

# Museum and Curatorial Studies Review





# **Museum and Curatorial Studies Review**

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Book review (1,000-1,500 words): send your CV and a 250 word proposal that includes a description of the book you intend to review and a brief discussion of its significance to the field of museum and curatorial studies.

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# Editor's Introduction

**Lucian Gomoll**

**O**n behalf of the editors and advisory board, I am thrilled to introduce the inaugural issue of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*. This is an interdisciplinary journal, a platform for scholars, curators, artists, activists, and other interested individuals to engage with the most current conversations about collection, exhibition, curation, and related topics. Each issue will feature full-length academic articles, conversational essays, exhibition reviews, and book reviews edited by our collective of scholars from the arts, humanities, and social sciences. New theoretical approaches to curating, timely interventions into mainstream practice and thought, analyses of under-examined exhibitions and curators, open conversations about the state of the field, and extended exhibition reviews that engage political perspectives – all have a potential home in *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*, a journal that seeks to be a leader in contemporary critical discourse.

Work for the journal began in 2011, when it was a nascent publishing initiative of the Museum and Curatorial Studies (MACS) research cluster at the University of California, Santa Cruz. As director of the cluster at that time, I was encouraged by the widespread interest in events we had been organizing since 2009. In front of diverse and excited audiences, scholars such as Griselda Pollock, Irit Rogoff, and Amelia Jones presented new theories of exhibitionary practice as part of our annual speaker series lectures. In May 2010, Lissette Olivares and I co-organized *The Task of the Curator*, a conference we expanded from a one-day symposium to a three-day international event in response to the overwhelming

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number of applications we received from prospective participants. Seating was at full capacity for the duration of the conference, described later as a “landmark event” by the UCLA International Institute. The attention being directed at MACS programming indicated to Olivares and me that our shared scholarly interests were hardly limited to our own collaborations. Indeed, recent years have brought with them a heightened interest in curatorial labor in particular, demonstrated globally by the many publications, conferences, and other initiatives now dedicated to the topic. Accordingly, in 2012, Olivares and I expanded our network beyond California by establishing the Museum and Curatorial Studies Multi-Institutional Research Cluster, now the official home of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*.

It is especially exciting in this millenium's second decade to engage with emerging discourses about curators and curation. However, we should be careful to not characterize contemporary concerns as completely new or somehow indicative of a break with the past. Critical approaches to exhibitionary practices have been staged for many decades in various forms – for over a century if we count nineteenth-century phenomena such as the French *Salon des Refusés* (exhibition of rejects) art shows developed in opposition to the conservative biases of the Louvre, or P.T. Barnum's popular American Museum which satirized and challenged the didacticism of nationally-endowed science museums. Twentieth-century examples are ubiquitous and include artists such as Andy Warhol, Renée Green, and Fred Wilson using curatorial methods to critique museums, as well as institutions such as the U'mista Cultural Centre and The Museum for African Art reimagining how to display non-Western material culture in North America. The editors of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* understand the journal to be a descendent of such projects which belong to a genealogy of critical museum and curatorial studies, shaped by a number of contributors from diverse socioeconomic and professional backgrounds. Exhibitions are spatiotemporal sites composed of words, images, material objects, bodies, actions, relationships, and many other types of contents which formally and politically demand an openness to interdisciplinary (or postdisciplinary) analysis. Following such a characterization, the journal identifies one of its major precursors and inspirations to be the interdisciplinary conversations about museums which took place in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, a variety of scholars, artists, and curators attempted to denaturalize display conventions of the twentieth century, participating in debates that yielded seminal publications such as *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991) and paving the way for the further implementation of museum studies departments in universities around the world. It is difficult to ignore connections between the conversations of the late twentieth century and the present moment – especially now with the increasing implementation of new curatorial studies programs in universities, or the renaming of existing museum studies programs to include curatorial studies. Several of the contributors to this volume explore further the relationships between

the present moment and the activities of the late twentieth century, as they also push the discourse into less familiar territories.

Two renowned individuals who have been shaping museum and curatorial studies for decades – John Kuo Wei Tchen and Amalia Mesa-Bains – open this issue with timely interventions that are informed by the past. Tchen, who begins his article with a putatively simple set of questions, develops a theory of curation informed by histories of colonization as he remains optimistically open to new possibilities offered by digital platforms and political critique. Mesa-Bains “reopens” the museum studies and diversity debates of the 1980s and 1990s and puts them into conversation with present discourse as she analyzes Latina/o critiques of museums and encourages us to continue asking questions. In our featured section *Curated Conversations*, Lydia Bell facilitates an exciting discussion about performance and performativity at The Studio Museum in Harlem, and Roya Rastegar writes a critically heartfelt letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who introduced dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012 with a written letter installation. The reviews that follow explore a number of stimulating additional topics, such as: the politics of Chicana/o art in Los Angeles (Robb Hernandez); art, tourism, and bodily functions at the Louvre (Lianne McTavish); curating, contemporary art, and motherhood (Petra Hroch); the fertile intersections of the studio, the field, and the lab as production sites in art and anthropology (Shelley Butler); the supporting structures of contemporary art (Rebecca Uchill); and the exhibition of topics related to violence and oppression in various sites around the world (Robyn Autry).

Together, the following contributions to the first issue of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* set a high standard for the critical interdisciplinary conversations this journal will cultivate in the years to come.

**Works Cited:**

Karp, Ivan and Steven Lavine (editors). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press (1991).



# Who is Curating What, Why? Towards a More Critical Commoning Praxis

**John Kuo Wei Tchen**

The inauguration of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* is a propitious moment to open the mystified institutional box. Characterized for many years by the Western high-cultural allure of museums and archives, the very meaning of curatorial activity is being challenged by a globalizing culture. However, who a curator is and what a curatorial practice might be are notions that stay mired in Eurocentric traditions that must also change. In a postcolonial world, the theory and practice of being a curator needs to be further decolonized and opened up. De-normalizing curation's everyday, taken-for-granted fixedness is imperative here.<sup>1</sup> The new possibilities of online and other virtual curation force us to reconsider basic conceptual and pragmatic concerns. And the curatorial skilling of everyday life further compounds the growing wealth divide – in the U.S., the Americas, and the world – the largest in history. At this critical moment, while more and more students are seeking to enter public humanities and museum studies programs, credentialing up while also racking up more debt in what is becoming a high-stakes jobs lottery, we need to unpack curatorial work, the public culture, and academic training. Within a liberal individualist framework, curation might be another career choice, but it also needs to be understood as part of a liberating, democratizing tradition, even if it is unbeknownst to the practitioner. We are in the midst of a paradigm shift where contestation gives us a chance to gain deeper insights into how cultural systems work. In other words, it is a good time to return to fundamental questions.

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Figure 1: Stephen Crowley’s whimsical photograph *In the Eye of the Beholder* (2013) is taken against the square tiled floor of the Hart Senate Office Building. The footings of the Calder-sketched sculpture *Mountains and Clouds* (1976) are framed, a trash container is cordoned, and the attention of the lone person is captured by the rectangular space of her smart phone. The photograph’s multi-layered, multi-faceted, multi-framed set of visual puns cajole the viewer to wonder what is on display and who has curated what. Image courtesy of Stephen Crowley. Used with permission.

The related terms *curator*, *curating*, and *curation* share the Latin root *cura*, which means “to care.” Ancient Romans coined the term to refer to a publicly recognized guardian of a minor (age 25 or under), the caretaker of persons deemed unable to care for themselves, or the keeper of properties on behalf of the public interest.<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defined “curator” in 1893, at the commanding heights of Great Britain’s global word-making power, indicating that during the European Middle Ages, the public caretaking usage became institutionalized: the Christian *curate*, who cared for souls within a highly-organized religious system, became increasingly distinct from the curator, who managed a specialized aspect of public works (such as aqueducts) within any given European state. The contemporary idea of the curator as one who cares for a collection, as “the officer in charge

of a museum, gallery of art, library, or the like” was deployed as early as 1667 in reference to The Curator of the Royal Society.<sup>3</sup>

Both the curate and the curator as caretakers made selective choices from any given body of knowledge, whether it was the scriptures or an inventory of things. Yet, as caretaking over the course of the last few centuries has also become the realm of increasingly secular medical practitioners who *cure* bodies and souls, so too has the work of curators become associated with museums and galleries, eventually invested with professional expertise and institutional authority in the twentieth century. Curatorial training, practice, and knowledge-creation has become less strictly about custodianship and more about having greater latitude to pursue secular research and publication in ways that are similar to professorial work, which combine with significant mediatory influences in constructing public exhibitions and deciding which objects will be acquired in collections. Indeed, the acts of curing and curating have always surpassed the formulation of who a curator has been at any given time and place. This slippage between practice and occupation during times of flux is what preoccupies me in this article.

My brief reference to the genealogies of curatorial work, with a gloss of context, is only meant to convey how curatorial practice can never be innocent from historically-embedded formulations of knowledge, selection, and power. Yet at the same time, various uses in different places and times suggest a persistent *play* in such practices and formulations. Curating, as an expression of agency within systems, must be understood as a contested activity neither strictly controlled nor free of all social and political limits. This awareness challenges us to constantly redefine and rethink what constitutes our contemporary curatorial practices. With and upon what unexamined assumptions are we curating? Within what traditions are we actively and perhaps also unwittingly operating? What new boundaries of knowing, understanding, and reimagining are we testing?

### **Curation and the Curator**

Herein I argue for the virtue of curators being shape-shifters that wear multiple hats and thereby engage in multiple practices and discourses at the same time. Emergent artists, public historians, curators, and tradition-bearers *et al* benefit from getting down, rough, and dirty in the trenches of creative, fresh work; and similarly, artists and other creative agents benefit from critical understandings of what they are doing and how their work is presented to others. At a moment when the United States and Anglo-American culture appear to be at the heights of globalizing power and influence, shaken up by the dramatic restructuring of the global fiscal system, this is an anxious, creative, and critical moment to unpack and repack who is curating what, why, where, and when. In the spirit of the down and dirty, I

will note four slippages, growing yet not sufficiently highlighted, between the august status of being a curator and the work of curation:

1. In the midst of the digital revolution, curation has been going through another paradigm shift. Led by the new information age priesthood of industry visionaries tagged as “thought leaders” in what can be called the *cyber-edutainment industrial complex*, a new blurring of intellectual labor is emerging. Erin Kissane is a self-identified “content strategist” who writes a witty, frank essay blog that is self-reflexive about her own professional activities and how they relate to the work of curators. She opens her blog by capturing our new culture war, likely to be more important in the long run than the massive pileup within the Washington Beltway.

Here is a snippet of her July 2010 post, entitled “Content and Curation: An Epic Poem”:

**NEWSPAPERS:** “The youngs say they’re curating things, even though they do not work in museums.”

**SOCIAL MEDIA/CONTENT MARKETING PEOPLE:** “Content curation is the new old newness. You must pure-play some content curation to leverage your thought leadership. It has good info-molecule and is lemon lemon easy thing. AHHHHH.”

**NEWSPAPERS:** “THIS will save newspapers. This and iPads.”

**ACTUAL CURATORS:** “YOU ARE FOUL OOZE OF DECADENT COMMERCE.”

**CONTENT STRATEGY PEOPLE:** “So, you know, this ‘content curation’ thing with the content is sort of what we already do. Here in content strategy where we are content strategists. But it’s not just really about making lists, because you need strategy. For your content. Hi.”

**EDITORS:** “Wait, isn’t that just—? No, no, forget it. We’re going to the bar.”

**ACTUAL CURATORS:** “OOZE.”

**10,000 BLOGGERS:** “Controversy! Curation! Monorail! Jazz hands.”<sup>4</sup>

Posed wonderfully by Kissane, the accelerated compression of the internet has brought a clash of job descriptions and cultural practices into increasing disarray. With each new

technologically-driven shift in relations of time and space, who does what and a chaos of categories and divisions of labor blur and meld. The title to Marshall Berman's classic study of "the experience of modernity," *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (originally from Marx) captures this shapeshifting moment, poetically and in substance

2. Might every person be a curator? In the post-industrial U.S., we still have a marvelous, obsessive fascination with our various things and their materiality – fabric, porcelain, glass, cast iron, wood, paper, plastic, wound up, electrified, and otherwise. Television shows such as *Antiques Roadshow*, *Pawn Stars*, and my favorite, *American Pickers* ("we make a living telling the history of America one piece at a time"), testify to this undying fetishization. Collection is not synonymous with curation, but the activities significantly overlap on the levels of selection and narration, noted here as part of our second slippage through which curation exceeds professional curators. If we all collect items and somehow set them into relation with one another, then everyone is a curator – a variation of historian Carl Becker's more definitive, populist 1931 maxim "everyman his own historian." Added to the American collecting and flea market traditions are the promises of everyone with a fast computer and the time to become curators of digitized, dematerialized things and experiences. Tumblr, for example, provides a convivial online space to collect and arrange – to curate – a wide range of visual work. And this recent expansion of transmedia curatorial platforms reaches out to the digital slippages I explored above.

What is curation, after all? Let us approach being a curator not just as a profession for which we produce works written down for all time or value things as sacred objects, but as a sociocultural process through which we care for things and tell stories about them with our various expressive capacities. A master storyteller entralls us, taking us from the here and now into another time and place. Storytelling is something we all do. But as is true for all activities, some of us do it more deliberately. Others more artfully. Some are too serious about it. Some make money from it. Most of us simply do it simply. "Once upon a time..." "Where I grew up..." We all perform stories about our experiences and ways of placing ourselves in our worlds, deliberately re/arranging our memories and the figures that suggest a spatiotemporal elsewhere. When I cook a dish my mother used to make, it is a form of caring for ingredients and culinary techniques, of striving to achieve a certain taste full of memory and meaning. Demystified in these ways, curation is not necessarily the special domain of credentialed specialists. But what does the collection and display of things, defined widely to include material and digitized objects, do for any given society? This issue can be unpacked historically.

3. In London, we can place curation within the centuries-long historical development of Westernization as one of modernity and colonialism. In the context of the United Kingdom,

contemporary curatorial practices have been significantly shaped by two overlapping nineteenth-century locations, one apparently “real” and material and the other apparently intellected. First the Crystal Palace Great Exhibition in Hyde Park (1851), critically described by Tony Bennett in his valuable study of the *exhibitionary complex*, and which “brought together an ensemble of disciplines and techniques of display that had been developed within the previous histories of museums, panoramas, Mechanics’ Institute exhibitions, art galleries, and arcades.”<sup>5</sup> A British citizenry was made palpable and public within the cubic footage of a grand architectural space, the contents curated by various organizers who did not call themselves curators (slippage #3). By arranging things from different sites and eras of the British Empire and beyond, the compression of time/space into an accessible building encouraged the visitor to imagine a sense of global knowing and commodification. This commons-making space enabled many eyes to focus on a carefully selected set of things from around the world. The second location, a fictional place Thomas Richards calls the *imperial archive*, encompasses the excessive knowledge that the British Empire accumulated about the world and the importance of classifying and arranging various components of the archive. Richards describes the claiming of the world through the acquisition and organization of information as, “a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of the state and Empire.”<sup>6</sup> Rereading Richards reveals that the fantasies and challenges of nineteenth-century Britain surprisingly correlate with those of the digital information age: an exalted abundance of information and the desperate need to organize and make sense of it. He recalls that,

Though the archive threatened at times to overwhelm the state with a mountain of documents, more often the state began to imagine that it could perform feats of magic with knowledge, doing a lot more than merely acting as its curator. A variety of narratives succeeded in transforming the uncontrolled accumulation of knowledge into a fantasy of a controlled flow of information to and from the state...the conditions and possibility of total knowledge began as mythical constructions but ended as the vast imagined community of the state.”<sup>7</sup>

What fantasies of social order or other modes of relationality might the myths of our own digital revolution yield?

As battles for control over definitions of truth and beauty transpired, and revolutions in knowing played out, curation became part of a more secular *bourgeois public sphere*, as Jürgen Habermas put it. Herein the museum and archive curator was born, but not yet invested with the high-cultural cachet and author-like power that the professional would acquire in the twentieth century. As the British colonial empire grew, its museum collections and

archival documents increased exponentially and altogether encompassed what was imagined as “the world” presented in various grand and ornamented buildings. Indeed, this imperial archive, mastering paper and objects from “all” civilizations, thereby materially and symbolically performed the nation’s proprietorship and superiority over all others.

Museums extended the power of empire to more of its citizens in both material and symbolic terms. The new middle classes and colonists became skilled in the enactment of social, educational, and cultural capital increasingly necessary to play an active, constitutive role in the new international system of production, consumption, and circulation. These new actors on the international stage learned how to produce and enjoy a culture that claimed grander swaths of times and places, as if colonized peoples and lands were there to be mastered, sometimes through activities that can be described as curatorial, as in the Great Exhibition or the arrangement of information.<sup>8</sup>

4. Museums and archives gain their power from the collection and arrangement of things, compressing the world into ordered configurations of time and space via exhibitions and collections. The precursors to modern museums, Early Modern cabinets of curiosities (*kunstkammern* in German), featured items that aristocratic collectors perceived to be strange and interesting, such as objects from “the Orient” and the “New World,” but also rocks, stuffed animals, family portraits, excavated pottery shards, books, weapons, shells, *ad infinitum* to constitute what were believed to be microcosms of the known world. The Christian God, according to English writer Soame Jenyns (1704-87), was understood during the era of *kunstkammern* to have created “nature” according to the “wonderful chain of being” – a hierarchical schema that ranks from top to bottom (respectively) the most advanced and powerful to the most simple and undeveloped: God, angels, kings, lords, peasants, animals, plants, and minerals, and within each subset various smaller hierarchies, such as the father being placed at the top of a family grouping. And by studying this chain, God’s “infinite wisdom and power” could be ascertained “from the senseless clod, to the brightest genius of human kind.”<sup>9</sup>

Such an understanding of God’s creations gave way to conceits of organization by human “reason” that arguably operated within what is now the realm of curation. Jenyns, in emblematic European Enlightenment belief, elevated reason as the motor of differentiation. He postulated that, “From this lowest degree in the brutal Hottentot, reason, with the assistance of learning and science, advances, through the various stages of human understanding, which rise above each other, till in a Bacon or a Newton it attains the summit.”<sup>10</sup> The understanding of both reason and civilizations as advancing helped to pave the way for a shift from the static model of the Great Chain of Being created by God to the

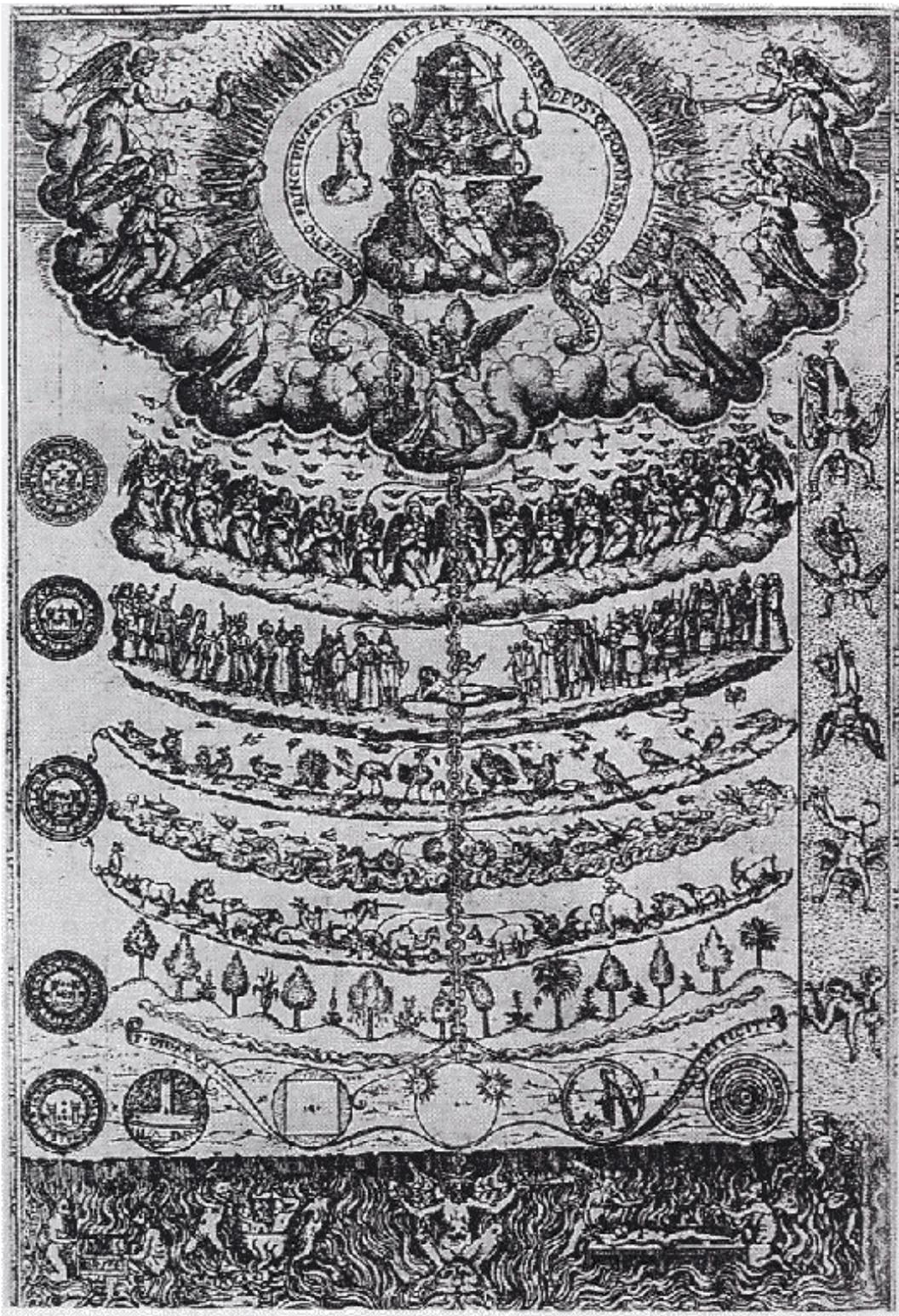


Figure 2: The concept of *The Great Chain of Being* ranked all forms of worldly being, from the dirt below to the Almighty on high. Didacus Valdes, *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579). Reproduced courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.

nineteenth-century evolutionary tree in which species evolve over time, the latter which had a tremendous impact on the exhibitionary complex as Tony Bennett has shown.<sup>11</sup> In both frameworks, European humans were presumed to be at the forefront of development.

