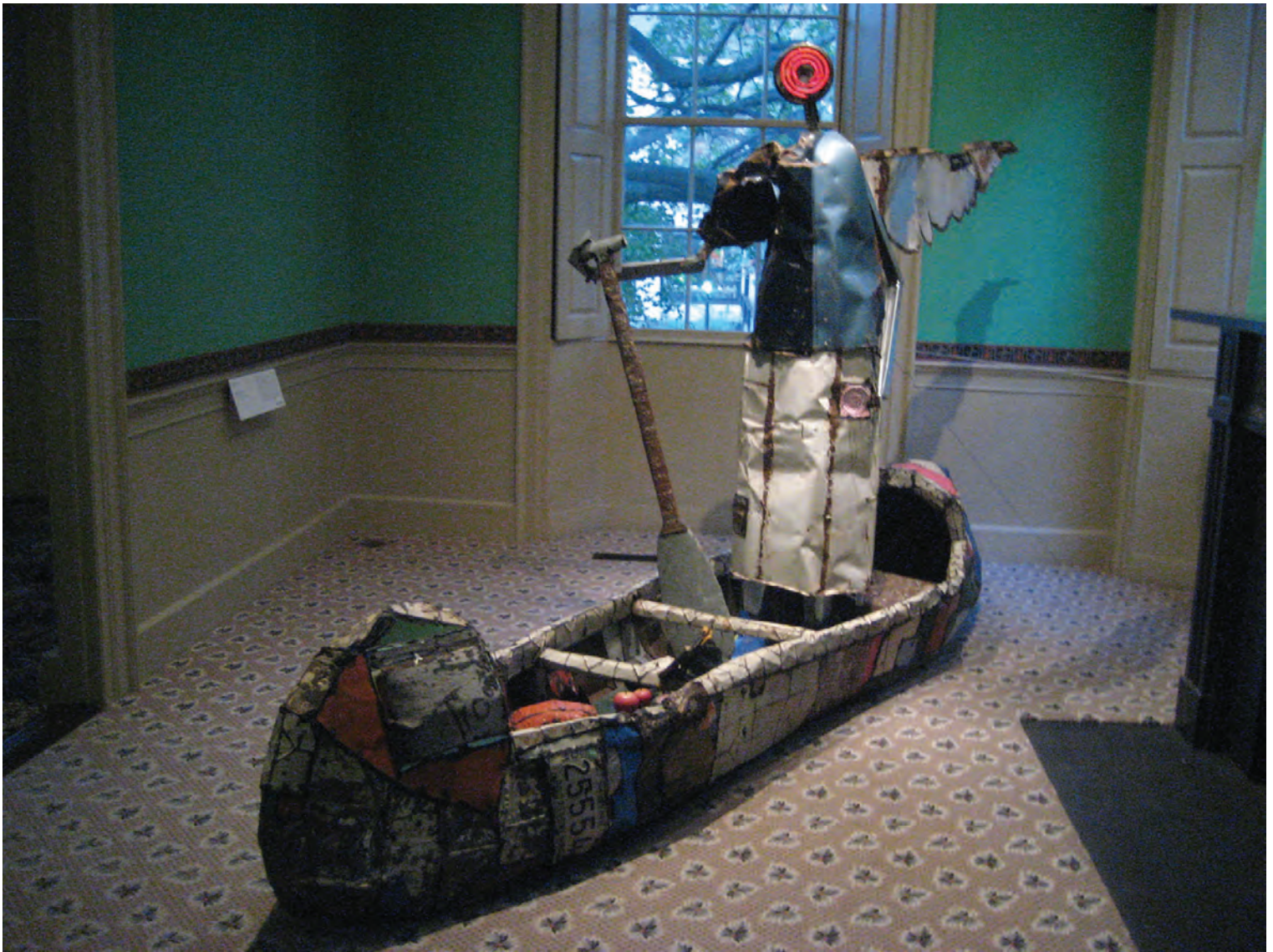
that the artist intended the emotion to be experienced in the artwork from the onset of its creation. How does that happen?

I would like now to present a triadic approach that might begin to solve the paradox of expressionism. The obvious triad is the artist, the work, and the audience. Let's begin with the first two.

In a suggestive article, the American philosopher David Goldblatt has claimed that there is a 'ventriloquial exchange' that occurs in the relationship between artists and their putatively expressive works (David Goldblatt, "Ventriloquism," in *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*). He cites the example of Edgar Bergen and his dummy Charlie McCarthy. Bergen was so adept in his skills that audiences had the distinct impression that he was actually carrying on a comedic conversation with Charlie at the same time that they implicitly recognized the illusion and knew that Bergen was really only talking to himself. Goldblatt sees these two dimensions of ventriloquism as ontological levels that interweave in subtle ways. Thus, it may be said that Bergen was engaged in an ecstasis—or 'standing out' of the self—so as to create a new voice through the character of Charlie. Just as Charlie was indeed

the voice of Bergen (i.e., he had been created by Bergen), so were possible selves in Bergen actualized by his interactions with Charlie. Goldblatt generalizes this point by suggesting that all artistic creativity involves ventriloquial action, or the artist 'throwing her voice,' in the relationship between artist and medium: sometimes she gets the impression that she is speaking or revealing emotions through the piece, and other times she gets the impression that the artwork is speaking to her. Pointedly, Goldblatt references Foucault in his analysis. The ventriloquial interchange, he argues, is similar to Foucault's idea that an author and her work open up a kind of 'space' in which many voices can speak, and it is often unclear who or what is more dominant—the writer, the intertext, or that which is written—or even where one begins and the other ends.

In this context, I want to add to Goldblatt's account the theory of the British philosopher Anne Sheppard. Sheppard comes at expressionism from the side of the audience and argues that the interchange of feelings between artworks and audiences relies upon 'imaginative projection,' a species of the willful suspension of disbelief. For example, when a viewer sees an action painting



Matthew Blackwell, *Crossing Over (Installation view)*, 1995-2011, tin, metal studs, enamel, mixed media, 76.5" x 130" x 32." Courtesy of the artist.

that seems expressive of anxiety, she imagines what it is like to be anxious, even though she is not actually anxious. Of course, such a projection can only work given a history of certain kinds of experiences the viewer has had, but with this history in place, it is not surprising that seeing the painting will enable her to ‘sense its anxiety.’ To be sure, this is a curious anxiety that only mimics real anxiety: experiencing the painting and sensing its anxiety is hardly the same as feeling anxious about, say, a real terrorist attack. It is an illusory anxiety that seems to coordinate logically enough with art’s being a realm of virtual or imaginary space. No doubt, there are many other factors that influence the sensing of anxiety in the painting, such as the title of the piece, the context in which it is experienced, the viewer’s mood at the time, the artist statement (if any), and the possible reactions of others who are also viewing it. But imaginative projection is clearly the key that allows the viewer to ‘find’ the state of anxiety immersed in the work. Such an explanation would work for other art forms as well, and has the added virtue of being open to empirical findings about correlations between artistic

techniques and psychological states.

If we combine Goldblatt’s ventriloquial theory with Sheppard’s thoughts about imaginative projection, we arrive at a triadic approach to the paradox of expressionism. Admittedly, there is a kind of artistic magic that occurs when we encounter works of art that speak to us emotively, and it is likely that no analytic approach can fully penetrate this magical veil. Still, it is useful, I believe, to regard emotionally charged artworks as intertextual spaces where artists have ‘thrown their voices’ and sensitive audiences have stepped imaginatively into these spaces in such a way that the works can tell us in their own way ‘how they feel’ about some aspect of the world and human existence. ■

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIS PITTAS ON THE OCCASION OF HIS BOOK *ROAD TO VICTORY*

the nostalgia for the past is a stupid thing

we are always ready for new work this has been part of our history I weight 76 kilograms

something went very wrong here this would not have been possible 10 years ago I felt I had to do something

someone is looking for you but I don't have time to be angry this is what we are left with I wish you'd come back tomorrow

we're ready to go home I tried not to show any emotion let the bordello burn a place we must remember to forget

he thinks we have nothing to hide we don't sleep at night

I read the above quote from an installation view of Antonis Pittas' work *Untitled (This is a historic opportunity for us)*, featured at the Van Abbemuseum as part of the artist's residency in 2010 and reproduced in his recently published book *Road to Victory*. For each week of the residency, the artist applied a sentence to the interior wall of the space with a graphite stick, constituting a performative act. This is one of the artist's characteristic ways of producing works by using writing with graphite on walls, floors, marbles and other surfaces, with the words and phrases taken from current news. Pittas' work comprises of context-sensitive installations, often informed by architecture and art-historical references. He is also interested in the performative aspects of installations, their social dynamics as well as collective history.

Pittas was born in Athens in 1973. He studied at the Athens School of Fine Arts, Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam Netherlands, and Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and has been an artist-in-residence at Bard College in Annandale, N.Y. Since 2000, he has lived and worked in Amsterdam, where he teaches at Gerrit Rietveld Academie. He is a regular guest teacher at Bergen Academy of Art and Design in Bergen, Norway, the KABK Fine Arts Department of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, and the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam. He is also a visiting professor at University of Hildesheim in Hildesheim, Germany, and has been a guest teacher at many other academies across Europe and the United States.

The following interview has been made on the occasion of his recently published book *Road to Victory*.

BY DAPHNE VITALI

DAPHNE VITALI - *Antonis, your new book Road to Victory, designed by Project Projects and copublished by Mousse Publishing and Hordaland Kunstsenter, is a beautiful and extremely interesting book that presents many of your recent projects and includes a great collection of essays as well as archival and research material. This publication is indeed to be seen between an artist book and a source book and can be characterized by its performative character. Tell me how the idea of this book was born.*

ANTONIS PITTAS - About five years ago, I started my research on the Bauhaus and the Russian avant-garde against the backdrop of the current financial crisis. What I found interesting was that both movements have bloomed around moments of crisis and transformation, for good or for worse. They are interlinked with the promising developments of the Interbellum period, the Russian revolution as well as the Great Depression, being followed by an even darker period in time harshly determined by the rise of fascism. There is a lot of contradic-

tion and tension in this historical period, including progressive social movements and forces of democratization alongside more destructive tendencies, sometimes even contained in the same historical entity. Both the Russian avant-garde as well as the Bauhaus were part of this bigger picture of which they were partly even responsible. Furthermore, Bauhaus points to the democratization of design and getting a wider public in touch with art, as it functioned as a catalyst for industrial reproducibility, while being aesthetically and initially also politically very cutting-edge, very challenging at the same time, and with a clear wish to change, overturn and even destroy the previous.

With maybe a sense of irony, I would say that we feel the post-post effects of this dynamic in our time, especially with regard to the unavoidable failure of the 'new' and 'better,' the repeated disillusionment that follows the fantasy of social progress. For me, it is important to revisit the moments when things turn—turn into something different that defeats the initial purpose by confronting



Artist Antonis Pittas. Photo: Vassilis Triantis

with its violent ‘other.’ In other words: when things turn wrong. To do this, I adopt a formalistic approach, borrowing from the aesthetics and theory of both the German and Russian avant-gardes in order to capture what I call ‘public memory in the making.’ What I’m dealing with is the history and historiography of crises, the dependency of modern history on the very notion of the crisis.

The book is a very important document concerning this artistic trajectory, offering a context for further reflection but also functioning as an artwork in its own right, as a performative object. It basically constitutes as a stage in creating a series of works that I have also selected to be included in this book. It is by no means a complete overview or monograph in the stricter sense of the word, as it functions as a constellation of text and images that together evoke the historical interrelations I just mentioned, without putting a definite point at the end of the narrative. That’s where it’s performative, although there is also a literal, material layer to this performativity, starting with the layout and design and the fact that we used so-called rock paper for the cover, which gives it a cold feeling, like stone. A book is an object, and a limited edition, so yes, it also fits the criteria of a work of art or, if you will, a monument. And by reading the book, it becomes activated, pointing to monumentalization as a performative act.

D.V. - In the beginning of the book, we find a reproduction of the June 1942 volume of the bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art entitled “Road to Victory,” which accompanied the exhibition with the same title organized by the MoMA in New York in 1942 and was dealing with the politics of the American involve-

ment in World War II, presenting, as the subtitle suggested, ‘a procession of photographs of the nation at war.’ A few years ago in the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA), you staged a situation which recalled the 1942 exhibition designed by Herbert Bayer and curated by Edward Steichen. Could you please tell me, how did you encounter this exhibition and this bulletin, and why did you choose to name your book after this historical propaganda exhibition? Has this exhibition influenced you both for its content and its form?

A.P. - I was looking into the work of Bauhaus designer Herbert Bayer when I encountered this exhibition project, which to me appears rather paradoxical. “Road to Victory” could be read as American nationalist propaganda; yet, it introduces the radically modern visual language of Bauhaus to the American context. It was actually the first non-art exhibition at MoMA. As an iconic exhibition and subject of study for many designers and artists afterward, it explores challenging strategies of display, approaching the exhibition in terms of a spatial choreography. The way the trajectory of the visitor constitutes a narrative in every exhibition is rendered explicit. Its complicity with patriotism and nationalism, and the question of growth and development it raises at a point in time when the world was at war, constitute, in my opinion, a very strong link with our own time. The title, “Road to Victory,” becomes ironic, maybe even sarcastic or cynical, applied to what happened after. Being a Greek artist in times of reoccurring crises, I could easily feel a sense of bitterness, but honestly, it’s more like hope. Because that’s in the title, too, I hope. I have these hopes for the future, something I don’t want to let go of as an artist, and there’s the simple beauty of the design as well.

D.V. - Again, in the beginning of your book, following the foreword, you included around 10 pages which are emphatically given to the word ‘IMPLEMENTATION,’ written with giant letters, referring directly to the famous words of Christine Lagarde and to the execution of the economic changes to be made and the plan of the troika for Greece. In this way, the reader of your book directly makes an association with the Greek crisis. Indeed, the contemporary situation of your native country is central to your artistic practice. Can you talk about this relation, and how do you as an artist relate to the contemporary sociopolitical reality in Greece through your work?

A.P. - Well, to be clear, I consider myself more of an observer than an activist. Being the observer can be a conscious artistic strategy. For me, it is closely linked to living abroad, keeping a relative distance to the events in my home country. It provides me with a certain detachment and, hence, emotional protection. Yet, at the same time, I feel that the



Cover page of *Road to Victory* Antonis Pittas. Bergen, Norway: Hordaland Kunstsenter and Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2017. Editors: Clare Butcher and Kris Dittel. Assistant Editor: Virág Szentkirályi. Contributing Authors: Anthea Buys, Clare Butcher and Nikos Papastergiadis, Galit Eilat, Charles Esche, Boris Groys, Jelle Bouwhuis and Joram Kraaijeveld, Jennifer Steetskamp, Steven ten Thije, Natalie Hope O'Donnell and Rebecca Uchill. Graphic Design: Project Projects.

economic crisis as it played out in Greece made me focus more, gave me responsibility as an artist. The majority of my works are somehow related to my visits to Greece, especially Athens. I obviously have emotional ties with the city, with my family, which cannot be denied. Being there also means that I can experience the crisis as a phenomenon and explore it as such. I don't pretend to be a neutral observer. I do position myself, but more subtly than throwing stones or joining protests or anything like that. I position myself by showing transhistorical lines of development that can be interesting to the present. In the end, it's not only about the crisis, it's about various contexts in which the same rules apply. The geographical distance helps me to remain critical, also towards the Greek society, with all its flaws. So I never fell into the trap of feeling a victim, like many other Greeks.

Now, to the word 'implementation,' borrowed from Lagarde, it also refers to my own trajectory implementing the ideas of Herbert Bayer to the present situation, and more specifically, to the book. What struck me about Lagarde's statement was the almost perfor-

mative quality of that utterance, as if by repeating the word three times, the implementation itself was already done. That she repeated the word this many times was linked to the felt necessity of the implementation of economic reforms in Portugal, Spain and Greece, three countries struggling with debt. The performativity of the utterance at once evokes the holy three—Trinity—and various other symbolisms from the past. That's why it also caught my attention.

D.V. - For their interesting and insightful discussion concerning the economic consequences, Clare Butcher and Nikos Papastergiadis take as a starting point the Greek poem Waiting for the Barbarians by Greek 20th century poet Constantine P. Cavafy written in 1898. The poem depicts a day in an unnamed city-state where everything has come to a halt because the population is awaiting the arrival of the 'barbarians,' whom they plan to welcome. It is interesting to note that recently this poem has also been referred to both for its relation to contemporary politics



Installation view from *Retroactive*, 2011, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, NY

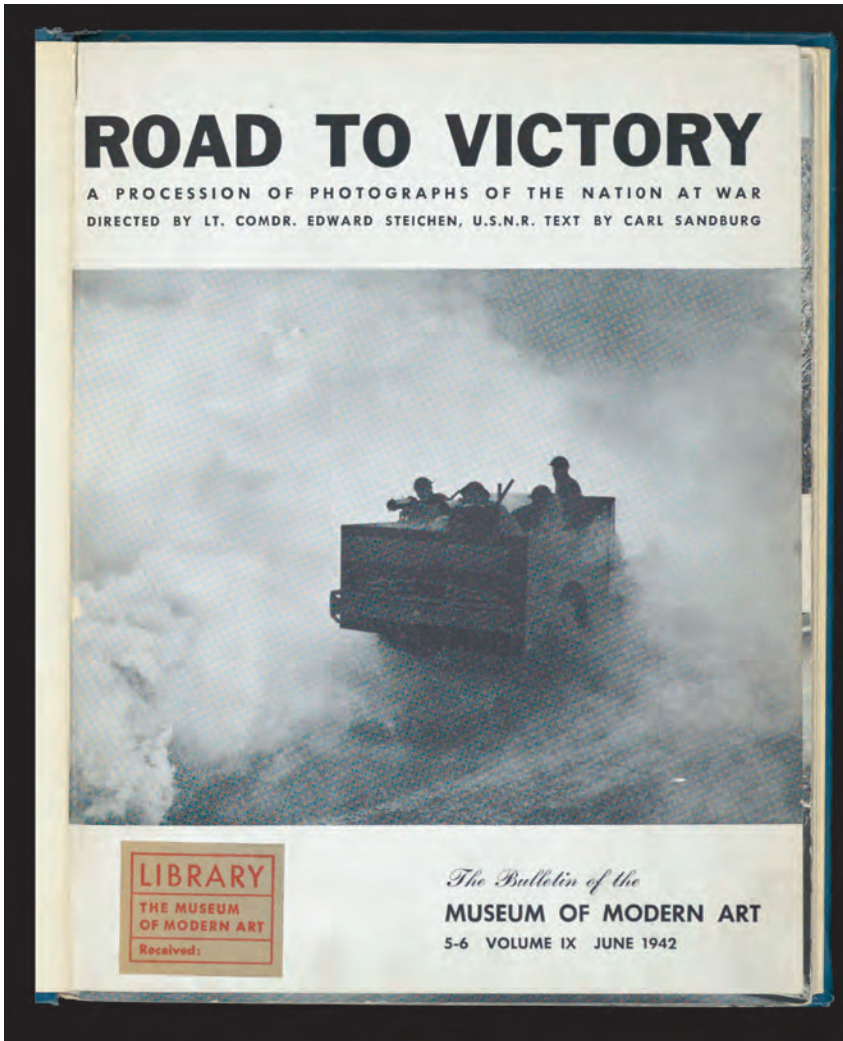
and for the arts in Greece. Specifically, this was also the title chosen by the curators for the last Athens Biennale. How do you feel about this idea of Greece being a platform for discussing modern European colonialism?

A.P. - Well, who's the barbarian in this case? Who is civilized? During the 20th century, and most acutely, through the financial crisis, the traditional relationship between Europe and Greece has been reversed. In that way, my book can easily function as a platform or point of departure to further investigate the issues—of economics, politics, identity—that underlie the complicated present relationship between Germany and Greece, to quote the obvious example. If you talk about colonialism, it's not so much about the literal geographic sense of the word but rather about the way ideas are colonized. I mean, who is learning from whom? Interestingly, the historical exhibition "Road to Victory" made a similar movement by exporting and introducing modernity to the United States, which, by this very instance, claimed their superiority. Appropriation basically turns into an affirmation of power. This dynamic applies to so many historical periods: Think of the Enlightenment and the reactivation and imaginative appropriation of Greek architecture in German Classicism. Greece is always already an unattainable idea, a surface of projection serving partic-

ular social desires. The Greek ideal and the Greek reality, there's a great mismatch. It is, in itself, an interesting paradox or polarity. The ideal is contained, but reality is always already failing.

D.V. - *You have worked several times with curator and museum director Charles Esche, who has written in the book the essay "Bodies, Gestures, Appearances" concerning materiality and physicality in the digital, post-human era. While, as he explains, the fabricated and the handmade are crucial elements in your practice, this is not the core importance of the work. Could you talk about your artistic practice from this materialistic perspective as well as from the physical point of view?*

A.P. - A concept is nothing without materiality, and reproducible forms cannot do without craftsmanship to begin with. Looking to the past, the Bauhaus and the Russian avant-garde already exhibited this strange tension between industrial reproducibility and at times romanticized notion of craftsmanship. At the core of these movements, there is an indecisiveness concerning the role and status of the artist, epitomized in the image of the hand. The hand, more specifically the hand of the artist, is related to the act of creation, but also to power in terms of physical power. Both Bauhaus and the Russian avant-garde use the hand to provide the artist with a status as world-maker and engineer,



Reproduction of the cover of MoMA New York bulletin entitled Road to Victory (June 1942), which accompanied the exhibition with the same title organized by the museum in 1942.

BELOW:
The two first letters from the work IMPLEMENTATION



Andreas Pitas, *hold on*, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, 2010

does not construct new narratives with his fragments, nor does he stick things back together in different ways. Instead he puts them into play in the space, and often changes parts of the work throughout the duration of the exhibition. Thus his work *landart* consists of a long marble block on which are hand written in pencil different public pronouncements by politicians. These texts are overwritten at various intervals with the traces of previous ones left on the floor and the marble. In this way, the labour of writing remains present, reaffirming the body and its physical substance as part of the work of art. The very physical marble block is itself weightily present both literally and as a copy of one of the steps in Syntagma Square, Athens where the Greek Parliament is located and where many of the protests against economic austerity have climaxed. Taking this very public element from the street and associating it with the fleeting expressions of politicians serves to materialise what might otherwise be ignored. The stones of the square allow the protest to take shape; they provide the necessary urban space to

Just like the body, modernism clings on to some of its earlier authority and retains part of its old power to emancipate the viewer through essentialism, even as most indicators point towards the success of a more discursive, contextual art practice.

collective actions. Here, they are given voice and also associated in the title *landart* to particular art practices from the 1960s and 1970s in which art was taken out of the museum and aspired to shape the environment and public social space. This combination of title, material, body and text from different sources is not eclectic in that rather discredited 'post-modern' manner but purposeful and grounded in a contemporary social reality in Greece where protest and empty words seem to share equal billing, and art is looking for a meaningful role.

One of the most substantial of Pitas' presentations to date was held in the SMBA, Amsterdam under the title *hold on*. Here the physical effort of his labour as an artist is suggested by the huge, soft-form copies of his hands in primary colours that are scattered through the space. Their giant scale welcomes you, and viewers can sit back in

the palm of the artist's hand, literally held tight while participating in the rest of the exhibition. The walls of the exhibition space are coloured in similar primary colours, the whole effect conjuring up the feeling of a kindergarten or an anthroposophic educational centre where play is given priority but learning is still a goal. It can be comforting or vaguely alarming, depending on your particular relationship with education. Given their scale, the monochrome hands feel complete but they are quite obviously also fragments of a whole body. Their radical detachment becomes more obvious when they are bent or scrunched against the walls and become slightly deformed. This sense of dislocated or even lost hands is emphasised by strange, partially erased images on the walls around the space and a series of heavy marble clipboards hanging or propped against the walls. These images of hands accentuate the brutal isolation of the soft sculptures further, both through the many images of disconnected hands or fingers, and also because of the scratched walls and cut stone surfaces on which they appear. What emerges in leafing through the images, ideally while sitting on the giant copies of the artist's own hand, is the simple variety of hand gestures, isolated from any context but still with the capacity to communicate clearly a need or desire without words. The fact that we can read in the accompanying information that these gestures are of public figures, often under the media's gaze, is significant. With this knowledge, the gestures are placed within a mediated frame, the expressions potentially subject to reproduction, replay and repetition in print and on screen. No longer just spontaneous and fleeting, these physical movements are frozen and judged for what they might reveal. Yet these collections of images also bring to mind the way our human hands move and communicate as something common across classes, cultures and geographies. These hands are also my hands, and those of the artist. They give and take, cradle and discipline, admonish and praise. Their power and potential lies in how they are disposed, and in what environments they are encountered.

In considering the mediated frame, we come to the crux of the physicality in Pitas' work. While the fabricated and the handmade are crucial components in his practice, they are not in themselves the core reason for the work. Rather, the visible craft and skill are attributes of a performance of these objects in the public arena. That's why the choice of images and objects—politicians' hand



ANTONIS PITTAS

Antonis Pittas included in his book photographic material from his archive research on Gustav Klutsis and Lyubov Popova at the Costakis Collection as these artists played a crucial role in the development of propagandistic visual language. In these photographs Pittas explores the fine line between exploration and destruction in his handling of the artworks, as his hands are seen touching the unprotected surface of works by the two artists.



Installation view from *We will do as we have decided*, 2013, at *De Nederlandsche Bank*, Amsterdam. Following the use of tear gas by police squads in cities like Istanbul and Cairo in 2011-2013. Pittas translated the shapes of the gas cans and other leftovers into sculptural objects, combining them with text fragments from news coverage.



Installation view from *Hold On*, 2015. Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam.

maybe also out of fear that artists, in the new societies to come, would otherwise be rendered obsolete. Simultaneously, the hand has this intricate link with the idea of manual labor—labor that had become industrialized, standardized. Craft is personal; labor is collective. The artist’s hand positions the artist as craftsman in the middle of his modern peers, workers. Even the digital era hasn’t done away with the hand: digital technologies, especially the dispositive of the touch screen, and human touch are not thinkable without each other. For me, the hand functions as an important signifier of both destiny and responsibility, from the wish to seek future guidance to the very act of taking your life in your own hands. The hand is a powerful image.

D.V. - Moreover, in Esche’s essay, while discussing your work from the exhibition “Hold On” in the SMBA in Amsterdam, where soft-form copies of the artist’s hands in vibrant colors and mimicking the gestures of public figures and are presented scattered in the exhibition space, he mentions that, “These hands are also my hands, and those of the artist. They give and take, cradle and discipline, admonish and praise. Their power and potential lies in how they are disposed, and in what environments they are encountered.” Can you comment on this?

A.P. - How to turn a powerful image into an even more powerful one? Making the hands literally big, they become this thing that can hold you, which is tactile, real, there. And as the large hands can function as furniture, they evoke the interior design side of the Bauhaus movement and the impact it has had on today’s consumerist culture. In the collages of Klutis, which I have researched more closely during my investigations, it is still the hands of Lenin and the unions that dominate the show. Eventually, it’s all about appropriation, translation, reiteration. I am fascinated by the way the meaning of a particular form can radically change over the course of history and through different contexts. This also counts for my own work. The most telling case of appropriation I’ve personally encountered was when I participated in the Tallinn Photomonth, a contemporary art biennial in Estonia, where somebody else used my hands without my permission or the permission of the biennial as props in his own photo shooting—some queer TV personality, I learned later on.

D.V. - For your project Handle Them (2015), you were invited to take up the role of a curator and work with the collection of the Thessaloniki State Museum of Contemporary Art, which houses the Costakis Collection that features works from the Rus-



Photograph of the streets of Istanbul during the social upheaval in 2013.

sian avant-garde. In the book, you have included photographic material from Gustav Klutsis' and Lyubov Popova's archive research. I am very interested in hearing from you more on how you worked for this project and what was the outcome.

A.P. - The reason that I wanted to focus on these two artists was the crucial role they played in the development of propagandistic visual language. For Popova, it was the theater, public space, the wish to reach a large public that fed her symbolism. Here, my heritage as a Greek artist plays up when I explore the dramaturgy of propaganda; how can you make a larger group of people believe what you are saying? I find this very fascinating. Klutsis, on the side, is all about participation, interaction, finding effective images and languages through slogans and magazine designs—less dramatic but easily as powerful. Popova and Klutsis constitute two different propagandistic strategies still valid today, as they are to convince, control, unify. This is why, for me, it was important to reactivate and contemporize them, creating new images in the present and making them available to the public. The images do not any longer function as a historical distant object—as usually in a collection or in a museum—but become relevant for the now. By looking at them, we learn about us.

D.V. - *I would like to ask you one more question regarding your practice. In the beginning of Boris Groys' essay "Under the Gaze of Theory," reprinted in your book, the author states: "Theory was never so central for art as it is now. [...] I would suggest that today artists need a theory to explain what they are doing –not to others but to themselves." How do you feel regarding this statement? Could you talk about your relation to theory as an artist?*

A.P. - Well, basically, I consider theory as a practice, a particular kind of cognitive activity. Theory can be a vehicle or tool to guide art-related research, to understand the dynamics underlying the images that I combine or create. Theory is about synthesizing, connecting, making links. But even more so, theory—or more specifically, history and historiography—can function as material for an artwork. It's more than just providing interpretation after the fact. It's part of the process of creation. For me, making art depends on a complex mix of emotional, cognitive and intuitive processes. In my view, there is no 'pure intuition' before cognition or conceptual thinking. They are inseparable, and this is what I think makes my work contemporary. There's no mind-body separation, mind and body go together, and the hand—my hand—is the interface between what I think and what I do. ■

MILTON GLASER:

The Prophetical Guide

Questions, interviews, and personalities often equal the lame, useless, and banal. What is real always changes you if you are teachable. Asking the right questions feels impossible at times. It leads me to realize that life itself often disguises itself as just that, a series of questions, such as what is real and what is not? Questions related to reality, art, and philosophy often swim in the same mind soup.

Now and then we obtain a guide who can give us either a word of encouragement, or point a finger for us in the right direction. *Guides are rare.* We all need them. They teach us to see.

Milton Glaser is one of those guides.

More than just a renowned international designer; Glaser's design matches his art through multiple venues including printmaking, posters, countless editorial works for major newspapers and magazines, and much more. His writing covers essays, lectures and editorials. His insight into analyzing art is on a par with Robert Motherwell. Now at age 88, Milton Glaser has shown the world that he appears to also be a prophet of America's politics, values and ethics. Kandinsky would surely say he is on the top of his "triangle of influence" as a guide of others.

Milton Glaser was educated at Manhattan's The High School of Music & Art, graduated from the Cooper Union in 1951 and later, via a Fulbright Scholarship, the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna under Giorgio Morandi with whom he later shared a show in 1989. He was one of the founders of Push Pin Studios in 1954 that influenced the direction of world design culminating in an exhibition at the Louvre Museum.

Former President Barack Obama presented the National Medal of Arts to ten recipients for their outstanding achievements and support of the arts. The National Medal of Arts is a White House initiative managed by the National Endowment for the Arts, the nation's highest honor for artistic excellence. Milton Glaser was one of those recipients.

BY DANIEL BONNELL

Daniel Bonnell - Your work over the decades rises to a level of visual linguistics where it becomes a language unto itself. The pieces you produced for the Rubin Museum of Art appear to voice this language, especially with your two pieces *Light Tantra* and *Dark Tantra*. Did this same creative language come from studying with Giorgio Morandi and the beautiful simplicity of his compositions?
Milton Glaser - It's very difficult to be objective about one's influences, largely because in most cases they are invisible; although, retrospectively, relationships can be discovered and similarities pointed out. I think in my own case, a broad interest in all forms of art history, regardless of their stylistic characterizations, led me to believe that all historical visual occurrences were useful to my own understanding of form and meaning. In a stylistic sense, I see no hierarchical difference between a cave painting and a Whistler etching. My study with Giorgio Morandi, most importantly, informed me that work itself was the core of my being, and that my commitment to myself came, essentially, through that work.

D.B. - Can you share with me one or more of the most valuable insights that you gleaned from studying with the renowned Italian painter Giorgio Morandi?

M.G. - The fact that Morandi's essential character never seemed to waiver in the face of fame or money protected and defined his integrity and accomplishment.

D.B. - You state, "*The interval between looking and seeing is one of communication's most profound issues... certainty is a closing of the mind. To create the new requires doubt.*"¹ Your theme of darkness underscores this thinking in your limited edition prints, *Dark Landscape*, *Dark Fruit with Highlights* and *Dark-Eyed Woman*. Doubt requires risk; how do you decide if the risk failed?

M.G. - Risk is essential to any form of learning. If one does not fail,



Renowned graphic designer Milton Glaser in 2011. Photo: Nami Aijima.

how can you measure success? Embracing risk requires courage and above all persistence. Failing in one's own eyes can be either discouraging or provocative. The ego enjoys success and fears admission of failure but controlling the ego is another thing we can talk about later.

D.B. - Back during the George W. Bush administration you wrote an essay on lying and ethics. I have lifted a section of that essay here: *"When people believe that their government systemically lies to them they become cynical. Cynicism breeds apathy and a sense of powerlessness that causes people to withdraw from public life. It is not coincidental that less than half our population votes. If only 44% of our country vote and we are equally divided ideologically, it means that 20% of the electorate control the fate of our nation—this has become a profound threat to the future of our republic and democracy itself. We can only call this a systemic scandal and observe that those in power have done very little to change the condition. Which raises one last question. From our government's point of view, have we become the "other"?"*²

It appears that 20% of the electorate put President Trump into office. Your prophetic analysis proved to be correct. Do you see any change in the ethics of the artists today becoming change makers for influ-

encing society or have we simply joined in to become the "other"?

M.G. - I must say, my question is more relevant now than ever. Largely because of Trump, the passivity that arises out of powerlessness has spread throughout the world. The contempt that the powerful have for ordinary people is overwhelming and relentless. Not to mention, the consistent lying and misrepresentation that is fed to the entire world.

It's hard to understand the time one lives in. Certainly, it has become increasingly popular for artists and others to demonstrate their opposition to the existing condition. Whether these gatherings, protests, posters and other like activities will affect those who control our lives and civilization itself is yet to be seen. For artists, the need to be on the side of fairness is a core definition.

D.B. - In an essay on *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci you state: *"The human brain is a problem-solving organ, a characteristic that probably is at the center of our dominance over other species. The brain frequently remains inert until a problem is presented to it. In the case of The Last Supper, the profound ambiguity it contains alerts and stimulates the brain into action. Leonardo clearly believed that ambiguity was a way of arriving at the truth. As a result, the painting moves us in a deeper and more profound way than any direct statement."*³

Would you then determine that ambiguity is the trickster of beauty?

M.G. - Ambiguity has an essential role in all art. It creates the opportunity for the mind to make connections and actually examine what is presented to it. Ambiguity amplifies the thinking process itself. Although, I must admit that not all ambiguity operates on the same level.

D.B. - In your essay *Dark and Light-The Strange Case of the Decline of Illustration*, you state: *"We have lost our sense of what is real, and replaced it with an addiction to the virtual reality created by television, entertainment, and advertising."*

To follow this path of what is real, you further state in the same essay, *"The deepest role of art is creating an alternative reality, something the world needs desperately at this time. Everyone here today chose to be on the side of Eros, that is you've devoted your life of making things, rather than controlling things. I used to feel that it was strange that artists are self-anointed. Now I realize it could not be any other way because above all, art is a view of life itself. It cannot be given by others or taken away by dealers or marketing men. Real artists are always working for nothing because they don't see their essential role in society as being simply to exchange goods. They turn up first in the anti-war demonstrations, not because they lack patriotism, but because they revere life."*

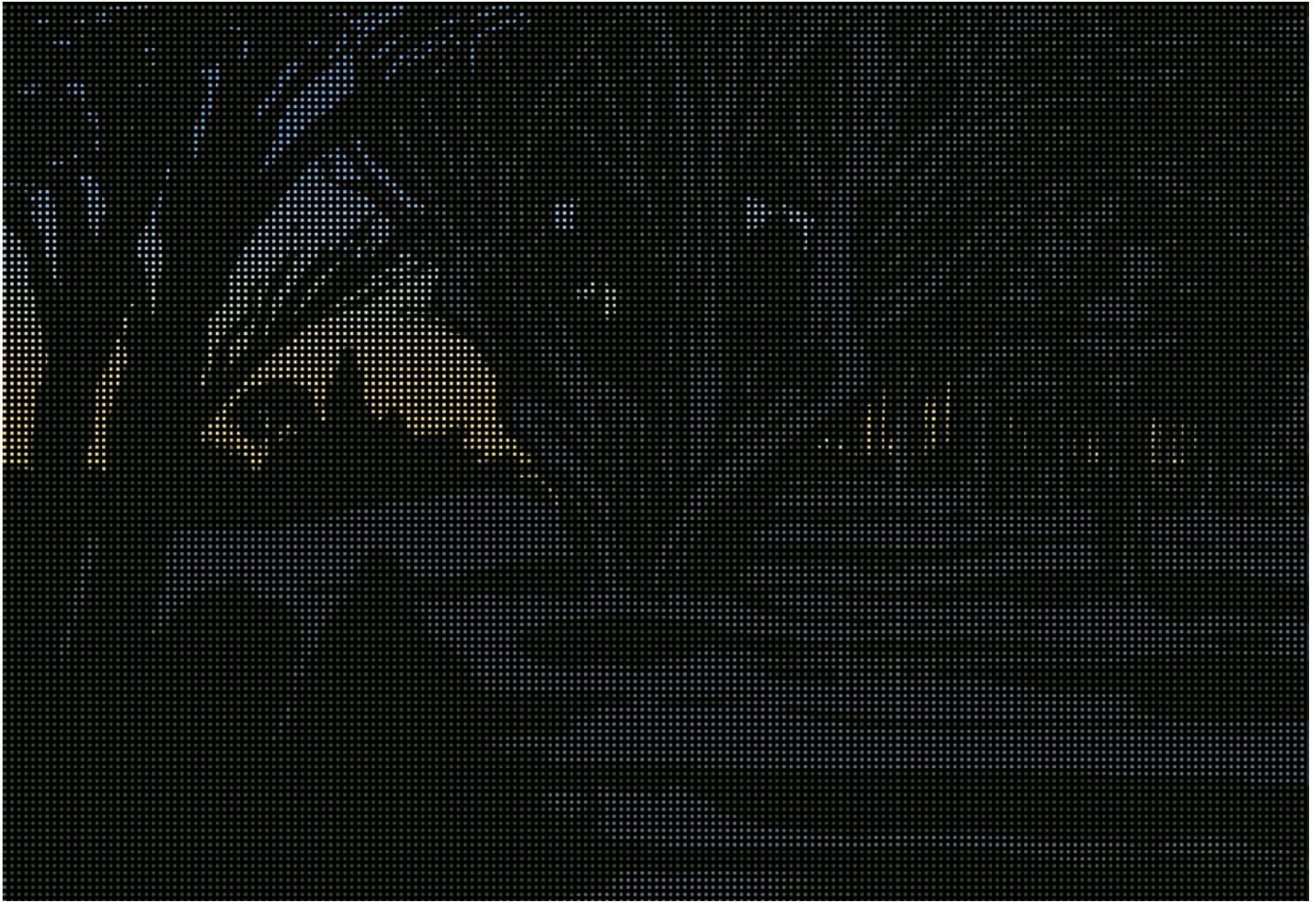
After reading this statement I think of various artists such as Leon



Milton Glaser, *I Love New York*, 1977 (designed for New York State Department of Economic Development).



Milton Glaser, *Dylan-poster*, 1967 (designed for Columbia Records).



Milton Glaser, *Dark Landscape*, 2009.

Golub who raised our awareness of terrorism, Luc Tuymans refusing to represent the representable in his untitled work depicting 9/11, and Roman Opalka spending a lifetime depicting the awareness of time. I also think of the photographer Duane Michaels who asks important political, social, and ethical questions. As contemporary artists, what individual attribute or attributes need to emerge today?

M.G. - For all of us who aspire to be, or call ourselves, artists, one uniformly characteristic attribute emerges. They care about others as much as themselves and their work on the highest level serves to create a sense of commonality and agreement. The work itself may not be agreeable but engaging people's attentiveness, we all have something to share. I've said it before, but my perception is that art is a Darwinian device to help the human species survive. In the presence of art we are least likely to kill one another, or to feel that we are all self-serving.

D.B. - How do you connect your famous I heart (Love) NY design with becoming a worldwide symbol that is used more than any cross cultural logo in history?

M.G. - To begin with, I fully believe that everything in the world is connected. There are no independent events. In every problem

you're given as a designer the most important discovery is what the hidden relationship is. It's always there. Once discovered, the answer to design problems are inevitable. Once I discovered I could change a noun into a verb (a heart into "love") the image materialized. Apparently, the world was waiting for that connection to be made and after 40 years, I see it on the streets of New York at least five times a day.

D.B. - You were born in 1929. You're 88 years must have gleaned patterns from a metanarrative perspective. Can you share with us the patterns of life that you have observed such as patterns of reality, patterns of great art?

M.G. - Simply said, in the world of art there is no reality. There is only abstraction of reality. Sometimes it is narrative, referential and illustrative. Other times, it is abstract and symbolic. It's all one thing. The discovery of what is 'real' is overwhelming and occurs rarely. ■

NOTES

1. Milton Glaser. *In Search of the Miraculous or One Thing Leads to Another*. New York: The Over Look Press, 2012.
2. *Dark and Light. The Strange Case of the Decline of Illustration*, lecture given at ICON Illustration Conference, Philadelphia PA on June 29, 2003. www.MiltonGlaser.com.
3. Ibid
4. "Duane Michals by David Seidner," *Bomb Magazine. Artists in Conversation*. Issue 20, Summer 1987.



Ramiro Lacayo Deshón at his studio. All images are courtesy of the artist and The Americas Collection.

RAMIRO LACAYO:

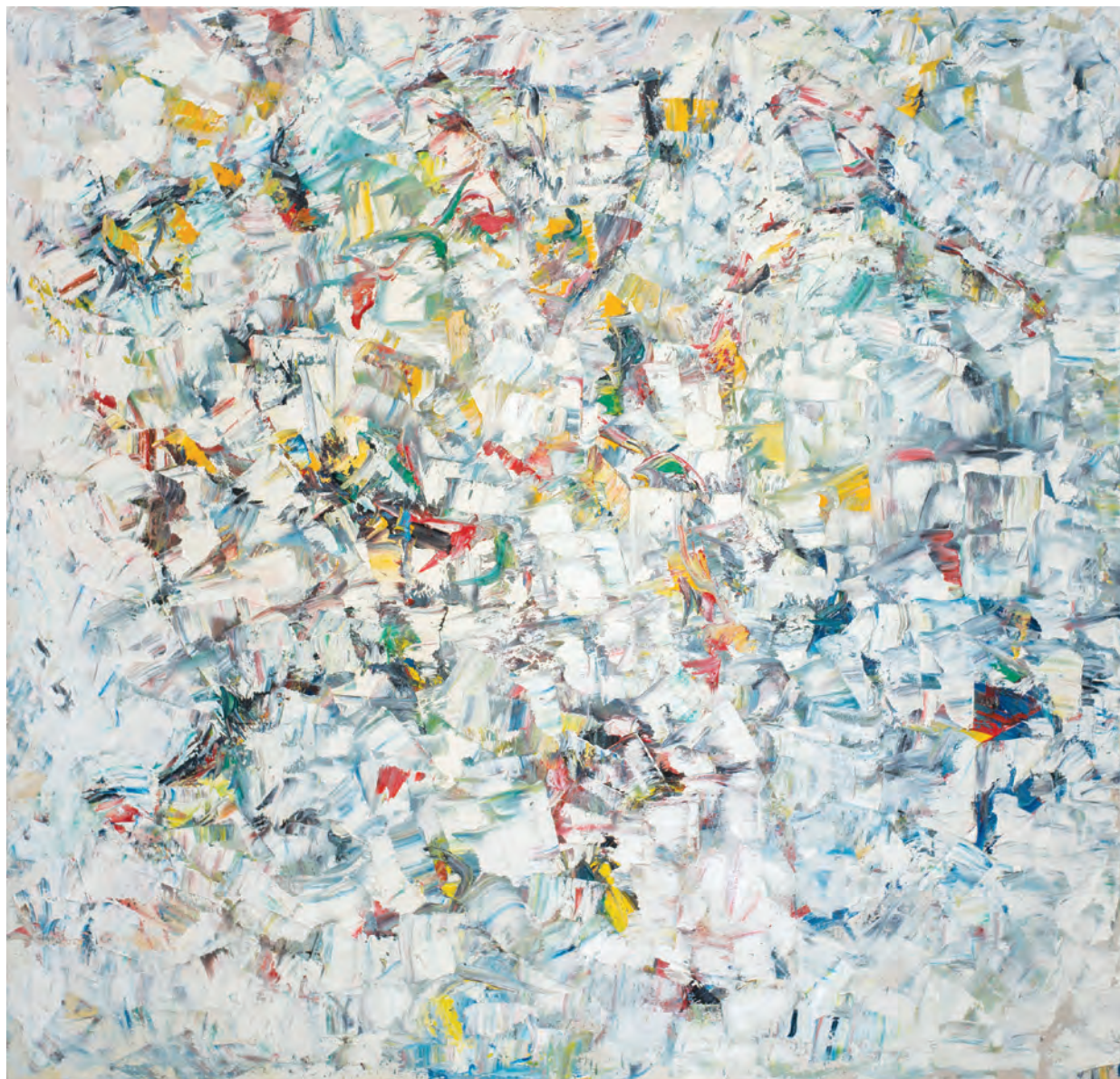
Conversations In and Around Painting

Ramiro Lacayo Deshón (Managua, Nicaragua, 1952) is one of the most interesting Central-American painters working these days. Lacayo began in the art world as a writer and filmmaker. In the mid-1970s, during the insurrection against dictator Anastasio Somoza, he joined the Leonel Rugama cinematographic brigade, which documented the armed struggle of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in film and photography. He was co-founder and director of the Nicaraguan Film Institute (INCINE) and the New Latin American Film Foundation. He also wrote screenplays and directed fiction films and documentaries that won awards and prizes at various international festivals. His short stories and poems have been published in numerous literary and cultural publications, including *La Prensa Literaria*, *Nuevo Amanecer Cultural* and *Taller y Carátula*. He has published a book of short stories, *Nadie de Importancia* (1984), and the novels *Tejedor de vientos* and *Así en la tierra*.

Over the last two decades, Lacayo has developed an extensive body of work that evidences his technical mastery. His pictorial language has evolved into Abstract Expressionism, passing through Impressionism, Realism, Cubism and expressionistic figuration. It is the result of his knowledge of the history of painting and his aesthetic and philosophical “conversations” on a pictorial level with the legacy of masters such as Willen de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and many others. After decades of “narrating stories,” he has managed to synthesize words in brushstrokes and gestures in compositions that converse with the spectator on a subconscious level.

In this interview, Lacayo shares with *ARTPULSE* details of his creative process, his artistic evolution and the series on which he is currently working. He also reveals his intellectual position in regards to originality and the challenges that a painter faces in 21st century.

BY RAISA CLAVIJO



Ramiro Lacayo Deshón,
Borrado, 2017, oil on canvas,
55 7/8" x 53 1/2" These
paintings are part of Ramiro
Lacayo Deshón's current
exhibition at The Americas
Collection, in Miami.

Raisa Clavijo - *Tell me about how your pictorial language has evolved since your first impressionistic works, passing through Realism, Cubism, expressionistic figuration, to reach Abstract Expressionism, which has become a constant in your work since 2012 with your exhibition "Gritos y susurros" (Screams and Whispers) presented at the Galería Codice in Managua. Why has the language of abstraction satisfied your expressive needs?*

Ramiro Lacayo - Of course, the classics—Rembrandt, Velázquez—are the foundations of the visual arts, but I believe that it is through Impressionism and Expressionism that we embarked upon the path we continue to travel. What better way to follow the evolution toward contemporary art than by allowing yourself to be influenced by its different phases?

That is why in my work there are some marked tendencies toward certain movements or schools; later on, I move in another direction. This evolution led me to search for a renewed and different figuration; for example, exploring new ways of simplifying the human body, which little by little turned into a figure with fewer traits, without losing expressivity and movement. From there, the leap to pure abstraction was inevitable.

Paradoxically, I find abstraction more expressive, and although a little complex, more communicative. Even though we are not recounting an anecdote, we transmit warm feelings, sensations. Every

painting is about something: an emotion, a mood. They are strokes that come from the subconscious. I usually observe that my paintings dialogue with the viewer at different levels.

Wouldn't it be ideal to communicate with each other from one psyche to another? It's important that the painting speaks, that it communicates something, even silence, because if it leaves you unaffected, it's not worthwhile.