If we can put aside each collected and displayed item's particular thingness for the moment, we can understand how curatorial power is gained through the selection, juxtaposition, and display of objects along a schema of superior versus inferior places, as well as progressive versus stationary or lagging times. In this colonialist, expressive, and creative process, curators play with the folding, refolding, and unfolding of any given current moment with other times and places. Mikhail Bakhtin discusses this as the *chronotope* in which the present time and place of the viewer, the "we" of the curator and visitor, is measured and interpreted against another time/place, the edifying other to be gazed upon, juxtaposed, arranged, and texted.<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin's novelist is in effect a curator of time and place, is arranging/rearranging, figuring/refiguring settings and moments through which the characters experience a plotline. Our earlier romp through the *OED* is another example. To write a critical etymology, the researcher assembles and narrates the uses of the same word over many times and places, relying on information collected in an expansive dictionary which is also a type of embodiment of the world as accessible and affiliated (in the case of the *OED*, starting from the founding 1857 moment by the Oxford Words Committee). As I glean for meanings to be made online in 2013 Brooklyn, a new juxtaposition is now made significant in this essay. Bakhtin's theories make possible the excavation of an otherwise exhumed back-and-forth between my writing time/place and the *OED* entry's time/place as a dialogic exchange process. As process, meanings are fluid and in constant contestation and redefinition, authority is not fixed.<sup>13</sup>

Fundamentally, curation is a performed, embodied practice of quotidian life, the activity of an everyday individual, group, and social improvisation. The curator as a type of professional role emerges with the growing division of social labor. Just as the everyday storyteller can morph into a professional singer, for example, the everyday curator can also become a specialized custodian of widgets paid by the corporation that bought up all local means of widget-making. To extrapolate from Diana Taylor's formulation, the archive is: of an authorized place (the museum building as a big box); "a thing/object" ("or collection of things...marked for inclusion"); and a practice ("the logic of selection, organization, access, and preservation over time that deems certain objects 'archivable,'" and I add here, museumable).<sup>14</sup> The curator, then, has been a particular formation of specialized labor, authority, and power organized from sites of the European and European colonial world. The curator is one of the actors who has enabled Benedict Anderson's *imagined communities*, reifying and mapping fictional relationship so that people can identify with others within emergent nation states and affiliate with others beyond national bounds.<sup>15</sup> Indeed,

established archives and museums have gained the authority of money and power accumulated over time. Yet more recently, emergent publics, counter-publics, and subaltern publics contest the still-dominant bourgeois public sphere. I will explore some of the efforts to decolonize and de-normalize curation and the curator later in this article.

### **Towards a Decolonized, Embodied Curatorial Practice**

It is time to take a step back. I have delineated above four slippages between being a curator and the dialogic activity of curating in a fashion that might suggest that the bourgeois public sphere has been exhausted of its liberatory possibilities, that it is incapable of the new work of a new century. The curator who is empowered to recognize and collect certain things which support a tradition of high positive valuation necessarily “sifts and winnows” out the chaff of the undervalued Other within and outside the ranks of that tradition. Indeed, conventional curators produce exhibitions based on collections that have been already assembled, already leaving out objects and related ideas that were not deemed worthy of preservation. This corresponds with the dynamics involved in writing history, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot theorizes, which can be silencing when facts, archives, narratives, and experiences are absented at the very moment in which a history is being produced. He identifies “four crucial moments” during which silences enter the process of historical production:

the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*);  
the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*);  
the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and  
the moment of retrospective significance (the making  
of *history* in the final instance).<sup>16</sup>

By using the sonic sense of the active verb form “silencing,” Trouillot immediately opens up the process of cultural-historical meaning making as not simply a written research practice of credentialed experts, but a practice of all people’s everyday life.

Take two British gentlemen for example: one well-tailored Oxford man greeting another person whom he surmises is of commensurate status, also a successful Oxford man. “How do you do?” with a nod is exchanged between them, as is the exchange of calling cards with the firm shaking of right hands. A relationship is established. Sight, sound, manners, and other signals tell each much about the other. A hailing of the other through the testing if that person is indeed a gentleman by his response is assumed as a matter of course; it is conventionalized. At the same time, implied in all such interactions is an invisibilized and silenced third party and more: the person who resembles a gentleman but does not “pass the test,” as well as those people who clearly do not look like gentlemen, and so on.

Joseph Addison (1672 -1719), a British writer and politician who engaged the public with philosophical ideas, reiterated the Platonic hierarchy of senses embraced by European intellectuals of the time and in some cases to our day. To continue with our previous discussion, the Great Chain of Being moves from the many lowly creatures “which have no other sense beside that of feeling and taste,” up to supposedly more advanced beings as “Life advances through a prodigious variety of species, before a creature is formed that is compleat in all its Senses.”<sup>17</sup> Such a “completion” relies upon the presumption that beings with complex vision are more advanced. Indeed, most of us are familiar with the Westernization of the senses in which sight is the “master” and most superior of the human senses, while touch, taste, and smell are the lowly “animal senses.” Sight has long been associated with human intellect and helps to render the European-descended man capable, according to Locke, of “life, liberty, and property.” Furthermore, the individual ownership of property was made possible with the Protestant-honed premium placed on belief in self-ownership and actively cultivating the land.<sup>18</sup> The white male subject understood indigenous Americans as not possessing the land because the latter lived within nature and did not master it, suggesting they lived an existence which relied upon a primitive, lower sensate. In our contemporary era of postcoloniality and neo-liberalism, the loss of local/regional knowledges to imperial archives may have been forgotten, but the judgments which continue to be made about the advanced and hierarchic ranking of the U.S. versus South Korea, Colombia, Cuba, or Liberia are still fraught with what Latin American scholars call *the coloniality of power*.<sup>19</sup>

By the colonizing moment of Westernization, the practices and theories of the oral and the aural were subjugated to the despotism of the visual, and silenced in the Trouillotian sense. Bruno Latour traces this history in his article “Visualization and Cognition” and explores the significance of an eighteenth-century encounter between Chinese men on a Pacific island and La Pérouse, an explorer who was sent by Louise XVI to bring back a map that would allow the people of Versailles to determine whether or not the region (which they called “Sakhalin”) was an island or a peninsula. Upon engagement with the local peoples, La Pérouse soon discovers that the Chinese on the beach are more than capable of constructing a map of the island, one drawn in the sand to be soon washed away and another drawn into La Pérouse’s notebook with a pencil, leading to Latour’s conclusion that the locals were able to think of cartography and navigation on equal footing with Europeans.<sup>20</sup> The difference between the “savage geography and the civilized one”? Latour insists that it did not have to do with some notion of the prescientific mind, the ability to draw and visualize spatial relationships, nor the value of different types of maps (such as concrete versus abstract geography). It is La Pérouse’s colonial mandate from Versailles. This mandate is twofold: first, to “take something *back* to Versailles where many people expect his map to determine who is right and wrong about whether Sakhalin was an island, who will own this and that

part of the world, and along which routes the next ships could sail” (original emphasis).<sup>21</sup> And second, La Pérouse’s project is part of a collective, cognitive effort which invests this map and similar visual technologies with knowledge/power. Such a combination of “visualization and cognition,” infused with power, links the competitive empire-building designs of Versailles with other European colonial capitals, and is the significant difference between “savage” and the self-proclaimed “civilized” ways of seeing and knowing.<sup>22</sup>

The assembling of a powerful colonial archive of maps is one example of transfer from the colonial periphery to the core, one which helped to make possible the transfer of other information, raw materials, and bodies for the purposes of strengthening empire. Colonial agents such as La Pérouse can be recognized as collectors of space/time who provided the stuff of knowledge/power, the information and objects to be archived and used with other materials in the service of the ruling classes. In Versailles, professionals who performed labor similar to present-day curators did the added work of archiving and museumizing the map, placing it within a powerful Western classification system in collections as well as public displays in the colonial core. The Chinese local who first drew his map in the sand is, henceforth, absented from the provenance recorded by the archives, traceable only in the contents of narrative documents (such as those studied by Latour) and possibly footnoted as an anecdote by a fastidious mapmaker.

French theorist Jacques Derrida characterizes *white mythology* as a type of metaphysics that effaces the scene which brought it into being, arguably the basis of Western notions of modernity, the effects which are traceable throughout the paragraphs above. Derrida explains the meaning behind the phrase: “the white man takes his own mythology...for the universal form of that which is still his inescapable desire to call Reason.”<sup>23</sup> British legal scholar Peter Fitzpatrick expanded on Derrida’s ideas, characterizing the West’s systematic rejection of myth to actually be a consolidation of myth, that white mythology constitutes a “negative teleology” in which “Occidental being is impelled in a progression away from aberrant origins” or “savages.”<sup>24</sup> According to Fitzpatrick, the difference between the modern and the savage is that the savage believes his origins derive from mythology, and the modern imagines otherwise.

A decolonization of European approaches to time and space requires a return to “the Age of Darkness” before the seventeenth century, before the European Enlightenment’s linear, segmented parsings of space and time interrupted and abjected other ways of understanding the world. From a critical vantage of indigenous epistemologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that we need to revisit “different orientations toward time and space, different positioning within time and space, and different systems of language for making space and time ‘real’ [which] underpin notions of past and present, of place and of relationships to the land,” and I

should add, relationships to the water, to the marge between the land and water, to the air above and within, and to fellow “things,” living and otherwise.<sup>25</sup> Ongoing indigenous attachments to origin “myths” and beliefs that humans are part of the animal spirit world could contend for the sharpest differences from the modernist, scientific detachment of “superior” human intellectual hubris to rise above all nature and “lower” forms of mankind.

The time of ascribed “darkness” before the “light” of “The Age of Reason” is one in which we may delve deeper before and around this hubris. For example, we can now access what land, water, flora, and fauna might have been like in 1609 in New York City, then called Mannahatta. The online visionary work of Eric Sanderson enables us to toggle between the current gridded, block-by-block maps of the metropole and that long disappeared time/place that existed before Henry Hudson’s ship the *Half Moon* arrived in 1609. With such digital tools we can begin to reimagine what the lives of Lenni Lenapes peoples might have been like, and consequently what changes on the land were wrought with the violence of the Dutch and British.<sup>26</sup> Seeing the lands and seas of this small part of the world through Sanderson’s curatorial knotting of the present and the past elicits a sense of the uncanny – to be out of step and out of place with normal time/place. He offers us a quick, evocative glimpse of a digital time machine being here, there, now, and before, from the vantage of a geo-coded smart device.

Scholar of medieval texts Carolyn Dinshaw explores another corner of the “dark age” in her delightful examination of pre-Reason texts read from the vantages of various presents and various places. She presents a series of unruly amateur enthusiast interpreters who break the rules of cool, disciplined Protestant detachment by attaching an assortment of abject, “improper” behaviors to pre-Reason time/place.<sup>27</sup> Rather than judging this unruliness as terrible and a sign of incompetence, Dinshaw insists on troubling the master narrative of linear progress in which her “queer diasporic experience, with its complicated time knots of past and present . . . places me in the heterogeneity of the present and sensitizes me to its other times.”<sup>28</sup> *Queer* here has a double meaning: it literally references non-normative sexuality and gender performance in the present, but it also performs a pre-normative past and post-normative future. In this framework, Habermas’ liberating bourgeois sphere has become a violating disciplining machine. Citing Halberstam’s *Queer Time and Place* (2005), “once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance,” Dinshaw insists that “queer time brilliantly erupts, and the ‘death of the expert’ is not far behind.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, she points out that “Amateurism is everything the professional leaves behind on the modern train of forward progress.”<sup>30</sup> If we return to the pre-professionalized moment, and take seriously alternative epistemologies such as queer time as well as indigenous understandings of time and place, we become

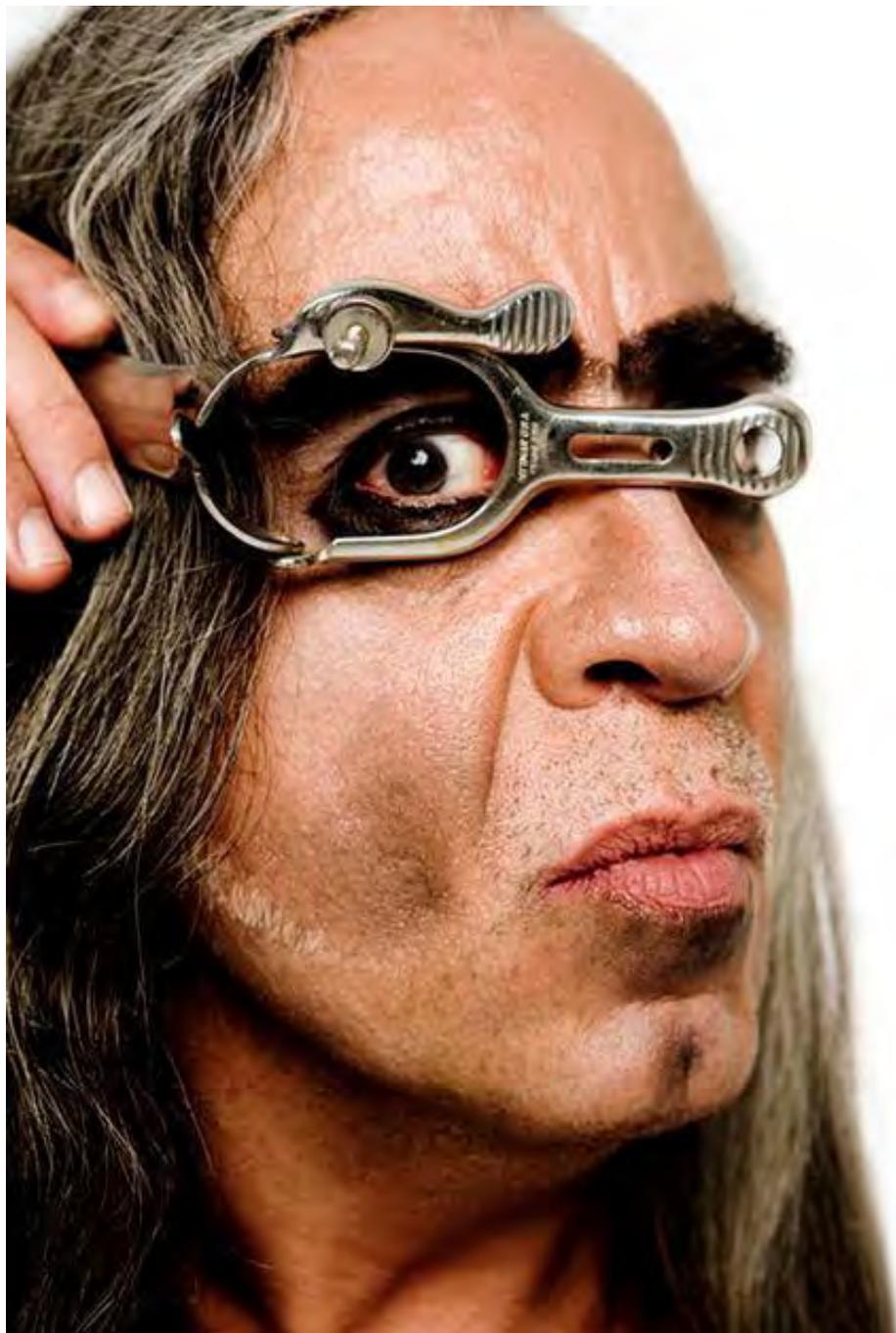


Figure 3: Archived by the Hemispheric Institute online, La Pocha Nostra and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance art has for decades provoked, prodded, and teased viewers to reconsider the realities of borders and identifications. This publicity image for *The Mexorcist 3: America's Most Wanted Inner Demon* (2008) playfully stares down viewers across a zone of vigilantes, three-ply fences, and the U.S. demand for pliant, cheap labor.<sup>31</sup> The Hemispheric Institute creates possibilities for another decolonized historical tradition by documenting and assembling performances from across the greater Americas. Image courtesy of the Hemispheric Institute. Used with permission.

enabled to recapture a compelling discourse of knowledge that may be mobilized for more democratic civic action and problem solving in curating. In contrast to the tightly proscribed and disciplined nature of professionals, “amateurism is by definition multiplicitous: so much for the ‘bounded body of knowledge,’ the rules of access and processing, the expert credentializing.”<sup>32</sup>

Curating as a liberating, chronotopic activity, today more than ever, requires a radical, decolonizing and queer reflexive awareness of the past infused with a hope for the future. To truly reinvigorate curation we need to defend and continue to reactivate its sense of social agency. Two points need noting here. First, decolonizing our curatorial practices, therefore, requires us to root out the systemic silencing processes through which curatorial sensate and agency have been disciplined. Second, *queering* curation in this sense is an activist performance and engagement with decolonizing time/spaces in ways that nurture oppositional publics (a reclaiming of the “care” in curation). Such a curatorial praxis here described can only be realized by the sustained problem-solving tests of theory challenged by practice and practice challenged by theory. By doing this we can work towards curating a new public commons that includes profusely-sensate, dynamically-embodied reconnections to the pasts that have been silenced and eviscerated of life.

I close with three questions:

What roles can we as decolonizing, radically questioning curators of space/time envision in our series of engagements?

What wisdom can we glean from our experience?

Can we today and in the future move beyond the show and tell of mainstream academic performance to instead collaborate, constructively critique, and build a shared authority with the publics alongside whom we are co-curating?

### Notes:

This essay is in dialogue with the work of Fernando Coronil, Neil Smith, and Diana Taylor in examining embodied practices that challenge the uneven relations and discursive formations of the coloniality of power. This essay is written in memory of Coronil and Smith. I’d like to thank Lissette Olivares and Lucian Gomoll for their support and expert editing.

<sup>1</sup> I would date the emergence of a critical curatorial movement in the U.S. back to the 1960s-70s. This work matured and some of the spirit and rigor of the time is documented and analyzed in *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991) and *Museums and Communities* (1992). In 1988 and 1990 Steven Lavine of the Rockefeller Foundation and Ivan Karp of the Smithsonian organized two major museum studies gatherings that resulted in these two publications.

<sup>2</sup> Smith (1870), page 376.

<sup>3</sup> Quotation from the fifth *OED* entry for the noun “curator.” It is important to note that sites such as the Ashmolean Museum existed in the seventeenth century, but they would have more closely resembled the Early Modern cabinets of curiosities than modern museums.

<sup>4</sup> Erin Kissane has written an excellent essay-blog exploring this question as content curator. <http://incisive.nu/2010/content-curation-an-epic-poem/>, last accessed June 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See Tony Bennett’s formulation of the *exhibitionary complex* in Bennett (1988), page 74. Also see Barringer (1998) on the colonial project of the South Kensington Museum.

<sup>6</sup> Richards (1993), page 6. Interestingly, Richards notes that “by 1900 not even the librarians at the British Museum seriously believed they would be able to chip away at this backlog of knowledge,” Richards (1993), page 7.

<sup>7</sup> Richards (1993), page 73.

<sup>8</sup> Within the cultural and knowledge production system of Great Britain and Anglo-American imperial cultures, the curatorial question of stewardship or guardianship versus the Lockean, Protestant infused formulation of self-possession and self-ownership is important – a topic I plan to write about in the future.

<sup>9</sup> Lovejoy (1976), page 197.

<sup>10</sup> Jenyns, as quoted in Lovejoy (1976), page 197.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin (1981), pages 84-85.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of how I have used the Bakhtinian concept of dialogics in the back and forth historians necessarily deploy in time/space, see Tchen (1992) and Tchen (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Taylor (2003), page 5.

<sup>15</sup> For a full definition and discussion of *imagined communities*, see Anderson (1991).

<sup>16</sup> Trouillot (1995), page 26.

<sup>17</sup> Lovejoy (1976), page 185.

<sup>18</sup> For how sight has presided over Western hierarchic ways of encountering the world, see David Howes, "Empire of the Senses," in Howes (2005), pages 10-11. For a critique of liberal individualism, see Canadian political economic theorist, C. B. MacPherson on John Locke's formulation of rights accorded to property owners. MacPherson (1962), pages 197-221.

<sup>19</sup> The key theorist of *the coloniality of power* is Anibal Quijano. I have found Walter Mignolo's juxtaposition of local knowledges and global designs particularly useful. See Mignolo (2000).

<sup>20</sup> Latour (1986), page 5.

<sup>21</sup> Latour (1986), page 5.

<sup>22</sup> Latour (1986), pages 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida (1974), page 11.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzpatrick (1992), pages x-xi; Tchen (2013), "Epilogue."

<sup>25</sup> Smith (1999), page 55.

<sup>26</sup> See Sanderson's *Mannahatta* and his Wildlife Conservation Society website The Welikia Project. <http://welikia.org/explore/mannahatta-map/>, last accessed June 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Dinshaw (2012), page 31.

<sup>28</sup> Dinshaw (2012), page 104.

<sup>29</sup> Dinshaw (2012), page 33. Indeed, passionate collectors and enthusiasts for the possibilities of playing with time/place have opened up curatorial practices and most effectively challenged the big box institutions. California-raised Anglophile Dennis Severs reinvented the stuffiness of historic houses, and Frances Glessner Lee, heir to the International Harvester founder, a pioneering forensic investigator in a man's world, designed miniature, intricately detailed crime scene dioramas to train police investigators.

<sup>30</sup> Dinshaw (2012), page 21.

<sup>31</sup> With his acid wit, Gómez-Peña creates a topsy-turvy series of interventions that trouble basic assumptions of who is an American and the unwanted/wanted other without and within. Citing the Hemispheric Institute's website: "The basic premise of these collaborations is founded on an ideal: 'If we learn to cross borders on stage, we may learn how to do so in larger social spheres.' La Pocha strives to eradicate myths of purity and dissolve borders surrounding culture, ethnicity, gender, language, and *métier*. These are radical acts." From "Guillermo Gomez-Peña & La Pocha Nostra," <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/hidvl-profiles/itemlist/category/68-pocha>, last accessed July 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Dinshaw (2012), pages 22-23.