R.C. - *Between 2012 and 2013, you developed an extensive series of works that you entitled "Conversaciones con el Expresionismo Abstracto" (Conversations with Abstract Expressionism). What was the intent of this exercise? What challenges did you confront during the creative process?*

R.L. - These conversations were not appropriations, but rather dialogues with painters from Abstract Expressionism in which colors, compositions and movements substitute for words. Each one of them was telling me something different. The challenge was that they not be unilateral or turn out to be lessons rather than conversations. It was a matter of trying to communicate as if we were both working on the same painting.

Some cases were difficult, such as in the case of Pollock or Rothko, where, given the very defined format, you could easily end up with a copy, and others, like de Kooning, with their overwhelming influence,



Ramiro Lacayo Deshón, *Conversation with Barnett Newman*, 2013, 68 ½" x 34 ¼".

eclipsed my voice. In general, however, the interchange with their languages was open and allowed me to combine my work with theirs.

What did I get out of this project? I gained a very interesting collection, a very positive influence that I would likewise have to resist; in the best of cases, a pleasant chat with individuals I admire, you know, as though having a beer.

R.C. - *The art critic Janet Batet, in the essay accompanying the book published on the occasion of "Conversaciones con el Expresionismo Abstracto," points out that your selection of Abstract Expressionism responded among other factors to a period of personal deception in the 1990s and a search for new horizons both personal and expressive. Under what conditions did you select this language?*

R.L. - At the end of the 1970s, the Sandinista philosophy proposed advocating for change that would eradicate social injustice and construct a modern society. I participated in this endeavor in many ways, including joining the war effort. In the 1980s, we believed we were realizing a dream, which little by little faded away. In the 1990s, the people chose a different alternative, and at that moment of electoral defeat there were abuses and inconsistencies in Sandinism, disillusionment.

This in me, more than wisdom, brought up questions about my being and what I should do. I then decided to self-impose a vow of artistic silence and to dedicate myself to other activities like the purchase of cattle, agriculture. But my inclination toward drawing was too strong; I continued to draw, and this led me to work with ever more complex media. The answers I sought, in reflection, I actually found in painting; I rediscovered myself in the smudges.

It was a subconscious process where colors and forms helped me reorganize my life, and I felt that I still had things to say. It was a kind of post-war period of uprooting, and similar eras often bring aesthetic solutions similar to the one I found.

R.C. - *Of all of the artists whose work you dialogued with in "Conversaciones con el Expresionismo Abstracto," which one did you identify with the most?*

R.L. - Willem de Kooning would be my first answer. His bold use of color, his strong and free brushstrokes, his compositions more based on intuition than on tradition have influenced me since my figurative period, and perhaps he led me by the hand to abstraction. The truth is that all of them are heroes of the visual arts: Joan Mitchell, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell. We must not forget the other side: Tachisme, Burri, Dubuffet, Asger Jorn, Fontana, Mathieu, Tàpies and so many others who have enriched this expressionist tradition.

R.C. - *Is there a symbolic intention in your use of color? How has your use of color changed over time?*

R.L. - I'm sure there has been an evolution in my use of color; I'm always trying to combine it without repressing it. Those who have followed my career are perhaps more aware of this evolution. What I can tell you is that I'm still seeking ways to illuminate the paintings, use unexpected combinations and maintain the natural vibration of the pigment.

More than serving a symbolic purpose, they are the reflections of this clear, strong, brilliant tropical light. I'm sure that if I lived in Finland, my palette would be different. Beyond a planned symbolic use, there is an intuitive use of color.

R.C. - *Parallel to your pictorial work, you have developed a successful career in the film industry as a director and screenwriter of both movies and documentaries. You have also authored several short stories, novels and books of poetry. I find it interesting that after passing through a realist phase as well as another of expressionist figuration, you have shown a preference for abstraction as pictorial language when words and a narrative quality are essential elements in your literary and cinematographic work. Instinctively, I am inclined to think that in your current work there must be a narrative component hidden among the textures and brushstrokes. Does your current pictorial work contain a narrative? Precisely, some titles of works—Volver (Going Back), Bor-*



Ramiro Lacayo Deshón,
En los cayos, 2015, oil on
 canvas, 55 7/8" x 72 1/2"

rado (Erasure), Circo (Circus), Otro Cielo (Another Sky), Algoritmo (Algorithm), En los Cayos (In the Keys), Paisaje con Bañista (Landscape with Bather)—currently being shown at *The Americas Collection in Miami* lead the beholder to search for the presence of this hypothetical narrative.

R.L. - The marvelous thing about this art is that it doesn't need a narrative to transmit something. The communication is on another level. I try to suppress literal, iconic and anecdotal elements. A separate issue is what people perceive in my work or think that I'm trying to suggest. I consider these interpretations valid in every case.

If there are symbols or some kind of narrative, it comes from my subconscious. At times, even I don't have them very clear, but they are definitely saying something. The paintings are always about something. Even a single line conveys a story with a beginning, a conflict and an outcome.

With respect to the names I give the paintings, they arise as the piece begins to manifest itself. That is to say, the painting whispers it to me.

A lot of times it's the ambience of a landscape I recently visited or a light. Some of the emotions I try to express are more distinguishable; others cannot be expressed in words, but all the same, they have to be given names. It would be ideal to give them numbers, 'lot 436,' so each person could give it a name in accordance with what the painting suggests to him ...

R.C. - Every work of art is intrinsically tied to the experiences of its author; it is the result of a profound process of self-discovery and

is obviously a child of its times. Kandinsky said that "each painting mysteriously encapsulates an entire life." Do the pieces you are currently working on have any autobiographical resonance?

R.L. - All of my work is personal and in that sense autobiographical. Although it may only be a reflection of the moment, of the present in which I am living, the painting intrinsically carries my story and the one that surrounds me, not as arrogantly portraying myself, but as testimony. They are like an X-ray of that nebulous and elemental world in which we live.

How can we relate the one, *the work of art*, with the other, *life*, circumstances? It's difficult to explain because it is not precise, nor can it be put into words. It is even more difficult when the past is always changing due to the mood of the moment in which we observe it. There are moments when your life appears happy, full, and seconds later, you look again and it is miserable. We are like particles, always jumping and reacting, but never in the same place.

It is difficult to think about which are the most explicit. Perhaps I identify the most with my white, in a way minimalist, paintings. My white paintings are like slightly cloudy mirrors with few but decisive strokes.

R.C. - Harold Rosenberg, in an essay published in *ARTnews* regarding *Abstract Expressionism*, referred to the canvas as "an arena in which to act." How does this gestural and somewhat cathartic aspect of the creative act function in your work? Is your creative process mainly intuitive and spontaneous, or do you plan



Ramiro Lacayo Deshón,
Paisaje A, oil on canvas,
69 1/4" x 55 3/4"

the composition ahead of time, the tones and the imagery that the work will contain?

R.L. - As I mentioned to you before, my work is very intuitive, and it is created in the moment as I paint. At times, it can be achieved in one session; at others, it refuses to come out and years can go by before finding a remedy. Although sometimes you start with a very schematic sketch or idea, the very needs of the painting impose themselves and you abandon the sketch for something new and surprising. As Rosenberg says, you paint with your entire body; to paint is to dance, and in that sense the painting is also an action, an 'event,' and if the mechanics, with its hits and misses, can be captured, all the better. The act of painting is an epiphany where something important is manifested, revealed.

R.C. - *In the catalogue created on the occasion of "Conversaciones con el Expresionismo Abstracto," it is noted that until the beginning of the 21st century, for you painting was a rather private act, not a consciously professional exercise. Tell me how you decided to let the works out of the studio.*

R.L. - It was private in the sense that my paintings, drawings, marks, were like a diary written primarily for me. Although I sold some paintings, that wasn't the aim. I didn't pursue showing them either, until one day I was convinced to show them to a gallerist and curator, and he liked them so much that he insisted I participate in a group show entitled "Materia Nueva."

The couple of pieces I exhibited had great impact, and people wanted to see more from me. A career in exhibitions began, which



Ramiro Lacayo Deshón, *T1*, 2016, oil on canvas, 57 1/8" x 69 5/8"

little by little transcended the local scene.

My "private" painting also tried to be "professional." It's just that I didn't exhibit it. It was a little like diaries written by authors or poets, like Thomas Merton. In the end, I kept few of those 'pages,' since most of them passed into other hands and followed their independent destiny.

R.C. - Today, originality is a very big challenge for artists. Being original is complicated when in painting almost everything appears to have already been invented. Picasso said, "Good artists borrow; great artists steal." How do you feel about the future of painting? Where do you think contemporary artist should look for answers?

R.L. - That is very difficult and controversial with so many trends in contemporary art. I believe than an artist should allow himself to be influenced and insert himself in the tradition of painting, but he will only be able to find answers within himself, in the renewal of these influences. If we consider art as individual expression, as an authentic search, then not everything has been said since we all have something special to say. The difficulty is garnering attention

in such a saturated market.

With reference to contemporary painting, only the passage of time will distill the good and forget art that is grandiose and gimmicky. I believe that today there are artists every bit as good as those of prior periods who are contributing to the advancement of painting or the visual arts in general. To be honest, many others leave me indifferent.

R.C. - What are you working on at the moment?

R.L. - I am always trying to renew my language, to go beyond what I have done to find new formulae. I don't like repeating myself, although at times it is inevitable.

I have been working on some pieces that retake elements of Cubism in its most analytic phase, some geometric elements, planes, floating in colors, always within the abstract. And on another note, I continue with my intuitive experiments, seeking ever more incredible, expressive strokes, involving media beyond the brush and spatula and contrasting more diluted colors with matter textures. There are so many things one might want to do, to experience, but every day I have less time. ■

RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

A Rake's Progress Hits the Sublime and the Not So Much

BY TIM HADFIELD



Ragnar Kjartansson, *The Visitors*, 2012, nine-channel video projection, 64 minutes. Photo: Elísabet Davids. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.

Billed as “an unprecedented solo exhibition—the first U.S. survey of this internationally acclaimed artist,” by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, this timely and ambitious show gave the opportunity to review a feast of work by an artist whose reputation has grown exponentially in recent years. The survey covers the breadth of Ragnar Kjartansson’s oeuvre, including live performances, documentations of performances, video installations, paintings, sculptures and accompanying sketchbooks.

At the entrance to the show, we are welcomed by a large neon sign proclaiming “Scandinavian Pain.” Illuminated with a cheery, ironic pink, it signals the importance of the artist’s Icelandic roots, just as it heralds his dry humor and Nordic melancholia.

Packed with a young crowd that looked as if they longed to be participants in one of his performances, the galleries were nevertheless quiet with the hushed, reverential air of a Rembrandt retrospective; plenty of knowing smiles, but not the stifled laughter and amusement I expected.

The survey opens with one of the artist’s earliest and strongest video pieces, *Death and the Children* (2002). Shot in a grainy, gothic, black and white, the artist is dressed as “death” in dark

19th-century clothes to ambush—with the teacher’s permission—a troupe of enthusiastic elementary-aged school children on a field trip. He intercepts them in a cemetery and, in a booming, scary voice, the Grim Reaper confronts the young children, addressing them theatrically on the subject of death, then leading them bobbing through the cemetery, bubbling with excitement and trepidation. Gradually, the children gain in confidence and skepticism at this amateur-looking Grim Reaper and his alarming words —“Your scythe is fake!” says one, “You’re just an elf with a stick!” says another. Before they know it, he disappears, chastened, into a crypt to the netherworld.

Kjartansson has introduced the children to an adult interpretation of their world, treading the fine line between fear and fun that children relish. It’s a beautifully layered piece, simultaneously about childhood innocence yet resilience, presented with purity and tenderness.

Another early piece has a similar directness and cutting-edge flavor. In *Me and My Mother* (2000), and repeated in 2005, 2010 and 2015, the artist’s mother stands rather formally next to Kjartansson and periodically turns to spit on him venomously and unapologetically. In the



Ragnar Kjartansson, *God*, 2007, video, 30 minutes 7 seconds, edition of 3 and 2 artist's proofs.

first rendition, there is a tension of intent between them as they break the bond of mother and son. So simple and so surprisingly shocking, the ritual has been repeated every five years since, with lessening power.

In 2007, his career already established, the artist gave us a contrastingly glossy and brilliant pastiche of glitzy period Americana in *God*. In this single video projection, a tuxedo-clad Kjartansson (an admitted Sinatra nut), croons 1950s-style along with an 11-piece band. The artist sings just one subversive lyric, which undoes the upbeat and sophisticated cabaret setting: “Sorrow conquers happiness.” A mournful, stretched-out rendition, it conjures up not so much the Rat Pack on Jack Daniels as Rufus Wainwright in Scandinavian pain. The publicity photo from this performance captures the mood so perfectly that the single image alone convinces in the manner of a Cindy Sherman film still. Having seen that image, there was a real sense of disappointment that this wasn’t a live performance.

God is closely related to *Woman in E* (2016), the only live performance in the survey and coming a full nine years later. Again, the presentation is cabaret-style, with the female performer dressed in a gold-sequined evening dress, partially hidden within a circle of gold tinsel curtains, which we must visually penetrate to see her. She is seated and very slowly, self-consciously strums a single E chord on an electric guitar.

Kjartansson has explained that this performance is a commentary on the objectification of women—she is literally on a pedestal. As such, it doesn’t seem to be making a clear point, as the performer appears to be acting out the specific will of her (male) director, with no autonomous power evident.

The two most powerful and well-attended pieces in the survey are both multi-channel video installations. *The Visitors* (2012),

is a nine-projection installation, and *World Light—The Life and Death of an Artist* (2015), a four-channel video that most obviously references Kjartansson’s theatrical family background.

The Visitors is set at Rokeby Hall, a grand, colonial-style mansion in upstate New York. In its beautifully dilapidated interior, a group of musicians play their instruments in separate locations. We are surrounded by the projections, spread around the gallery set at angles to one another, and playing concurrently. Earpieces give away that the initially casual bohemian jam—Kjartansson plays his guitar naked in the bath—is, in fact, a carefully coordinated, complex and evocative musical arrangement. The instrumental builds and joins with vocals until the lilting refrain of “Once again I fall into my feminine ways” coalesces and dominates. The performers and others in the house gather together, singing and accompanying each other as the loose-limbed mantra takes a hold of the entire party. Entranced, they slowly spill out of the house and off into the pastoral landscape, to the fading strains of the refrain.

If a sense of longing and sadness presides—the piece was apparently a consequence of the artist’s split from his then wife—the collaborative nature and inclusivity of the piece transforms it into an uplifting spiritual, which had the tangible effect on the spellbound “visitors” to the gallery of appropriating them into the performance. They remained reluctant to leave at the conclusion, as if held by a symbiotic embrace between the performers and audience.

Based on the epic novel by Icelandic Nobel Prize-winning novelist Halldór Laxness, *World Light* is a four-channel presentation with particularly large-scale projections. Although a more straightforward installation than *The Visitors*, the content is an altogether more visually



Ragnar Kjartansson, *The End – Venezia*, 2009, (June 2009), six month performance during the 2009 Venice Biennale during which 144 paintings were made.



Ragnar Kjartansson, *The Visitors*, 2012, nine-channel video projection, 64 minutes. Photo: Elísabet Davids. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.



Ragnar Kjartansson, *Me and My Mother*, 2000, video, duration: 10 minute loop, edition of 6.



Ragnar Kjartansson, *Me and My Mother*, 2015, video, duration: 10 minute loop, edition of 6.

challenging and intense collage, with a dense narrative that pays homage to a text Kjartansson has described as his “bible.”

Ostensibly staged with the use of actors rather than participants, as well as scenic props, staged special effects and influences from both Nordic film and the artist’s love of opera, the installation is the result of a one-month filmed performance. With 80 scenes in all, it was produced at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in Vienna. In this epic undertaking, the artist finally fully engages with the seminal influence of his family’s theatrical background; one provocative tableau after another filled with the raw emotion and complex interpersonal relationships that were the life of folk poet Ólafur Kárason.

It was difficult to give this 20-plus-hour epic of Kjartansson’s the attention it deserved, with so many other pieces in the show be-

ing measured in hours, not minutes. *World Light* suggests that the survey might thus have benefitted from fewer selections.

This touches on the much-discussed emphasis on repetition and endurance in Kjartansson’s work, which while integral to some pieces, is not so in others, as his own words suggest. When describing *Woman in E*, for example, the artist says, “For the audience, it’s a very free invitation to look at it for as long as you want. You can go and sit there for hours or take a glance at it for one minute—sort of gives you the same kick.”

This principle is again demonstrated in the Hirshhorn theater, where a video features The National, Kjartansson’s favorite band performing *A Lot of Sorrow*, in a six-hour nonstop repetition of the same song. Here, just like Warhol’s *Empire*, (eight hours plus), it



Ragnar Kjartansson, *Woman in E*, 2017. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington.

gives these pieces an important context to *know* what the duration is, even if you do just “glance at it.”

Kjartansson has represented Iceland at two Venice Biennales, and at the 53rd he explores the eternal “block” of the painter. Kjartansson plays the role to the hilt, passing up the standard solution of painting the view through the window—those Venetian views are too hot to handle—and instead has his friend Páll Haukur Björnson pose for him as the stereotypical debauched artist, replete in Speedo swim shorts, while both of them drink and smoke themselves into Hogarthian excess—or at least act it out.

Painted largely wet-on-wet, every variant of languid, louche and world-weary pose is explored, portrayed on a rainbow of brightly hued grounds, carefully designed to animate the salon-style hanging. All 144 paintings are exhibited. Thus, we are grateful to Kjartansson for exorcising the ghost of a “last resort” that every artist who has ever attended a residency must have dreaded while also delivering a genuinely amusing installation of “amateur” paintings in mix-and-match sizes and colors. The installation is one of the highlights of the show.

Not so the piece the artist created for the 55th Biennale, which is a much less successful partner, far from its original context of Venice. *S.S. Hangover* (2013-2014), depicts a fishing sailboat with a cargo of musicians playing their instruments, setting out from a dock in the bay for a two-hour journey to another dock. It is shown in two projections joined together as a mirror image. One musician is dropped ashore occasionally to play isolated from the others, the sense of separation creating a metaphorical mirrored effect, if not an aural one.

Called by one critic at the time “one of the most haunting spectacles in the history of the biennale,” it appears to be a faintly pompous and redundant exercise here, without the glorious location of Venice permeating our senses.

The real weak link in the show, however, is *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt* (2015), which is comprised of a series of painted stage “flats” of snow-topped rocks, or possibly mountains, about waist high, arranged facing the direction in which visitors move through the show. As you walk past them, you see their unfinished plywood backs that wouldn’t normally be visible to a theater audience. I thought they were items left over from a live talk or performance, but apparently not.

The label for the show describes the piece thus: “On approach, one is confronted with a picturesque landscape of snowy rocks, but as the scenery is navigated, the flimsy plywood of the set pieces is revealed from behind, suggesting the disappointment that inevitably lies on the other side of romantic desire.”

Coming after the ambition and intricacy of the video installations, this concept looks as flimsy as the plywood. Even Kjartansson’s small sketchbooks nearby are stuffed with enticing projects and whimsical humor and prove, despite the artist’s protestations, that he can indeed draw.

There were times during this show that I found myself wanting to whack Kjartansson round the head with the memory of Chris Burden or Martin Kippenberger or agree that he is “just an elf with a stick.” But again and again I am, almost reluctantly, drawn back to Kjartansson’s unique marriage of lush image and music, his lyricism and slovenly beauty, summoned up by his array of talented participants and performers who bring to life the deeply indulgent and seductive tableaux that tap into our emotional core. Pieces that are new, that are fresh.

As Kjartansson says in the catalog accompanying the show, “Since life is so much abyss and pointless and useless, I decided to look at it as paradise.” Bravo to that, though this fascinating survey both supports the artist’s burgeoning rise to prominence with sublime moments *and* questions that status with uneven work and inherent contradictions.

Perhaps I’ll defer to Kjartansson’s mother and her pithy quote: “Why spoil a good story with the truth?” ■



Dara Friedman, *Dancer*, 2011. Super 16mm film transferred to HD video, black and white, sound, running time 25 minutes. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, partial gift of Robert and Diane Moss. © Dara Friedman, courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

PERFECT STRANGER

An Interview with Dara Friedman

BY HEIKE DEMPSTER

Shadow Roses Shadows

Ingeborg Bachmann
1956

Shadows roses shadows

Under a strange sky

Shadows roses shadows

In a strange land

Between roses and shadows

In a strange water

My shadow

(From: Dara Friedman, *Dichter* (2017), four-channel HD color video transferred from 16-millimeter film)

“Perfect Stranger,” Dara Friedman’s mid-career survey at Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), is the Miami-based German artist’s most comprehensive show to date, spanning over 20 years of production. The 16-millimeter film and video works, created between 1997 and 2017, invite the viewer/participant (none of Friedman’s works ask simply that you view the films but rather actively

connect the audience with those perfect strangers they encounter) to walk, dance, communicate, experience and discover themselves and others alongside the artist, focusing on shared human experiences and emotions even in the most exuberant of films.

Friedman experiments with physicality, stripping film as an artistic medium down to bare essentials whilst channeling intimacy to create works that evoke deeply emotive responses and profound connections through imagery, motion and sound. Many of the works include dance and music, displays of raw emotion, or intimate moments and conversations, yet the viewer is more participant than voyeur. In *Sunset Island* (2005), a conversation leaves room for the viewer/participant with two separate monitors for the respective speakers to allow space for insertion. The viewer/participant becomes not just part of the physical space and experience by standing in between or in front of the speakers, but he/she also simultaneously becomes part of the conversation and emotional state conveyed by the experience.

Friedman’s camera movements invite the viewer/participant to move alongside the actors, singers and dancers with whom the artist often collaborates by leaving space to sit in a circle around the fire,



Dara Friedman, *Dichter*, 2017, four-channel HD color video transferred from 16 mm film, with sound, 32 min., 13 sec.; 24 min., 10 sec.; 22 min., 51 sec.; 24 min., 46 sec. Courtesy the artist and Supportico Lopez, Berlin.

as in *Mother Drum* (2017), dance through the streets of Miami in *Dancer* (2011) whilst suggesting the moves of a dance partner, or by creating an environment of immersion in poetry as in *Dichter (Poet)* (2017). In *Dichter (Poet)*, the viewer/participant is surrounded by strangers reading poetry from continuously switching screens that utilize space to create an immersive and participatory experience.

Combining techniques and principles of structural filmmaking with a strong emotional charge and an intuitive approach to subject matter, such as intuition, impulses, creativity, interaction and connectivity, Friedman, who studied film under legendary avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka in the 1990s, disregards any form of linear or traditional narrative or storytelling. Instead, she relies on straightforward gestures and situations she carefully plans in advance, involving precise choices in regards to camera movement and editing to invite human interaction and a connection to the environment and self. Even with the work being carefully planned, Friedman retains the sensuality, and her films are rarely lacking in awareness. There is a connection that emerges with the viewer beyond the boundaries of the screen that teems with an intensity that encourages empathy and asks that we truly see ourselves and others with clarity.

“Perfect Stranger,” curated by Rene Morales, is connected to Miami in location, space and partially also in subject matter. Set up in the main gallery at PAMM, the space is partially closed off to create an intimate experience and partially allows for glimpses of Miami through windows, also inviting the city back into the museum space and creating an energy movement throughout the exhibition. Especially for *Dancer*, this adds to the immersive experience and gives

the film a firm sense of place. Art is connected to the outside, not insular and separated inside the museum, and PAMM has a reputation for awareness when it comes to location, place and the role art plays in community building and creating a space for exchange.

Heike Dempster - This your first career survey and largest presentation of your work to date. Can you tell us about your selection process for this exhibition?

Dara Friedman - It is almost everything. It is 20 years of work, and I only make one or two pieces a year. It is really involved. There are just a few pieces that did not seem absolutely vital, otherwise it is just what there is. Fortunately or unfortunately, I sort of got in my head really early on that if you make artworks you should always try to make masterpieces. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but somehow it really stuck. That's why there aren't many minor works, there are just these sort of bigger works, and they seem to take the time and energy and will to do. And that's just what there is.

H.D. - Is PAMM an institution where you wanted to show these works?

D.F. - They chose me. I am really, really moved and thankful.

H.D. - How long does it take to conceptualize, plan and film your works?

D.F. - *Musical* was an idea for 20 years. *Mother Drum*, the last one, really took two years to make, including one and a half years to edit. I am not slow or lazy, but there are so many elements with a film I feel like it is almost a symphony. There are so many instruments in a symphony: there are so many parts to write and so many ropes to braid that you have your hands full all the time.



Dara Friedman, *Government Cut Freestyle*, 1998, 16 mm film transferred to DVD, silent, running time 9 minutes, 20 seconds. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Dennis and Debra Scholl. © Dara Friedman, courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.



Dara Friedman, *Musical*, 2007-2008, HD video, sound, running time 48 minutes. Collection Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Beth Swofford. © Dara Friedman, courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.



Dara Friedman, *Mother Drum*, 2016, three-channel HD video projection with sound, running time 14 minutes, 31 seconds. © Dara Friedman, courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

I am a one-man band so I have to be the conductor, but I am dealing with the full symphony of instruments.

H.D. - You are really interested in 'the radical reduction of the medium.' Can you elaborate on what that means within the context of your work?

D.F. - Say you read a novel, but then you could look at that novel and the writing in terms of grammar or in terms of structure and what's the pacing like and what the paragraphs are like and what are the sentences like. Are they complete or incomplete? Compound or complex? Where are the commas and the punctuation? Looking at it from the narrative and the feeling but also from the grammar, which is the structure of the film, which is the aspect ratio and the type of camera and the relationship of sound to picture, the relationship of the camera to the person you are filming. That's the reduction. What is it? When you write, when you put the pen to paper what is the pen? How does it meet the paper? What's happening? What happens when the thought transmits from brain to hand? Thinking about those things instead of skipping over them as givens and making assumptions.

H.D. - How important is scale to you in terms of the imagery in the film but also how it relates to the space in which the work is presented and experienced by the viewer, considering the importance of engagement and the intimate connections between the subjects of your films and the audiences?

D.F. - I really want each work to articulate it, and when Rene and I were thinking about what the overall feel of the exhibition should be, I thought that I really wanted it to be like the cosmos. There is black, black, black and then you travel to a planet, and when you are there you can travel to another planet. And each planet and each work is differentiated from the other, so you can do that with size, which is one obvious way. Some are small and bright and some are bigger and you can get lost in them. I wanted to articulate the space where the experience happens.

H.D. - How important is it for you to have the audience as participants rather than observers?

D.F. - We are women and we understand what it means to be looked at and we understand what the difference is. We all like to look. I like to look. It does not mean that you cannot look. It is how you look. Are you going to look thinking that you yourself may not be seen? Or do you look knowing that you, too, will be seen? You better arrange yourself so that it won't come back at you. It is a reflection.

H.D. - Do you think of the viewer as someone to 'be seen' in the film?

D.F. - No. I am seen. When I film somebody then I know that they are looking at me, too, that it's a relationship, a two-way street. You are not just taking their image. They are going to reflect and there is an exchange taking place, so you have to arrange yourself in a way that makes that okay.

Friedman's *Dichter (Poet)* is a work that resonates as an exploration of continuity. By adapting Jerzy Grotowski's voice-training techniques, Friedman applies the method of 'speaking with the entire body,' which continues the artist's previous exploration of movement and motion such as *Dancer*. This is layered onto the idea of continuity based on the notion of poetic language becoming part of self, intellectually as well as emotionally. With *Dichter (Poet)*, Friedman captures and shares the energy created by language and its emotional response.

Mostly German from the previous century with a few Russian, Italian and English, the poems are by: Anna Achmatova, Ingeborg Bachmann, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Charles Bukowski, Erich Fried, Goethe, Mascha Kaléko, Karl Levy, Alda Merini, Christian Morgenstern, Rainer Maria Rilke, Joachim Ringelnatz and Werner W. Wallroth. These poems express feelings of frustration, confusion and anger, but also passion, wonder and vitality.

When no way out was to be seen

Erich Fried
1979

Those who wander madly about
And even say
That they know
That they're wandering madly about
And that they still want to say
What they see
As they wander madly about
If they even see anything
As if they had anything to say

Namely, that they see nothing
When they see nothing
And that they see something
When they see something
And that they're wandering madly about
Because they don't know where
Or even if
There is a way that's not a wrong
Way

And maybe then their madly wandering about
Isn't such a great madness as those who do not say
That they know they are wandering madly about
And who don't want to say what they see
Or if they see nothing, don't want to say
That they see nothing
Because they don't want to see
That they are wandering madly about
And that perhaps there is no way ■

(From: Dara Friedman, *Dichter* (2017), four-channel HD color video transferred from 16-millimeter film)

IN CONVERSATION WITH BALINT ZSAKO

Balint Zsako's (b. 1979) artistic language is a curious blend of psychological, mythical, spiritual and sexual narratives that express his devoted exploration of emotional complexities and somatic configurations. Although Zsako creates in a range of media including watercolor, collage, painting, sculpture, drawing and photography, his ongoing series of works on paper demonstrate his preoccupation with human interactions and intensities. Within the environs in which his characters engage in imaginative activities, Zsako orchestrates an existence that is both playful and mysterious. His focus on figurative elements reveals his ongoing interest in humanistic qualities coupled with semiotics.

Zsako was born in Budapest, Hungary, grew up in Canada, and currently lives in San Francisco after many years in New York City. He studied fine art at Ryerson University in Toronto. Zsako has had solo exhibitions at The Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago, IL; The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto; The Proposition Gallery, NY; and Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects, Toronto, Canada. His works are featured in Phaidon's *Vitamin D2* drawing anthology and are included in the permanent collections of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, KS and The Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, Australia. Having recently relocated to the Bay area, *ARTPULSE* writer Taliesin Thomas conducted this interview via Skype.

BY TALIESIN THOMAS

Taliesin Thomas - Please tell us about your background as an artist and how you started making art.

Balint Zsako - I was born in Hungary and both of my parents are artists. My mother Anna Torma is a textile artist, but she is more in the fine art world than the craft world, and my father Istvan Zsako is a sculptor. Both my parents were successful visual artists in Hungary but my father wanted to leave Eastern Europe because he didn't know how the communist experiment was going to end. We left before the wall came down, so we ended up in West Germany for about two years and then from there we went to Canada. I grew up in Canada. I have been making art and building things from a young age, and I was surrounded by my parents' artist friends, so a life in the arts seemed natural. I was good at math in school so I was seriously considering studying Industrial Design but instead I started studying new media in college and finished with a fine arts degree in photography.

T.T. - Most of what I know about your work is your watercolors on paper. Do you still work in a variety of mediums these days or mostly drawing?

B.Z. - During college I was making these thick journals that contained everything I did—drawings, paintings, photography, writing—like Peter Beard sketchbooks, you know, just cram everything in them. The journals stopped after college but I have worked a lot with photography, I have built my own cameras. The last photographic series I did were cyanotypes, and I have done series where I draw or collage the negatives and then print them in a traditional c-print enlarger. I have always loved the medium of photography but most of my time now is spent drawing and making collages. I like to rotate the mediums I work with to make it exciting to come back to after a break.

T.T. - Your drawings often exhibit gorgeous and sumptuous color combinations.

B.Z. - I figured out the way I like to paint watercolors isn't in washes of colors combined but more in glazes, painting thin layers on top of each other. If you paint a red on top of a green, the kind of rich brown you get is not a color you can get with any single pigment. I lean toward saturated bright color instinctively, so sometimes I have to stop myself and tone things down or try and pick unpredictable color combinations instead of easily likeable ones.

T.T. - The figures in your works seem to either agree in their actions or struggle for control through open-ended narratives. I am curious about your influences or ideas for the stories in your work.

B.Z. - The open-ended part of it is important. People are complicated, you never know someone's motivations in either love or war. Somebody's heroic action is somebody else's war crime. I don't like to make illustrative or declarative works, where it's airtight and where it's like 'I am saying this' and if you don't see that then the work dies. Most successful artwork is like that. If you look at a Caravaggio you are not excited by the religious content, you are looking at it because of the humanism and the humanism is always complicated. And that is why the question of political art is really interesting to me, because you want to be engaged with things that are going on, but it's difficult to make something—especially with ink and watercolor on paper—that will change somebody's mind. So what you do is show what people are and show who people are and that goes a lot further in opening someone's minds than sloganeering.



Balint Zsako, *Modern Dance, Series 1 (#95, #71)*, 2014, watercolor and ink on paper, 12" x 9,"each. All images are courtesy of the artist and The Proposition Gallery, NY.

T.T. - *Your recent body of work, Blood Orange exhibited at Foley Gallery in New York, those pieces are notably absent of landscapes or objects. The sole focus is figurative, so the isolated realms in your work seem wholly devoted to the complexity of the human being. Please elaborate on those figures.*

B.Z. - I find that by focusing on the figure it makes you look at interactions and the subtleties of those interactions. The last series at Foley Gallery was the most concentrated in terms of just paring down: there are no objects, there is no landscape, there is no ground, and there is no sky. It just makes you look at the figure. This is the first time I have worked like this—in previous works I would add a bottle or add a tree to make the painting work compositionally or thematically.

T.T. - *Those works suggest a kind of pleasure, power and negotiation among men and women. Figures often share an organ or other bodily part, such as two figures who divide one eye. Is this merging of bodies psychological, physical or sexual? Is it a combination of all that?*

B.Z. - These paintings show physical metaphors for personal interactions. Are the figures working together or working against each other, being in love or having hate—how do you show that with just the physical body, how do you show that with just color? Possession of a body seems like a direct way of representing who

has control over a sexual relationship or emotional trajectory. Are they trying to get away from each other or closer to each other? I want that to be unclear.

T.T. - *I am really intrigued by that sexual element in your work, this idea about overlapping bodies that suggest poly-amorous or non-monogamous behavior. Is that an accurate interpretation or is there something else that you are saying with that?*

B.Z. - I think the world is amazing in the spectrum of genders and in the spectrum of desires and in how people relate to each other. People are complex and not binary, they always have been, going back to the Romans and to the cave men. This makes its way into my work.

T.T. - *I'm a huge fan of that 'open-ended complication' in your work. There are so many sensual moments in your work where men and women or figures of the same sex melt into each other in erotic ways, yet there is also an underlying tension in some of these assemblages. For example, one of your works from the recent Foley exhibition in NYC included a piece with two men whose penis' becomes one. The work is explicit without being pornographic. Please describe what you think viewers of your work might experience in a moment such as this. What do you want them to feel?*

B.Z. - I have several sketches for that work in which I incorporated the arms into the touch, like thinking about the fingers touch-



Balint Zsako, *Untitled (Blood Orange #1)*, 2016, watercolor on paper, 30" x 22."



Balint Zsako, *Untitled (Blood Orange #32)*, 2017, watercolor on paper, 30" x 22."



Balint Zsako, *Modern Dance, Series 1* (#41, #38, #65), 2014, watercolor and ink on paper, 12" x 9,"each.

ing the face or the hands being linked. But once I painted the bottom part with just the penis' being linked it was such a strong and gentle gesture at the same time, it didn't need anything else. You can look at it as a metaphor for sexual desire but not desiring any other part of that person. But it can also be read as the figures pulling apart, where they used to share a lot of things but those things are no longer relevant and all that has left is that single touch. Or it could be like soldiers in war where conflict makes camaraderie in a very specific way. It represents strength and brotherliness without being sexual, an intention to move forward with strength and power to victory.

There is a multiplicity of directions in painting and I find it sat-

isfying when the viewer comes to a conclusion or a reading of it that is personal. What happens to me during a day is completely different from what happens to you. When I look at that picture, it might make me happy but its probably different than what it does to you. That reaction is what the artwork is, and that requires the viewer to bring a lot of their own life to it. It's not telling you 'this is a fact'—it's telling you the world is complicated. Is it war, or is it sex, or what is it?

T.T. - *There are obvious sexual narratives in your work, and sometimes blatant sexual overtones that suggest sexual intensity or even the so-called violence you are speaking of. What inspires*

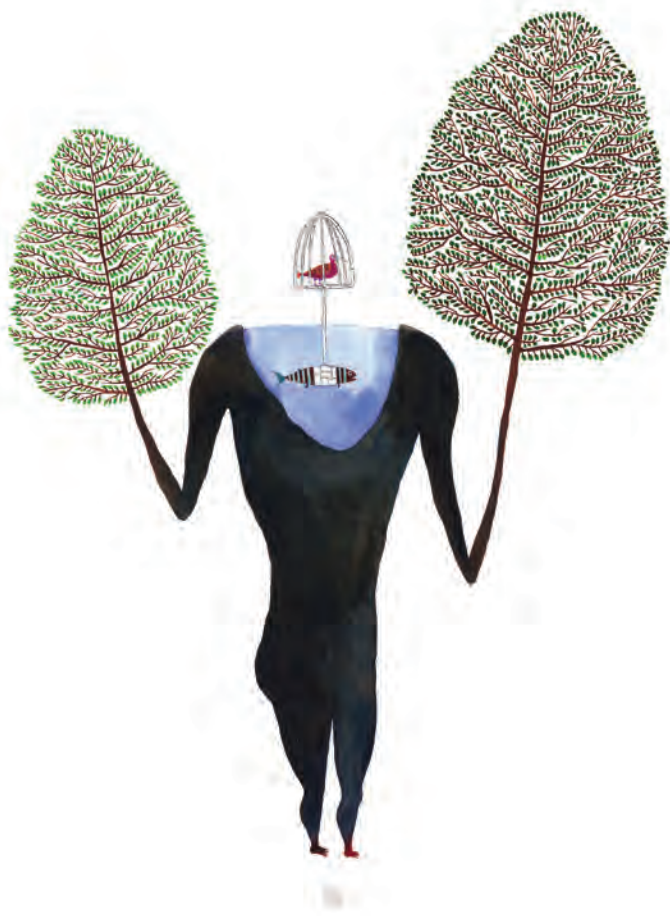


the sexual element in your work and has this evolved over time or has it always been a part of your practice?

B.Z. - It's been there for a very long time. I don't know if it's a direct relationship with the kind of work that my father makes, he makes abstracted but sexually explicit sculptures. His work was always in the background so I never thought the theme was unusual, it was just always a part of the landscape of my house. In my own work I find that you make one drawing and then the second one follows from it, so it wasn't a conscious decision—if anything it was more a desire for the figures to be timeless and have no clothes. Once there are no clothes it's an easier access to sexual metaphors. Looking at prehistoric art, Australian art,

Indian art, paring it down to the body and simplifying the bodies—how much can you communicate by simplified bodies? What do they do to each other?

T.T. - *I love what you do with bodies in your work because your art is so dedicated to the physical form and the delightful, allegorical stories that evolve. Your works express a kind of fluidity that I equate with modern dance movements, where isolated figures partake in personal scenes and act out moments that define something indefinable. When you are finished with a piece, do you stand back and often see something else than what you intended? Or do you always aim to say something specific through these vignettes?*



Balint Zsako, *Untitled (swimming cage)*, 2006, watercolor and ink on paper, 16" x 12."

B.Z. - It's fascinating that you bring up modern dance because for a long time I was not a fan of it at all, but once I started becoming familiar with the work of Pina Bausch and going to contemporary performances in New York, it really made me think: 'Oh, that could be one of my drawings!' I am speaking the same language that the dancers are speaking. It was a real wake-up call to see this completely different art form that I didn't have an interest in become such an important part of the things I look at now. Being concerned with what bodies can do and how they interact with each other is a direct comparison to contemporary dance.

T.T. - *I loved hearing you speak at the Foley Gallery in NYC where you described the levels of complexity in your work and these ideas about struggle, control and conflict. I am curious to hear what you think is the difference between the sexual versus the psychological aspect of your work and what are the motivations?*

B.Z. - They are getting more and more refined. When I first started making these drawings more than 15 years ago, the bodies were simplified and the faces were without expression. The bodies became less chunky and the expressions of the faces show greater psychological depth now. The compositions have also become more complicated. I love abstract art and that's always in my head when I'm thinking about blocking or positioning. So even though the figures look like they are in motion, or they are in action, compositionally I

am thinking of Miró or Ellsworth Kelly. Even though one person is standing on the other's head and it looks like something is going to happen, they are also very still. Most of my pictures are stable, they don't look like they are falling over, it doesn't look like someone is flying across the canvas—it looks like it's captured in a moment that could go either way but it's not in a hurry to do so.

T.T. - *I recall a few years ago The Proposition showed your work at the Art on Paper fair in New York and the smaller drawings could be rearranged, the little chapters could be moved around to tell different stories and that seems to describe that very idea—these slices of relationships and they way they can intermix. I feel there's a certain meta-narrative in your work with respect to human relationships. Do you agree with that? If you had to describe that meta-narrative what would you say about it?*

B.Z. - There are not that many lone figures in my works and if they are by themselves, then they are directly speaking to somebody who is just off-stage. So it is about the relationships and people speaking to each other. You picked up on it really nicely, that meta-narrative. In one series the same theme is presented by the layering of bodies, while in another it is addressed by the ability of the audience to rearrange the actual sequence of artworks. Changing the scale was a big part of it as well, when you go from something that is very intimate to something slightly larger, how does that narrative carry through or change? ... [Balint had to check on his infant son and then returned to the interview with Felix in his arms]. Felix, do you mind if I talk on the phone a little? He can stay here and we can continue to talk if this is not too distracting.

T.T. - *Of course! So these storylines, these ideas contained within the work or sort of underneath the work, would you say that is an accurate intention of yours as an artist, that you are infusing these pieces with these hidden stories?*

B.Z. - I try to do that by mining so much of what I see in the world. I want to take everything I experience or hear and be the filter to turn it into a work on paper, from news to art. I love Matthew Barney's work but don't make films, so the question is, what is my version of those types of narratives in the form of works on paper? I look at the world of Frazer's "The Golden Bough" that examines superstitious or traditional practices from all over the world and how amazing they are and how they make logical sense on their own terms but they are also magical in their thinking. That leads you toward Italo Calvino and Kurt Vonnegut. There are all these rich underlying stories in the world and they come out in my work.

T.T. - *I really delight in your mysterious, hidden storylines. They are truly captivating and curious and even strange. There are some very beautiful moments in your work that I think are, as you were saying before, these universalisms. The raw elements of your work—just watercolor and paper—it's not trying to be anything more than that.*

B.Z. - It's also that I want to surprise myself. When I start work-



Balint Zsako, *Untitled (two emissions)*, 2008, watercolor and ink on paper, 16" x 12."

ing, I usually start with painting a figure, often sourced from an old master painting or from a vintage photograph. I will use that as a starting point and add objects and other figures later. It's like writing a short story—you have a character and you see where they take you, and they tell you what they are going to do in the world. I don't want to take the same direction twice. If it feels like something too familiar then I want to change directions and surprise myself.

T.T. - *It truly comes through in your body of work, and even a Google image search of your art offers an incredible narrative of related themes. Do you have any favorite philosophers or a personal philosophy that inspires you?*

B.Z. - What humanity is capable of is what I am really interested in. There are terrible things in the world, but in a way they are often necessary for the beautiful things in the world. You try to fix all the terrible things and you end up making a lot beautiful things along the way. I can't say I want the terrible things to continue, but the Renaissance was the bloodiest time in history and the most amazing art came out of it. In my mind those things are linked. Of course in a purely humanist way you don't want hunger, war or conflict, but then what would you have in terms of culture or the beauty of people relating to each other under duress? There is a richness that comes out of suffering and hardship.

I know what it's like to have very little and to live in a country where you don't speak the language, and you're not necessarily welcome. The world influences who you are and what you do and what that means in other people's lives. What are you allowed to say as an artist? What are you allowed to say as a *white* artist? I have been thinking a lot about that, when you see delicate, attractive female nudes painted by a Middle Eastern woman, it means something fundamentally different than if a white man paints the same picture. I find it fascinating how context is such a rich world for painting. Sometimes you have paintings and it's enough for it to speak for itself, but sometimes knowing who made it makes it's either empowering or exploitative. I have no idea what the answer is, but I think about what my position should be.

T.T. - *Yes, like Nietzsche says, there is wisdom in pain. Just curious, what are you reading these days? I know you just moved to San Francisco and you have your hands full with your beautiful baby, but are you reading anything noteworthy?*

B.Z. - I really love reading anything by Aleksandar Hemon. His descriptions of what it's like to be an immigrant are beautiful and accurate. And the Russian constructivist-surrealist, absurdist 20th century poet Daniil Kharms is marvelous. In the art realm I just finished reading *Chromophobia* by David Batchelor and frequently dip into Philip Guston's collected writings.

T.T. - *What are you working on now and what's happening for you in the near future?*

B.Z. - I am very interested in language right now. I am making my kind of paintings with the repertoire of objects I have used often, and building words and sentences that I collect into it. For example, a stick and twine construction spelling out a phrase, or a swarm of flies in the shape of letters. Finding the right image to go with the right phrase is the challenge. I am trying to use language in the same way that I use narratives—they are open-ended but they are powerful to the right person at the right time. You don't want the relationship of the image and text to be obvious but you don't want it to be too cryptic either. The friction has to be just right.

The second part of this project is focusing attention away from the face to other parts of the body. There is a problem with faces, they are naturally the first thing we look for, it's a basic human reaction. People want to relate to a face but this might mean that other parts of the image get lost. John Baldessari solved this by covering up faces in his work with colorful dots. I'm not doing that but it's the same idea. How do you take the focus off the face and how do you emphasize written language? I am also having an exhibition of the *Blood Orange* works in Toronto, at Birch Contemporary, from September 7 to October 14, 2017.

T.T. - *I love your ideas and I love your work! Your work truly speaks on its own terms. Thank you so much.*

B.Z. - Thank you, it's always a pleasure to hear somebody else's take on what I do. Having to articulate what I think about is a good thing. ■



Pia MYrvoLD, *ART AVATAR*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2014, installation view. Photo: Anya Buklowska.

PIA MYrvoLD: DIALOGUES ACROSS MEDIA

Paris-based artist Pia MYrvoLD started her professional career in the 1980s in her native Norway, and along the way, she broadened her artistic practice to include different media and disciplines. It was in Paris in the 1990s that she began making a name for herself while working closely with architect Bernard Tschumi to create a project at Parc de la Villette that involved architecture, design and urban planning as well as social and cultural interaction. She then was active in the Paris fashion scene for more than a decade while developing a broad spectrum of collections that mixed fashion with new technologies.

MYrvoLD is a pioneer in the exploration of the use of computer tools and digital interfaces as a new art medium. Her works invite the public to penetrate and participate in immersive environments in which she combines performance, music, architecture, video art, digital technologies, the design of interfaces, the design of robotic sculpture and fashion design, among other media. She firmly believes in the role of the artist as a visionary, as a proactive force that generates social change and evolution on both mental and cultural levels.

MYrvoLD has exhibited her works at galleries and museums in Europe, Asia and North America and has been the subject of solo exhibitions at a number of prestigious cultural institutions, including Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris; Stenersen Museum in Oslo, Norway; Bergen Kunstmuseum in Bergen, Norway; and Vitenfabrikken (the Science Museum) in Sandnes, Norway. Last year, she was invited by *The New York Times* to lecture about her contribution as an innovator and pioneer in digital art at the conference “Art for Tomorrow” in Doha, Qatar.

In this conversation, on the occasion of her upcoming exhibition in Miami, she shared with *ARTPULSE* her philosophy of work, which encourages endless dialogues between artworks, artists, exhibition spaces and publics, as well as revealed details about many of her most remarkable professional projects.

BY RAISA CLAVIJO

Raisa Clavijo - *You started in the art world as a painter. During the first decade of your career you developed a vast body of pictorial works, but you have also worked in a wide spectrum of media, such as performance, experimental electronic music, design, video art, fashion design, architecture and urban planning. In the 1990s, during the advent of the Internet and the boom of digital technologies, you started exploring the possibilities of digital art. Tell me how your interest in new media arose. What did you find in the digital world that satisfied your creative needs and that brought together all of the talents of your multidisciplinary professional background?*

Pia MYrvoLD - My interest in new media arose due the interdisciplinary work I had done. Interdisciplinarity was vastly rejected by the art world, at least in Norway, but I also found prevalent traces of conservative positions in Paris in the early 1990s. I did a large summer project in Parc de la Villette that was directly commissioned by architect Bernard Tschumi, who worked closely with important French philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault. The world of architecture had entered a new phase of planning and improving urban spaces and society throughout the material execution of projects that allowed the inclusion of sculptures with social connotations.

With the development of computer technologies and especially with the advent of the Internet, knowledge and information reached wider distribution. Additionally, these advances allowed plural approaches between disciplines. My first interactive interface was a web-based work, *Dada Memory*. In 1996, it was linked to my wearable art collection with the same name in which individual sound loops could be gathered randomly by the user to generate a creative and performative experience.