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# The Latino Cabinet of Curiosities: A Postcolonial Reopening

**Amalia Mesa-Bains**

As both an artist and a curator, I am interested in the heightened critical attention now being directed at curatorial labor from a number of professional and political perspectives. Contemporary conversations in the academy, as well as experimentations in art and curating, are producing new vocabularies and methods for exploring once again the politics of display, including postcolonial practices carried out by artists of color and their allies. In the spirit of the emerging discourses that prompted the formation of the journal *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*, as well as the establishment of a number of related academic programs and publications, this essay reexamines the roles of artists who make use of curatorial strategies within community and museum settings. We are now entangled in a moment that is characterized by change and excitement in the field, and to better understand how we arrived at where we are today, it will be useful for us to revisit a similarly transformative period for engaging with museums and the arts: the 1980s and 1990s. The late twentieth century was an exciting moment when critical writings such as *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991) were being published, curators such as Susan Vogel began to denaturalize museum conventions through experimentation, and the artist-as-curator emerged as an exciting and popular phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of multiculturalism in the 1980s in particular brought forth the increased exhibition of artists of color in museums and galleries, as well as debates about what counted as equitable inclusion and “authentic” cultural representation. It is common for critics to dismiss art of the period that engaged with culture and identity politics on the grounds that it enacted an essentialist, speaking-from-my-position politics; however, critics Homi Bhabha and Jennifer A. González have since shown that such a suspiciously disengaged attitude usually ignored the critical interventionism that was at the heart of so much of the art being made at the time.<sup>2</sup> For example, Fred Wilson and Renée Green actively remapped our relationships to cultural objects and signifiers, challenging traditional identity constructs and collective histories rather than uncritically representing them.<sup>3</sup> In conversation with other artists, curators, and scholars, Latino artists created installations that attempted to retrieve, reclaim, and alter display forms, including those that have been long considered to be obsolete, such as the Early Modern European cabinets of curiosities, in order to critique the history of the museum within its contemporary context.

Prominent scholars of the period such as James Clifford armed many artists of color with transformative critical theory, and impelled the burgeoning questions they brought to the battlefields of aesthetics, exhibition, collection, and representation. Clifford privileged non-Western and indigenous knowledges as he strategically violated the Eurocentric logic that structured art criticism and museum exhibitions for so many years. He helped bring into focus the long history of displaying non-Western objects and cultures in the West. Clifford was famously attuned at the time to the critical power of interdisciplinarity, in the air and on the horizon, as he called forth a past that was also characterized by experimentation and critique in order to shed light on what was happening in the 1980s: before the West became so invested in the classificatory separation of art and ethnography, surrealists relished in the fecundity of symbolic play and cross-cultural exchanges. The interventionism of *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) could be found in its advocacy for a cross-pollination of ideas and strategic betrayal of disciplinary boundaries, practices that made famous Clifford and his colleagues in the History of Consciousness department at UC Santa Cruz. He boldly declared, “instead of acquiescing in the separation of avant-garde experiment from disciplinary science, I reopen the frontier, suggesting that the modern division of art and ethnography into distinct institutions has restricted the former’s analytic power and the latter’s subversive vocation.”<sup>4</sup> It is in a similar spirit of reopening possibilities in the present by exploring complexities of other historical moments that I write this essay.

Surrealism troubled social norms in the 1920s, in ways that were not unrelated to art of the late twentieth century, such as Wilson’s juxtapositions of objects that normally would not have been seen together at the Maryland Historical Society, or Pepón Osorio’s installations that put into proximity spaces that are disciplined to be socially and spatially segregated,

such as a boy's bedroom and a father's jail cell. Indeed, collisions of artistic and social conventions were staged in the multicultural era with astounding results. The cultural activism of artists of color was in step with the powerful changes of the late twentieth century. Other scholars have reflected on this period, including renowned art critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, who contextualized multiculturalism as part of a broader movement of equity. He clarified,

in a country of immigrants, many felt that social justice and cultural equity could only be secured with the agenda of multiculturalism. If a common culture remained it was no longer composed only by a European core but was multi-centric, with African, Asian, and Latino components. The paradigm of multiculturalism was deemed fitting as a description for the heterogeneous Latino community composed of multiple ethnicities, races, and cultures.<sup>5</sup>

For some, such a multiplicity might signify an identity politics based on relativisms that reified the borders of ethnic and racial categories. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, there were also exhibitions and projects in which artists of color explored heritage, identity, social meaning, race, class, and gender as formations to be questioned and re-sculpted. Appropriately, as museums began to recognize the cultural and artistic production of artists of color, many of us understood such recognition to be an opportunity to change our worlds. As Ybarra-Frausto observed, “the paradigm of ‘multiculturalism’ countered the belief of a unitary Euro-centric American culture with a polyphonic focus stressing the multiple voices and visions of a complex and heterogeneous composite society.”<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding multiculturalism's limitations, to which some contemporary scholars prefer to reduce it, such a counter-homogenous intervention was indeed significant.

Major traveling exhibitions, symposia, and conferences during the 1980s and 1990s addressed issues of diverse aesthetics, appropriation, cultural reclamation, heritage, memory, and spirituality. In looking at the context of this era, it is crucial to identify both the discourses and practices that fell under the banner of multiculturalism and their roles in the changing museum world. The following is a brief look at some notable conferences and exhibitions, many of which I contributed to as part of my politically-committed art and curatorial praxis. The remaining sections thus doubly function as review of the events and a critical retrospective of my own contributions as a feminist Chicana artist during such an important time of change.

### *Conferences*

The multicultural era was a time of debates in the popular realm as well as discourses of self-determination brought about by artists and cultural activists in a rich mix of communities of

color. Mainstream cultural brokers of the period, such as foundations and museums, sought to address demands for diversity in their collections, exhibitions, and display models. They sponsored many forums and other platforms for dialogue related to a variety of complex issues. Participants of major events such as the Ford Foundation panel on Black and Hispanic Museums (1990) sought to implement mainstream strategies in community-based organizations, while mainstream institutions more quietly replicated practices from these same ethnic organizations. The MoMA series *Context in Contemporary Art: a Generation Apart* (1989) brought artists together to discuss multiculturalism in a panel on diversity in contemporary art chaired by Riva Castleman. Panelists included Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Luis Jiménez, Inverna Lockpez, David Driskell, G. Peter Jimison, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Patterson Sims, and Lorna Simson. The panel represented some of the most critical interventions on behalf of diversity in the arts at that time. Attempts to place the artists of color in a parallel position (“a generation apart”) was disassembled in the evident challenge to museums mounted by the participants. The intense discussions on activism as a critical component of diversity and consequently a responsibility in changing the museum’s practices went far beyond the traditional curatorial perspective. Panelists disputed the mainstream posture on artists and objects as they instead valorized the politics and processes of artists of color.

Another major moment of collective inquiry into cultural re/presentation and community self-determination occurred at the panel, *Cultural Context: Latino Art and Culture*, at the *Conference on International Cultural Exchange* in Oxford (1989). This event brought together ministers of culture from around the world as well as a North American delegation concerned with diversity and inclusion. Challenges to the global model of cultural exploitation in places such as museums and galleries in France, and the ongoing issue of inclusion with the British Arts Council, were at the core of debates and oppositional platforms crafted by cultural activists of color and black leadership from England in locations such as Brixton Village in London. Activist Marta Moreno Vega of the Caribbean Cultural Center (CCC) in New York City led a conversation about cultural exchange in a postcolonial context that would inspire U.S.-based organizing. At that time Moreno Vega also began planning a conference that would explore cultural diversity through self-determination models (in contrast to top-down, state- or institutionally-produced initiatives). *Cultural Context* included the voices of members from the British black communities and also encouraged more critical understandings of British colonial complexities that included a reconsideration of the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish territories. The formation of international coalitions of communities of color in this gathering inspired new projects within the United States that were spearheaded by the CCC.

The North American conference, *Cultural Diversity Based on Cultural Grounding* (1989), hosted by Moreno Vega at the CCC, sponsored forums convened by a core group of U.S.-based artists and community organizers such as Dudley Cocke, Olga Garay, Kalamu ya Salaam, Sonia BasSheva Mañjon, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Tonya Gonnella Frichner, Caron Atlas, Carlton Turner, Randy Martin, Art Menius, Pedro Rodriguez, Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen, and others. Events such as these spanned a decade and brought together scholars, cultural activists, artists, and other emerging leaders to create publications, exhibitions, symposia, and collaborative projects. *Cultural Diversity Based on Cultural Grounding* paved the way for *Voices from the Cultural Battlefield: Organizing for Equity*, an ongoing twenty-two year international conversation about the role of art and culture in the struggle for human rights. Hundreds of activists grounded in the cultural life of their local communities have participated in the conversations facilitated by the CCC, coming from a variety of fields including education, art, health services, and youth services, from all of the inhabited continents. The work of the CCC in bringing together a first voice perspective was one of the most critical moments of solidarity for me as a Chicana often isolated on the West Coast. In particular, developing a deeper understanding of the complexities of Latin American art and Caribbean spiritual practices changed my own approach to art making and activism.

By the 1990s, artists and activists on the West Coast began organizing to explore regionally-specific concerns under the leadership of the late and legendary Carlos Villa through the *Sources of a Distinct Majority* symposium (1990). The conference was held at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), which continued to host critical symposia including *Worlds in Collision* on the topics of cultural appropriation, multicultural education, and diversity. The ongoing activities brought intense discussions, such as the moment when bell hooks and I challenged the role of white feminist scholars in interpreting the work of artists of color. Debates over non-Latino uses of the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, or the authenticity of Lucy Lippard's book *Mixed Blessings* (1990), brought audiences and panelists to their feet in shouting matches.

### *Exhibitions*

The conferences outlined above and similar forums staged in international settings to promote intercultural exchanges inspired a number of exhibitions that would put pressure on cultural institutions to engage with complex and diverse perspectives in their programming. Several exhibitions stand out for their contributions to challenging curatorial practices, as the distinctions between museum strategies, activism, and contemporary art practice continued to blur. *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990) was a watershed exhibition and major intervention into debates about the forms and contents of contemporary American art. It was an effort to bring more attention to artists from multiple

ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and to disrupt the biases of the art-historical canon. *The Decade Show* helped to establish aesthetic dialogues by assessing what was then a recent past. In one of the accompanying catalog essays, curator Lowery Stokes Sims described some of ways that art of the 1980s was influenced by practices of prior decades:

Women, gays and hyphenated Americans responded to the intellectual and moral challenges of the 1960s and 1970s by rehabilitating the role of content-subject matter in art. Political activism, gender and sexual orientation, ethnic and racial identity and other autobiographical elements were grist for the alternative artistic mill. In the 1980s the art establishment began to adopt these ideas, recasting them under the guise of the “new figuration” also known as “neo-expressionism.”<sup>7</sup>

One problem with characterizing such politicized and socially-engaged work as neo-expressionist is that it sometimes took for granted the persistence or return of a monadic subject that Fredric Jameson argued had become fragmented and schizophrenic in postmodernism, unable to outwardly express as modern (European or Euro-American) artists such as Edvard Munch once did.<sup>8</sup> Such an approach was also a sign of the times, as art criticism often structurally isolated minoritarian artists who were committed to social dialogue and transformation, rather than just expressing themselves, even if they were committed to making their own social locations and situated knowledges transparent. The exhibitions *Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality among Contemporary Hispanic Artists* (1988) and *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art* (1993) encouraged pan-Latino approaches to examining tropes of memory, cultural survival, human geography, and spirituality – and were among the shows not organized simply on the bases of ethnic categories, but by thematic issues related to critical social practice and meaning.

Making waves in the Culture Industry and challenging its responses to artists of color, individual artists and collectives began to manipulate the traditions of the museum. The discourse on appropriation, aesthetic difference, and critical intervention informed and increased the visibility of major projects such as James Luna’s *The Artifact Piece* (1987-1990), an installation that featured his own body and personal belongings as artifacts near a permanent exhibition devoted to Kumeyaay Indians at the San Diego Museum of Man. He re-performed the piece in *The Decade Show*, furthering his critique of museums and the art/ethnography divide in an art gallery context. Fred Wilson, perhaps the most renowned artist-curator, mounted his own extraordinary museum critique in *Mining the Museum* (1992). In collaboration with the Contemporary Museum, he was given access to the Maryland Historical Society’s collection, and used the techniques of conceptual and installation art to create alternative forms of classification that might encourage new

interpretations of the objects he found. He famously presented fine eighteenth- and nineteenth-century silver dinnerware around slave shackles, all as “Metalwork,” a category that did not obscure the economic relationships which produced both types of objects. Jennifer González explains that, “skillful in its rhetoric of display, *Mining the Museum* delved into the institution’s archives to offer a new version of Maryland’s past that was not without its darker moments.”<sup>9</sup> The strategies of juxtaposition and disciplinary defiance at the heart of Luna’s and Wilson’s interventions might be seen as practice-based engagements with Clifford’s “reopening” of interdisciplinary experimentation at the time.<sup>10</sup>

The artists and exhibitions I discuss above are a few among many projects which interrogated and transformed museum practices and are part of the history that made possible contemporary conversations about curatorial praxis. Through strategies of satire, irony, juxtaposition, inversion, and inquiry, artists such as Wilson, Luna, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Louise Lawler, Renée Green, and many others, redefined and distorted the distinctions between folk and fine, art and artifact, as well as artist and curator – and provoked collisions between display conventions of the mid- and late twentieth century.

### **Early Modern Cabinets of Curiosities**

A critical but sometimes underexplored thread of interventions into twentieth-century classificatory structures included art that cited and transformed the Early Modern “cabinet of curiosities,” the English version of the German term *kunstkammer*. Such cabinets were also known as *wunderkammern*, “cabinets of wonder” or “wonder rooms,” that housed encyclopedic collections of *naturalia*, *artificialia*, and *mirabilia*. A colonial invention, the cabinet of curiosities was a European form of display that preceded the modern museum and often combined through “cluttered” or “mosaic” arrangements objects of religion, natural history, as well as items brought to Europe from the Americas as a result of colonialism.<sup>11</sup> *Kunstkammern* grew into room-sized presentations, encyclopedic “microcosms of the world” that were spurred by a restless desire to link art with nature and the divine. They were also realms of knowledge that exoticized objects from the so-called new world in false taxonomies, and by extension, interpellated the peoples associated with such objects as strange Others. The collections and their presentation might now seem “surreal” because they did not abide by the classificatory distinctions that would come later with museum categories and academic disciplines. They were thus potent display forms that artists could explore for spatial languages that were related to, but different from, curatorial conventions.



Figure 1: Illustration of Imperato's museum, an oft-cited Early Modern cabinet of curiosities. Engraving from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale*, Naples (1599)

*Wunderkammern* were places for the rare, the precious, and the unknown. The cabinets functioned not only for their owners to define, discover, or possess the rare; they also inscribed the objects within a special setting, which could suggest multiple layers of meaning due to the dense ways in which objects were placed in proximity to one another. This is a display form to which many of us are unaccustomed, since museums usually place objects more sparsely at our line of sight. But in the Early Modern period, objects covered the walls and ceilings, and were stored in cases and drawers in order to preserve them or conceal some items from view. Each object was recontextualized in a vast network of meanings and semiotic correspondences. The cabinets were thus reifications of Western syncretism and universalism at the time, mixing cosmology with high and low, animate and inanimate, living and dead.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the *kunstkammern* began as religious treasuries, and others were associated with the *studioli*, aristocratic spaces of contemplation that were especially popular in Italy. For secular amateur enthusiasts, an excitement over collecting began in the fifteenth century and continued throughout the Colonial Age. The halls of man in natural history museums would later emanate from some of the impulses evident in the cabinets to frame the Other in fragmented and imagined ways, though the halls would enforce more isolative and rigid forms of categorization. Unlike in modern museums, strange objects were incorporated into *wunderkammern* microcosms, rather than being cast aside as “abnormal” or “non-representative.” Collectors who owned the cabinets sent emissaries around the world to locate what were considered to be wonders of the time, and travelers would bring items to Europe knowing that the owners of *kunstkammern* had an interest in things from far away. Such a demand for new and strange objects partially motivated colonial thefts, during which many precious objects were taken from their contexts and force-fitted into the collectors’ flexible-but-limited understanding of them, a process that produced newly-created meanings. Other professionals who were involved in colonial expansion and collecting included mapmakers, botanical illustrators, and landscape artists. Landscape artists such as Alfred Bierstadt, and commissioned works such as the Badianus Herbal botanical illustrations now in the Royal Windsor Library, are just a few examples of how artists brought descriptive materials from the new world to Europe.<sup>13</sup>

In the late twentieth century, a number of artists came to be interested in cabinets of curiosities as examples of alternative display models that could open up new critiques of the modern museum. Such artists included David Wilson, Pepón Osorio, Mark Dion, Mario Merz, and others. They cited the *kunstkammern* for various purposes, such as Wilson’s interest in preserving through display outmoded technologies and ideas at his Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. For Latino artists the cabinets afforded us a new strategy for contesting distorted or missing histories, for inverting false taxonomies in a continued effort to reconstruct the past. Artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña had already attempted to satire and critique the idea that the Americas were “discovered” by Europeans, and Carmen Lomas Garza, using codex research, had reconstructed an ephemeral paper journey to Aztlán and the fall of Tenochtitlan at Smith College. Chicano artists in the traditions of *rasquachismo* and bricolage, as well Boriqua (Puerto Rican) artists in the tradition of *chuchería*, developed in their installation art cabinet-inspired methods of accumulation and non-serial taxonomies of cultural presentation. In such projects they used the cabinet display style as a form of presentation of the self as well as of ethnic communities, reversing the proto-Orientalism common to the Early Modern versions. Pepón Osorio’s art has been discussed in terms of the political messages he conveys, his critiques of masculinity, as well as his uses of juxtaposition and vernacular materials. Approaching his art as a critical recuperation of the *wunderkammer* and as a critique of the

museum will contribute to the ongoing critical writings about his oeuvre. My own art of the 1980s and 1990s explicitly reactivated the cabinet form to explore Meso-Americana and Afro-Caribbean heritage in conversation with the artists and ideas outlined above. In the following section, I will reexamine Osorio and my installation artworks in terms of how they construct personal narratives in cabinet-like environments, and how they organize and activate domestic materials as well as cultural and tourist objects. In such critical reopenings, on multiple levels, the power relationships traceable in the *kunstkammern* will be newly legible, inverted, and reclaimed for contemporary political purposes.

### **Latino Cabinet of Curiosities**

As mentioned above, the Early Modern cabinet of curiosities presented items from the indigenous Americas in random and suggestive fashions, whereas some Latino artists beginning in the 1980s used the cabinet form as an autonymic or self-descriptive device, reclaiming heritage, legacy, and geography while ultimately gesturing towards the healing of a stolen and distorted past. In looking at Pepón Osorio's and my own art I emphasize both the content and the form of these works as modern-day *wunderkammern* that invert older intercultural power relationships and critique the modern museum as they are often nested as installations within larger institutional contexts.

#### *Pepón Osorio*

Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1955, Osorio moved to the South Bronx in 1975 and began his early works in 1982. His art has explored issues of Latino identity and cultural narratives since the beginning of his career. Osorio has established an artistic style that connects the artist, the community, and at times the museum in a complex system of storytelling which draws from popular-cultural and vernacular visual languages. His classic work, *100 % Boricua (Puerto Rican Island)* (1991), consists of a three-shelf china cabinet with a beach scene painted on the wood exterior, and two glass doors that frame dinnerware and other objects inside, all vibrantly decorated by bright blues, golds, and greens. Osorio describes the installation as reminiscent of a grandmother's cabinet, which he suggests is a fruitful site for someone to visit if he or she seeks to know more about his or her own family history. Typically such domestic cabinets would be white or a stained-wooden color; this installation's surface harkens back to the artist's island roots by way of a sunny coastline scene which envelopes a number of objects that have moved from the Caribbean to the mainland United States, as Osorio did in 1955. The twentieth-century grandmother's china cabinet summons the older wonder cabinets as the artist invokes the perspective of a child who feels a sense of amazement at the striking objects that have traveled from faraway lands and were placed into the dense and semiotically-rich space of a collector.



Figure 2: Pepón Osorio's *100 % Boricua (Puerto Rican Island)* (1991). Collection of the Walker Art Center, MN. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

Unlike the old European cabinets, *100 % Boricua (Puerto Rican Island)* is humble, not an attempt to possess the whole world in miniature, but a small and intimate enclosure of items that recall one's own experience of traveling and making a new life in a foreign context. *Wunderkammern* are also cited through the abundance of objects, such as numerous plates propped up on easels, a lavishly-dressed doll, and numerous small tourist trinkets which viewers must spend time visually exploring to appreciate. If one does offer the installation more than a quick glance, he or she will notice that many of the objects feature writing with information related to the New York Puerto Rican community; however, one's access to the meanings of such text is mediated by his or her understanding of English and Spanish. The decorative surfaces thus bring together touristic notions of *lo de afuera* (the outside) and the personal or domestic. Indeed, the cabinet is a container of both the past and the popular as it activates immigrant memories in the context of an installation that simultaneously invokes a twentieth-century china cabinet and an older cabinet of curiosities. The trope of tourism can take on a disturbing provocation and irony in Osorio's cabinet, as it reframes one's own heritage in a tender *artificialia* that reminds us how peoples with indigenous ties to the Americas have been made to be outsiders in our own land.