When I was invited by the Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode, in Paris, to have my own show, I used that opportunity to access the press and mass media to speak about fashion as an art medium. I introduced 16 collections during my time on the 'elite list' of French fashion designers.

Clothes as Publishing (1996) evolved quickly into cybercouture.com, and that art interface was a new kind of business model for art, fashion and what we referred to as 'insemination of ideas,' like I did in *Osmoses*. It is about adding information (substance) into the mix, to alter the whole. For 'insemination of ideas,' I mean a reference to the beliefs of deconstructionist philosophy. It proposes that it is possible to combine art and architecture with concepts and information embedded in the design, so it is possible to spread ideas in another way. At Parc de la Villette, it was a way to educate people from 80 different nationalities about high culture that was not accessible to them on a level as it was available for upper class Parisians, who begin art classes at The Louvre from the age of five.

Today it sounds logical. In fact, there are many services available due to the easy access to technological platforms and clever interface designs. Many of them are similar to the ideas I developed in my early works. However, I worked almost without budget. I also had to invent most of the techniques that linked the user's creative platform to the content of curated digital art exhibitions, and to create a banking system for payments was really hard in those days. So it was not sustainable for me, as an artist. I struggled to break even for each collection, with the evolving digital platforms, video content, music and performances that included the catwalk shows.

I tried to get investors, and to create a satellite system, in which production could be decentralized into remote areas so local communities could be involved in the creative knowledge production of each project

and develop a sustainable local industry in which young people could learn and exchange knowledge with the best Paris-based fashion and design centers. In the end, I was not successful in finding a cultural match among potential investors.

R.C. - *As you mentioned, you have explored the possibilities of fashion as an artistic medium since the early 1990s. Your first collection of fashion designs was called "In-formation." Tell me about the concept that united those works.*

P.M. - This was in 1994, after finishing the Parc de la Villette project. Unexpectedly, the gallery world in Paris was largely opposed to this project and everything that was related to it from a philosophical perspective. I was not eager to go back to Norway, so I made a small collection of 16 garments that I exhibited at avant-garde boutiques. The collection was bought by Charivari in New York, so in three months I was on Fifth Avenue with a show, large press coverage and lots of attention. After I went back to Paris, I was invited by the Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode to have my own catwalk show.

I was asked to continue the first collection, so I split the show in three parts; the second collection was made from plastic bags from high and low cultural institutions in Paris, a kind of 'dérivée' map.¹ The third collection included clothes that had a geometric overlapping line system that represented the infrastructure in a microchip. I called that last part *Internet Softwear*. It represents the first step into thinking of the clothes not just as a vector but also a digital platform. To link these three collections, I called the show "In-Formation."

R.C. - *What would be the steps of the creative process to design an interface applied to art? What parameters must that interface meet?*

P.M. - What this entails is actually a new discipline. I am aware that when I create an art interface, the aesthetics and the ethics must work hand in hand and respond to co-authoring the intellectual property. The design must therefore entail the identity of the artist, while at the same time consider the identities of the users. And this is very exciting to me. After cybercouture, I have created many interfaces: *Female Interface* (2004), *Explorations in Landscape* (2007) and one of the most remarkable, *ART AVATAR* at Centre Pompidou in 2014. I created an interactive and immersive landscape in which the users could interact with my 'sculpture and paintings' through animated icons related to my forms. I created new, augmented and animated sculptures that visitors could see and interact with in a digital mirror. Using infrared light and a body tracking software, the public could interact with the form. The interaction additionally generated sound through the body movement.

The *ART AVATAR* exhibition series (the second just finished last August at the Science Museum in Sandnes, Norway) seeks to investigate the possibilities of new tools and parameters of learning through human interaction and body movements. Working with talents from Paris' digital art community, the project aims to be at the forefront of virtual interaction. Specifically, the 'virtual mirror' is a tool that links experiences in the virtual world to those of our real inner world. That is still the primary reason for why I work with technology.

R.C. - *For decades, museums have dealt with the challenge of creating strategies to improve the quality of the visit experience and increase public participation. The public's interests have changed in the past 25 years, since now people are trained to live in a technological and interactive world. In your retrospective at the Stavanger Art*



Pia MYrvold, *Dada Memory*. Photo: Jaques Denarnaud.



Pia MYrvold, *cybercouture.com*. Photo: Jaques Denarnaud.

Museum (2007), you created a link between the real and the virtual worlds. You proposed a different relation between the public, the work of art and the museum space since the spectator was no longer passive. In Explorations in Landscape, visitors were allowed to virtually enter the museum space and into Norwegian 19-century artist Lars Hertervig's landscape paintings to explore and modify them. It was a preamble for subsequent paintings and sculptures conceived as 3-D animated forms such as Transforming Venus (2012), Expandium (2013) and Stargate (2011), among other works. Are all these pieces randomly created depending on the interaction with the public? How have the works evolved technologically and conceptually according to this idea of favoring the participation of the public?

P.M. - I have always dialogued with the museums where I have exhibited, including Centre Pompidou, about how to involve visitors on a deeper level of participation and beyond the 'unilinear' format of communication. Many institutions and curators are not ready for this transition, from both the intellectual and technological perspective. Centre Pompidou's curator Boris Tissot has been working for the recruitment of future audiences and asked me to present an interactive project in 2004 (*Female Interfaces*) and in 2014 (*ART AVATAR*).

At the lecture I presented at *The New York Times* conference "Art for Tomorrow," I therefore stressed that my projects investigate new exchanges between museums, artists, artworks and the public. This challenge requires me to hire a professional staff to manage the public and

to get the interfaces constantly updated. It was easier in my exhibition at the Science Museum, where curators are more habituated to look for ways to engage the public in the learning process.

Museums have scarce opportunities to develop entire immersive environments according to the goal and vision of the exhibition. They deal with many issues from financial, logistics and also legal aspects such as the issues I faced at Centre Pompidou about connectivity and privacy laws when using tracking sensors.

There is also a misconception about interfaces in the art world. They aren't appreciated as an artwork, but as a kind of pedagogical tool. I have received some criticism from other artists who think that the use of interfaces in art creation is less serious, especially if it involves children, young people or what they consider an uneducated public. This kind of elitist perspective of the art world often dismisses the education and training we have acquired through our technological devices. In the last 20 years, people have become tech savvy, they are habituated to use digital tools to make music, videos, blogs and share details of their life in social media networks. When such people enter an immersive and interactive space, they intuitively understand that they are allowed to play. At my exhibitions at Centre Pompidou, it was evident that the public wasn't too self-conscious but rather had fun at the environment.

The interface I created in 2007 that involved Lars Hertervig's work had records of 40 percent of participation. The public participated in the creation of A3 printouts, which they were allowed to take home. More



Pia MYrvoLD, *Explorations in Landscapes*, 2007. Stavanger Art Museum, Norway. Photo: Johannes Worsø Berg.



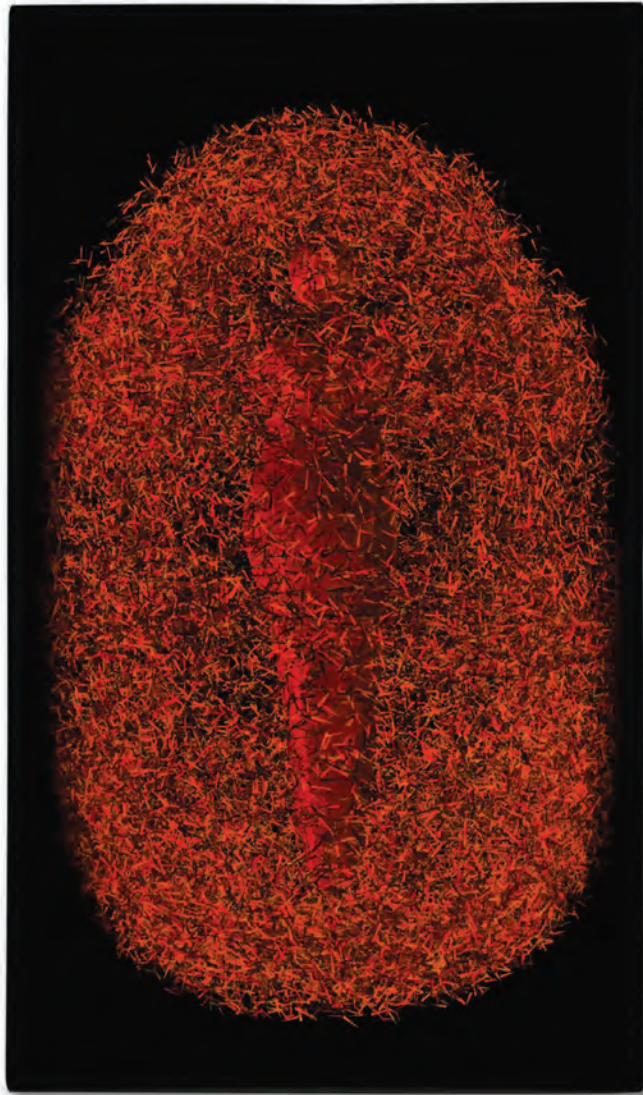
Pia MYrvoLD, #LightHackSculpture, *Icarus II*, 2017, mixed media electric gadgets with video projection mono-loop: Stripe Field, 2015, 70.86" x 55" x 60." Photo: Thiago Pedroso.



Pia MYrvoLD, #LightHackSculpture, 2017, mixed media with drums. Photo: Thiago Pedroso.



Pia MYrvoLD, *Stargate*, 2011, mixed media, LED screens, aluminum frame, reinforced glass, 3-D animated video. Photo Sindre Haaland



Pia MYRvoLD, *Transforming Venus*, 2012, still from mono-loop. Photo: Anya Buklowska

than 10,000 visitors took part in this project, which was comprised of Hertervig's work, my 3-D virtual sculptures and their own signature.

R.C. – *What do you mean by 'digital architecture'?*

P.M. - In my 2011 production *FLOW-a work in motion*, I created an independent pavilion parallel to the official exhibition in the context of the Venice Biennale. It was my own platform to introduce my digital art to the international art world. Being the first and the only artist who presented a digital art exhibition in the context of that edition of the Venice Biennale, I found interest in perhaps 2 percent of the professional visitors to the event.

I presented *Stargate*, the first ring in an immersive tunnel project, consisting of a total of 11 rings and 77 screens, using digital mapping tools to create what I described as “the inside of a painting while it is being painted.” With *FLOW-a work in motion*, the process became increasingly interesting. The individual pieces, such as 3-D animated sculpture (*Venus*), can be moved around on all surfaces, as characters in a theater production, and the concept of a digital architecture emerged in my work. Then, I tried to convince the organizers of *The New York Times*' “Art for Tomorrow” conference to build a 360-degree environment around the conference and to project the entire conference content through textures,

chromatics and inserts of presentations, with the timeline flowing from opening to end.

I also work to create such an interactive environment in building facades. In Oslo, I proposed a project for the architecture firm Element, in 2009. I created lighting schematics that worked with the movement of the users, which reflected on the facade in such a way that, for instance, the building itself could have a New Year's Eve celebration. I think this idea is best illustrated by the Empire State Building in New York, which keeps changing the combination of light at a rhythm within that urban setting.

R.C. – *As you mentioned before, the project ART AVATAR (Centre Pompidou, November 2014 - March 2015, and Science Museum Vitenfabrikken, Norway, April - August 2017) was based on continuing to create a bridge between real and virtual worlds. What changes on a technical level took place between the first and second presentation?*

P.M. - Last year there was a big improvement in the art and technology circuits, with a polarization between the enthusiasts of Virtual Reality and the ones who believe in Augmented Reality.

I have been reluctant to the isolation of the Virtual Reality user, so my ART AVATAR is a mixed reality, using both Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, but basically we developed another interface where we could explore new realities. Exploring the virtual, without leaving the physical world. In my latest - *script series* - I identify this innovation as Extended Realities, as I believe it is our imaginative resources that are coming into full, through these immersive production tools.

R.C. - *The results of ART AVATAR led you to create the projects WANDS, your first generation of smart sculptures, and the robotic installations HYBRID LOVE. You combined your experience as a painter, fashion designer, interface designer, electronic music composer, etc. How did your interest in the production of robotic sculptures arise? To what extent do these projects contribute to the tradition of kinetic art?*

P.M. - I started producing a series of sculptures and paintings in 1988 by using computers and graphic image assembly that proposed combinations of codes, a Pollock drip code next to a Mondrian graphic code, with other art or visual references. I have worked on those series that in the 1990s also included the Internet, the multilateral navigational platforms and patterns that describe time through graphic or chromatic modulations.

After ART AVATAR (2014), I returned to the object with the technology available. I was able to make sensor-based surfaces, as it had been my proposal for over 20 years.

WANDS is a second generation of smart sculptures that can read movements and measure body mass, so they are able to detect how many people are in the room and can react accordingly to different sensorial responses. A lot of the potential of the technology is already used for surveillance and more mundane purposes. I am still interested in their creative potential as sculptural objects, but my skills are more about integrating software and hardware. When I launched WANDS in 2015 at Atelier Nord ANX in Oslo, I also did a project with three robotic arms that I dressed in *haute couture*. I had a limited budget, as always, and I used my skills as a designer to create crinoline structures around the joints of the robots.

R.C. - *What is the philosophy that guides your artistic practice across this wide variety of media?*

P.M. - When working with public participation in the early 1980s,



Pia MYrvoLD, *WANDS- First Generation Smart Sculptures*, 2015, installation view at the artist's studio, Paris. Photo: Anya Buklowska.

especially through the theater group Chameleon Circus, I became aware of the risk of being a trend leader rather than proposing new art and developing my talent. So my art projects bridge these two interests. They give me a platform to explore my multidisciplinary talents, and equally, they engage the public in developing knowledge and research while using their own intuitive and creative skills.

I do not believe in rhetoric as much as I believe in motivation, the way to ignite or inspire people to see or to understand. In any case, we can never control or predict with certainty what someone will take from an artwork, as it is based on their perception and interpretation skills.

R.C. - *You said at the "Art for Tomorrow" conference organized by The New York Times in Doha Qatar last March that it is important to explore how 3-D animations could evolve towards new forms of writing. Could you share with us how this objective is reflected in your work?*

P.M. - When I created the first series of 13 animated sculptures for the *FLOW* project in Venice in 2011, I had already worked several years with virtual shapes, but the animation became a step into a kind of 'no man's land.' As the very idea of a sculpture that changes shapes adds a lot of complexity when thinking of a form, I organized each animation as loops, in order to move them into a continuous moving landscape that has its own natural cycles.

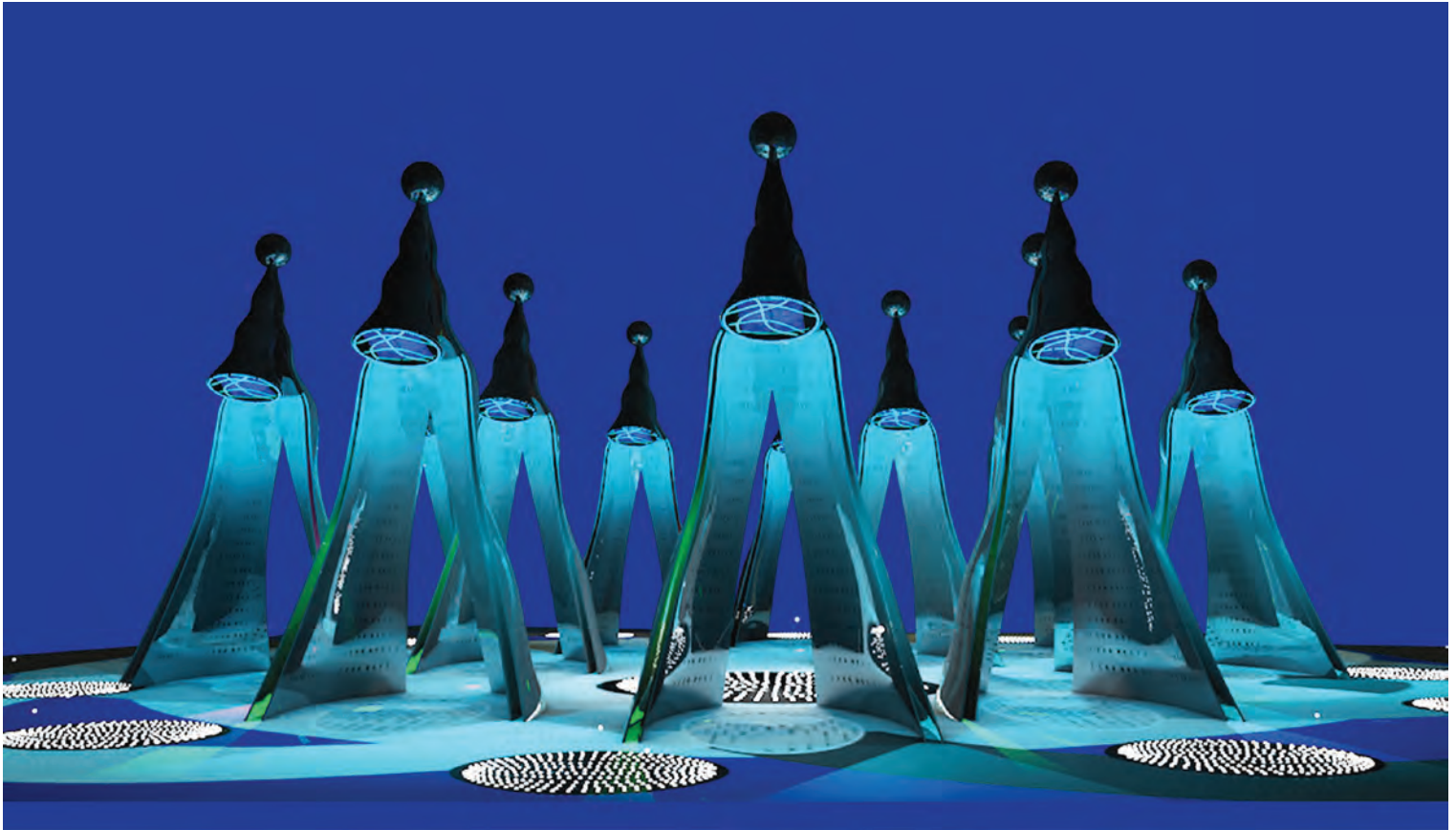
Also, I started to see meaning in each form. I linked the idea to early language, like hieroglyphics that is a visual language, but that

have no time, present or future to link events, but rather, a concept by which combining more forms, new meanings would emerge. With *Transforming Venus*, I also linked my work to 30,000 years of art history in Europe, from the first Venus we know to this Venus of the digital age. Both are central to the desire to procreate and survive. The reality of today's Venus is different, as human beings can procreate with new resources, by manipulating DNA, renting a womb or ordering semen on the Internet. There is also cloning and the fusion of man and machine through biotechnology.

So to come back to your question, I think the brain can understand and process immersive environments like in Virtual Reality. The linear organization of language has been a need, but now we can transmit ideas in 3-D using animated forms to increase our communication skills.

R.C. - *Which projects are you working on? In your presentation at The New York Times' conference, you spoke about SYN-ENERGIES, a sustainable project you developed in collaboration with the government of the region of Jæren in Norway. What does this project consist of?*

P.M. - *SYN-Energies* is a holistic concept that builds on art but contemplates how art can instigate cultural and economic growth in a matrix. My region, Jæren, in Norway has a long history of innovation and an exceptional level of engineering and research related to the production of oil. Due to the exploration and harvesting



Pia MYrvold, SYN-Energies. *Sun Trumpets*, 3-D rendering. Photo: Yann Minh.

of oil and gas in the North Sea, an extreme weather complex with constructions, robots, submarines and sensor grids the size of Los Angeles has been built 1,000 meters under the sea level.

With the oil crisis, during which 50,000 employees were laid off and many allied companies suffered, I thought about how my ideas could match up with this industry. I used my modest but growing international reputation and contact network. My goal was to create new revenue models to inspire creativity in this industry, but also in the educational sector and with a series of sculptures and installations that harvest energy through wind, water, solar and human interaction, to start a process of rethinking energy harvesting, which integrates aesthetics and art at the base of economic development and includes cultural tourism and the strengthening of the local identity.

I presented these concepts in the 2016 “Art for Tomorrow” conference and had immediate interest from Sheikha Mayassa in Qatar to develop *Sun Trumpets*. We worked for six months on the second presentation, but with Qatar being in a political conundrum, no further funding to develop the project was offered by them.

In Norway, the project was also halted, as the consensus in the politics of the regional governments, industry leaders and various partners I talked with are not able to root around the concept. I think basically that they do not believe in art, nor the potential for art to set off economic development.

R.C. - *You recently had a solo exhibition at Galerie Lélia Mordoch in Paris. Which artworks did you present on that occasion? What artworks will you be presenting at the gallery in Miami this December?*

P.M. - At Lélia’s gallery, I presented works from 2010, starting with monoloops of the animated sculptures *Un-Dress* and *Transforming Venus*. The last was both the title of the exhibition and of the recently published monograph about my work. I will have the

opportunity to present again the *Transforming Venus* monoloop in Miami this December.

I also exhibited the *Coloss Island* series that I started in 2014 for the Pompidou exhibition that included animated forms and textures, prints and wall sculptures. These will be on display at the Miami show in December, as well.

I included two WAND sculptures, *Bio Myth* and *Trans Human*, from the first generation of smart sculptures from 2015.

Additionally, I presented in Paris the *#LightHackSculpture, Wonderland*, 2016. I created a site-specific installation of these series, in which I integrated projectors to create small visual theaters as well as a drum set. The drum set was then activated at the performance *Extended Realities* during the FIAC week in Paris. I worked with a Japanese drummer, Emiko Ota, who performed in an improvised set where I wore a body suit and a *#LightHackSculpture* mask that made reference to the VR masks so visitors could witness the separation between this mask of the virtual experience and the body left behind in real space.

I will present the *#LightHackSculpture* series in Miami, working with local drummers who at intervals will activate the sculpture. These series are part of the *-script series-*, for which I just launched a Kickstarter campaign to ensure funding for research, as many of my projects are too early to reach the marketplace. My *-script series-* continue to explore future scenarios to match museums, performance and urban spaces with new technologies.

I am preparing a large exhibition for a festival in Oslo in the fall of 2018, where I will work in large scale and with advanced technologies such as digital mapping in a large industrial cylinder 180 meters in diameter. ■

NOTES

1. See, Guy Debord. “Theory of the Dérive.” *Les Lèvres Nues* #9 (November 1956).

INTERVIEW WITH ARTURO DUCLOS

“The autonomy of kitsch comes from the disobedience of the Western canon, especially in areas like Latin America where it matters a damn.”

BY PACO BARRAGÁN

Chilean artist Arturo Duclos was one of the youngest members of the so-called *Escena de Avanzada*, the political and conceptual movement in the mid-1970s and early 1980s that became the canon of the Chilean art scene against Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's military regime. Painting, for him, soon became the perfect conceptual tool to engage with concepts like language, human rights and utopia. We spoke to him on the occasion of his recent exhibition “El fantasma de la utopía/Utopía's Ghost” at the Museo de Artes Visuales (MAVI) in Santiago de Chile.

Paco Barragán - Let's rewind and go back at to your beginnings. You were one of the younger members of the Chilean avant-garde, the so-called Escena de Avanzada that took place at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the '80s, with artists like Lotty Rosenfeld, Eugenio Dittborn, Carlos Leppe and Juan Dávila. What do you recall of your beginnings?

Arturo Duclos - I got in touch with the artists from the *Escena de Avanzada* in 1981, when they became interested in the projects we were developing together with other artists in the field of installation and political art. We should remember the context of the Pinochet dictatorship. We were studying at the Universidad Católica. We were a group of students experimenting with a kind of Latin American conceptualism in the workshop of Eduardo Vilches, very influenced by the writings of Luis Camnitzer, *Art & Language* and Joseph Kosuth. At that time, the university campus was transformed into a place for experimentation, meeting and discussion with these artists that you just mentioned and who, along with Nelly Richard, Raúl Zurita and Carlos Altamirano, visited us assiduously. Neither were there private galleries active, nor spaces for discussion, so our campus was transformed into a clandestine space that welcomed these artists. We, the group from the Universidad Católica, including Soro, Paredes, Rodríguez and many others, were inserted in the fervor of the movement *Escena de Avanzada*. We participated in that rupturist spirit, feeling part of its history.

P.B. - The Escena de Avanzada used a varied style of languages but was especially focused on performance, conceptual art and video. But you started primarily as a painter. How did that work out?