Osorio also makes use of *chuchería*, the Latin aesthetic bravura of embellished surfaces, rich in layers and decorations that give status and beauty to the everyday. He particularly employs strategies of abundance, accumulation, and hyper-visibility to transform domestic settings in some of his most well-known art. For example, *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* (1993) was a pivotal work and a highlight of the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1993 Biennial. As with *100 % Boricua (Puerto Rican Island)*, relocation is central to Osorio's Whitney installation, but in the latter piece he more strongly emphasizes displacement by moving domestic cultural narratives into the museum. And while a typical viewer might only see the "scene" as having taken place in a Puerto Rican living and dining room, an accrual of so many cultural objects, especially the placement of images and objects on every inch of the walls' surfaces, recalls the "mosaic" spatial articulations of cabinets of curiosities. *Scene of the Crime* dramatizes police brutality and intrusion into the domestic spaces of ethnic minorities, suggested by the title, the yellow caution tape strung around the installation, and the evidence bags left on the floor – the material traces of a violent discord. We might say that Osorio reverses the meaning of "evidence," here as proof of the state's oppression of Puerto Rican families, as he also renews a sense of violent conflict between two systems of knowing, which was true for Early Modern Europeans and the peoples' of the "new world" whose objects they collected. Osorio's installation creates a sense of tragic loss reminiscent of the colonial violence that is only vaguely reflected in the original *Wunderkammern*. The installation is thus a citation and reclamation of colonial display histories.



Figure 3: Installation view of Pepón Osorio's *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* (1993). Collection of the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

The importation of intimate and private items into a public sphere is a strategy Osorio also uses in *Badge of Honor*, assembled first in New Jersey and then later in the Newark Museum in 1995. One of several life-sized dioramas, this installation features two distinct rooms: a boy's bedroom and his father's prison cell. The father and son figures were based on Osorio's interviews with actual members of the Latino community living in New Jersey, and the two rooms share one wall to suggest a structural bond. The work was inspired by his own concerns as a young father and the types of popular-cultural images of masculinity to which young Latino men are exposed, as well his confrontation with a common belief amongst some Latino boys that having a father in prison is a "badge of honor."<sup>14</sup> Osorio began the two-room installation when his own son was two years old, critically exploring what it might mean to be a good father in a cultural context with such expressions of masculinity.<sup>15</sup> He was giving lectures in prisons when the father that is presented in the piece expressed an interest in working with him.

*Badge of Honor* started to materialize when Osorio facilitated dialogues between the father and son through videos that the artist painstakingly transported to each of them over the

course of multiple visits to their respective living quarters. Clips of the mediated dialogue were screened in the installation, undermining the “thin wall” that separates their lives, as González has explained.<sup>16</sup> Given my analyses above, we might now more easily see how the construction of the son’s bedroom summons forth many dynamics that were characteristic of the cabinets of curiosities: the bedroom features a plethora of images of masculinity that covers the walls, in proximity to various items around the room such as basketballs, a bicycle, professional sports posters, martial arts posters, and much more. The *chuchería* of their excess and bright colors seem to be attempts to compensate for the family deprivation of the absent father, imported into the boy’s personal space, manufactured and mediated with the aid of corporate advertising. Not only does the boy’s bedroom resemble a *kunstkammer*, but the jail cell resembles another, more familiar display paradigm: *the white cube*. While suggestive, characterizing the two sections of the installation as resembling Early Modern and contemporary forms of display can point to the limitations of the more contemporary gallery form. Osorio’s bipartite diorama (or diptych) can cause us to question, as critics of curatorial practice currently are doing, the limitations of white cube displays that require works to stand alone in hyper-visual isolation not unlike a prison cell.

Other references to cabinets of curiosities abound in Osorio’s oeuvre, and on different scales. His small *TKO* boxes are lined with red velvet and feature arrangements of ceremonial objects that reference boxing as well as histories of migration and memento. Another life-sized work that fills a large room, *Face to Face* (2002), is informed by his



Figure 4: Installation view of Pepón Osorio’s *Face to Face* (2002) at the ICA, Philadelphia. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

experiences as social worker. The setting combines a corporate cubicle with a storage facility, like the *studioli* of Early Modern Italy, in which cabinet collections were combined with study rooms for the aristocratic elites. In *Face to Face*, Osorio continues his reworkings of older display forms into the new millennium, focusing on peoples' struggles with trying to find new homes, and putting into direct relationships bureaucratic representations and material possessions of the families that social workers regularly encounter. The complex and rich ways that Osorio reactivates and reopens how peoples with indigenous ties to the Americas have been presented in displays throughout history affirms that such a critical approach is an effective mode of critiquing culture and museums in a contemporary context.

#### *Amalia Mesa-Bains*

In reviewing my own interventions into collection and display practices since the 1980s, it is important to establish an understanding of what I call *domesticana*, a feminist corollary of the everyday vernacular *rasquachismo* that was theorized by Ybarra-Frausto. *Rasquachismo* is a style in which the irreverent and spontaneous are mobilized to make "the most from the least." One takes both a transformative and rebellious approach to visual and material culture in this type of Latino sensibility, which uses discards, fragments, and recycled everyday materials such as tires, broken plates, and plastic containers, elaborately combining them in yard shrines (*capillas*), domestic décor (*altares*), and even automobile ornamentations. *Rasquachismo* is a way for the Chicano to survive with a sense of dignity. Nevertheless, I have shown that *rasquachismo* is a predominantly masculinist strategy as I introduced the concept of *domesticana* to critically engage gender conflict in domestic spaces through installations that involve accumulating and repurposing domestic objects.<sup>17</sup> In my early works, I created altars that were spaces of collecting, perhaps a kind of spiritual *wunderkammer*. I linked the *curandero* (a traditional Native American healer or shaman in Latin America) with a taxonomy of nature in the *botánica* (or herbal cures and an organization of wondrous and divine materials that bring together the natural and the supernatural). It seems as though the impulse to articulate Latin American identities and histories through the sensibilities of *kunstkammern* pulsed through my art since the beginning.

My later interest in reworking laboratories and libraries through installation art has been ongoing since 1990, when I began to develop art in preparation for the 1992 Quincentennial of Christopher Columbus' supposed discovery of the Americas. I consider this moment to be one of widespread postcolonial interrogation and social practice – a personal intellectual foundation due to the massive opposition staged by artists and activists who challenged the notion that the Americas were empty territories until the Europeans arrived. We also resisted the celebration of a five-hundred year history of colonial violence and settlement. It was an occasion for me to further develop my own concerns about the global conditions of



Figure 5: “Curiositas the Cabinet” installation from *Cabinet of Curiosities: Curiositas the Cabinet and Speculare the Laboratory* (1990) by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

the Americas at the time, and how such conditions were influenced by ideologies of the vacant *frontier*, as Mary Louise Pratt has described it.<sup>18</sup> My interest in learning more about the histories of colonial, intercultural exchanges between Europeans and peoples from the Americas led me to the old cabinets of curiosities more deliberately than in the altars I previously constructed.

My first installation explicitly inspired by the *kunstkammern* was *Cabinet of Curiosities: Curiositas the Cabinet and Speculare the Laboratory*, exhibited at the M.A.R.S. Artspace pre-quincentennial show in 1990. As with Osorio’s *100 % Boricua (Puerto Rican Island)*, I make use of a common wood-and-glass cabinet to reference the Early Modern display form. However, in my installation, objects exceed the enclosure of the wooden furniture piece to include a rug, leather armchair, golden frames on the wall, and a decorative sheer scarf supported by sconces, the latter feature reminiscent of my earlier altar works. The space beneath the cabinet dramatized colonial “discovery” in a miniature tableau, as I depicted a scene of conflict with dolls of Spanish and Native American peoples located on each side of the cabinet. In her analysis of the installation, González accurately explained that

part miniature diorama, part iconic map of historical relations, the tongue-in-cheek use of the toys referenced contemporary mass production while

gesturing to the lust for gold that brought ships and soldiers to the new world. Inside the glass cabinet, indigenous and pre-Columbian artifacts were placed beside small piles of domesticated grain and pottery shards, along with sinister instruments of torture and bondage.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the scene of conflict depicted by the dolls called forth the epistemological conflict present in all *kunstammern* that included objects from the new world, as well as the history of struggle between indigenous peoples and Spanish colonizers.

*Emblems of the Decade: Numbers* (1990), shown at The Studio Museum in Harlem, was created with scholar and curator Victor Zamudio-Taylor. Together we gathered data about immigration patterns in the Americas, Latino school drop-out rates, and HIV/AIDS infections throughout the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> The installation cited modern scientific laboratories in which such intense, emotional topics become quantified and dissected by science. The laboratory as a trope was meant to reference not only contemporary issues of culture and



Figure 6: Installation view of *Emblems of the Decade: Numbers* (1990) by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

social justice, but also the long history of how science and quantitative methods have been used in the service of genocide and racism. Statistics, after all, was invented by eugenicists.<sup>21</sup> Photographs, shells, glass jars, scissors, a magnifying glass, and statistics on the issues Zamudio-Taylor and I researched were parts of the varied assemblage of objects scattered on the laboratory table. The style arrangement of such objects directly invoked the cluttered spatial patterning of *kunstkammern*, and in the museum the installation had a fragmentary and chaotic feel that encouraged the viewer to viscerally apprehend the knowledge rather than view it in a disinterested fashion as is more normative of “netural” gallery spaces. Three years later, I presented *Vanitas: Evidence, Ruin, Regeneration* (1993) at the Johnson Museum of Cornell University. The installation brought together an altar for César Chávez, who died that year, with a laboratory table of colonial extremities, a *Vanitas* painting, Pre-Columbian objects for Teotihuacán 150-AD, and Reading Room. Similar to *Emblems of the Decade: Numbers*, the table and reading room in *Vanitas* cited the display tactics of *wunderkammern* through accumulation, juxtaposition, and fragmentation – all in order to give material embodiments to the suffering, devastation, and loss that characterized so much of the “Age of Discovery.”

My *Venus Envy* series would continue to combine cabinet-inspired display arrangements with critical interrogations of colonial relationships, while taking more autobiographical approaches to how these histories have impacted my own experiences as a Chicana feminist artist. *Venus Envy I: First Holy Communion Moments Before the End* (1993), shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, consisted of several installations and a wall covered by lavish white silk fabric that made more intimate the sterile walls of the white cube. I organized the space according to three significant figures of femininity in Latino culture: the nun, the bride, and the virgin. The three areas of the installation were called the Boudior Chapel, the Museum of Self, and the Hall of Mirrors. For example, the virgin was represented by a wall of reproductions of seminal Chicano art images of the Virgen de Guadalupe including works by Patssi Valdez, Cesar Martinez, and John Valadez. I intended for this part of *Venus Envy I* to recall the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, located in a wealthy region of France that is just outside of Paris. The Hall of Mirrors was built in the late 1600s and for centuries was used for royal weddings, births, and processions, at a time when mirrors were extreme luxuries to own. The top of the contemporary vanity echoed the Hall’s famous archways, but at the center of the mirror was a partial image of Coatlicue, the Aztec “Mother of Gods” who gave birth to a number of celestial entities, such as the moon and the stars. An icon of feminine strength, the deity appears to the boudoir user as it would in a religious apparition, staring at her simultaneously as a separate being and a reflection of the self. The use of the image of Coatlicue was also a reflection on the Spanish Baroque *Vanitas* strategy of using the image of death to render all vanity useless. The



installation consisted of several images from Catholic and indigenous religions to convey a modern syncretism that has run deep in the Americas since the beginnings of colonization. *Venus Envy I* also featured in the Museum of Self white rectangular containers with glass tops for viewing the contents which included photographs of young Chicana girls (myself, Judith Baca, and Ester Hernandez included) participating in Catholic rituals, as well as objects such as communion dresses, candlesticks, dolls, religious announcements, locks of hair, and even a reproduction of Titian's famous painting *Venus of Urbino* (1538). The drawers in the boudoir, boxes, and display cases facilitated both the disguise and revelation of expressions of womanhood in Mexican-American culture; together the containers operated as reliquaries of cultural display, past and present. The walls of the installation were covered with handwritten text regarding the role of the Catholic church in the suppression of women and their mystic experiences. As González has observed when interpreting the Whitney installation, "the cultural institutions (economic, religious, familial) that shape the identity of the female subject are filled with inherent contradictions: to be delicate and to be strong, to be pious and to be filled with desires. The virgin, the nun, and the bride are the ground upon which, and against which, new images of womanhood are projected."<sup>22</sup> The installations' syncretism was thus used to portray conflicting histories, representations, and possibilities for feminine subjectivity in contemporary Latino culture.

"Sor Juana's Library" (1994), a part of *Venus Envy, Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures* displayed at the Williams College Museum of Art, was a celebration of the woman whom many consider to be the first feminist in the new world: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, author of *La Respuesta* (the Response), a poet, scholar, and nun who lived in seventeenth-century Mexico (then "New Spain"). I first engaged with Sor Juana through a library installation in the Mexican Museum in 1981. This exhibition took place at the former location of the Mexican Museum in San Francisco's Mission District and was an altar for the Days of the Dead. At that time I was finishing my dissertation and Sor Juana's image hung above my desk as I considered her to be a mentor and inspiration. My 1994 installation re-invoked the laboratory tables constructed for *Emblems of the Decade* (1990) and *Vanitas* (1993), and in this version the table was contextualized within a replica of Sor Juana's library and laboratory space, also a musical and poetry salon – a feminist *wunderkammer* and *studiolo* that was located in the Americas. I constructed the imagined space based on her writings and the descriptions of her varied studies in science, musicology, and poetry. She strongly believed that women should be educated, a cause over which she battled with the Catholic Church. The conflict resulted in her own stigmatization and the relinquishment of over 4,000 books from her library. Soon after her collection was sold and dispersed, she died of disease from tending to her sister nuns during a cholera epidemic in 1695. "Sor Juana's Library" imaginatively revealed what this woman's collections and self-expressions might have looked like when



Figure 9: "Sor Juana's Library," installation from *Venus Envy, Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures* (1994) by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

everything was still in-tact. The approach was part of my larger project that addressed women and access to education throughout *Venus Envy II*, contributing to my ongoing explorations of womanhood in the multiple *Venus Envy* installations.

I have continued to rework heritages of intercultural display into the new millennium, such as in *El Fin del Siglo, Latina World's Fair* (2000), which invoked scientific racism and representations of women in nineteenth-century world's fairs, large-scale exhibitions that amplified the encyclopedic impulses of earlier *kunstkammern* at much grander scales. In *El Fin's* "Hall of Science," I created a perfume laboratory for examining spells, potions, and *botanicas* that suggested corporal and spiritual seduction. *The Curandera's Botanica* (2008) was my most recent engagement with the cabinets, in this case for the purposes of healing after a devastating accident that broke a vertebra in my neck. The installation included a healing table with two levels, the top one referencing Western medicine and the lower level reflecting many of the tools of the curandera. In addition I created a medicine cabinet that included five shelves dedicated to family members, my own health struggles, as well as material from the earlier piece *Curiositas, the Cabinet*. It has been my own tradition to use in new installations personal mementoes as well as artistic mementoes of previous exhibitions

from a thirty-year span. By drawing from such an intense experience dealing with pain, as well as the illnesses and loss of several family members around the same time, I once again turned to incorporating indigenous icons into a reclaimed *kunstkammer*. The installation consisted of a room of marvels delimited in the gallery space by lavender on the wood floor, with its own laboratory table in front of a green wall that had an image of Mariana Escobedo, my paternal grandmother, at the viewer's line of sight. To the left of the table, in



Figure 10: Installation view of *The Curandera's Botanica* (2008) by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Image courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.

front of a white wall, was a cabinet that had many shelves filled with bottles, amulets, family memorabilia, and personal mementoes. In this chamber I deliberately combined the natural, artificial, and miraculous in a gesture of recovery from the Eurocentric separation of objects that would fit into such categories. Flasks, elixirs, eggs, antlers, candles, and other items on the table invoked Western and indigenous medicine, such as the healing of the spirit and *curanderismo*, the Mexican religious worldview of healing. As a whole, the installation offered a variety of methods for both cultural and personal remedy, in terms of my own experiences as well as the ways in which visitors to the exhibition would engage with the installation.

The strategies discussed above were part of my ongoing critiques of the museum and its brutal history, as well as creative uses of vernacular aesthetics of abundance and accumulation throughout my oeuvre. Responding to different social experiences, and reimagining the *kunstkammern* in ways specific to the topics we have invoked, Osorio and I have created spaces for wonder, beauty, and healing that are at the same time political remembrances of injustice, sorrow, and death – all in distinctively Latino Cabinets of Curiosities.

What other ways might an engagement with display histories inform the present moment? How might curatorial work be further blurred with artistic intervention and other cultural practices? There are of course many possible answers to these exciting questions, some directions for which I hope this article will help to facilitate. To start, we might avoid approaching the multicultural era of the 1980s and 1990s only in terms of its limitations, as we also learn from works that were timely interventions and helped to create the new and exciting openings that we are now experiencing in terms of curating and art making. We should continue to engage with collaborative and intercultural event planning, such as the conferences that have been organized by the CCC for decades, keeping our questions critical and timely, while fostering new ways of intercultural relating through art and curatorial praxis.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For more on the debates around exhibitionary practices in the late twentieth century, see Gomoll (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha (1994) and González (2008).

<sup>3</sup> González (2008) and Phelan (1993).

<sup>4</sup> Clifford (1988), page 12.

<sup>5</sup> Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, excerpted from a draft of “The MultiCultural Decade.” Monograph on the work of Amalia Mesa-Bains, the *A Ver Project*, UCLA.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Stokes Sims (1990).

<sup>8</sup> Jameson (1990).

<sup>9</sup> González (2008), page 83.

<sup>10</sup> The Quincentennial wave of celebration in 1992 glorified Christopher Columbus’ “discovery of America,” and in response a number of Latino artists staged counter-memorials that challenged the assumptions of mainstream culture. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco’s oft-cited *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit \_\_\_\_\_* (1992-93) is perhaps the most famous of these initiatives. For it the artists lived in a golden cage in a number of major art and science museums around the world, citing histories of putting non-Western peoples on display as freaks and exotics in museums and world’s fair exhibitions. Fusco later commented on her astonishment that visitors believed they were “real” in her book *English is Broken Here* (1993).

<sup>11</sup> Findlen (1996).

<sup>12</sup> Mauries (2002). Much of my understanding of the function and history of the cabinets comes from Mauries’ extensive work.

<sup>13</sup> Blunt and Raphael (1994), page 109.

<sup>14</sup> See González (2008), pages 185-189 for more discussion on the politics of this installation.

<sup>15</sup> In our many conversations about our artistic processes and the links to our life experiences, Osorio shared with me his personal reflections on what led him to interrogate larger community issues such as incarcerated fathers and their sons.

<sup>16</sup> González (2008), page 189.

<sup>17</sup> Mesa-Bains (1999).

<sup>18</sup> See Pratt (2002) for a discussion on why we should understand the colonies as *contact zones* rather than empty frontiers in order to recognize the relational histories of these spaces, latent with uneven power relationships and violence. Clifford later famously characterized museums as contact zones, in conversation with Pratt. See Clifford (1998).

<sup>19</sup> González (2008), page 134.

<sup>20</sup> I was a television producer and host for *Latin Tempo* at KPIX San Francisco and this material was part of a series of reports I prepared for television shows in the late 1980s.

<sup>21</sup> See Lennard Davis' essay "Constructing Normalcy" in Davis (2010). The ramifications of statistics in terms of museums and display were elaborated by Lucian Gomoll in his lecture "Chronopolitics of Nineteenth-Century Displays of Difference" at Wesleyan University (September 17, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> González (2008), page 148.

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# Curated**Conversations**



# Performing at the Studio Museum

A conversation with Thomas J. Lax, Nicole Miller, Taisha Paggett, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Narcissister  
Conducted in April, 2013

## Lydia Bell

*Fore*, a group exhibition hosted by The Studio Museum in Harlem from November 2012 until March 2013, featured the art of twenty-nine African Americans born between 1971 and 1987. It was the Museum's fourth installment of group exhibitions that feature emerging artists, famously started by Director Thelma Golden with *Freestyle* in 2001, when she coined the term *post-black*. Golden's phrase referred to artists who refused to be marginalized by the label "black artist" but were actively working to redefine our understandings of race and ethnicity. More than ten years later, Studio Museum curators Naima J. Keith, Lauren Haynes, and Thomas J. Lax ask: "what happens to black after post-black?" *Fore* approached possible answers through the presentation of artists who work in a range of media, most prominently painting and performance.

Following the close of *Fore*, I spoke with curator Thomas J. Lax as well as artists Nicole Miller, Taisha Paggett, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Narcissister about the performance elements in the exhibition. Paggett, Satterwhite, and Narcissister each staged performances in *perFOREmance*, a series of events that accompanied the main exhibition and was organized by Lax and his co-curators in December 2012 and February 2013. All four of the artists also installed work in the galleries, on view throughout the entire duration of the exhibition. In the following interview, we discussed the artists' diverse performance practices and

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training, especially in relation to dance. Lax and his co-curators' sensitivity to the specificities of performance approaches, and their openness to how live actions can change the space and the roles of participants, helped to make *Fore* such a successful exhibition – one where blindfolds, ballet, auto-tune, painting, photography, and sculpture not only co-existed, but were mutually transformative.

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Lydia: Thank you all for being here, and congratulations on a fantastic exhibition. My personal interest in exhibitions such as *Fore* that include live performance elements in the white cube is related to what I understand as the messiness and urgency of performance. I mean a literal mess, as in bringing music and props and dirt and glitter into the space and into the institution. But also messiness in terms of genre, in terms of the potential for ruptures in genre. What are our responsibilities as curators and artists and audiences to care for the work in terms of how we see it and how we talk about it? When we foreground live or virtual bodies, we are forced to confront more immediately questions about who is the artist, what is his or her process, how is he or she interacting with the institution, how is he or she being historicized or not, and why. Thomas, I was hoping you could start by talking about some of the impulses for including performance and performative elements in the exhibition.

Thomas: That is such a beautifully expansive and specific way to start us off. Thank you, Lydia. In terms of the organizational framework that Naima J. Keith, Lauren Haynes, and I came to *Fore* with: exhibition-making is as much about the set of eyes that curators bring to art as it is about opening oneself to what artists are doing and how they are thinking. The role of performance in the exhibition could arguably be as much about how we prioritized and enjoyed looking at certain strands in contemporary art as it is about what it is contemporary artists are up to. We found a lot of folks either making exciting performance-based art or expressing an eagerness to be given a context to pursue such activity. There were people who participated in the *perFOREmance* events who had never before made live performance. They approached the festivals as opportunities to both create one-off events or something that would lead to multiple iterations and would make sense within their other body of work. The exhibition was an opportunity to give people a platform that already existed and at the same time, to shift the frame. This included dislocating or recontextualizing the work that Jacolby or Narcissister had done in non-museum spaces – such as the street or a club – into the context of a museum.

In terms of my own reading practice, I bring an interest and love for both live bodies and mediated bodies in space, and for dance in particular. We are in a moment in which dance and choreography are making both real-time and spatial interventions in museums, and when the idea of choreography has expanded into a theoretical, philosophical, and material framework. Several key curators have discussed the choreography of an exhibition as opposed to simply its production. Nicole, one reason we were really excited to have you participate was the way in which you are thinking about embodiment in your video installation *Dagging*. In your work, dance is neither live nor a metaphor; it is dance as dance, then mediated by the camera.

Lydia: In the introduction to the catalogue that you wrote with your co-curators, I liked how you wrote about starting off with research that you did not yet know would become an exhibition. I felt that spirit throughout the programming. Jacolby, I was telling you that I saw *Fore* with a friend and when we first walked into the space she made a total bee-line for your installation. I teased her, saying that it was an example of what people always say – “TV sucks you in!” – which I think is a motif with which you were playing. I was hoping you could talk a little more about what it means for you to be in a museum.

Jacolby: I consider it to be a variable. I think my strategy as an artist is always to be a work in progress. Everything is experimental, and it is a variable. It is a hypothesis regarding how various spaces inform what I do, how they recontextualize what my body does politically as a black performer. I always talk about how I came from a painting background, and it was so political that I could not take it anymore so I felt like the immediacy of my body being in the forefront, ironically, gave it enough specificity for it to be more evident that the work was about me. Being in the Studio Museum was definitely a different parameter for what my body was doing compared to the videos. I went to the windows and performed for the pedestrians and brought people who normally would not come into the museum to come see the work. I am doing the same thing street performers do in the subway, you know? It is weird, because when you frame yourself in the contexts of museums or galleries, it totally redefines the gesture. But it was funny and interesting, that glass dividing me between the pedestrians during the performance in the museum, like the glass of a showcase or vitrine.

Lydia: Where were you? Which glass was it?

Thomas: We had a renovation nearly a decade ago and now there are windows that look out onto the street from our atrium.

Jacolby: Every now and then there would be a mass concentration of people that stopped



Figure 1: Installation view of Jacolby Satterwhite's *Reifying Desire: Model It* (2012). Two-channel video installation, painted wooden platform, spandex catsuit, and live performance. Photo by Adam Reich. Image courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Used with permission.

and pulled out their smart phones. Which is a whole different kind of gaze. All kinds of possibilities that I could not predict were happening. People were hiding their children or allowing their children to stay. Others just said, “werk bitch.” It is a more porous way of performing. I stopped scoring my actions and making them linear and having an “A, B, C narrative” in them because I feel that just living with the audience really pushes what I want to negotiate with other bodies. And what I can do with them. And my limits. This is going to sound like a lie, but I am a really shy, introverted, dorky person in real life but when I am assigned a performing role I feel like I am everything I want to be. I feel like I have extreme agency and extreme rights over other people’s personal space and privacy. It is ironic that I am doing this camp, sissy thing yet the empowerment that I feel when I perform is very masculine.

Lydia: Wow. I was thinking that there was even a lot of agency in the way that you framed your performance, as occurring within time windows during which it was not guaranteed that you would be present. There was an invitation for the audience to attend, but you were only going to perform when you wanted to perform.

Jacolby: That evolved because I was late. [laughter]

Lydia: Love it. Talk about logistics. [laughter]

Jacolby: There was some confusion. Sometimes I feel like I get confused with schedules. I should not be that honest. I expected myself to be there from 12-6pm or from 4-8pm because it was about the endurance. Every time I would perform, my muscles would be aching and I would take an Epsom salt bath when I got home. The performance was about continuing in a real space what was consistent and on loop in a video. The more I put out with absolutely nothing but me, my body and a platform, the more I repurposed the site, the museum. I virtualized the site. I was a living art object that was mobilized throughout the space, which itself became transformed. The people experienced the space differently, it became my territory. It was an act of endurance that involved a lot of gesticulation and movement. The performance added a fourth dimension to my video practice, which is primary for me. People say, “oh he is a performer,” but considering all the labor that goes into my video, the performance is more peripheral. But it is something I enjoy, it adds another dimension, it extends the frame a bit. The person in the video bleeds out, the person is the main pivot for all the content in the work. So really, in my vision I am just pixels in the space. I am a digitization manifesting throughout the space.

Lydia: That is wonderful. Your discussion of video also relates to Nicole’s installation *Dagging*. It was such a treat to discover it sort of hidden in the back. I loved the location; it

was the last piece that I saw in the exhibition. Nicole, could you talk about that physical orientation of the piece and your thinking around it?

Nicole: Right off the bat, Lydia, you began our conversation talking about messiness in performance, and I immediately started thinking about how for me the decision to make videos has been quite an opposite move: it is about gaining some sort of control from things that I have had a difficult time processing, or trying to re-confront issues from my subjects' pasts that they are willing to explore with me.

I grew up as a ballet dancer, so I grew up as a performer, and my whole experience was basically negative. *Dagging* is me reprocessing that history. I wrote down stories about the terrible things that happened to me. In the space of the installation, around every 15 minutes, one of these stories will come on above your head. Being a ballet dancer was all based on me being humiliated because I was forced to perform a character that I did not identify with whatsoever. And so *Dagging* started to grow out of this idea of being humiliated through misidentification. I try to illustrate this through storytelling, by revisiting the ballet ten years after I quit. And then Skerrit Bwoy, a friend of mine, basically brought over from the Caribbean this dance craze called *Dagging*. I wanted to film something with him. It did not work out so he sent me to a club in Brooklyn where some of his friends were having a birthday party and I ended up filming there that night. I realized after I watched the footage that it was very much related to what I had been thinking about in relation to my past. But it was a lot more theatrical. I think a lot of *Dagging* is about humiliation, kind of a theater of humiliation. It was this strange mirror image to what I had going on in my past with the ballet. *Dagging* is a dance between the two dances.

Lydia: Yes, I felt that.

Nicole: With me directing attention with the narratives that come on every once and a while.

Lydia: The narrator's voice was startling in this wonderful way. I was not expecting a male, authoritative voice. The section that I heard was about menstruation, during which I thought, "oh wow, he has a perspective on that?" I laughed with my friend because there was an older man who was sitting with us, talking to us about the exhibition and when that part came on he just exited.

Nicole: I installed the piece once in Dallas in a huge warehouse and we had older installation workers who I think mostly worked at Death Metal concerts. We spent three full days



Figures 2 and 3: Installation views of Nicole Miller's *Dagging* (2012). Two-channel video with sound, total run time 34 minutes. Photos by Adam Reich. Images courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Used with permission.



installing the piece. It was also surreal listening to these embarrassing stories from my teenage years with these guys in Dallas.

Lydia: I am interested in what you said about your attraction to video in terms of creating structure, as opposed to some aspects of performance. I cannot remember what video artist I heard say that when she makes a video, it is always a performance for her, even if the audience is an audience of one and it is the person behind the camera.

Nicole: For me, no, I do not feel like a performer. I feel like I am an editor or a director. I shot *Dagging* years ago and it took me a really long time to put it together and write the stories. It is a very long process of making decisions for me, very slow decisions. That can be a performance I guess. I think about editing a lot and feel very much like an editor. That is one the most important aspects of my practice.

Lydia: Narcissister, I was struck by the fact that both you and Nicole started your careers with dance training. How would you say you use dance in your work?

Narcissister: My performance has modern dance as its foundation. Dance is central. I wear a mask that has fixed expressions, which asks my body to be incredibly expressive. My dance training, and love of dancing, allow for this. They are part of what I believe makes my performance practice unique.

Lydia: Taisha, can you describe the installation performance that you developed for the Studio Museum?

Taisha: Essentially, I created a score that outlined basic directional cues and steps, such as right and left and high and low, in a dialogue with Laban Movement Studies. During the first iteration I actually just faced the wall blindfolded. Then for each of the subsequent iterations the enactment of the score was based on a trace of the previous experience. The score itself was also created with a consideration of what might look nice and use up the whole “stage” space, which is a type of thinking common in dance. So when I create a score, I do not draw it out; I mimic how it might work in the space and get a sense for how many steps it will take to get across the full length of the wall. However, I do not actually act everything out until the very first performance. At that time it becomes a retracing over many hours.

Lydia: I see. So the physical marking takes on an almost ceremonial or special place, in that it happens in front of an audience.

Taisha: Sure. When I first created this performance [*Decomposition of a Continuous Whole*], I was invited to create a work in someone's house in Los Angeles. I chose a very small office space and thought a lot about what it means to ghost an experience, to bring your presence into an experience. I had also come from two or three years of touring in large-production dance performances on big stages, set works that were very frontal, where the audience is there and the performance is here and no one sees what is going on behind your body. I wanted to create a performance myself that allowed me to be in a process and allowed the audience to enter into the space and take in whatever they wanted to take in, for however long they wanted to take it in. I was not interested in a front or a back; I wanted to become part of the architecture, to dance with the walls, and to be connected to the space. I was interested in taking vision out of the experience because in dance you are usually so aware that you are being seen and how the audience sees you, how that affects what you do. I will raise my leg higher for an audience's eyes and so on. I wanted to free up my performance experience and also bring the focus into my body in relation to the drawings. I could not rely on seeing the markings to make sure I was going over the same pathway.



Figure 4: Taisha Paggett performing in *Decomposition of a Continuous Whole* (2009-12). Site-specific performance and pastel wall drawing; score on paper. Photo by Scott Rudd. Image courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Used with permission.

Lydia: In the aftermath, the sense of the body was so present, not only because of the actual markings, but for me the work felt body-sized. The interaction with the wall left a sense of how tall you are. It documented the limits of your body, which made the reference in Thomas' catalogue essay to Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-76) even more apt – that it was so much about this space of the body, which in Laban is so important. Thinking of Schneemann, did that comparison hold resonance for you? Were you thinking of it while you performed?

Taisha: Not until I read Thomas' essay in the *Fore* catalogue, which is really fantastic. Another project that I was working on before I created this piece involved me doing Laban scores over and over and over. The traces of information from that previous performance were still in my body, so when I went to create the score against the wall in *Decomposition of a Continuous Whole* I found myself doing these high diagonals. I embraced them as just fact, a vocabulary in my body. So if anything the previous performance was the reference, but I love the Carolee Schneemann connection.

Lydia: It was interesting to me that there were performance interventions staged not only in the gallery but also in the Studio Museum's downstairs performance space. Are there any other spaces at the museum about which I am unaware?

Thomas: No I think that pretty much covers it. Taisha and Jacolby performed in the galleries and the others performed in the theater.

Lydia: Taisha, do you want to talk about what you did in the downstairs theater?

Taisha: Sure. I made *verse chorus* to deal with my curiosities concerning Zumba. There are so many beginning points for the piece, but I would say that generally I was interested in and aware of my – for lack of a better term – art snobbery. I have become self-critical of how I sometimes think, "I dance, and I do this certain type of dance and other forms of movement, who cares about popular phenomena such as Zumba?" I felt similarly about auto-tuned music, thinking "back in the day people really sang with their own voices." However, someone has since pointed out to me, "Taisha, did you ever consider that for younger generations, auto-tuned music is what they know and it is actually very meaningful?" So I started entering into this process of recognizing the borders that I put up and throwing myself into different movement practices. Zumba became that thing and it actually started with me taking step-aerobics classes. I recognize that Zumba is a problematic exercise form, as most are, considering how so many cultural movement practices get eaten up by the aerobics industry.

Lydia: Yes, very true.

Taisha: There is very little accuracy to the aerobic-industry versions of the forms. They are all to the same beat of music and that is totally off. However, in these classes there is a real sense of community and a powerful way in which people are interacting with their bodies. They made me realize how in the dance form that I practice, people sit in cold dark seats and watch me dance as a way of learning about the body and experience. However, in aerobics classes everyone is moving and they are having full-body experiences. It is good and it is bad.

Lydia: What you say makes me curious about the audience. How was the audience in the theater context?

Taisha: Very receptive. I was trying to create a space that felt intimate, where there was no typical divide between audience and performer. People were very visible. No one was sitting in the back. There was one section that had three or four rows of people who were seated but I think everyone felt like they were part of the experience. I felt the presence of their energy. You know when you are on a small plane and you feel as though you really have to pay attention to the flying, as if the plane is going to crash if you stop paying attention? People felt as though they were part of the experience to the extent that if they let go, they would be letting go of something in the work.

Lydia: That is a nice metaphor.

Thomas: I have to say that as an audience member and an observer, what Taisha just described was structurally part of the choreography and part of the improvisational process of the work. Taisha began the dance even before we saw a body. Each of the viewers received a “My Name Is” sticker that also had “MMM” or “HMM” written on it. During her performance, Taisha would point at each of the members of the audience and there was an accumulated understanding that emerged, that people should say “MMM” or “HMMM” when she pointed at them with a branch. The mode of spectatorship or the kind of participation that you are asking about is something that was deeply integrated into the way that the piece was organized.

Taisha: Yes.

Lydia: Narcissister, you perform both in museum/gallery “white box” spaces as well as in more theatrical “black box” spaces. Is there a particular kind of space that you think suits your work best, or to which you are particularly attracted?



Figure 5: Narcissister's *Untitled (Zagreb)*, (2009). Image courtesy of the artist and Envoy Enterprises, New York. Used with permission.

Narcissister: I am interested in creating work that is as broad as possible so that I can connect with as wide an audience as possible. This means that I am open to all types of performance spaces. I have performed in museums, art galleries, nightclubs, theaters, on television, in the street, and even in my own home for small groups of friends and fellow artists. Each space was rewarding and challenging in different ways, and each was a meaningful opportunity for connection with an audience.

Lydia: Can you describe specifically the piece you did for *perFOREmance*, and how you may or may not have adapted it for inclusion in *Fore*? Does performing in a museum context have any particular meaning for you?

Narcissister: I presented an assortment of short live performances and art videos. This formula offers an opportunity to present several aspects of my practice (my live work and various approaches to art video work) and to present to the audience several of the many characters and themes I take on as Narcissister. Presenting a series such as mine works well in a museum or art gallery context because it allows for interactivity and non-traditional duration. Such an approach would not work well in a nightclub or theatre setting, for

example. The audience demands and capabilities are very different in each setting, in my experience.

Lydia: Nicole, did you get to see how audience interacted with your piece?

Nicole: [laughs] No, I show my work to my friends and my family. It is different with video, I think; it is not so immediate.

Jacolby: Well, everyone loved it.

Thomas: I viewed Nicole's installation with Ryan Kelly and Brennan Gerard, two choreographers who have worked with Danspace Project in New York and organized a conference at UCLA called *Dancing with the Art World* to explore these questions related to art and dance. What they said in particular was – I guess it was the first time that you have ever appeared in your own work?

Nicole: Yes.

Thomas: – just how manifest the ideas and the emotions were that you had on your person. So even though in the installation there was not an explicit articulation of the issues that you were describing in terms of your ambivalence around the form, Kelly and Gerard could see and read that in your body. Nicole used the structures of cinema, of light technology, moving technology, and the physical sense of being in that space, to require her viewers to either look one way or another way. So much of that active looking towards or away, that desire or aversion, was structured by light. Yes, I think there is a way that one could read light and dark in racialized terms, but I think there is also a way in which light and dark were interacting with what gives life to the medium. The video channel that features Nicole is saturated and flush with light, whereas the other has focused light that also draws our attention to a darkened space, to a performed action or attention in another kind of a way. That was another physical experience.

Lydia: The physical pull. I actually felt similarly while viewing Jacolby's piece. It was more on an angle, but I felt a similar pull between the two videos.

Jacolby: The triangulation was important because the frame on the black platform was a pictorial dimension, just like the videos were. When viewers would sit in front of me for 40 minutes there was pressure for me to continue to perform, but in the video there was a different kind of animation of myself. I was thinking about how I was in the museum, sweating on the platform and bleeding sometimes, using the body in an extreme capacity to

keep up with something that was auto-tuned and on loop. I love the idea, though I feel conflicted as a performer: I always feel like the outsider performer, or the bad performer, because there is a modernist notion of performance that requires an audience, a complete and pure body; so I feel like I am convoluted with auto-tuning, 3D animation, virtual space, and a lot of mediating tools. My body is extremely secondary. When I performed in the Studio Museum it was so demanding, physically, and the audience and I had engagements that were unexpected and that was super. There are a lot of questions about perception that arise when you are looking at a physical body underneath a performative body. The physical body becomes an assemblage of components, a sculpture. Questions about those issues are important to me. They are very unresolved, but they are important to me. I am still figuring it out.

Lydia: These ideas seem to relate to the title of your piece, *Reifying Desire*.

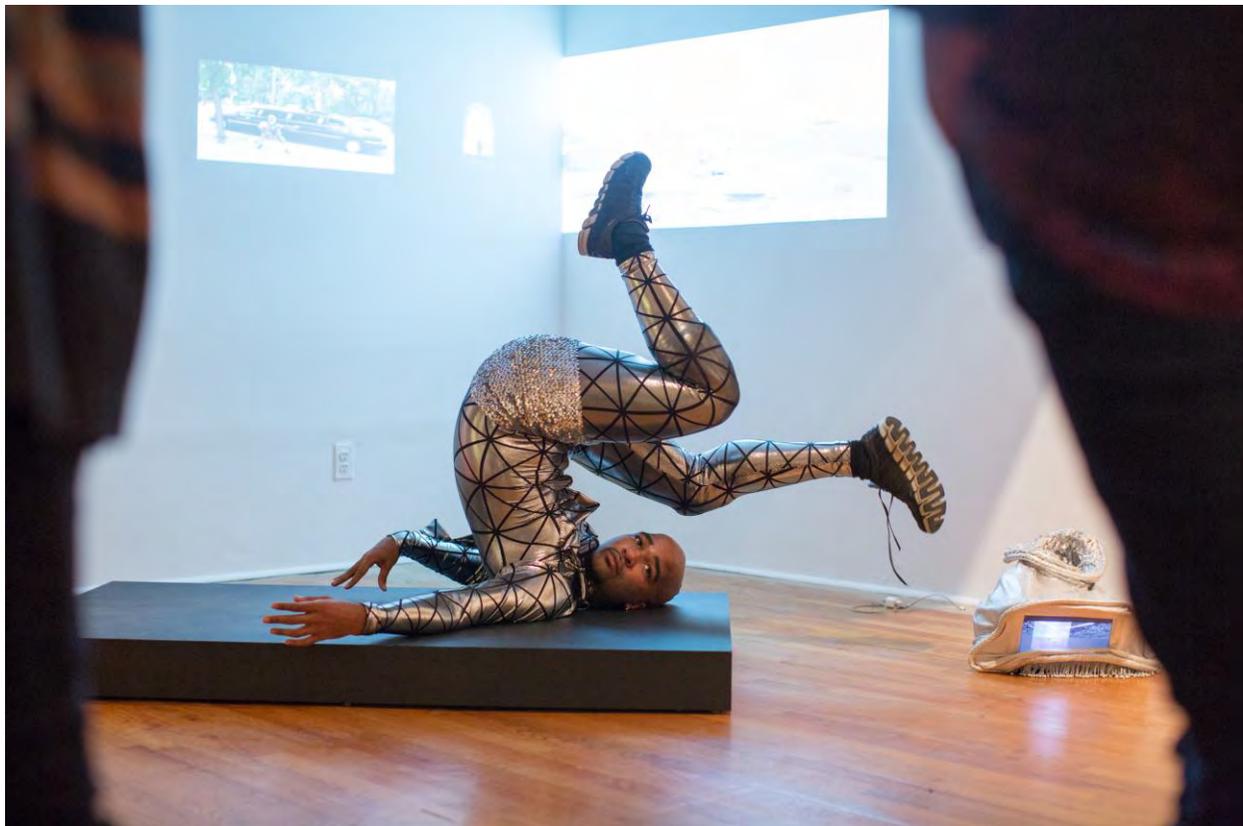


Figure 6: Jacolby Satterwhite performing in *Reifying Desire: Model It* (2012). Two-channel video installation, painted wooden platform, spandex catsuit, and live performance. Photo by Scott Rudd. Image courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Used with permission.

Jacolby: The whole overarching theme of my entire practice is that I am always trying to find a concrete physical example of abstraction. What is queerness? What is my relationship to minimalist drawings when I try to make them into physical manifestations? I am trying to concretize an overarching narrative of my life into an art piece.

Lydia: Beautiful.

Jacolby: That is why performance is my medium. Kori Newkirk said in his retrospective catalogue that to be a good artist you have to pull from what only you know and use it.

Lydia: That is a great reference.

Thomas: Yes, and I would like to bring another reference into our discussion. We invited theorist Fred Moten to be in conversation with the artists who participated in the second weekend of performance. In the project that Taisha presented that weekend, and even in *Decomposition*, Moten commented on how she gave new meaning to and mobilized *unison*, in distinction to how theorists in the twentieth century feared unison because of its associations with totalitarianism. He was interested in the more ambivalent or mixed possibilities for unison, whether through repetition or the commercialization that is brought in through Zumba. But then he discussed your project, Jacolby, in terms of how leftist intellectuals often uniformly understand the commodity form as bad. Yet there is such a seduction in terms of how objects that come out of consumer culture are dealt with aesthetically in Jacolby's video. So Lydia, your comment about *Reifying Desire* interested me in relation to Marxism and Moten's commentary – something we might continue to think about in terms of the broader significance of the works featured in *Fore*.

Lydia: Yes, and thinking of the broader significances of the show: Thomas, please tell us more about performance in the context of the Studio Museum, including its history. Is *Fore* one of the first instances during which live performance was staged throughout an exhibition? Is there a precedent for it?