A.D. - I started in art when I showed my objectual artworks and urban interventions. My first works were related to the street and to objectual art. Originally, came to formation in engraving and graphics; later, I went over to painting, when with our university group we wanted to rebel against the *Escena de Avanzada*'s orthodoxy regarding painting, and especially against its critique of the most hedonistic groups that were known in the early 1980s. There was a very reactionary spirit towards painting. It was in

1983 when I started painting on human bones, and I also made some very political paintings. Then I made the decision to paint and develop a body of work that oscillated between painting and objectualism, where I would subtly focus on political issues and human rights, disguised as sumptuous Neo-Baroque ornaments and references. This was my most well-known work since 1989 and was included in several exhibitions later, linked to a way of doing the *Escena de Avanzada*, that is basically related to the language forms of the *Escena* that used to use many metonyms, ellipses and metaphors, but translating it to painting and turning it into more attractive discipline based on symbolic elements that could have a greater impact.

P.B. - You were having success at a very young age participating in international exhibitions and exhibiting in the 1990s with gallerist Annina Nosei in New York. How did that success affect your career? What do you remember of those years?

A.D. - I started working with Annina Nosei in 1993, and that same year I had my first solo show in New York. It was the beginning of the globalization of art and the advent of Latin American art in galleries and museums in the United States. Like all trends, at that time there was a boom in the circulation and sales of my works, which also happened with many artists who were part of the boom of the time and who worked with Annina Nosei: Schnabel, Galán, Kuitca, Basquiat and Bedia, among others. This wave began to fall very early in the late 1990s, and the same happened to Chinese, Japanese and Korean artists, the emerging galleries of Soho in the 1980s moved to Chelsea and the art world changed radically for our entire generation. I worked for 10 years with Annina, until she retired and only dedicated herself to represent a small group of artists as a private dealer. No doubt the lack of visibility began to affect my performance, and although I worked with other galleries in New York and the United States later, the glam and the presence of my work was very affected and was never the same as in that period of working with Annina Nosei.

HIBERNATION, REINVENTION AND PAINTING

P.B. - With the advent of the new millennium, you disappeared a bit from the international scene. What happened?

A.D. - With the arrival of the year 2000, I participated in some important group shows in the United States and Latin America, as well as solo exhibitions in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Spain and Sweden. I was very involved in teaching and some academic projects in Chile, which reduced my presence in international fairs and events. Then, many people thought that I had withdrawn from the art scene, but I was only in hibernation mode. It was a period of



Artist Arturo Duclos.
Photo: Nico Deyer, Santiago de Chile.

great intensity and exchange with students, which also helped me to reinvent my work.

P.B. - I have seen with my own eyes after working in Chile that the art scene is very small and that the scene is very self-referential and not very open to foreigners, which together with the geographical isolation makes it very difficult to have any resonance on the international art scene from Chile. What are, in your opinion, the handicaps of the lack of presence of the Chilean art scene internationally?

A.D. - I think that the main problems of the Chilean art scene come from its geographic isolation, as well as from the absence of cultural policies for its diffusion. Collecting is also very recent. Collectors' taste in Chile was in many cases historically conservative and didn't enable the construction of a potential national art market. Although there is more openness in collecting today, many artists remain isolated from global trends, phenomena that I find interesting, so that local issues may arise that are of interest in the global world. Everywhere there are personal and local problems that today are reduced by the interest in globalization. In short, the disadvantage of the Chilean scene lies in its lack of dialogue with the world and in the lack of the construction of a narrative—for example, for the *Escena de Avanzada*—able to insert their masterworks and their theoretical articulation in the international art market, as the Brazilians have done so well with the Neo-Concretism, its artists and even with the new generations.

P.B. - Your painting has always been very conceptual and political. I remember, for example, a work like Je ne regret pas de rien (1989), which is symptomatic of your artistic practice. Can you comment on how you see painting in general, and this work in particular?

A.D. - My work has always been influenced by the political mark inherited from the *Escena de Avanzada*. A practice of artistic work that emerged as a reaction to Pinochet's dictatorship then became a language for my way of thinking and expressing myself in art. In the specific case of the work you quote, *Je ne regret pas de rien*, I elaborate an ironic discourse on power, desire and death. I am generally interested in the language of painting because it is a permanent quote to history, and the meaning of a work of art should be inscribed in both the history of art and that of the image. In particular, I think that painting today has many limitations if we only think about new media that have opened other possibilities of expression, but it continues to be sensual, and that is why it is so attractive even as a language, in a dimension where the technology used is still of 20,000 years ago.

P.B. - In 1995, you made a polemic work titled Untitled (Flag): a wall sculpture simulating the Chilean flag made out of human bones. That was a very challenging and direct comment on Pinochet's dictatorship.

A.D. - The work you are referring to is an epitome of human rights issues in Chile. From 1983 onwards, I have done many works using human bones as the main significant element. In this case, *Untitled (Flag)* was a work that related the meaning of the



Arturo Duclos, *Je ne regret pas de rien*, 1989, oil on curtain, 60.23" x 78.74." Courtesy Private collection, Los Angeles. Photo: Jorge Brantmayer.

national flag with an empty flag—literally ‘in its bones’—without body, without flesh, alluding to the political conflict of the people who disappeared during the dictatorship, which in the context of the time was still being negated by the Chilean right-wing political parties. Today that work constitutes an *object unique* in Chile that has become a sort of transverse icon. In 2011, it was showcased in the “Crisiss” exhibition in Mexico City at the Palacio Nacional de Bellas Artes for the anniversary of a century of the Mexican Revolution. Previously, this work toured to a dozen museums in the United States and Latin America together with the traveling exhibition “The Disappeared.”

THE FAILURE OF UTOPIA AND MESSIANISM

P.B. - *But let’s get back to the present and your touring exhibition that kicked off at the Museum of Visual Arts (MAVI) in Santiago de Chile. How did “El fantasma de la utopía/Utopia’s Ghost” come about?*

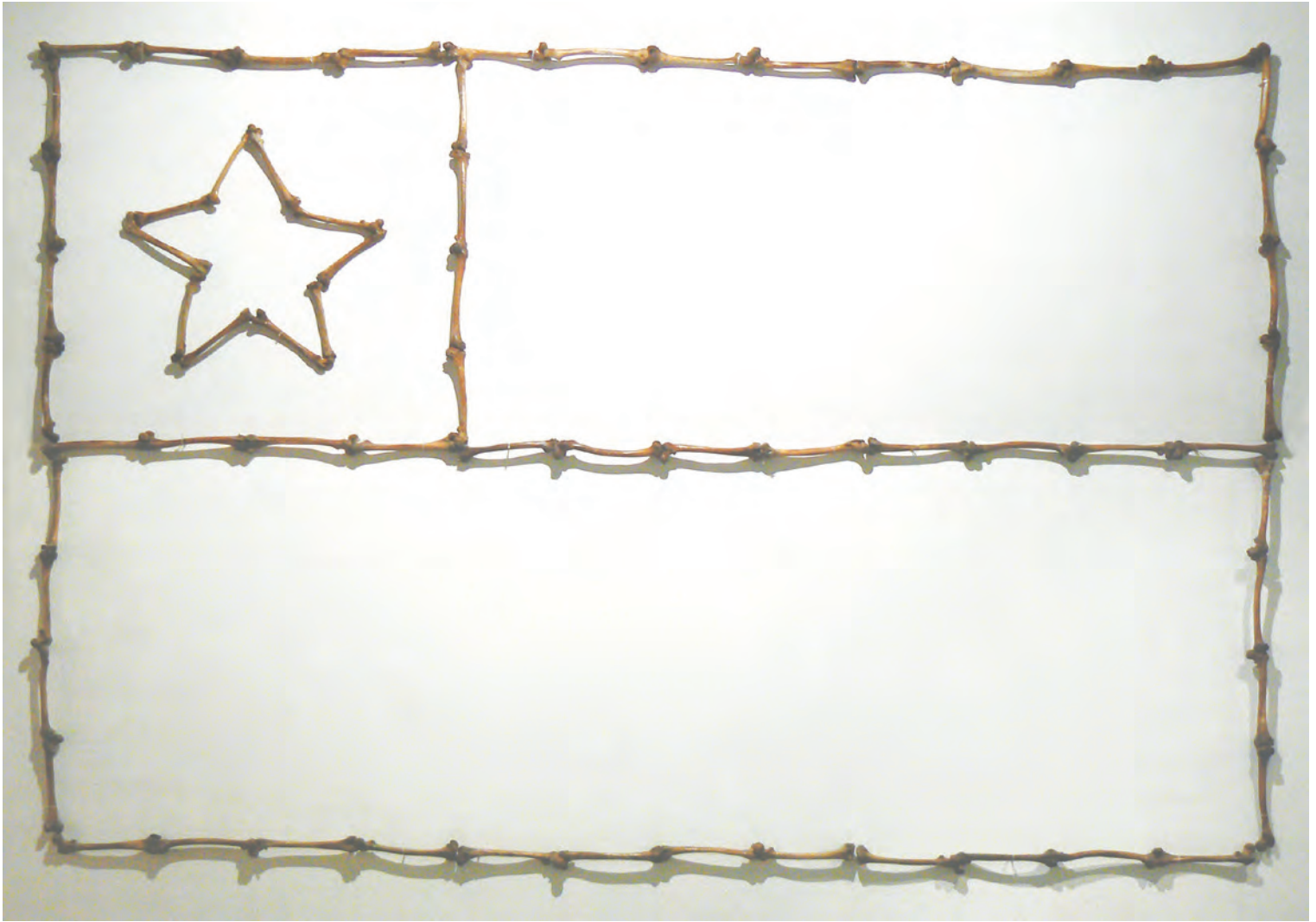
A.D. - “El fantasma de la utopía/Utopia’s Ghost” emerges as a project first of consolidation and then as research, motivated by social movements that began to occur in Chile and the rest of the world. After the heydays of the social welfare state of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, we had to pay out the

“bills of the sweet money,” and with it came indebtedness and social bankruptcy that has led to a state of neo-slavery.

The revolutionary changes that came at the beginning of the 20th century with great promises and social utopias set fire to many a state of mind, generating a spirit of freedom and power that began to question the subversion of the Latin American order through armed struggle, a subversion that manifested itself against the Alliance for Progress initiated by U.S. President John F. Kennedy in 1961. I return to this particular episode of social history as a revival and a ghost of those ideals that mobilized for almost five decades numerous movements that sought to produce changes in society through armed struggle. I am trying to grasp that particular spirit of the exchange of ideas and passions as a possible motor of struggle for today’s society under the new world economic order.

P.B. - *The very title is tautological: according to Thomas More, utopia was a non-place, and with the word ‘ghost’ you’re forcing the idea of fiction, of impossibility.*

A.D. - I believe that religious, political and social thought throughout history has intervened in favor of the hegemonic narratives in order to create this idea of freedom of this non-place as a promise of liberation of the individual, a place that will be ac-



Arturo Duclos, *Untitled (Flag)*, 1995, human bones and screws, 137.79" x 196.85." Courtesy of the artist and Carlo Solari Collection, Santiago de Chile.

cessed “after working as a mad dog” throughout your whole life, being that utopia basically is the secular version of paradise. The ghost then consists in bringing to the dissolution the fiction and impossibility of this reality that is offered as a placebo.

P.B. - In this sense, the Protestant view of utopia-paradise is very different from the Catholic one: If for a Protestant it was possible here and now, for a Catholic it was always a promise to be realized in the afterlife. In fact, I think that in the opposition, duty-guilt is where we find the different visions of utopia-paradise.

*A.D. - The Catholic vision of utopia-paradise is an unverifiable promise and is what has also colored the political thinking of the 20th century. That is also why most of these revolutionary movements carried in their origins both the messianic spirit of Catholicism as well as Marxist thought. The Catholic promise was to be fulfilled after one’s death. It is interesting to analyze here though the political origins of these ideas mixed with the American neo-colonial pattern. Then that latency of duty-guilt has to do with the heroic vision that these groups undertook with their social-political responsibility, having to generate a narrative for the people, a discourse that has its *telos* based on the liberation of guilt and duty, a sort of existentialist exculpation.*

P.B. - Utopia went always hand in hand with messianism, a topic that has always been of great interest to you. The mythical and

religious origins of utopia (even more than the positivistic ones, I would argue) have both stimulated and reenforced that messianic element that is common to so many revolutionary leaders and politicians (Castro, Allende, Chávez, etc.). How do you understand the relationship between utopia and messianism?

A.D. - Messianisms have always interested me and are part of the artistic project that I have been developing since the 1990s. From the use of cultural symbols based on the discourses of armament, religion, politics and science linked to capitalism, all have in common the same messianic spirit fueled by the promise of liberation. This is what happens today in political movements that point to a populism that is sustained on the same basis. If we go through history, all the promises of freedom have had the same origins and seek to satisfy people tired of abuse with the same messianic arguments contained in all the ideological manifestations of the individual. The very 20th century has been a parodic parade of cultural, political and religious movements that have raised the flag of the freedom of man—from psychoanalysis to Marxism, from the artistic avant-garde to the Islamic state. Therefore, this close connection between utopia and messianism shares, in my opinion, the same roots: the problem of freedom and how that freedom is achieved.

P.B. - As a matter of fact, the project you sent for the Chilean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2016 was precisely titled Messianism and Utopia.



Arturo Duclos, *Caporales*, 2017, installation view at Museo de Artes Visuales (MAVI, Santiago de Chile), dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and MAVI.

A.D. - Yes, for the contest of the Pavilion of Chile in Venice 2016 I presented a project called *Messianism and Utopia*. I resorted to the symbolism and iconology of the flags of a representative selection of guerrilla and revolutionary groups and movements that we, in Latin America, traditionally associate with messianism and utopia: Tupamaros, EZLN, FARC, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), M-19, MIR, July 26, FPMR, MRTA and FSLN. With these images, I intended to build a one-to-one reconstruction in ephemeral architecture of Lenin's funerary monument at the Red Square in Moscow.

In the 21st century, there seems to be no longer any place for utopia, and utopia would have become rather the new kitsch or, at least, a populist parody integrated and subordinated to neo-capitalism. We assume that for that reason studies, books and exhibitions about history and memory, and even nostalgia, are so in vogue. And since we also suppose that art has the capacity to disrupt and rethink new, fairer worlds, the question we ask ourselves is: What can we do to revert or reverse that utopia that feeds art as pathos and ethos? This research about messianism and utopia is a double investigation: On the one hand, it seeks to investigate how those ideas have spread in Latin America and ended up addressing humanity's destiny in general and, on the other hand, we codify through its failure or discredit—as Lyotard would say—insofar as it relates to any grand narrative or meta-narrative that contains in itself the promise of utopia.

Messianisms have become the main axis-engines for the construction of economic power based on military, religious, scientific and political narratives. All messianisms, whether of religious or secular origin, have promised certainties—sometimes achieved—and have sponsored exclusions and persecutions to impose the domination of their ideas through force. What these great messianic narratives have in common are the infallible messages constructed in an unattainable illusion, often centered on a positivist utopia.

P.B. - And then you participated in the Nuit Blanche Toronto on 1 Oct., 2016, with the intervention Fallen Flags, which is a continuation of the proposal for the Chilean Pavilion and an antecedent to the project you did recently at the Museum of Visual Arts (MAVI).

A.D. - Yes indeed, the Toronto project helped me to try and find out how powerful these images are still today. The fallen flags deposited literally on the street became a sort of carpet that was to be humiliated and dominated by Western culture. I know that it sounds, in an old-fashioned way, a bit “lefty,” but it is precisely the power of icons and what they represent that moves our feelings and ideas against the injustices of the system. This view of the surrendered flags is a metaphor for the ‘end of ideas,’ when the flame of avant-garde ideas and revolution has waned against the Western cultural system.



Arturo Duclos, *Machina Anemica*, 2017, installation view at Museo de Artes Visuales (MAVI, Santiago de Chile), flags and fans. Courtesy the artist and MAVI.

THE REVOLUTION, POPULAR CULTURE AND KITSCH

P.B. - How did the installation Caporales come about? Why were you attracted by that particular element, which is characteristic of popular culture, and where we find a strange mix of mythic, religious and political discourse?

A.D. - Caporales is the name given by the dance groups from the South American *Altiplano* (high plateau) to the “foreman,” usually a mulatto or mestizo who commanded the African slaves that took them to Bolivia at the time of the colony. It was this character who later became for the popular religious dances the inspiration for the dance fraternity groups representing a leadership and power role in the group.

I was interested in these popular festivals because of their connection with the Andean culture and, in turn, how this Andean culture of social hierarchy created a resonance in the leftist revolutionary movements that emerged during the 1960s as, for example, ELN, Sendero Luminoso, MRTA and ML 19. There is a close correspondence between the emergence of political groupings in the 1960s with the doctrine of the Alliance for Progress implemented from the United States to combat the advance of communism in Latin America and the rise of the religious dance fraternities, which were popping up in the Andean area, in Peru, Bolivia, northern Chile and Argentina.

So I am interested in reading these double configurations that come from the unconscious of popular culture, which supplants the paramilitary groups with this hierarchical regime based on religious dance groups. For this purpose, I elaborated in this installation called *Caporales* a mix between the languages of the ornamental display, the brightness and the *fiesta* along with the most significant emblems of some Latin American revolutionary groups and movements.

P.B. - Also in the installation Escudo de armas/Coat of Arms, you return once again to popular mythology.

A.D. - Escudo de armas/Coat of Arms corresponds to the oldest heraldic representations. That is why this correspondence effort between these armed groups of wanting to represent themselves in these formats that concern rather the Medieval armies draws my attention. The flags, emblems and banners are all signs grouped under collective ideas that pertain to certain communities that are identified under these signs.

Using elements that I researched from Andean popular culture, I have reinterpreted these coats of arms by mixing these codes and also recharging the signifiers to connote the political speeches and “betrayals” that took place between the actors of the time. The National Liberation Army, for example, led by Che Guevara appears represented by a lamb skin. On the other hand, the 26th of July Movement wears a fox skin. I wanted to shift the semi-otic discourse towards an interpretative and poetic field adopting certain totemic forms that adapt popular mythologies and that constitute an axis in this particular aspect that I am giving to the social utopias that mobilized these revolutionary forces.

P.B. - The idea of kitsch flies over both installations. Is utopia the new kitsch?

A.D. - Kitsch in this exhibition represents for me the autonomy from the Western cultural paradigm, especially when we understand how politically incorrect it becomes towards high culture. The autonomy of kitsch comes from the disobedience to the Western canon, especially in areas where globalization matters a damn, since they have known how to maintain their identitarian aspects as a kind of cultural insurrection, almost involuntary, where the aesthetic values of the global culture are not recognized. In that sense, for me, utopia is a new kitsch that insists in its insubordination and its resistance to being delegitimized and remains a kind of nostalgia in our inner self.

P.B. - You also included the performance Polvo de estrellas/Stardust, in which you were sitting on the floor with a mortar



Arturo Duclos,
Coat of Arms,
2017, installation
view at Museo
de Artes Visuales
(MAVI, Santiago de
Chile), dimensions
variable. Courtesy
the artist and
MAVI.

and pestle grinding human bones for approximately one hour. There is an interesting connection between science, mythology and philosophy here at play.

A.D. - *Polvo de estrellas/Stardust* is a performance that reflects on the proposal of the scientific origin of biological life on earth. Astronomer Harlow Shapley coined the concept in 1929. He argued that organic beings that call themselves “human” are made of the same material as the stars. This would have been produced by the carbon that traveled through the galaxies in the supernova explosions, creating dust hurricanes that finally gave rise to our planet and its organic life, thus enabling human existence. In this performance, I explore the *poiesis* of the life cycle along with the generation of these chemical components in an act of inverse reduction from the same human body connecting the great questions that arise from the local cosmogonies and the interpretations about the origin of the world that come from science and religion. The proposal has a ritual and philosophical origin that raise how, from the interpretation of the brutality of cosmic events, we can trigger processes of creation that allow us to elaborate the great cultural and ideological narratives that make up human culture.

UTOPIA AS ZERO DEGREE

P.B. - *In the last installation, which is entitled Machina Anemica, you have reduced utopia both conceptually and formally to a zero degree. Does this imply that utopia is impossible, and has it ceased to be relevant?*

A.D. - I wanted to experience in this installation the emptiness of meaning in terms of the saturation present in the other pieces

of the show. I think that more than saying that utopia is irrelevant and impossible, I wanted to propose a mechanical device to refill that void again. A new air is blowing and inviting us to reflect, to fill with ideas the poverty of contents that both the national and international political panorama offers us today. These have ceased to be flags of struggle but continue to be utopian in movement. It is a call to stamp these flags again with fresh ideas.

P.B. - *I would like to finish our conversation with the following question: Although it is clear that we have lost faith in human happiness and prosperity, the image of utopia keeps captivating our imagination. Why is that, in your opinion?*

A.D. - Because against all odds, 99 percent of the human population has not stopped believing that it will have an opportunity to be happy, very much in spite of our rulers or our living conditions. Throughout history, we have known how utopia has been mutating and taking different faces, transcending religious faith, political fervor, armamentism and scientific discourse. From Plato to Thomas More, virtuous men have always wanted to be surrounded by more just societies.

The image of utopia is still captivating because it is part of our ethos; it constitutes us as humans. Contrary to the discredit and the nostalgia that utopia implies today from the pragmatics of advanced capitalism and postmodernity, social forces are measured in the effort to achieve progress for the following generations, even if the road towards that utopian republic is very tiny.

P.B. - *Thank you very much.* ■

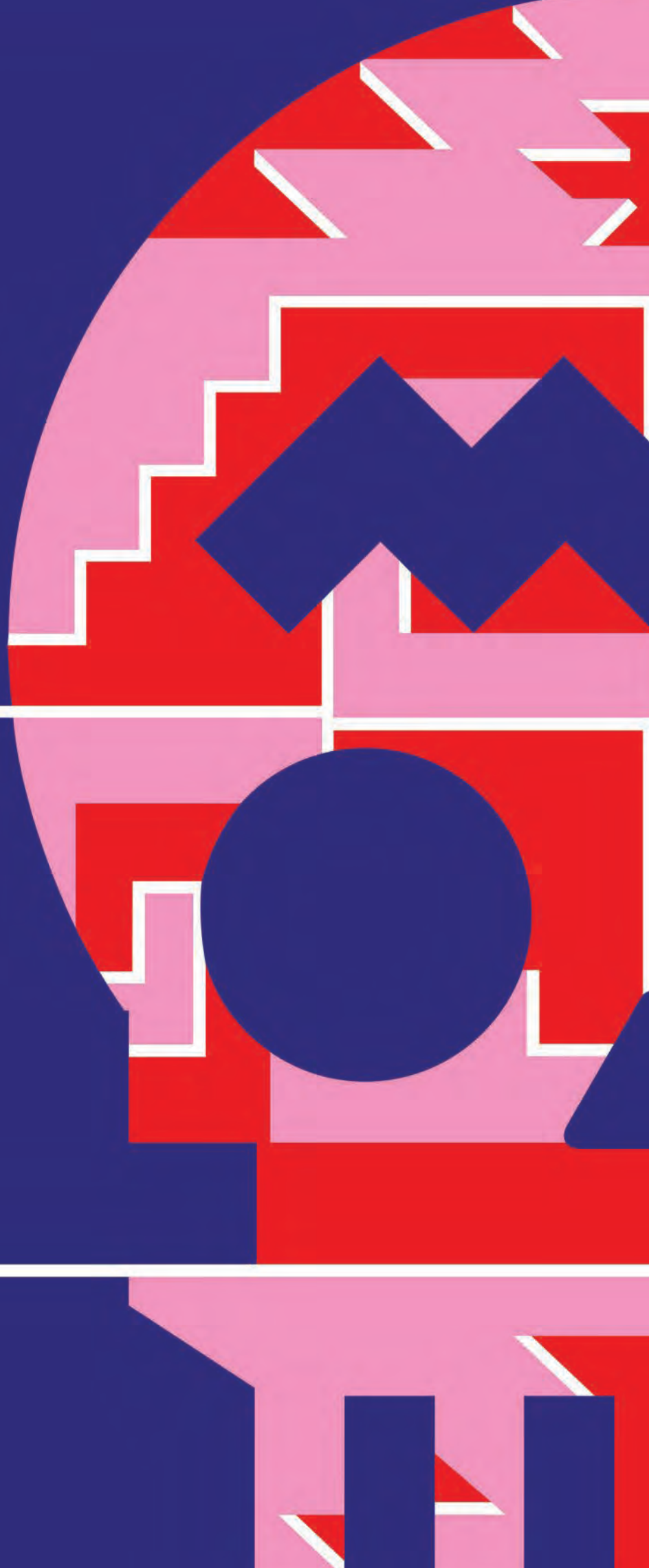
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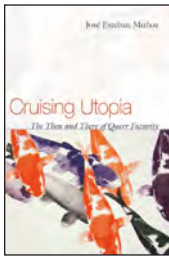
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EDUARDO CARRERA

Eduardo Carrera Rivadeneira is the chief curator of the Center for Contemporary Art (CAC) in Quito, Ecuador. He was co-director of No Lugar - Arte Contemporáneo, as well as Advisor and National Director of Museums and Archaeological Sites of the country's Ministry of Culture and Heritage from 2015 to 2016. He has collaborated on projects with the Metropolitan Heritage Institute of Quito since 2012, and previously worked as curatorial assistant at LOOP Barcelona in 2015 and researcher at the CAC from 2011 to 2015. In addition, he conceived and organized the seminar *Estrategias en uso*, a cycle of conferences and meetings about curatorial practices, museums and artistic institutions, also in Quito.



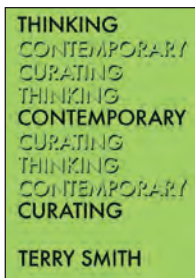
José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2009.

José Esteban Muñoz begins his book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), with these words: “Queerness is an aspiration toward the future. To be queer is to imagine better possible futures.” He goes on to consider the role of desire in the transformation and representation of a city, arguing that queer geographies critically examine experiences based on desire and the construction of diverse subjectivities in that urban area. This book not only asks readers to reconsider ideas such as hope and utopia, but also challenges them to *feel* hope and utopia, and sometimes even curiosity. Interestingly, my recent personal choices have seemed to respond to some of the ideas expounded upon in this book.



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemología del armario*. Barcelona: Ediciones de la Tempestad, 1998.

This book was an important addition in terms of studying responses to the construction of identities that the dominant heterosexual world creates. After reading this book, I began investigating practices by individuals and groups that deal with queer and gender-related issues in their work, and I became interested in putting them in contrast to my own experiences as a queer person. It was a way to look for tools I could use to build other stories and readings of queer and gender-related topics. This is perhaps a window into how I became interested in curating in the first place: the desire to look for things in common that reflect on the queer experience.



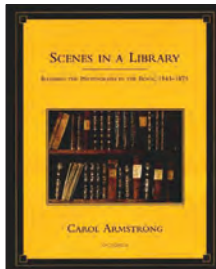
Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*. New York: Independent Curators International, 2012.

My curatorial practice responds to the possibility of developing a steady flow of work for the benefit of local communities, and my expositions address issues such as representation, art production systems, contemporary archives, affective devices, landscape and territory, the city, body identity, gender and subjectivity. This book undoubtedly made me reflect on the curatorial practice, as well as understand that models, formats and strategies have been produced to re-imagine the artistic institutions, design of exhibitions and relationships between artists, curators and the public sphere. It also made me realize that curatorial practices are activated according to the contexts they occupy. This book was a great influence on my training as a curator and formed the basis for my work in that field while always trying to integrate as many curatorial visions as possible into the projects I got involved in.



FRED GROSS

Fred Gross is a professor of art history at the Savannah College of Art and Design, where his focus is on the art and photography of the contemporary period. He has published numerous articles and reviews in *Cabinet* and *Afterimage*, and his book *Diane Arbus's 1960s: Auguries of Experience* (2012, University of Minnesota Press). Most recently, Gross published a review of the Vito Acconci retrospective at MoMA P.S.1 for the fall 2017 *Journal of Italian American Studies*. He is currently working on a book involving diagrammatic painting in New York in the 1980s and its connection to the emergent computer programming and video game culture.



Carol Armstrong. *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998.

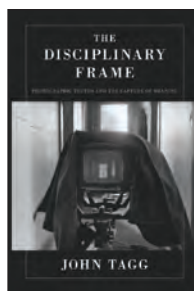
When I was a student of Carol Armstrong's at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center, she always challenged me to look deeper at the photograph, to plumb its many fine layers of meaning and shades of critical interpretation. It is through Armstrong that I discovered the complexity of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, perhaps the most extraordinary writing on photography of the 20th century and an important part of the structure of Armstrong's narrative.

Scenes in a Library, in Armstrong's words, "reinscribe[s] the 19th-century photograph in its textural surround, and if art history or the art museum have removed it from its album series or book pages, to reinsert it there." Her method placed photography back in its original discursive context and cast a critical eye on established institutions' constructions of history.



Geoffrey Batchen. *Each Wild Idea*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.

I was lucky enough to have Geoffrey Batchen as my dissertation advisor, and his *Each Wild Idea* presented a compendium of his essays in an anthology that demonstrated his impressive range in writing about the history of photography, from daguerreotypes to digital photographs. Batchen stresses his analysis of photography as "something that is simultaneously material and cultural" and employs nuanced methodologies, from Barthes and desire to Derridean *différance*. Vernacular photography, often overlooked by the history of photography, is given careful analysis as a tactile, physical object with palimpsestic layers of physical and metaphorical presence. Batchen always brings me back to the simple yet koan-like ontological phrase "What is a photograph?" This apparently simple query allows for investigations into questions of production and temporal boundaries, of intention and authorship. *Each Wild Idea* fluctuates between close readings and nuanced analysis of the way in which photographs operate in a social context and what they can tell us about that moment.



John Tagg. *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

John Tagg's *The Disciplinary Frame* is a noteworthy collection of essays that continue his Foucault-inspired meditation on the connection of documentary photography and its history to ideology and power. Building on his seminal *The Burden of Representation*, Tagg's eloquent essays cover a remarkable range of subjects, shifting from Bertillon to Baldessari. Tagg examines the trope of the frame as a mechanism to reveal the discursive spaces and political economies of documentary photography. I like that, with Tagg, poststructuralist theory is applied in correct dosages, adding deeper layers of meaning. I am compelled by critical perspectives such as Tagg's which reexamine the connection between photographs and their histories, exposing flaws, contradictions and repressions which have become a naturalized part of that image history. As a writer, I am compelled by deep connections between the photograph and the literary imagination as an integral part of a social moment. Coming of age in the 1980s, I feel a continued affinity with the art and social politics of New York during that era.

LIN TIANMIAO: PROTRUDING PATTERNS

Galerie Lelong - New York

By Taliesin Thomas



Lin Tianmiao, *Protruding Patterns*, 2017, installation view. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

This fall New York City is host to several significant exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art, including Lin Tianmiao's (b. 1961) solo show "Protruding Patterns" at Galerie Lelong. Lin is one of the distinguished stars of her generation and her art consistently invites a range of interpretations—from 'handicraft-based' to 'feminist inspired,' she continues to create a diverse body of work that is both charming and candid, often at the same time. Lin's art resides in the permanent collections of prestigious museums worldwide and she has been exhibiting steadily since the 1990s. Considering the powerhouse cohort of Chinese male artists whose work tends to define contemporary Chinese art on a global scale, Lin's contribution to the conversation concerning art from China is a necessary aspect of how the international art community encounters the range of practices representative of this field.

The title of this show hints at the quasi-womanist yet gender-role-specific tension at the heart of contemporary feminist and sexual-identity conversations. On the one hand, women cannot ignore the 'protruding' scale of male chauvinism, misogyny, and sexism writ large (consider, for example, the flagrant remarks made by the current U.S. president). On the other hand, these prevalent 'patterns' of discrimination are also creative fodder for tenacious women such as Lin to address the nonsense head-on, even if that means sowing fuzzy bubble letters that confess derogatory remarks about the female species.

Although Lin adamantly eschews the standard Western feminist label and feminist-oriented discourse—she comments that such descriptions are not relevant to Chinese culture and restrict the interpretation of her work—one cannot help but notice the traditionally 'feminine' labor-intensive activities such as stitching and embroidery that define much of her art. Nevertheless, Lin says she hopes that *Protruding Patterns* reflects

the ways in which women's roles in society have changed over time.

This body of work has already been exhibited at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing and the Long Museum in Shanghai. For this exhibition, Lin filled half the gallery space with the aging antique carpets that comprise the base of the installation while an adjacent room displayed new paintings and sculptures of human and animal bones. The carpets were covered with chunky fabric words of red and pink hues that spelled out colloquial phrases that address the female sex in various cultural contexts. These phrases represent an equivocal mix of attitudes toward women that reveal outright belittlement tempered by empowerment: "leftover women," "Tiger mom," "bossy" and "goddess" are a few select examples.

Over the past six years, Lin has been researching the Chinese lexicon for labels about women. She has collected nearly 2,000 expressions from various sources including media, literature, newspapers, pop culture, the Internet, and conversations with friends. Employing multiple languages—Chinese, English, French, among others—the words comprise a larger statement about blatant inequity and obfuscation. Taken together, Lin's linguistic symbols of interrogation form a 21st-century semiotic that illustrates both the unfortunate normalcy of sexist attitudes toward women and the rising critical backlash. Installed on the ground where visitors can actively trample the words in an act of physical authority, this artwork suggests an extant feminist disposition without trying to be feminist—the actual movement of one's feet over these phrases demonstrates the ability to crush their meaning while recognizing their presence. ■

(September 7 – October 21, 2017)



"Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern" (March 3 – July 23, 2017), installation view at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: LIVING MODERN

Brooklyn Museum – New York

By Taliesin Thomas

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887 – 1986) is widely recognized as the stoic 'Mother of American modernism,' the unabashed creator of sensual female genitalia-inspired paintings, the lover to her mentor and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz, and in her later years, a recluse cloistered in the Southwest. Despite all her existing fame, a recent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York presented her in a most unexpected and distinguished light—O'Keeffe as dauntless celebrity and unrivaled style icon. Not your typical O'Keeffe retrospective filled with glorious vaginal-flower compositions and stark deer skulls set against a blue sky, "Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern" offered a revived glimpse into the life of this progressive and independent woman who single-handedly defined an epoch in American art.

O'Keeffe's journey to art world stardom took a dynamic path—raised in Wisconsin, she later studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and The Art Students League of New York. She worked as a teacher and a commercial illustrator before Stieglitz presented an exhibition of her art in 1916. She became his muse—later his wife—and he shot hundreds of sensuous photos of O'Keeffe over the course of their love affair. Despite her rising fame in New York and beyond, she was consistently drawn to the desert of New Mexico where she eventually settled to live out her days as an artist-ascetic.

The "Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern" exhibition included many personal pieces from her elegant and emblematic wardrobe—silk scarves, felt hats, simple black dresses, exquisite kimonos, faded shoes—shown for the first time alongside some of her rare paintings and select photographs. Carefully curated to highlight O'Keeffe's self-crafted public persona and gender-bending character, the out-

fits gracefully hummed with the calm energy and signature mode of their former inhabitant. Among the treasures in the show was her beloved brass "OK" pin created by Alexander Calder and a gorgeous diamond-dust 1980 portrait of O'Keeffe by Andy Warhol. Just next to that glittering work an *Interview Magazine* photo shoot from September 1983 showed a series of intimate images by Christopher Makos of O'Keeffe with her younger assistant (and beau) Juan Hamilton. A room toward the back of the exhibition displayed a short documentary that included footage of O'Keeffe discussing her life at Ghost Ranch—the symbolic temple of her soul—and a video reel of her influence in the world of international fashion.

Also included in the exhibition were numerous black and white photos of O'Keeffe taken by a younger generation of artists smitten with the doyenne of their era. Over the years the likes of Ansel Adams, Annie Leibovitz, Andy Warhol, Bruce Weber, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Todd Webb visited her in New Mexico to capture their vision of this pioneering idol. Often an androgynous figure in front of the camera, O'Keeffe's singular profile and handsome beauty still shines forth and defies categorization. These rare photos reveal notable contours of O'Keeffe's character and leave us with a poetic impression of this devastating loner, someone we will never get over.

A fitting tribute to O'Keeffe's first-ever museum exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1927, "Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern" was not only a nod to the art of the feminist movement still advanced by the exhibitions and programming at the Brooklyn Museum, this show was also a respectful portrait of an individualistic woman and a remarkable creator. Taken together, the refined elements in the exhibit presented O'Keeffe as she remains: a dignified and mysterious figure who captured our popular imagination; a meditating mystic; a fashion symbol; and a revered legend among legendary artists. ■

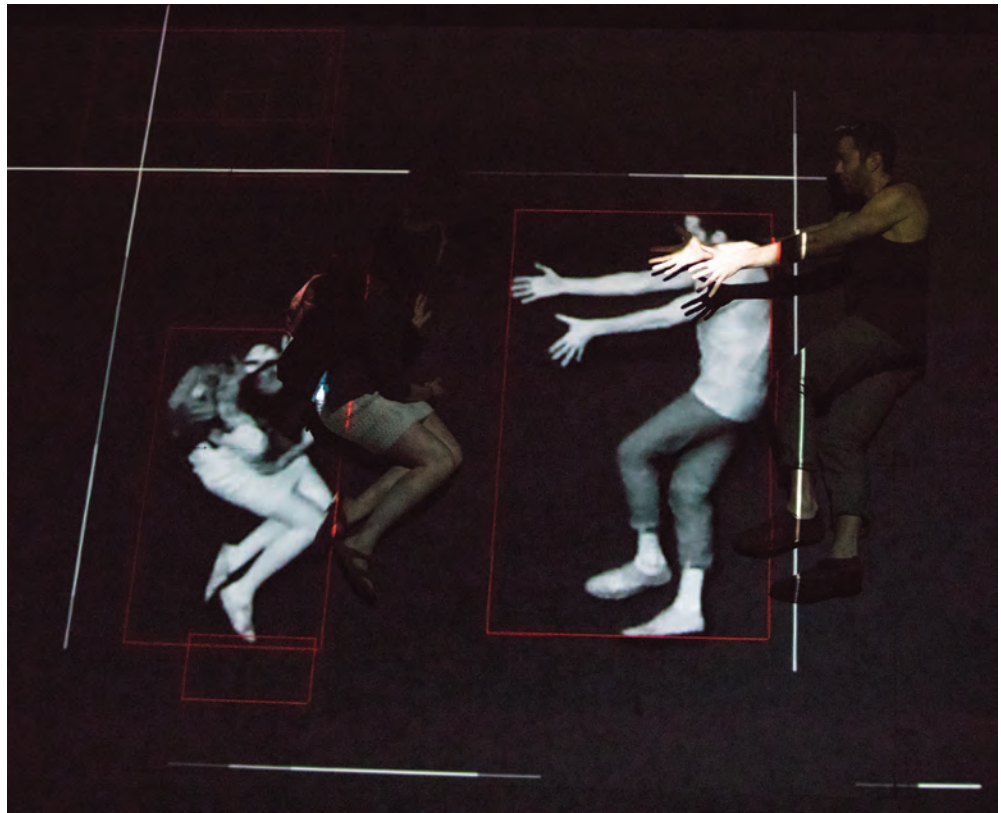
(March 3 – July 23, 2017)

REVIEWS

HANSEL & GRETEL

Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron,
Ai Weiwei
Park Avenue Armory - New York

By Taliesin Thomas



Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Ai Weiwei *Hansel & Gretel*, Park Avenue Armory, New York (June 7 – August 6, 2017). Courtesy of Resnicow and Associates, New York.

In the classic fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*, the young male protagonist leaves a trail of bread crumbs in the forest as means for him and his sister to return home. This attempt to outwit their cruel stepmother—who convinced their father to get rid of his own children so the adults can survive a famine—turns out to be a failure because the crumbs are devoured by birds. Among the subversive themes of that narrative is the notion that children eat too much. A behemoth site-specific exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory in New York exploiting the same name, *Hansel & Gretel*, re-contextualizes certain aspects of the age-old fable, notably that we consume a great deal, and these days our appetite for the digital sphere as accessed through private technology is among the greatest of seductive thrills. But given the pervasive nature of technology today and that privacy is nearly impossible, *Hansel & Gretel* affirms this outright.

The first thing to notice about this unusual exhibition is the larger-than-life cast of characters who collaborated on this commissioned show: Ai Weiwei (the veritable contemporary emperor of the international art world), Jacques Herzog (prize-winning architect and one-third of the team that designed the Olympic stadium in Beijing with Ai Weiwei), Pierre de Meuron (the other prize-winning architect involved in that project), Tom Eccles (co-curator of this exhibit and director of the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies) and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (curator, critic, art historian and *bon-vivant*). The amount of ego stuffed into this artistic collaboration is enough to explode any existing art world paradigm; however, the various reviews that surfaced after the opening of *Hansel & Gretel* divulged a cryptic account—the majority of the criticism cited the seemingly extraordinary cost of this tricky high-tech installation and the overly “public entertainment” aspect of the show.

The interactive nature of the exhibit unfolds in specific stages: to enter, visitors shuffle down a dimly lit corridor at the back of the Armory that leads into the large Drill Hall. The completely blackened space hums with human activity and shifting ghostly-looking shapes populate the ground. Then it becomes obvious those motley images

are traces of everyone around you, including yourself. It’s a cavern filled with spying drones and infrared cameras that create eerie impressions of the complicit crowd who delight in snapping iPhone photos left and right, presumably to upload to Instagram and Facebook at once. Visitors wander about bemused while creating unique bodily designs on the floor such as infrared-illustrated snow angels and other yogic poses that remain like ghosts of activity. The spectacle was indeed a bit absurd, yet the behavior merely highlights the bizarre nature of reality now—surveillance is happening all around us all the time, and everyone is having a blast in selfie-land despite it.

The second part of the show required visitors to exit the Drill Hall, walk outside and down the block to re-enter the Armory building through the main entrance and into the Head House. There, visitors encountered streaming footage from the Drill Hall and tables with mounted iPads, where people were encouraged to find their faces among the photos taken by the hovering drones. The entire Armory was transformed into a veritable “surveillance laboratory” and thus became a kind of covert monitoring hub fit to expose the extent of a hyper-monitored world. These days, most everyone cooperates with forfeiting their anonymity in exchange for taking part in the sprawling domain of the Internet—especially social media—and *Hansel & Gretel* tells this story with unequivocal candor.

I ended my visit to this show on the second floor of the Head House in one of the extraordinary baroque rooms reminiscent of a time gone by. That particular space was filled with stunning examples of majestic taxidermy and the lights under the massive antlers of those stoic animals created ominous shadows writ large on the walls above them. The metaphor was uncanny; these days no matter where we go, we gorge on the delights of the virtual sphere while our digital shadow follows us like a traceable trail of analog breadcrumbs, available to anyone who might be devious enough to prey upon it. ■

(June 7 – August 6, 2017)



Johan Wahlstrom, *See Me Feel Me Love Me*, 2017, Urethane and color pigments on canvas, 92" x 59." Courtesy of the artist and Georges Bergès Gallery, New York.

JOHAN WAHLSTROM: DISTORTED HAPPINESS

George Bergès Gallery - New York

By Paul Laster

A rock musician turned artist, Johan Wahlstrom makes energetic paintings that blur the boundary between abstraction and figuration. Taking one of his own 2015 paintings of crowds of people seen from the performance stage as the point of departure, his solo show “Distorted Happiness” at George Bergès Gallery pushed his previously illustrative style into a more surreal, nightmarish realm.

That earlier painting, *The Search for Happiness*, captures a cluster of faces clamoring to see someone on stage, while equally hoping to be seen by a figure that they adore. Sketched in black paint like human caricatures or masks on a splattered, abstract field of pigments and newspaper, the gathered heads seem largely devoid of both bodies and souls. Representational in nature, they blend into the background of the work to become an accumulation that makes a mass.

Although he is a fifth generation Swedish artist, Wahlstrom began his creative career as a keyboardist and singer—performing with such celebrated musicians as Ian Hunter, Graham Parker and Mick Ronson, as well as his own band. After nearly 20 years of making music, he left the stage and moved to France to pursue the life of a painter. Inspired by Jean Dubuffet and the Art Brut movement that he championed, Wahlstrom turned the tables on his audience by making them and their social and psychological state of minds the focus of his expressive art.

When he came to New York in 2015 for a residency at Mana Contemporary, the newly launched presidential campaign of Donald

Trump caught his attention and became the artist’s subject matter. One of the paintings from that provocative series was exhibited in the show. The 2016 canvas *Punch Them Hard* shows Trump giving a stereotypical two-thumbs-up in a sea of indistinguishable people, while deeper into the image a man gets punched in the face and a shadowy gang stomps a fallen protester.

Over time, however, Trump’s fervent supporters morph into skulls in the works on view and this is where Wahlstrom’s painting gets even more fascinating. In *See Me Feel Me Love Me*, whose title references a lyric from The Who, and *Worn Out* (both 2016) the artist uses stencils and poured paint to create skull-like heads that float in an abstract realm. In the 2017 paintings *Distorted School* and *Distorted Reality*, however, Wahlstrom’s barely formed faces approach apparitions, with features that flow like smoke.

And thrusting the notion of figuration to the limit of recognizable forms, the 2017 canvases *Torn Apart* and *Keep the Party Going* appear more like scrawls on alley walls—where the rebellious side of humanity commonly leaves its mark—than a depiction of real people. Mixing a sense of angst for the oppressive politics of the moment with a memory of youthful times when his world was a stage, the artist paints an expressive picture for everyman. ■

(June 29 – July 9, 2017)

Paul Laster is a writer, editor, independent curator, artist and lecturer. He is a New York desk editor at ArtAsiaPacific and a contributing editor at Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art and artBahrain. He is a contributing writer to ARTPULSE, Time Out New York, The New York Observer, Modern Painters, Cultured Magazine, Harper’s Bazaar Arabia, Galerie Magazine and Conceptual Fine Arts.



Su Su, *The Wall*, 2016, oil on canvas, 5 panels, each panel 36" x 72" overall dimensions 188" x 72." Photo: Jamie Gruzska.

SU SU: RECENT PAINTINGS

Martin Chen Gallery – Pittsburgh

By Tim Hadfield

Originally from Beijing, China, where she studied undergraduate theater design, Su Su came to Pittsburgh for her graduate degree at Carnegie Mellon University in 2011. When her MFA program here enabled her to return to her first love of painting, she grasped the opportunity and never looked back.

This ambitious first new series of paintings since graduation is an outpouring of energy, formal skill and conceptual power, which heralds the emergence of a major new talent.

Su Su's paintings address many interrelated issues, of identity, culture, sexuality, and the clash of high and low culture that typifies our time. They also examine the ubiquitous influence of digital media, portrayed without irony on large-scale multi-panel canvasses. These have less in common with the flats and backdrops of her early theater background than with her deep interest in film, TV and video, its temporal existence transposed and viewed through the lens of the painted surface.

The manner in which Su Su prompts us to continually revise our reading of these paintings—begging questions of our initial assumptions, or preconceptions, is gripping, subtle and refreshingly new. In describing this process she speaks of “folding and unfolding an image.” This could be a literal description of the layering, repetition

and interruption of form and image found particularly in *The Wall*, *Inauguration*, or *DeWalt*. Her metaphor does, however, more beautifully describe a method of unpacking and revealing the meaning of elements within the work gradually, or piece by piece, through analysis of the painting's content—which applies to all of these paintings. The way she allows us to do this is one of the greatest strengths of the work: it is what separates her from the pack.

The power of Su Su's practice is propelled by formidable technical fluency that demands our attention, yet which serves the content. She can seduce us with dazzling brushwork, as finely detailed and exquisitely polished, as say, the torsos in *Glimpse*. Or, she can leave a figure only just finished enough to play its role successfully, such as in the fractured narrative of *The Wall*, wherein her subjects are painted with loose and expressionistic brushwork. Ostensibly a deliberate device to obfuscate the personal details of these figures, it prevents them from being read as individuals and instead renders them human ciphers, subjugated to the overarching concept. In contrast, the ‘agents provocateur’ cartoon characters found in most works are suitably laid down as flat as flat can be—and in *Inauguration* she walks the tightrope of technique between all of the above.



Su Su, *DeWalt*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72" x 30." Photo: Jamie Gruzska.

Although these paintings feature quite diverse subjects and environments, certain themes reveal a continuity of sorts. Dislocation, for example, recurs in various forms in the work, as a shift of time, location, or even technique. It is found initially in *The Wall*, 2015-16, a large four-panel painting and the first of this series.