Thomas: Coming into it, I had this whole narrative about what a break this was from what we have done before. The idea that there has not been performance at the Studio Museum is somewhat illusory. While working on *Radical Presence*, a show for fall 2013 that we will be taking from the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston that looks at the history of performance art by black artists, I realized that many of those performances took place at the Studio Museum. They included Adrian Piper's meta performances of *Funk Lessons* and Lyle Ashton Harris performing Michael Jackson. I thought of the ways in which the artists in



Figure 7: *The Artist's Voice* public discussion with Fred Moten on February 21, 2013. Photographed (from left to right) are Harold Mendez, Steffani Jemison, Jamal Cyrus, Taisha Paggett, and Fred Moten. Photo by Elizabeth Gwinn. Image courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Used with permission.

*Radical Presence* have such a longstanding relationship to the Studio Museum. A network of performance artists has existed for decades and our Museum has existed alongside that network. I have been incredibly struck by how artists who have been so aligned with our Museum's mission have worked for years and years in performance. Maybe at the beginning I would have tried to make some territorial claim about the difference between *Fore* and the earlier *F* group exhibitions, and yes, there was more performance in this iteration than in the previous ones. But there is continuity as well. The differences seem to be more about degree and transformation than originality. Similarly, the ways in which we have talked about these questions since the opening of *Fore* encourage us consider performance in more capacious terms. We are now able to more subtly understand the history of performance at the Studio Museum.

Lydia: Indeed. I also wanted to touch upon issues related to the afterlife of performance, particularly because the museum is traditionally a place for archives. What does it mean for you to see the afterlife of your performance play out in that realm?

Jacolby: What does it mean to see an afterlife of a performance? I want my performance to live on. I want it to exist online, or you might see me in the street with it or in a gallery or a club or a museum or a video. I always want the blurred edges to remain. That is why I am trying to loosen up the screws of my performative existence and not say “I am going to do this” with absolute certainty. No, I am going to build a black pedestal in a gallery and you will see what I am going to do, I might lick somebody in the museum – I do not know what is going to happen.

Nicole: Do you document your performances, Jacolby?

Jacolby: Yes, I document them. The videos take on a whole different purpose and role, shaped by the visual zeitgeist of Facebook and dating websites and the weird ways in which we perform our bodies via the Internet. I see it as an ever-expansive, completely porous, ongoing project.

Lydia: Would anyone else like to comment on this issue of performance’s afterlife?

Nicole: I think it is difficult. I love the idea of video installation because it is constantly on a loop and audiences may enter it at any point and leave it at any point. I personally love to watch dance on film – more than dance that is live – and I think it has something to do with performance being this site of humiliation for me in the past and how film has allowed me to re-process those experiences. For some reason, watching performances on film is more attractive to me because there is a danger to the live performance. Perhaps that is why I make work the way that I do.

Narcissister: I feel honored to have had the opportunity to present my work at the museum, especially because I understood that a record of the performance would be preserved, and so would ensure its afterlife. This is not always the case at the places in which I perform, where performances are often completely ephemeral. There is value in this experience as well.

Taisha: I feel somewhat “old-school” in this regard. There is something really valuable about the immediate experience of a mediated exchange that takes place in live performance. I think it is great to work with technology and my position on this issue is somewhat ironic because I am trying to find ways to take my body out of the dance. Performing in public



Figure 8: Installation view of Taisha Paggett's *Decomposition of a Continuous Whole* (2009-12). Site-specific performance and pastel wall drawing, score on paper. Photo by Adam Reich. Image courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Used with permission.

totally gives me anxiety and there is so much baggage that comes along with all of that experience. I think there is an exactness of documentation but also a falseness to it; it flattens out the experience. I actually love photo documentation of dance pieces. While viewing photographs we must piece together what happened in between the various images, whereas video documentation gives us the whole thing in a limited, two-dimensional plane. The pieces I make are so specific to the spaces in which they are shown that I find it difficult to repeat them. I do not see my work as something that will happen over and over and over. I feel as though I have a responsibility to create something from the documentation. But that is not the performance, it is another thing, like Cliff's Notes.

Lydia: Thank you all. This was a thought-provoking conversation about your individual practices and how all of those practices came together at the Studio Museum. I look forward to seeing what each of you does next!

# Seeing Differently at dOCUMENTA (13): A Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

**Roya Rastegar**

Dear Carolyn,

May 2013

It has been almost a year since I was in Kassel. On the plane home, I remember pouring over both your letters about the curatorial adventures of organizing dOCUMENTA (13). Since my trip, I have been stuck on the place of beauty, its exhibition, mobilization, consequence, and price. I could not have anticipated the depth of my emotional response to dOCUMENTA(13). It was my first time. And it had been such a long while since I was so moved by the expressions of artistic practice and curatorial intentions that encircled Kassel.

Your letters emphasized that dOCUMENTA is different from other art exhibitions because it emerged in the aftermath of WWII from trauma. Your point was that this was distinct from the nineteenth-century trade and world's fairs, those showcases of industrial triumphs. But such a characterization made me uneasy as it was trumpeted across the numerous exhibition materials and circulated as a fact across the many glowing reviews of dOCUMENTA (13). Did the trade fairs not also emerge from trauma? Britain's Great Exhibition of 1851 occurred two years after its violent annexation of Punjab in March 1849. The French Industrial Exposition shares 1844 with its wars on Morocco and Algeria. But I suppose for trauma to even be legible, it must be understood as relative.



Figure 1: Kai Althoff Letter Display in empty Hall of Fridericianum. Photo by Carlos Albuquerque. Used with permission.

I quite agree, however, that dOCUMENTA occupies its space in the art world differently. Perhaps this is what comes from a deep investment in the very act of calling forth trauma as a lens through which to see ourselves, and beauty. You and I share a soft spot for provocations that compel a different way of seeing.

What a bold decision to fill that “prime real estate” of dOCUMENTA – the first floor of the Fridericianum – with only a five page letter! I felt for you as I read Kai Althoff’s plea to forgive him after he rescinded his agreement to participate in the exhibition. He had over-committed himself, it was plain to see even in his handwriting, which had an overwhelmed, overworked sense about it. There was one part, though, that felt awkward. It was when he lauded your brilliance as almost a justification for not being confident enough to produce something to your liking. This produced an anxiety in me – for you, and him. Alone with the emptiness of that large room, I could only reflect on how established structures for exhibiting and valuing art impose paralyzing expectations for production, for genius.

But I could not sit with that reflection too long. After all, I had only just arrived at this momentous exhibition, and had a lot of ground to cover. I spent too long on the rotunda of the second floor. Absorbed into Goshka Macuga’s larger-than-life, black and white digital collage tapestry, *Of What is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not I*, I fantasized about the far

away other places of the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition, especially Kabul. The threatening elegance of the cobra loomed centrally in the foreground of Macuga's tapestry of the banquet in Kabul, yet the journalists, artists, and government and NGO worker guests were unfazed. I was curious about what untruths were held in the circle's other half, a portrait of an awards ceremony with the dOCUMENTA (13) curatorial team at the Kassel gardens, displayed at the Bagh-e Babur in Kabul. Could the two halves of the circle fit together equally? Was the overall picture wholly un-representable? dOCUMENTA (13) was already a ravenous exhibition, fed further by its multiple locations: Kassel, Kabul, Alexandria-Kairo, and Banff. I wondered about the impulse to locate the exhibition in these places specifically. But it was a welcome relief that the exhibition was designed with a deliberate impossibility, a rattling of all hubristic attempts to "cover the show" or get it all in. With more modest plans, then, I ventured to the dOCUMENTA-Halle.

I am weary of apocalyptic projections, but MOON Kyungwon and JEON Joonho's double-screen film *El Fin del Mundo* (The End of the World) registered a future that pried open something in my present. Both screens showed vastly different times and places. On the left screen, a middle-aged male artist mourned his pit bull as he waited for the world's final moments in a studio surrounded by his sculptures of found objects and strings of light. On the right screen, a young female scientist (in a hot, nude leather jumpsuit, no less) sat blankly in a sterile, all-white lab. She dryly conducted tests on the toxicity levels of the found wreckage of that time past, in preparation for the archive. Out of the corner of her eye, the string of lights flashed on suddenly. She was startled, but barely moved. Not knowing their function, she sat with the tangle of lights on top of her head. Yearning swelled in her eyes, up to the brink of a tear. To her, the object was beautiful and strange, a remnant of the past that moved her beyond the composed rational framework in which she was trained. The tear was an instinctual – and dangerous – emotional response that made her vulnerable to the unknowable. As she packed up her testing materials and left for the day, she sensed something behind her. She looked, but there was nothing there. However, on the other screen, from another time and place, the pit bull trotted across, full of life and in a glowing light. I was so glad the pup was alive, somehow.

The accompanying project *News from Nowhere*, installed in the room just behind, presented the "designs" of *El Fin Del Mundo's* world, most prominently featuring proposed technology that would transform the human body into a self-sufficient "water bottle" that would effectively recycle water through a closed-circuit hydraulic system that renders food and drink obsolete. This would require a near elimination of unnecessary liquid excretions – i.e., tears, sweat, urine, or cum. A single glass pill a few times a day would be all that must be ingested to sustain the body.



Figure 2: Installation view, *Of What is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not I* (2012) by Goshka Macuga. Photo by Carlos Albuquerque. Used with Permission.

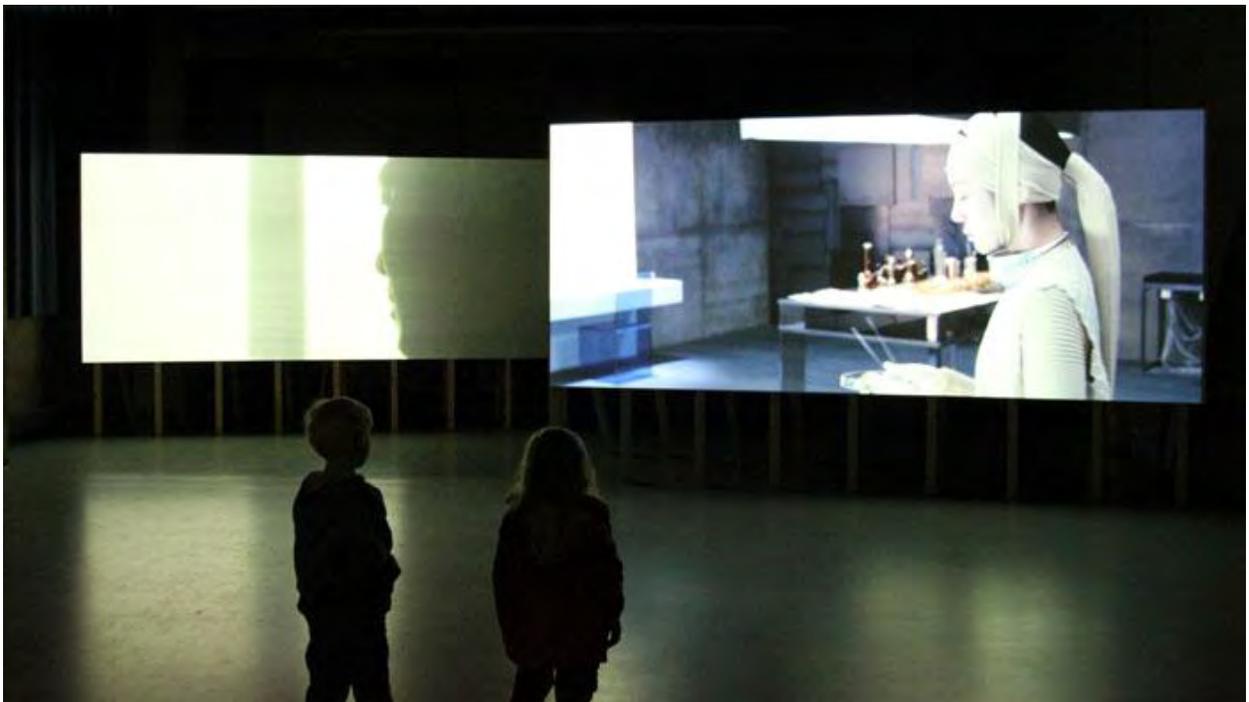


Figure 3: Installation view of *El Fin Del Mundo* (2012) by MOON Kyungwon and JEON Joonho. Photo by Carlos Albuquerque. Used with Permission.

The scientist's emotional response had threatened her life in this future world. What are the limits of how we are willing to live our lives? And what place does beauty and joy, sweetness and light, take in relation to those limits? I met one of the project's designers in the exhibition. We discussed the ethics of this technological system that preserved human life by cutting it off from other life forces. He encouraged my heated skepticism; this was not a proposition, he said, it was a provocation. How will a lack of resources change the ways we see art as connected to, or separate from, the earth, our life?

At the Kassel train station, I waited in an intimidating line to borrow the iPod and headsets for Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*. At first I was amused by the cleverness of the concept, a pre-recorded audio and visual tour of the town's historic *hauptbahnhof*. My eyes were already well trained to stay on the mobile screen and dutifully walk where I was told. I retraced the artists' steps, seeing through their eyes/the camera's lens figments of the past that shared this place: the ballerina's pirouettes, the dog's bark, and the trumpets of the marching band. As I walked out to the tracks, the whistling of the trains in both real and recorded time pulled me into some different realm. It was as though I had been taken hostage by the camera, to serve as witness, possessed by Janet's softly spoken stream of consciousness. I make myself too vulnerable to these immersive forms of cinema and new media. At track 13, Janet began telling the story of Jewish residents from Kassel who were sent to concentration camps via these tracks. She narrated a day in the life of the executioner who struggled to grasp the atrocity of the mass murders that settled into a routine in his life. It felt as though time opened below me, beneath layers of stones and dirt and tracks. She walked us back through the main hall, speaking about her father's Alzheimer's, and how it changed the way he experienced the present through vibrant memories of the past. She stopped me by a photo booth and pulled the curtains back. A woman looked at me startled. I wanted to see her in my space, in my "real life" – but as I opened the curtains, she was not there. I had conflated the recorded time/place with my own so completely that the woman in the booth came and went as a flash. "No matter how much we love someone and hold them close to us," Janet whispered as we watched a last dance, choreographed and frenetic, "we will always be a completely separate person." No matter how hard I might try, we will never be the same, and I will always see differently from you.

It was not until I encountered Rabih Mroue's installation *The Pixelated Revolution* at the left wing of the station that I began to grasp how this difference could extend life. I was transfixed by the projection of a shadowy figure being shot, dropping his cell phone, and then in some kind of rewind motion, getting back up, only to be shot again and fall. It was not a loop; the phone falls out of his hand differently each time. I began to play with the six photo flipbooks on display on top of inkpads. My fingers spread ink all over the room. I did

not register what I was seeing until Mroue's "nonacademic lecture" set forth a critical mode of reading these videos. The flipbooks were frame-by-frame images of cell phone recordings taken by Syrian protestors, moments before the military police shot at their direction. Mroue's premise that the camera lens has become an extension of the body, eye, and retina resonated deeply after I experienced the *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*. The camera, Mroue said, can bear witness to death, which cannot be grasped by the naked eye. But because the camera continues to record, even after we (the recorder, the viewer) are shot, Mroue said, we do not have to be dead. We can be alive, because we are watching these images, again and again, frame by frame. The wall text offers "Instructions and Advice on How to Shoot Today": "It is a war between a camera with three legs and a camera with two legs. Image until Victory?" I wondered what it might mean to extend the boundaries of life by refiguring the limits of our sight.

In the gardens of Karlsaue park, I nourished myself with the strawberries and radishes sold at the AND AND AND kiosk. I listened to the bells chiming across tonalities, swaying in the hammock, haunted by the ghost statue that followed Apichatpong Weerasethakul to Kassel in his work *The Importance of Telepathy*. Anri Sala's *Clocked Perspective* gave a time that I had begun to take in, and I tasted the commemorative *applesaft* (apple juice) from the orchard of Korbinian apple trees – some planted by you. I browsed through the archives of books, short films, and videos inspired by Donna Haraway in *The Worldly House* – a cabin of materials dedicated to multi-species co-evolution. I cautiously moved through the roaming dogs, beehive-headed woman, and organic mess of Pierre Hugye's *Untilled*.

Finally, I ventured deep enough into the woods and sat for a long while on a stump listening to the otherworldly *for a thousand years* (another project by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, manifest as a sound installation in the forest). There, I began thinking about Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolas Goldberg's project, *A Guide to Campo Del Cielo*, to bring El Chaco, a thirty-seven ton meteorite, from Campo Del Cielo in Argentina to Kassel for dOCUMENTA (13). You wrote that this project would inspire ways of seeing from the perspective of a meteorite. At first, I was glad for the stories this idea created within me. But at what expense would this opportunity for pleasure and creativity come? I suppose statements from the people of the Moqoit First Nation who critiqued the colonial impulse to move and display the meteorite were persuasive enough to compel the curatorial team to revoke the loan request. I cannot help but think about the frictions the very act of requesting the meteorite in the first place created between the indigenous people and the Argentinean state. In the excitement, international prestige, and cultural cache that accompanies participation in an international art exhibition such as dOCUMENTA, how quick the government was to override those legal measures the First Nations people and collaborating scientists had worked hard to advocate for as a way to protect the meteorite's place.



Figure 4: *Applesaft* (apple juice) bottles from the orchard of Korbinian apple trees. Photo by Carlos Albuquerque. Used with Permission.



Figure 5: *The Worldly House: An Archive Inspired by Donna Haraway's Writings on Multi-Species Co-Evolution* (2012) in Karlsaue Park. Photo by Carlos Albuquerque. Used with Permission.

The project's ordeal provoked me to your suggestion of seeing differently. So I imagined myself thousands of years ago, an inhabitant of Campos del Cielo. I felt the trauma of losing my land to a gulf of fires that fell from the sky. I wondered how much time, how many generations, needed to pass before this trauma, and the remnant's material presence deep in the ground, could be recognized as a connection to the divine. I wondered about the process of spending generations of time developing a relationship to that rock, and then to have conquistadors lay claim to something that has defined the land and its people. For them to come in and violently and stealthily try to steal away with what they can only see as the exact iron density necessary to develop artillery.

I must say that I was rather pleased the project did not manifest in the end. I suppose the idea did not have to materialize into an object to generate possibility. In order for Faivovich and Goldberg's project to succeed, it was necessary for it to fail. But a few months after I experienced this relief, I read an unsettling announcement from dOCUMENTA (13) boasting the travel of a piece of the Campo del Cielo meteorite to Kassel from the Vienna Natural History Museum, which has its own fraught history of collecting specimens as part of a colonial project. After all that? So I spiraled back around, to this challenge of seeing differently. Suspending anthropocentric fantasies of its wanderlust and desire for fame and



Figure 6: Video of Campo Del Cielo. Photo by Carlos Albuquerque. Used with Permission.

adventure, I imagined myself as the meteorite, but with my own agency, restless and in motion, in my own kind of time, one that is born in the universe. I thought of my millions and millions of years en route. I chose my place to land, in a heap of fire and a death that bore another kind of life. I nuzzled myself deep into the earth – warm and wet and full. Until I was hunted, dug up, fragmented, exhibited as an oddity, picked at and tested in European labs. Bought and sold, 224 grams at \$134. “A curious specimen with a billowy and wavy look,” reads a description from CampoMeteorites.com, “This iron would make a striking coffee table piece.” As though I came all this way to become a thing. Though it may not be legible, I carry my own inalienable claims on the earth, the universe, and life. So, put me back, leave me be, and one day, another of my kind will find its way you, Kassel, and beauty will be exhibited, and trauma seen, in yet another way.

This letter is now getting long. I meant to share with you the productive misunderstandings I had with pieces in the Ottoneum or Orangerie, and my emotional responses to so many of the works at Neue Galerie, including Susan Hiller’s room of revolutionary songs with a book of lyrics, and my excitement at hearing the screams and music from Stuart Ringholt’s anger management workshops at the very center of the first floor. But I hope I have at least shared with you, as you have with me, some of the thoughts and feelings *DOCUMENTA* (13) brought out in me. We need to continue exploring different approaches to seeing differently, and remember that they are interlocked. Trauma seems to compel another approach to art and aesthetics – one that could account for the ethics of time and beauty, and for the ever-expanding formations of life in its destruction.

With all my heart,  
Roya



# Exhibition **Reviews**



# Mapping Another L.A.:

## The Chicano Art Movement

Curated by Chon A. Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas.

Shown at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles

October 16, 2011- February 26, 2012

### Robb Hernandez

A mural façade entitled *The Birth of Our Art* (1971), designed by Don Juan otherwise known as Johnny D. Gonzalez, opened *Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement*, on view at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from October 2011 until February 2012. For the first time since 1981, the wood panels that once covered the exterior walls of the Goez Art Gallery in East Los Angeles were reconstructed for public viewing after being recovered from the storage unit of the designer's brother and Goez co-founder, Joe Gonzalez.<sup>1</sup> The mural's appearance in the immediate foray of the gallery space was a bold visual and spatial statement that rearticulated the interrelationship between Chicana/o image and place – an indexing of barrio aesthetics and vernacular architecture in the Goez gallery front, as well as the commemorative style and language of the modern frieze it composes.

A 33-foot long towering landmark that honors Chicana/o artists' prolific art and literary production at the precipice of the Chicano civil rights movement in the late 1960s, this mural memorialized culturally-affirming narratives as it beckoned passage: beyond a Spanish-colonial suit of armor and a Quetzalcoatl head standing guard before the Goez façade in the main gallery stood the artifacts of "another L.A." For the museum visitor, these figures, silkscreens, newsprint, ephemera, and maps visually encapsulated the regenerative sentiment of the mural's title and thus gave "birth [to] our art." For this, *Mapping Another L.A.*'s provocative mural installation in the Fowler museum challenged the dominant vision of contemporary art in California by revealing a counter image of the city, one that vacillates against and between violent racially-stratified realities and proliferating cultural visibility. The exhibition unfurled a complex set of art practices "hidden" beyond the mural ruins that are at once "pedagogical, aesthetic, and political," and by doing so, sought meaning in forms that enable community-centered Chicana/o place.<sup>2</sup>

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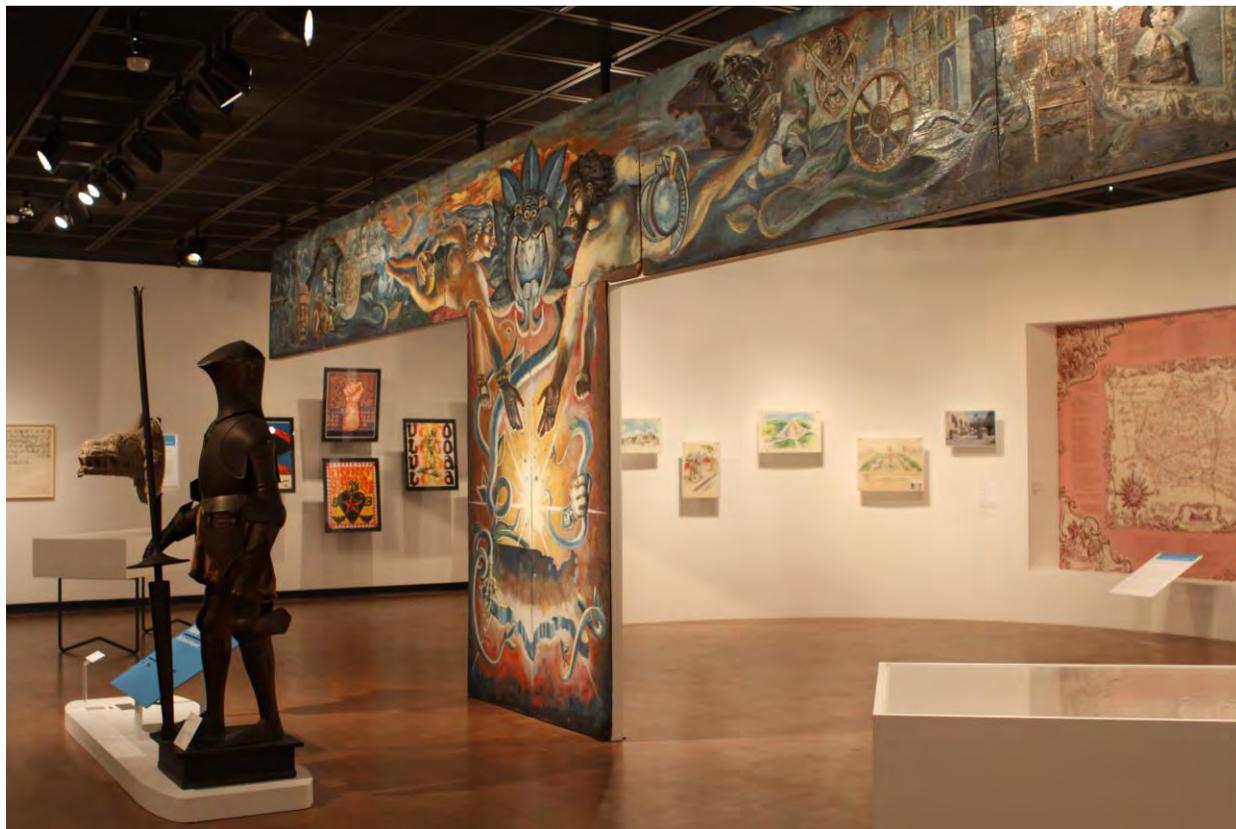


Figure 1: Entrance view of *Mapping Another L.A.*, with Don Juan's *The Birth of Our Art* (1971) at center. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

In terms of curatorial practice and exhibition design, *Mapping Another L.A.* enfolded the hand of the curator with that of the cultural geographer and *barrio* urban planner. The show was an assemblage of material culture, ephemera, architectural site plans, mural pencil studies, video projections, photography, and painting. These diverse materials directed the viewer through nine artist collectives, centers, and organizations constituting east-side Chicano art production. The exhibition featured established artist *grupos* that have been the subject of recent art-historical and curatorial inquiry over the last ten years, including Self-Help Graphics, Los Four, SPARC, and Asco (the latter was recently the subject of another retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, or LACMA). Also emphasized were commonly overlooked art spaces such as the Mechicano Art Center, Goetz Arts Studios, Plaza de la Raza, and Centro de Arte Público. Label texts documented more obscure and relatively short-lived groups and art venues such as the East Los Angeles School of Mexican American Fine Arts and the Concilio de Arte Popular. This distinguished archive structured through label copy, ephemera, and wall texts provided ample para-textual encounters that augmented the exhibition experience for the viewer through gallery panels.

*Mapping Another L.A.*'s curatorial perspective advanced under the influences of post-modernism, cultural geography, and barrio urbanism. Curators Chon Noriega, Pilar Tompkins-Rivas, and Terezita Romo adapted Fredric Jameson's *aesthetics of cognitive geography*, with its allusions to planner Kevin Lynch's polemical studies of L.A. residents' "mental images," in which one's location and mobility alter spatial perception and portraits of the city. Indeed, the exhibition charted how images, words, and poetics of Chicana/o art production in the 1960s constituted a "sense of place" for marginalized communities, combating the schizophrenic inertia of the postmodern city.<sup>3</sup> This cognition calls forth "radically new forms" of political, pedagogical, and aesthetic representation, something that the curators claim was inherent to the groups that fostered Chicana/o art.<sup>4</sup> In lieu of an emphasis on the individual artist-genius, the curators abandoned a more conservative fine art restriction and chose to thread, for instance, a classic Carlos Almaraz acrylic painting *Beach Trash Burning* (1982) with ephemera from the art collective Los Four (1973-80), which he co-founded with the late Gilbert "Magu" Luján, Beto de la Rocha, and Frank Romero. The curators' attention to the collectivist orientations of these *grupos* in variegated pictorial and written texts was a risky maneuver. It defies a more traditional attention to singular great painters of exceptional pedigree and thus echoes a Marxist tenor of the period. That is, the display of a "shared, collective Chicano experience" is something quite redolent with Almaraz's philosophies, which were widely disseminated in his classic manifesto, "The Artist as a Revolutionary," printed in *Chismarte*.<sup>5</sup> He asserts, "Public ownership of what is classically called the means of production would alleviate the burden of an artist, or any other minority person, of providing for himself and his family. So, if you will consider the artist as part of a minority group, just for a minute, then you might see that he suffers the same economical problems that Blacks, Chicanos and Puertorriquenos suffer."<sup>6</sup> By affiliating the Chicano artist as a fellow and masculine *guerrillero* in armed struggle with paintbrush in hand instead of a gun or protest sign, Almaraz staged an appeal that mitigates *Mapping Another L.A.* The show actualized this ideological force, tenaciously negotiating the institutional museum surroundings through artifacts that demonstrated a shared means of cultural ownership in visual, print, and literary evidence. As the late Tejano art historian Jacinto Quirarte succinctly put it, this formative period of group-based art making is one in which artists realized that "The cultural centers have the purpose of providing a forum and a space for the *barrio* (community) where it can see and learn about its culture."<sup>7</sup>

The challenge of *Mapping Another L.A.* could be especially located in the exhibition design itself. Behind the reconstructed Goetz gallery façade, viewers were faced with a wall-length inset reproduction of the *Goetz Map Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles* (1975), which listed the variable barrio sites of Chicana/o mural production. Famously declaring, "In Europe all roads lead to Rome – In Southern California all freeways lead to East Los Angeles," the guide represents what Karen Mary Davalos has called an *aesthetic reversal* that encouraged

cultural tourism against the directional deterrents of freeway entanglement, concrete barriers, and traffic congestion.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Goetz succeeded in countering tourists' attention from Museum Row and elevating Chicana/o muralism among the monumental gems of the city.

However, the map's large-scale reproduction and central display in the gallery encouraged viewers to consider how Chicana/o artist groups used the cartographic medium to "contribute to a psychologically and materially sustaining sense of 'home' location."<sup>9</sup> By exteriorizing *barrio* identity within the empowering domain of the cartographic field, it deflected racial marginalization and mapped Chicana/o art into the urban landscape, setting the spatial propriety for such expression in the culturally-affirming context of the barrio. That is, the *Goetz Map Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles* concretized ways that Chicano art organizations adopted the counter-discursive imagery of *barrio* muralism to exteriorize the "sense" of ethnic belonging in an alienating city.



Figure 2: *Goetz Map Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles* (1975). Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Created by Goez co-founder Johnny Gonzalez, designed by David Botello, and illustrated by Robert Arenivar, the map is dedicated to the “Heritage of our Ancestors.” It registers over 271 murals in 107 locations via a cartographic layout framed by four narrative vignettes of Mexican-American contributions to the founding of California, including: *vaquero* (cowboy) adventures, gold mining, and the introduction of irrigation, farming, and ranching crucial to the development of Los Angeles agriculture. A closer examination of the display reveals that though it grafts Chicano murals in the empowering shelter of the East L.A. cultural landscape, Arenivar’s illustrations and episodic texts also mapped a nostalgic Spanish-colonial romance in the pictorial statement.

In the upper-right portion of the composition, we see a young *caballero* (gentleman) serenading an obedient *señorita* who fans herself in restful repose next to a flourishing water fountain where birds bathe and dance to the strums of his guitar. Beneath this illustration, a historical episode reads, “The Californios enjoyed a tranquil, romantic, and prosperous life. They spent much leisure time playing music and creating unusual sporting events.” This vignette’s inclusion in the cartographic frame defined not only a guide to East Los Angeles murals, but also cites heteronormative romantic narratives set in nineteenth-century California among the “heritage of our ancestors.” The murals carefully delineated in the “culturally affirming” *barrio* streets of Belvedere, Boyle Heights, and City Terrace empower particular forms of sexuality into the cartographic visual field: Chicano heterosexuality was “in place” – located appropriately and granted visual expression – and thus correlated sexual orientation with spatial orientation. Just as *Mapping Another L.A.* mapped Chicana/o art in the urban cultural landscape at the Fowler Museum, its central installation of the Goez guide instilled specific sexual expressions into the very walls constructing the display. The map towered over museum viewers summoning our attention, lecturing above us with a heterosexually-imbued Chicano art vision and sense of place.

The compulsory heterosexual desire at the center of *Mapping Another L.A.* was reiterated in the mural façade that opened the show. Spanish-colonial conqueror Hernán Cortés and his Indigenous Aztec lover, La Malinche, are depicted in the mural unclothed, stretching their hands toward each other. Their touch anticipates a photonic emission that suggests the procreative basis from which Chicana/o culture, and particularly Chicana/o art, fires. This prescient heterosexual discourse in the objects that introduced the exhibition necessitates further inquiry into the sexuality of the *grupos* featured throughout the installations, particularly when we consider the homosexuality of lovers Carlos and Antonio Ibanez y Bueno who co-founded Self-Help Graphics, the gender-diffusive style codes of Asco, and the queer avant-garde performance collaborations of Cyclona, Gronk, and Mundo Meza.<sup>10</sup> The curious influences of the sexual liberation movement among the East L.A. *grupos* are undeniable – and although *Mapping Another L.A.* dutifully exposes the pervasive racialized,



Figure 3: Documentation of Self Help Graphics' Barrio Mobile Art Studio (BMAS). Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

gendered, and spatial biases in the portrait of the city, sexual difference is a pressing-but-obfuscated area of analysis.

Reflecting what urban historian Dolores Hayden calls the *power of place*, *Mapping Another L.A.* demonstrated “the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory.”<sup>11</sup> The exhibition symbolically and literally mapped “shared” spatio-temporal experiences of the landscape and gave empowering place to the memory-work instilled in Chicana/o visual and expressive culture. The exhibition investigated nine artist organizations in nine movements: cognitive mapping, free association, spaces, travel, events, communication, an aesthetic alternative, education, and time. These groups were categorically distributed throughout the gallery space, not necessarily corresponding to singular movements. Rather, they contained competing elements. One vitrine featured photo documentation of Self Help Graphics’ Barrio Mobile Art Studio (BMAS), which gestured toward community-based education, travel, and spatial resistance. The walls also defined the communal art activities in compartmentalizing order. On the far wall to the left of the entrance, a brilliant collection of silkscreens and *calendarios*



Figure 4: Installation view of silkscreens and *calendarios* from the Mechicano Art Center (1969-1978). Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.



Figure 5: Luis C. Garza (second to right) giving a gallery talk on December 7, 2011. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

(calendars) from Mechicano Art Center (1969-1978) were stacked in a vibrant cluster of nine wall hangings that were attached to tilted mounts jetting into the museum space. Similarly, pencil studies, architectural drawings, and monument designs embellished the curvilinear wall surface that contained the inset *Goez Map Guide*. David Botello's plan for the proposed Tlalocan Commercial Center, an urban pyramidal answer to Teotihuacan, demonstrated the "cognitive mapping" and spatial consciousness shared among Goez Art Studios' artists. Such an arrangement gave the initial impression that individual artist collectives were as autonomous as their distribution in the gallery space; this was better presented during photographic journalist Luis C. Garza's gallery talk about Plaza de la Raza on December 7, 2011.

Attendees of Garza's presentation were stationed before photo documentation and representative works on paper, including video footage of Alice Baggs, lead singer of The Brat who performed gritty feminist punk rock at Plaza's lakeside boathouse. David Alfaro Siqueiros's lithograph, *Heroic Voices* (1971), prompted Garza's vividly entertaining recollection of his first meeting with the artist in Budapest, Hungary in 1971. His talk itself remained fixed, allowing for a referential presentation against the themed wall.<sup>12</sup> As a result, it became difficult to discern how the nine movements of the nine groups operated intersectionally in relation to each other. This stasis was difficult to overcome but best negotiated through small wall panels, called "focus moments," which provided neat reversals of passive viewing experience. Anchored throughout the exhibition, the panels drew key interrelationships between artist collectives represented by the works on view. For example, in a "Public Exhibitions" focus moment, we learned that Ceeje Gallery on La Cienega Blvd was a formative commercial art space for the early Mexican-American Generation. After it opened on June 25, 1962 with a show that featured former UCLA studio art students and friends Eduardo Carrillo, Roberto Chavez, Charles Garabedian, and Louis Lunetta, Ceeje Gallery became a hub for Latina/os, women, and other artists of color. As Romo asserts, "Ceeje had supported, by the time it closed in 1970, the careers of many prominent artists, carving a place for itself in Los Angeles art history."<sup>13</sup> Mechicano Art Center was similarly founded on La Cienega Blvd in 1969 as a part-time gallery before moving to an abandoned laundromat in East L.A. The "Public Exhibitions" focus moment therefore suggested a continuation of artist social networks that took place at first in West L.A. and were sustained through a conscious reemergence in the east side, where "at least 133 exhibitions featuring Chicano artists had been held in Los Angeles."<sup>14</sup>

The achievements of *Mapping Another L.A.* lie in its exhaustive study, restorative narratives, and conservationist impulse. The Fowler Museum's production extended a broader vision of Chicana/o art through *L.A. Xicano*, a sub-series of shows that were featured in the Getty-



Figure 6: “Public Exhibitions” focus moment (left), with promotional materials from exhibitions of Chicana/o art and a timeline of shows produced between 1945-1980. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

sponsored *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980*, an ensemble of exhibitions shown in over sixty venues across Southern California from October 2011 until March 2012. Curators Noriega, Tompkins-Rivas, and Romo launched an ambitious five exhibitions in three major cultural institutions, including: the Autry National Center, LACMA, and the Fowler. *L.A. Xicano* spanned a broad stretch of the city, most significantly bringing Chicana/o art from barrio streetscapes to the corridors of public art museums and the specialized intercultural history center. Breaking with neoliberal art institutional strategies that oftentimes reify American ethnic art within a singular and reductionist presentation, the curators of *L.A. Xicano* exulted in its expanse.

Too complex to merit one art-historical survey, the curators succeeded in conveying Chicana/o art’s cross-generational, mixed-media, and collaborative art practice. This point was made transparent when contemporary Chicana/o artists Arturo Romo, Reies Flores, and Sandra de la Loza (among others) restaged a fascinating reenactment of *Stations of the Cross*, a protest against the Vietnam War Draft that was first performed by Asco in 1971.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 7: Installation view of Arturo Ernesto Romo-Santillano's *Xolotl Soup* (2012). Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Adopting the roles made iconic by Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez, the video and audio collage entitled *Xolotl Soup* mounted inside a “found object” telephone booth, conveyed an afterlife for Chicano avant-garde performance – a postmodern and postmortem practice of duplication, appropriation, and reanimation. Romo explained that, “While re-performing, we become the image as we are being transformed by the image as we interpret the image as we change the image while looking out through it.”<sup>16</sup> Both the East L.A. urban landscape and the contemporary Chicano artists were trailed by this performance archive or what Marvin Carlson calls *the haunted stage*.<sup>17</sup> That is, our reception of *Xolotl Soup* is shaped by Seymour Rosen’s classic photographs of the Asco intervention from 1971. Therefore, its legibility necessarily conjures the ghosts of a Chicano avant-garde past. Like an overture to *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* on view at LACMA in 2008, the exhibitions in *L.A. Xicano* sounded with a polyphonic tempo that showed more historical reverence for a foundational generation of Chicana/o artists and the organizational infrastructure it conceived. *L.A. Xicano*’s compendium was partly corrective, filling a cleavage in our art-historical regard for the figures that place Chicana/o art in the urban landscape, in a way that may have been obscured in *Phantom Sightings*.

Provided the Getty’s emphasis on the Post-World War II period of 1945-1980, *Mapping Another L.A.* and *L.A. Xicano* as a series rose to the occasion. These exhibitions intervened into a California art history that is predicated on a masculinist pantheon of Asher, Hopps, Kienholz, and Ruscha. Presenting hundreds of Chicana/o artists in an unprecedented five shows, a first for Southern California, the *L.A. Xicano* exhibitions imparted a perspective that augmented the center of L.A. art production from the financially-sound west side by reiterating the barrio spaces and architectural vernaculars on the east side which nourish image production, visual expression, political activity, and community-based collaboration. A curatorial attention to the influences of the urban landscape itself – with its twisted network of freeways, bifurcated global networks, and transnational migration – explicated the hybrid and variegated influences of the urban environment in Chicana/o art. While this was evident in *L.A. Xicano*’s other exhibitions, *Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, *Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza*, *Icons of the Invisible: Oscar Castillo*, and *Chican@s Collect: The Durón Family Collection*, none did so with the unwavering viewpoint of *Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement*.



Figure 8: installation view of *Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza* hosted by LACMA. The exhibition was also part of the *L.A. Xicano* series produced for *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980*. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The discovery and restoration of *The Birth of Our Art* is recounted in an interview with Goetz co-founder, Joe Gonzalez. For more, see “Joe Gonzalez Discusses His Reactions to Restored Mural, ‘The Birth of Our Art’” online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DqUxCEPwfg&feature=relmfu>, uploaded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center on November 8, 2011 and last accessed July 2013. The physical medium and dimensions of the mural display at the Fowler are eloquently described in Lauren Roberts’s journalistic account of the show. See Roberts (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 74.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson reference made in Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 74; for more on Lynch, see Hayden (1995), page 27.

<sup>4</sup> Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 74.

<sup>5</sup> Curatorial Statement. Museum wall panel on foam board (recorded by the author on February 22, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Almaraz (1976), page 54.

<sup>7</sup> Quirarte (1984), page 14.

<sup>8</sup> Davalos (2011), page 34.

<sup>9</sup> Villa (2000), page 5.

<sup>10</sup> In the *L.A. Xicano* exhibition catalogue, Carlos and Antonio Ibanez y Bueno were regarded as Self-Help Graphics' co-founders and cited as homosexual lovers. However, we gain little more information into the relationship between these men and the other co-founder, Sister Karen Boccadero, a Franciscan nun. See Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 78.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden (1995), page 8.

<sup>12</sup> Luis C. Garza, "Culture Fix: Luis C. Garza," Fowler Museum at UCLA, December 7, 2011. Video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLXnNe4xeBs>, uploaded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center on January 20, 2012 and last accessed July 2013

<sup>13</sup> Romo (2011), page 19.

<sup>14</sup> "Public Exhibitions" focus moment. Museum wall panel on foam board (recorded by the author on February 22, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> *Xolotl Soup* was a performance collaboration that included Romo, Flores, de la Loza, Sesshu Foster, and Dianna Marisol Santillano.

<sup>16</sup> *Xolotl Soup*. Museum wall panel on foam board (recorded by the author on February 22, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> For more, see Carlson (2003).

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# Economies of Hospitality: Wim Delvoye at the Louvre

*Wim Delvoye—Au Louvre*, curated by Marie-Laure Bernadac

Shown at the Louvre Museum, Paris

May 31, 2012 to September 17, 2012

## Lianne McTavish

As I lean out the window of my second-floor apartment in Cortona, Italy, I notice a woman standing in the street, aiming her camera up at me. She is hoping to photograph a “local” hanging laundry, preserving an authentic slice of contemporary life in the medieval hilltop town made famous by the 2003 American film, *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Such visitors often arrive on tour buses for a single day of shopping, eating, and seeing sights that include the house rented by the recently divorced character played by Diane Lane in the film. After illicitly snapping pictures of Fra Angelico’s painted *Annunciation* (1436) in the Museo Diocesano, tourists typically climb up the town’s narrow stone-paved streets, stopping to take photographs of dark passageways, quaint doorknobs, worn shop signs, well-fed cats, and laden clotheslines. Cortona has in effect become an open-air museum, with inhabitants that more or less willingly perform the role of historical actors. With their shops and homes – the two are often indistinguishable – opened for business, the Cortonese welcome hoards of foreigners armed with credit cards amidst televised news reports of the debt crisis in the Euro zone.