Here we encounter a group of businessmen, who look as if they have strayed from an office meeting, incongruously traversing a desolate grassy hillside, more suited to hikers. The only bond between them is their smart white shirts, dark pants and shoes, suggesting a common workplace. Ill-equipped to navigate the wet and soggy no-man's-land, they act as if at someone else's behest and with mysterious purpose. Down the hill they come, to cross a small stream, jumping precariously from one stepping-stone to another—a balancing act suggesting that of Su Su herself.

As one examines the painting more closely, it becomes clear the characters are not all individuals; some are a sampling of the same group, repeated in an overlapping sequence of interrupted time and space. With no apparent purpose to the journey or destination visible, we sense the men's frustration at their dislocation, as we too are denied the means to decode their predicament or intent. Yet we care to know, and the painting holds us in a suspended state of tension, as we attempt to reload a narrative for these players who, looped in a time warp, are destined to repeat the trek as we too fail to reach closure.

Inauguration, 2016, a ravishing five-panel tour-de-force, is a feast of Hollywood red-carpet glamour with all the flash, shimmer and excess of celebrity and fame on which we can gorge. But as Leonardo, Rihanna and Lady Gaga strut their designer gowns and beautiful bodies, paparazzi in tow, Godzilla and Loony Tunes crash the party for their cameos. Beautiful bodies stretch into elastic contortions, lose their heads, or multiply uncontrollably to a digital beat as the paint itself slips and slides about the lush

surface of the canvas, skidding from cultural icon to pop culture banality, taking normalcy with it. Su Su pokes us in the eye with the attraction and repulsion of the American equation of fame and money, suspending these 'actors' for us to examine, caught in this scarlet "abstract space," as Su Su calls it.

In *Glimpse*, 2017, the beautiful bodies return; this time fame and celebrity are banished as anonymous naked models twist, turn, splay and cavort, skin gloss as a porpoise and lit as a lamp. Filtered through a screen of exotic palm fronds, the figures are tossed into different sizes and configurations, the information sown together convincingly by the layered vegetation. Once again, comic and cartoon 'outtakes' defuse the erotic, and flowers painted as if from a botanical print, or animation, play with how we read this information. Are we voyeurs here? Or observers? The disengaged nature of the nudes, initially so provocative, mellows as we look further and see figures that have more in common with a compilation of life paintings or an issue of *National Geographic Magazine*.

Su Su makes us work in these paintings and in *DeWalt*, 2017, she pushes our acuity to the limit, as we struggle to piece together this blasted image, as a bird's delicate plumage is blown apart by an infernal leaf blower, wielded by the ghost of a cartoon character.

Now the line between a 'real' bird, comics, or animated bird is blurred. We seek the refuge of an easier explanation than Su Su is prepared to give us. Half avian, half 'toon', it is nevertheless a tragi-comic image, painful to look at though we somehow empathize with this frightened creature that is itself a disturbing and unsettling image. This powerful painting, built from hypotheticals, pulls the rug of recognition from under our feet and refuses to give us a safety net to grasp. We are on our own. ■

(April 12 and 13, 2017)



Maggie Mullin O'Hara, *Stills from This Is Me Crying*, 2017, archival Inkjet prints. Courtesy of the artist.

MAGGIE MULLIN O'HARA - I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU

Telfair Museums/Jepson Center – Savannah GA

By Todd Schroeder

Piled in a corner of Maggie Mullin O'Hara's persuasive and conspicuous exhibition ("I'm Trying To Tell You") is the sculptural assemblage *This Is My Nowhere*, a sweep of 13 mismatched television sets from the 1990s—as if a collection of discarded relics, plucked from such places of distinction as living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens, and stored akimbo in an impractical corner of the basement. Talking heads of the artist are split-screen on the TVs, filling the gallery with the sound of a chattering "musique concrete." O'Hara videotaped herself for a 30-second confessional twice a day—first in the morning and then in the evening—every day for a year (occasionally missing a morning, an evening, or full day).

Her 2-channel video and sound projection *This Is Me Crying* grew out of the process of making *This Is My Nowhere*. O'Hara stumbled on the structure when she noticed that she would often cry in her 30-second confessionals. She used her static camera setup, already in place for the confessionals, whenever she felt the urge to cry, the swell and ebb of emotion dictating the duration of the recording. Viewers find themselves running an immersive gauntlet of empathy through the passageway into the main space of the exhibition. From floor to ceiling on opposite walls, 2 looping videos are projected—close-ups of the artist crying, with fluctuating intensity, welling up, calming down, and sometimes apologizing. Notable in the 20-minute loops is O'Hara's medley of outfits, a vast range of apparel, makeup, and hair style, that help to propel the narrative of what might have caused her to cry. Was she just in from work, was she lying around watching TV, did she just wake up, just get off the phone, just get in from a night on the town?

Allusions to classic conceptual and performance art abound in O'Hara's show. She sets in place rules that dictate chance-oriented outcomes, and she appropriates the structure of Tehching Hsieh's yearlong performance commitments, but the most obvious cry out is to Bas Jan Ader's seminal public display of emotion *I'm too sad to tell you*. While Ader is too sad to tell us, O'Hara is willing to try. Clearly inviting the evocation of Ader, she extends his expressionist act into contemplating questions about gender expectations relative to public weeping.

As a contrast to the often-uncompromising structure of classic conceptual art—think of Sol Lewitt's neat pronouncement in 1967 that "The idea is a machine that makes the work"—the emotional and messy is foregrounded in O'Hara's work. The structure in *This Is My Nowhere* is more akin to the conventional model than *This Is Me Crying*, but she doesn't sweat the occasional missed morning, evening, or even day. This improvisational flexibility would not have flown with Tehching Hsieh in 1981. One missed hour—let alone one day—would have devastated his *Time Clock* performance. It's the crumbling itself in O'Hara's work that solidifies it.

The show is part of Telfair Museums' #art912 initiative, a dedicated platform to raise the visibility and promote the vitality of artists residing in Savannah. ■

(July 28 - November 5, 2017)

Todd Schroeder is an artist and educator based in Savannah GA.

FOLD UNFOLD

Lyndon House Arts Center - Athens, GA.
Curated by Jessica Smith and Susan Falls

By Dianne Totten



"Fold Unfold" (June 24 – August 19, 2017), installation view at Lyndon House Arts Center, Athens, GA.

The Lyndon House Arts Center (Ware-Lyndon House, built circa 1840) in Athens, GA was the perfect setting for the “Fold Unfold” exhibition. The installation culminated after a long period of research on Southern coverlets, supported by a Craft Research Fund grant from The Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, and the Savannah College of Art and Design. The show not only celebrates the existence of the handwoven coverlet, but encourages a renewed look at the creativity and functionality of the past and instills a desire to repeat this work in the present. The installation also places the overshot coverlet as a timeless art form for the future.

In a collaborative effort, Susan Falls, Professor of Anthropology, and Jessica Smith, Professor of Fibers (both at the Savannah College of Art and Design) designed this aesthetically rich, ambitious exhibit. They put out a call for coverlets to be woven on manually operated looms by individuals or groups. The size was established to be approximately 80” x 88,” the size of a typical 19th century coverlet. Makers were asked to use any color falling on the white-gray-black scale, keeping a neutral palette to draw the viewers’ attention to the detail and the mastery of the weavers’ work. The materials could be traditional or contemporary. The patterning could be historical or innovative, but should consider overshot geometric patterning of 19th and early 20th century American coverlets.

The show opens with the coverlets neatly folded and stacked forming pillars, echoing the way Falls and Smith found many coverlets in their research in house museums. Being able to view only a small portion of pattern for each creates excitement; viewers actively imagine what the unfolded coverlet looks like. The viewer can con-

template the stories, the planning, the skill, and the decisions that were involved in the creation of the coverlets.

When it was time to reveal the coverlets, the public gathered in anticipation of the ‘Unfolding.’ The performance began with a brief overview of the project. The pillars of coverlets, standing ready for exposure, were impressive reminders of the skills of the maker’s hands and the countless hours spent creating such a body of work. One by one, as the weaver’s name was announced, their coverlet was unfolded, the design revealed, and held for viewing on both sides, then re-stacked to display the full size, calling to mind its purposeful use.

Well over 100 weavers from coast to coast participated. Their backgrounds were as varied as the designs and patterns they produced. Makers’ skill levels ranged from production weavers, designers, college professors and art program teachers to students, tradesmen, and hobbyists. They each have their own reasons for making.

With the diversity of coverlets displayed the viewer can be engaged on many levels. The ideas behind the designs, the significance of fiber and color choices within a neutral palette, dyeing techniques and the stories of each artist are revealed in the “Fold Unfold” catalog.

“Fold Unfold” is an awe-inspiring project that admirably calls back to memory long after one has left the exhibition. ■

(June 24 – August 19, 2017)

Dianne Totten is an award-winning weaver. Her professional career spans for 30 years. She is a professor at John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC.



Installation view of *Iyapo Repository* at Law Warschaw Gallery, Macalester College. Image credit: David Turner, 2017

AN ARCHIVE OF THE FUTURE: IYAPO REPOSITORY

Law Warschaw Gallery - St. Paul, MN

Curated by Jehra Patrick

By Christina Schmid

Iyapo Repository, an ongoing project in residence at Macalester College's Law Warschaw gallery in St. Paul, invites participation in creating an archive of the future. Envisioned by two New York based artists, Ayodamola Okunseinde and Salome Asega, *Iyapo Repository* pays homage to Afrofuturism's Octavia Butler and the heroine of her Xenogenesis trilogy, Lilith Iyapo, but charts its own path into a complex not-yet: an archive of what might come to be that holds the imaginary residue of an even more distant future.

Iyapo Repository collects ideas, turns them into digital prototypes and, occasionally, into physical artifacts dedicated to, as lead conservators Salome Asega and Ayodamola Okunseinde put it, "to affirm and project the future of people of African descent." Some of the artifacts designed and produced for the Repository reference trauma directly, such as the marvelous blue sensory suit "that simulates the feeling of being underwater. This suit has sensory units on the inside that collect data from subject, such as heart pressure, vital signs etc. to evaluate the subject during their 'underwater experience.' This suit is useful for helping trauma victims and/or people with water-related phobia as a form of therapy." Imagined in one of the workshops the project hosts, the suit now exists as a physical artifact, on view in the gallery. A video, part of the Repository's moving image collection, shows the suit in use: an alien-reptilian costume of otherworldly beauty. And that is precisely the point: to imagine another world.

The aftermath and lingering effects transgenerational trauma, such as the transatlantic slave trade, impact the experience of time. Past and present collapse as memories loop endlessly. Flashbacks arrest

the passage of time. But trauma also affects the capacity to imagine, a phenomenon the literature on trauma calls "a foreshortened sense of the future." *Iyapo Repository* aims to tempt the mind into unruly speculation, to dare imagine differently.

Though described as an "archival and pedagogical intervention," the design thinking *Iyapo Repository* promotes steers clear of didactic instruction. Workshop facilitators provide participants with prompts designed to articulate a general direction. For instance, what kind of a future is this artifact for: dystopian, utopian, apocalyptic, or revolutionary? Which cultural arena does the artifact engage: music, politics, fashion, space travel, security, education, or health? (Perhaps needless to add, this is not a complete list.) A third tag asks for more detailed description: does the object have a motor, transmit data, permit wear, make sound, change color, or serve for self-defense? The results never fail to surprise: bio-suits to aid adaptation to alien species, space traveling rockets that emit perfectly pitched sound, or Afrotation pills that deliver historical information directly to the brain.

The goal is to not get stuck in the feasible but freely engage in fabulation and speculation. *Iyapo Repository's* storied artifacts gesture toward a not-yet that is free from the imperative of the functional and celebrates the impractical pleasures of fashion, music, and art that may act as kindling for imaginative leaps. Rather than set the record straight, *Iyapo Repository* radically re-imagines what counts as a record. ■

(September 22 – October 25, 2017)

Christina Schmid is a writer, critic, teacher and curator. She works at the University of Minnesota's Department of Art, where she teaches contemporary practices and critical theories. Her essays and reviews have been published both online and in print, in anthologies, journals and digital platforms, including Artforum, Flash Art, Foam Magazine, afterimage and mnartists.com.



Omer Fast, *August (film still)*, 2016, stereoscopic film in 3D, 5.1 surround sound, 15:30 minutes. The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund. Courtesy of the artist and gba agency, Arratia Beer and Dvir Gallery and James Cohan Gallery. © Omer Fast, 2016.

NEW PICTURES: OMER FAST, APPENDIX

Minneapolis Institute of Art – Minneapolis, MN
Curated by Yasufumi Nakamuri

By Christina Schmid

"Appendix," a three-part exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art curated by Yasufumi Nakamuri, sets two recent films by Omer Fast, *Looking Pretty for God* (2008) and *August* (2016), in dialogue with August Sander's century-old photographs of German people: farmers, construction workers, artists, bricklayers, and revolutionaries gaze at the camera with stern, unflinching eyes. Carefully posed, each of Sander's subjects is fully aware of the photographer's presence and the making of the image. *August* imagines the artist as an old man haunted by his past, while *Looking Pretty for God* combines a funeral director's dispassionate explanations of his profession with images of a faux children's fashion shoot. What emerges from the dialogue between still and moving images is an intricate reflection on time, memory, mortality, and the role and reliability of images and their makers.

Carefully sequenced, the exhibition begins in a non-descript waiting room: chairs line the walls, a water cooler, coat rack, and potted plastic plants complete the ambience. A couch faces a low table littered with magazines. While you wait in such carefully designed, inoffensive neutrality, *Looking Pretty for God* loops on a wall-mounted flat screen. The voiceover alternates between the details of preparing a body for an open-casket funeral—you replace a third of the body's blood with embalming fluid, fluff cheeks with cotton wads and clean dirty fingernails—and the psychology of grief, especially how people want to visually remember deceased loved ones. The images alternate between children getting readied for the fashion shoot and empty coffins, luxuriously lined in shiny fabrics. At

times, when the young models lip-sync the funeral director's stories, the discrepancy between speaker and spoken turns creepy, emphasizing further the artificiality and unreliability of what you see.

August screens in the next gallery. Blind, the famed photographer follows strings that run through his apartment, orienting him from bed to bathroom to gramophone. Thanks to 3-D, they seem to extend off the screen as if to compromise the separation between surface and space. The passage of time, too, is compromised as Sander's memories invade his present. One memory in a particular, an encounter with a uniformed Nazi officer, is of central importance to the film and the exhibition as a whole. While completing the death certificate for Sander's son, who died in prison of a burst appendix, the bureaucrat compliments the tender empiricism of Sander's work, poses for a portrait, and muses on the appendix: it only lives off the system like a parasite. But infected, it can endanger an entire organism. The innuendo connecting the artist-appendix to the social body is unsubtle.

People of the Twentieth Century, Sander's ambitious collective portrait, restates the question of social purpose. His titles identify his subjects, with the notable exception of artists, their assistants, and wives, by their profession and social role. Some are portrayed with tools of their trade; others in their finery. The photographs conjure a Germany before World War II, when social destinations equaled identity. Yet his images, no less than the fictitious photographer's in *Looking Pretty for God*, construct his subjects. The dialogue between Fast's films and the century-old silver gelatin prints amplifies the ideology driving the production and consumption of images, then and now. The parallels are disconcerting; the myth of neutrality thoroughly exhausted. The image performs as future memory, its questionable reliability imperfectly masked by nostalgia for a lost specter of authenticity. ■

(September 23, 2017 - February 11, 2018)



"I Giganti dell'Arte dal Teatro. Julian Beck-Hermann Nitsch-Shozo Shimamoto," 2017, installation view Casa Morra. Archivio d'Arte Contemporanea, Naples, Italy. Courtesy Fondazione Morra. Photo: Amedeo Benestante.

LIVING THEATRE

Casa Morra – Naples, Italy

By Santa Nastro

Casa Morra was born in the volcanic mind of Giuseppe Morra. A former gallerist, collector and Maecenas of many artists, Morra founded a museum dedicated to Hermann Nitsch. In 2016 he started this new project. The space, in a superb 18th-century palace in Naples, Italy, hosts a magnificent collection and is devoted to the surrounding community, organizing workshops, shows, laboratories, a cinema and documentary archive led by the filmmaker Mario Franco, and much more.

Casa Morra opened with numerous installations by Allan Kaprow, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage that we can still admire at the entrance. Then, Morra decided to dedicate the second stage of his project to another iconic trio of artists: Julian Beck, Hermann Nitsch and Shozo Shimamoto, being shown now.

The choice of the artists is not casual nor curatorial; it combines numerology and Snakes and Ladders-type rules in a fairly complicated way that tethers the institution to the project for 100 years. Based on this premise, the show, "The Giants of Art and Theatre," will last for one year. Upon entering, the visitor is first greeted by a huge room dedicated to Shimamoto (Osaka, 1928-2013), one of the fathers of the Gutai group. Big canvases are punctuated with arabesques that overwhelm their surfaces. That gesture is sensual and full of rage but at the same time natural and peaceful, as the Buddhist Japanese culture requires. And Buddha is, it almost goes without saying, one of the protagonists of Morra's solo show.

He sits watching the world in front of him, above a throne made of plastic glasses, the same that Shimamoto uses to blend colors. It's then Nitsch's turn. The legendary figure of Viennese Actionism and

the Orgies Mysterien Theater, the artist, born in Vienna in 1938, is present at the opening with a performance and a series of crucifixions, paintings and cases filled with tools, sugar cubes and ampoules displayed with an obsessive sense of cosmic order. A big part of the show is also dedicated to Beck (New York, 1925-1985) and the Living Theatre (the foundation owns the entire archive of the collective). Here you can find—and they're a real gem—Beck's first paintings, made in the period when he was one of the artists represented (together with Jackson Pollock) by Art of This Century, Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, where he had his debut. He then met his wife and work companion, Judith Malina. Together, they founded Living Theatre in 1947. In spite of his success as a painter, Beck abandoned his practice in favor of a new form of total art, where life and action coincide and collide. Living Theatre's actions, which the show in Naples illustrates with documents, texts and images from the original performances, are choral, involving, experimental and a result of a collective way of working. In addition, Casa Morra didn't forget to show Beck's work as a cinema actor: Indeed, the show displays the poster of *Edipo Re*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, with stars like Franco Citti, Alida Valli, Carmelo Bene and Beck.

The exhibition ends with a focus (in collaboration with Lucrezia De Domizio Durini) on Joseph Beuys' project *Difesa della Natura* (Pescara, 1984), the follow-up to the lifetime action *7000 Oaks* started in Kassel, during documenta, in 1982. ■

(October 8, 2017 – October 2018)

Santa Nastro is an art historian, journalist and art critic based in Rome. She is the author of the project arTVision and member of the editorial committee of Artribune. Her texts have been published in Exibart, Corriere della Sera, Arte Magazine, Alfabeto2 and Il Giornale dell'Arte, among other publications and exhibition catalogs.



Lucy Skaer. Left, forefront, right: *One Remove*, 2016, with nine objects belonging to Rachel, Peter, Caitlin, John, 2010; Background: *Untitled*, 2010. Installation view at KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Photo: Frank Sperleng.

LUCY SKAER: AVAILABLE FONTS

KW Institute for Contemporary Art – Berlin, Germany
Curated by Anna Gritz

By Lydia Magyar

Confounding re-contextualizations and hybridizations are now expected from artist Lucy Skaer. In 2000, as a transient public intervention, Skaer left a scorpion and a diamond together on an Amsterdam sidewalk. In 2003, Skaer hid moth pupae and butterfly pupae in the ‘Old Bailey’, the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales. They could have hatched mid-trial, or at any other time. Her scenes work as ideas alone, and her poetic displacements continue in “Available Fonts,” curated by Anna Gritz. With this assembly of conceptual set-ups, Skaer becomes a material semiotician. The meaning of ‘fonts’ as sets of communicative parts is opened to include sculptural constructions.

In *La Chasse* (2017), Skaer restages scenes from the illuminated hunting manuscript *Livre de la Chasse*, produced between 1331 and 1391. Now in the distant future, the imagery is represented in a composition of clay, wood, metals, slate, film, rosin and lab-grown crystals. Many are components of Skaer’s previous works. The result appears to be a garden of natural and synthetic materials meant to represent trees and animals—an industrial forest dream. Skaer describes certain elements as ‘terracotta lozenges’ and ‘quartz bricks’, set down in a grid to become a place as mysterious as a chess board. One wooden sculpture is speared by wood. Seemingly, any unmov- ing material could be used to represent game. In this unspontaneous forest, it is striking that every object in every room was purposely placed. Brittle, disintegrating rosin is laid directly into glass windows.

They appear to be permanently sealed, an invitation to re-imagine openings completely enclosed, or crumbling glass. *La Chasse* prods the distorted nature of abstraction and Skaer is unhindered.

Downstairs, Skaer displays *One Remove* (2016), a series of copied, interconnected tables and a rug that spans floor space in a multiplication of itself. One table copied is a replication of Skaer’s actual kitchen table. Skaer gives a thrilling hallucinatory quality to still objects expanded in a closed room. Film work accompanies. In *Rachel, Peter, Caitlin, John* (2010), the film is physically cut with geometric forms based on the ticket punches of Long Island Railroad conductors. The geometric forms visible in the film are rendered tangible objects atop the tables of *One Remove*. Skaer pulls objects from images like shadows making things. The beauty is in the gesture.

One large contact print, *Thames and Hudson* (2009), is made from all the printable surfaces of a chair in succession. The representation of this object becomes its physical stamp, as if painting were about tools used to apply paint. The experience of “Available Fonts” is designed for breakdown. Skaer recasts systems of symbols in an expansion of the installation format. The result feels like a fictitious lesson or a new form of environmental poetry. But for the viewer, it’s unforced. Space becomes freedom here, and understanding “Available Fonts” could be walking through it. ■

(October 13, 2017 – January 7, 2018)

Lydia Magyar is an artist and writer based in Berlin, Germany. She is currently researching the venues of performance art in her PhD research at the European Graduate School (Division of Philosophy, Art and Critical Thought).

WILLEM DE ROOIJ: WHITEOUT

KW Institute for Contemporary Art – Berlin, Germany
Curated by Krist Gruijthuisen

By Lydia Magyar



Willem de Rooij, *Ilulissat*, 2014, 12 channel digital audio recording, speakers. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Friedrich Petzel, New York. Installation view KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2017. Photo: Frank Sperling.

*“I feel a pleasure of never contained sweep over me,
now that I know place is never”¹*
– Laurie Sheck

Willem de Rooij’s “Whiteout,” curated by Krist Gruijthuisen, draws focus to Ilulissat, a village in Greenland on Disko Bay. The exhibition presents works produced over two decades, either by de Rooij alone or with his longtime collaborator, Jeroen de Rijke (1970-2006), as de Rijke/de Rooij. Following their initial visit to Ilulissat in 1997, de Rooij returned in 2014 to continue its meditative representation. The body of work across time is a reminder of the nature we imagine. And there is beauty in imagining Ilulissat, here with untied senses, through clarified sound and visual work.

Who has seen an iceberg? The 16mm film *I’m Coming Home in Forty Days* depicts one as it was in Disko Bay, 1997. The film, by de Rijke/de Rooij, takes a viewer completely around an iceberg in 15 minutes. How long did it take for this ice to freeze? On camera, invulnerable, distant ice moves with waves swinging. The filmic process looks like one of a gentle, pictorial cartographer—but the iceberg is gone now, imagines de Rooij.

The film ends with a blue still of water in Disko Bay. Outside the screening room is *Blue Table* (2004), another joint work by de Rijke/de Rooij. In *Blue Table*, one blue image reprinted in several publications is featured in its imprecise manifestations, adding dimensional-

ity to image production. All the variations of blue look real. Here the artists collapse representation into itself, their facility.

In 2014, de Rooij travelled back to Ilulissat to record its population of dogs, resulting in the sound installation *Ilulissat* (2014). The experience of “Whiteout” is scored by a faint howling of dogs as *Ilulissat* starts and stops in a separate room on schedule. Rarely are dogs so intensified. The swarm of howls blows like strong wind. De Rooij evokes an atmosphere created by animals. In a phone conversation, he said the sound “travels over the village. [...] If you’re standing, let’s say in the middle of the village, it will go over your head like a snowstorm.” The title “Whiteout” returns with new meaning.

The rhythm between screenings and sound also allows “Whiteout” to hold silence, darkness, blankness. One wonders what is between real experience and being in a space designed for this. What is “Whiteout”? De Rooij describes how, in a meteorological whiteout, “it becomes unclear where is the floor and where is the ceiling, or [...] where is the ground and where is the sky.” Even in a flurry, don’t forget this world. ■

NOTES

1. Sheck, Laurie. *Captivity*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

(September 14, 2017 – January 7, 2018)

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