These observations, made while I was teaching in Cortona for the University of Alberta during May of 2012, remained with me when I left Italy to undertake research in more prosperous Paris, encountering, among other things, Wim Delvoye’s installations at the Louvre Museum. Known for his ingeniously pointless shit-making Cloaca machines, controversially tattooed pigs, and intricately designed neo-gothic sculptures, Delvoye produces work that is conceptual, self-referential, and open ended. The official publications promoting his exhibition at the Louvre stated that the Belgian art star was invited to provide a “contemporary counterpoint” at the museum by intervening in such spaces as the reception area beneath the Cour Napoléon, the reconstructed apartments of Napoleon III, and the

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Figures 1 and 2: The author's apartment (left) and a nearby passageway (right) in Cortona, Italy. Images courtesy of Lianne McTavish. Used with permission.

gothic rooms of the Département des Objets d'art ([www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr)). Delvoye gladly accepted the invitation because, in his words, the Louvre Museum is “a strong brand...like Led Zeppelin or Microsoft” ([www.designtrend.com](http://www.designtrend.com)).

Arguably Delvoye's most striking and photo-worthy contribution to the Louvre is *Suppo* (2010), a twisting, thirteen-meter-long Corten steel sculpture located immediately below the apex of I. M. Pei's famous glass pyramid. This grandiose suppository combines the artist's longstanding interest in medieval aesthetics – like the impressive *Tower* temporarily placed in the *cour d'honneur* of the Rodin Museum in 2010, for instance, the laser-cut *Suppo* is laced with references to gothic architecture, particularly cathedral façades – with his career-making exploration of the physical processes of elimination. At the Louvre, however, Delvoye alludes to the rectum in a beautiful work, at odds with the scientifically odoriferous machine first exhibited in 2000. *Suppo*'s setting significantly shapes its meaning, for by engaging with Pei's monumental pyramid, which opened amidst controversy in 1989, the contemporary sculpture both expands and comments on the relatively recent efforts to modernize the Louvre. The museum underwent extensive renovations from 1981 to 1999,

becoming the Grand Louvre as part of the *grands projets* supported by former President François Mitterrand. Designed to portray Paris, and by extension France itself, as founded on impressive cultural traditions but nevertheless open to innovative technologies and the new digital economy, other projects included the Bastille Opera house and the new Bibliothèque nationale de France (incidentally the structure in which I am seated as I write this review). In keeping with the transparent glass pyramid, which creates a centralized focal point for the maze-like Louvre, *Suppo* provides material evidence that established French institutions can embrace change, facing the future with fearless confidence.

While on one hand Delvoye's sculpture fulfills its role in portraying France as a progressive risk-embracing society, on the other hand it refers to bodily functions, a key aspect of the transformed Louvre. The massive reception area beneath the Cour Napoléon was meant to accommodate an increasing number of visitors, orienting them within the museum. The second phase of Louvre renovations included the overhaul of the Richelieu Wing, which opened in 1993 to address further the bodily desires of visitors with its additional bathrooms as well as shopping mall and food court – the first in France. These changes were (and still are) driven by economic necessity, denoting the begrudging acceptance of foreign bodies, and thus the need for foreign capital, in the museum. This welcoming of tourists into a visibly accessible and modernized Louvre is part of broader shifts in economic and cultural policy, shifts that are neither chosen nor entirely controlled by either French government or museum officials, a situation reminiscent of tourism practices in Cortona. With his installations in the Louvre, Delvoye seems to recognize both the complexity of this ongoing economic negotiation and the status of his presence in the museum, generating an eye-candy suppository that epitomizes his “cutting edge” career, even as it associates him with something foreign that is often reluctantly introduced in an effort to achieve cleansing renewal.

Delvoye bluntly admits that his recent work is popular, giving the average Louvre visitor, who “know(s) very little about art,” what he or she wants: rich and luxurious objects that exude materiality (as he indicated on [www.artinamericamagazine.com](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com)). According to the artist, people come to the Louvre to revel in such items as tapestries, not to worship blankly before opaque minimalist canvases, perhaps like those concurrently on display in the Gerhard Richter retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou. Delvoye's provision of optical delight within the Louvre is consistent, but reaches a climax in the apartments of Napoleon III, where “tapisdermied” pigs – polyester molds in porcine shapes covered with decorative silk Indian rugs – relax amidst the ornate stuffed chairs and carved side tables of the leader of the Second Empire. *Kashan* (2010) and *Mughal Jail* (2010) depict sumptuous pigs that, like Delvoye and even tourists such as myself, are outsiders making themselves at



Figure 3: Wim Delvoye's *Suppo* (2010) at the Louvre. Laser-cut stainless steel. Photo by Lianne McTavish. Used with permission.



Figure 4: Installation view of Wim Delvoye's *Kashan* (2010) at the Louvre. Carpet on polyester mold. Image courtesy of Studio Wim Delvoye. Used with permission.

home during a temporary and regulated museum visit. Delvoye claims that his work at the Louvre has been dumbed down for a mass audience, and yet it is both thoughtful and clever, with layers of potential meaning, especially for those with some art education. The tapsidermied pigs evoke, for instance, Delvoye's displacement of his *Art Farm* from Belgium to China, after tattooing live animals was deemed unethical in his native land. By substituting at the Louvre "orientalized" artificial pigs for living animals, the artist invokes a longer history of transnational exchange, highlighting the role of imported textiles in the fashioning of European domestic spaces and identities, as well as the role that colonization played in this process. Like Mitterand, Napoleon III oversaw a vast reorganization of Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century, supporting Haussmann's production of expansive boulevards, while at the same time he pursued dominance in Indochina by, among other things, assisting Britain in the 1860 invasion of Peking. In short, Delvoye draws attention to the consumption of the Other in a timely manner, one suited to both the historical content of the apartments, and the visual exchanges continually occurring within them.

*Wim Delvoye—Au Louvre* is, I believe, commenting on the shifting economy of hospitality at the Louvre, embracing the artist's role as an invited guest who benefits from and is essential to the museum's marketability. Like the tourists who meander through Cortona, bringing an influx of cash even as they blur the boundaries between public and private spaces, Delvoye's installations situate the production and consumption of art within an international web of consumer demand and economic realities.

# New Maternalisms: The Materialities of Art-Making and Becoming-Mother

Curated by Natalie Loveless

Shown at FADO Performance Art Centre, Toronto

March 2012

## Petra Hroch

How do contemporary performance artists experience the materialities and meanings of being an artist and becoming a mother? This is one of the central questions asked by curator Natalie Loveless and the artists who participated in *New Maternalisms*, a weekend-long exhibition of live- and video-based performances, artist talks, and community events presented by FADO Performance Art Centre at Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art, in Toronto. *New Maternalisms* complexified the ways in which we can understand motherhood, art-making, and their co-productive “intra-action” today.<sup>1</sup>

As many of the artists in the exhibition expressed, balancing these two kinds of labor – motherhood and art making – can often be more *counter-* than co-productive. Several of the participants in *New Maternalisms* noted that the structures of the professional art community are not always hospitable to family life. Many artists who become mothers struggle to maintain an active artistic practice, especially in the absence of material supports such as paid parental leave, affordable child care, and, in some cases, the absence of the support of a co-parent and/or extended family and friends. As some of the participants described in the exhibition’s round table discussion, the idealized figure of the contemplative, single-minded, autonomous, creative, publicly-celebrated (and historically male and “masculinized”) artist “genius,” as well as the conventions that support it, stand in stark contrast to the attention-divided, multi-tasking, collaborative, mundane, “private” – and historically female and “feminized” – labor involved in parenting. Although the concept of the artist “genius” has often been challenged by feminist artists and art historians since the mid twentieth century, enabling women to participate in the art world in new ways, *New Maternalisms* raised the question of whether structural inequities persist in twenty-first century parenting practices when it comes to the division of labor involved in the care of children.

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At the same time, although art-making and parenting may well be different kinds of labor, the unchallenged reproduction of a necessarily counter-productive schism between art-making and parenting was precisely what *New Maternalisms* sought to challenge by questioning the material and discursive barriers set up between the two practices. In this regard, the performances revealed both the ways in which motherhood can complicate and transform the work of the artist, as well as the ways in which being an artist can complicate and transform the work of being a mother. The joys and pains, imperatives and absurdities, silences and cries, breakdowns and breakthroughs of the twelve performances and one roundtable discussion revealed that immensely rich, creative, co-productive possibilities emerge when mother-artists/artist-mothers make works that engage both kinds of performative practice together.

Jill Miller's social intervention *The Milk Truck*, parked next to the curb in front of the Mercer Union Contemporary Gallery, was the first artwork visitors encountered when approaching the building. The truck, topped with a bubblegum-pink breast and red beacon-light nipple, used humor and hypervisibility to draw attention to the politics of breastfeeding as a private versus a public act. The truck also functioned as a mobile emergency vehicle that came to the rescue of mothers who experienced discrimination and distress from hostile reactions to breastfeeding in public. It was an intervention that, as Miller explained during the artists' roundtable discussion, did not arise from a "lactivist" stance or the promotion of breastfeeding. Rather, *The Milk Truck* arose as a response to ongoing intolerance directed at women who choose to breastfeed in public. Capped with its giant pink breast and replete with a support crew, the truck comes to the rescue call of women experiencing discrimination when breastfeeding in public and creates a collective response to potentially isolating experiences.

Like *The Milk Truck*, H el ene Matte's action *L'Essence de la Vie* deployed humor and play, though with a darker tinge. Matte involved exhibition visitors in a series of games, songs, and dances, invited them to share snacks and perform tricks, and thereby dissolved the distinction between audience and performer. She mixed collaboration (in the form of singing together and conversational audience engagements) with spectacle (such as making faces through a potty-training toilet seat) and soliloquy (such as dramatically reciting poetry replete with *jeu-du-mots*). Her performance kept the audience on edge as her perspective shifted and her mood swung from that of an energetic child to that of an exasperated and exhausted mother. Also a physically demanding demonstration, Alejandra Herrera Silva's *Challenge* was a three-hour expression of repetitive household tasks. She used mundane objects such as jugs of milk, bottles of wine, stemware, and glass bowls to construct a stoic representation of motherhood, and conduct an *in vivo* test of her own embodied endurance



Figure 1: Alejandra Herrera Silva performing in *Challenge* (2012). © Alejandra Herrera and FADO Performance Inc. Photo by Henry Chan. Used with permission

as well as the durability of the material world around her. Affective tension built up through a silent and seemingly ceaseless cycling of tasks such as pouring, spilling, wiping, sweeping, and folding. The mounting pressure was so palpable that, though it first presented a shock, it came as somewhat of a relief to the audience when she suddenly threw wine glasses across the room and shattered them against the wall. The pressure-mounting then resumed as she swept the gallery floor covered in glass shards with bare feet and balance-walked on a row of up-side down glass bowls. Herrera's performance was indeed a balancing act: a test of the tension between the strength and fragility of glass, a negotiation of the nurturing of milk and the numbing of wine, a movement between the absurdist repetition of repetitive, invisible, and erasable "domestic" tasks and the visibility and permanence of public "artist statements" – words she spelled by spitting wine through a stencil to stain white cloth, which she framed and hung in a row on the wall.

Lovisa Johansson contributed two live performances to *New Maternalisms* that explored the repetitive labor involved in feeding (*Milky Way*) and sleeping (*Jumping Lullaby*). In *Milky Way*,



Figure 2: Lovisa Johansson performing in *Milky Way* (2012). © Lovisa Johansson and FADO Performance Inc. Photo by Henry Chan. Used with permission.

Johansson was encircled (confined?) by baby bottle couplings, each of which consisted of a filled bottle with a rubber nipple that dripped milk into an initially empty bottle below it. Johansson exhibited meticulous care and concentration to keep the milk flowing in these lactic hourglasses. We could interpret the artist's concentration as a kind of meditative contemplation, since Johansson dutifully and carefully tended to the bottles for three hours. In contrast, the exhaustion that can result from watchful endurance was made evident in *Jumping Lullaby*, in which Johansson tried to put countless ringing alarm clocks to sleep with a mixture of care and attention, yet increasingly overt and utter exasperation.

Marlene Renaud-B's *Dis/sociation* explored the diffraction of subjectivity involved in motherhood and took the notion of "breaking points" to an extreme. Her performance incorporated the sounds of technological interference from baby monitors, microphones, cameras, and speakers, the visuals of night vision projections, mirrors, and metal objects, and the "mixed media" of electrical wires, glass, a rubber mask, and liquids – all to keep her audiences on edge and "to explore the limits of sight and sound as access points to the maternal body."<sup>2</sup> Although her actions were not conventionally recognizable as acts of mothering, they expressed some of the affectivity of motherhood provoked by enduring bodily changes and mediated relationships with oneself and a child. Renaud-B's performance was anxiety-producing and incited us to worry and fear; we might say it was one of the more extreme invitations, or even imperatives, to "care" in *New Maternalisms*.

In addition to live events, the exhibition included a number of performative video installations that explored themes related to motherhood and art practice. Beth Hall and Mark Cooley's *Safe* projected onto a full gallery wall overwhelming information about parenthood through lines of text that cut across intimate videos of body parts engaged in domestic activities such as hand washing and flossing. Gina Miller's *Family Tissues* expanded through a small looping video the meanings we make of the placenta, as it documented Miller thawing, discussing, and burying with her three sons the connective tissue that was part of their gestational development. Alice de Visscher's *Dream or Nightmare of Motherhood* documented her flirtations with motherhood as "not yet mother" in a corner of her kitchen.<sup>3</sup> Her life-sized, window-like video installation portrayed the artist blowing up a white balloon and bursting it over her belly, followed by her suspending from her breasts two washcloths dripping with milk. Proclaiming in the label text that "something similar could happen one day to my body," de Visscher invoked the affective ambivalence of anticipating pregnancy, childbirth, and becoming-mother. Dillon Paul and Lindsey Wolkowicz's durational video *In Place* treated the intimate, everyday space of the bedroom as a site for renegotiating time and being. From the perspective of an overhead camera, viewers could observe almost three hours of footage that documented various combinations of family members who performed mundane activities on their bed (as well as in-between moments

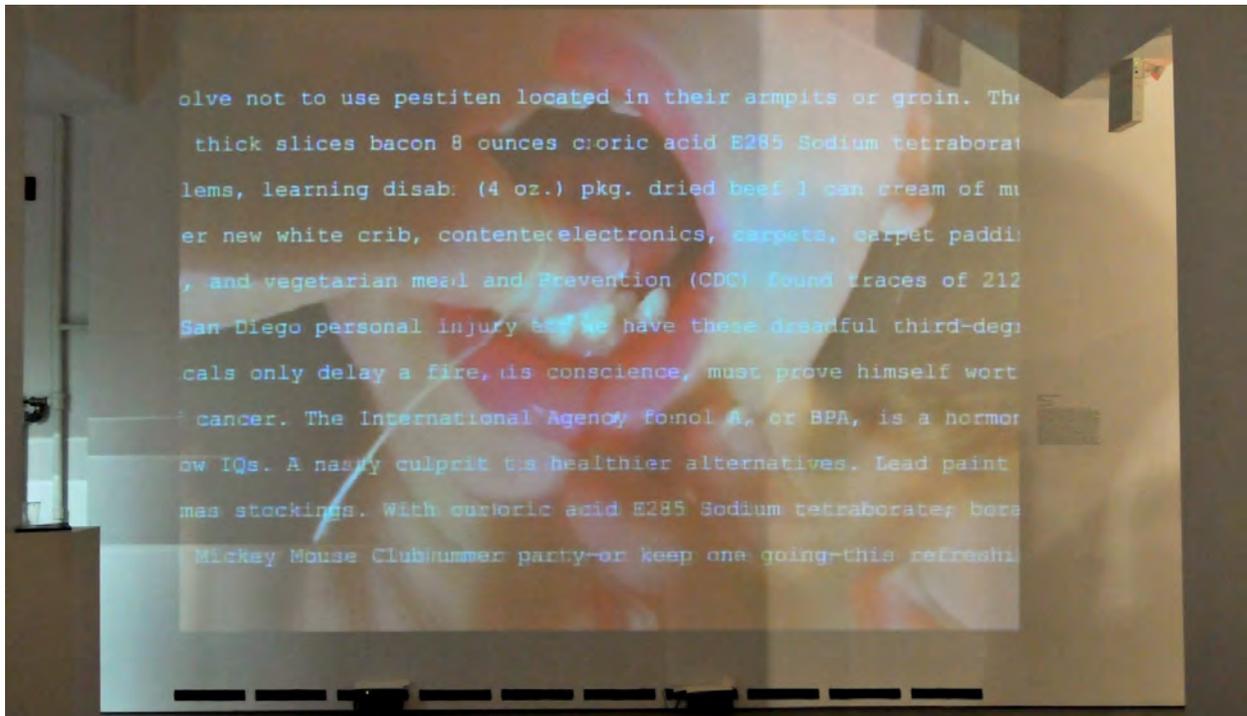


Figure 3: Installation view of Beth Hall and Mark Cooley's *Safe* (2012). © Beth Hall, Mark Cooley, and FADO Performance Inc. Photo by Henry Chan. Used with permission.



Figure 4: Installation view of Alice de Visscher's *Dream or Nightmare of Motherhood* (2012). © Alice de Visscher and FADO Performance Inc. Photo by Henry Chan. Used with permission.

when the bed was empty). Masha Godovannaya presented in an intimate, closet-sized “artist’s cabin” a triple-split-screen, thirty-nine minute video called *Hunger* that featured, in the central image, her breastfeeding her son and, in the images to the left and to the right, scenes that depicted, respectively, her experiences as a mother-artist and her son’s becoming-artist as he played (or resisted playing) the violin. Victoria Singh’s twenty-two minute video *SON/ART: Kurtis the 7 Chakra Boy* turned mothering into an art practice when she involved her son in seven year-long experiences that corresponded with the seven Hindu Chakras. The film documented moments of the child’s responses to the influences of the artist and the broader culture through glimpses of what each year involved.

The live- and video-based performances at Mercer Union unfolded against Lenka Clayton’s ambient and sonorous *Maternity Leave*, a live Skype-based performance that transmitted into the gallery sounds which emanated from her home, where the artist was “on leave.” Clayton’s sound-performance brought to the fore the “background” domestic context in which she was situated – and the context in which most of the *New Maternalisms* artists have once been situated. The child’s cries and giggles, as well as the artist’s attempts to soothe and entertain him, did not so much make life into art as remind us of the life supposedly



Figure 5: Installation view of Lenka Clayton’s *Maternity Leave* (2012). © Lenka Clayton and FADO Performance Inc. Photo by Henry Chan. Used with permission.



Figure 6: Roundtable discussion with curator Natalie Loveless (in a black shirt) and artists from *New Maternalisms*. © FADO Performance Inc. Photo by Henry Chan. Used with permission.

“outside” of art-making. Writer Christine Pountney, as if to close the circuit, connected those who could not be present with the events unfolding in the gallery space by live-blogging throughout the weekend.<sup>4</sup>

As Loveless elucidated in her curatorial statement, *New Maternalisms* aimed to bring together and amplify the expressions of a new generation of women artists: the daughters of women who were part of feminism’s second-wave and are now mothers themselves. The views and voices that emerged from this exhibition were varied, but what became clear was that the work of performance art, and the performative practice of mothering, are precisely that: work, labor, practice. *New Maternalisms* expressed a complex understanding of the term “labor” in the contexts of doing professional work, becoming a mother (which includes the sense of labor as giving birth), and performing parental tasks once children are born. The goal was not to build a united collectivity around an ideal or essentialist notion of the artist or the mother, but rather to embrace the complexities of art-making and parenting, and to create networks that undermine structures of isolation.

*New Maternalisms* not only drew attention to critical issues, it performed new relations. The exhibition created the opportunity to converse and connect with artists, mothers, and others, across generations and among members of communities-in-the-making, as well as

those who care in broader senses. Indeed, *New Maternalisms* successfully curated – and created – the kind of collaborative, connected, and caring community it sought.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> New materialist feminist Karen Barad coined the term “intra-action” to describe the co-productive interaction among objects and/as agencies in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). See Barad (2007), page 33. As Natalie Loveless (2012) describes in the *New Maternalism* exhibition catalogue, the exhibition is informed by new materialist feminist philosophy and sought to bring these perspectives together with contemporary performance art practices as a way to explore art-making and motherhood.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Loveless (2012), page 8.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “not yet mother” and the location of the actions were specified in the label copy that accompanied the video.

<sup>4</sup> Pountney’s blog entries remain posted at <http://newmaternalisms.wordpress.com/>. Last accessed July 2013.

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# Ethnographic Terminalia: Field, Studio, Lab

Curated by Kate Hennessy, Fiona P. McDonald, Trudi Lynn Smith, Craig Campbell, Stephanie Takaragawa, and Maria Brodine, with Partnering Curator Erica Lehrer.  
Shown at the Eastern Bloc Centre for New Media and Interdisciplinary Arts, Montreal  
November 2011

## Shelley Butler

Now in its third year, *Ethnographic Terminalia* is a popular and anticipated exhibition held in conjunction with the annual American Anthropological Association (AAA) Meetings. *Ethnographic Terminalia* highlights multi-media installations created by anthropologists and artists, and proposes new ways of conducting and presenting critical social inquiry. As stated in its promotional material, the exhibition series seeks to create “generative ethnographies that do not subordinate the sensorium to the expository and theoretical text or monograph.” Indeed, *Ethnographic Terminalia* exhibitions offer an alternative to the *status quo* of academic meetings that rely on conference papers and PowerPoint presentations to communicate research. Rather than listening to research presentations, *Ethnographic Terminalia* visitors socialize (openings have a hip, cocktail-party ambiance), look at and interact with art, are immersed in audio and video installations through the use of headphones, and wander freely in gallery space.

The edition of *Ethnographic Terminalia* held in Montreal was organized around the thematic of “field, studio, lab.” The curatorial collective called upon artists and anthropologists to consider each of these three domains simultaneously as sites of cultural and academic production, as well as lived experience. With over 25 contributors, the exhibition addressed a wide variety of substantive issues that resonate with humanities and social science research, including global outsourcing, waste collection, diasporic identities, religious ritual, racial stereotypes, traumatic memory, urban space, and democracy. The majority of participants were artists, though there were a number of visual anthropologists fluent in multi-media production. The participants who identified foremost as anthropologists were largely associated with the *Centre for Ethnographic Research in the Aftermath of Violence (CEREV)*, this

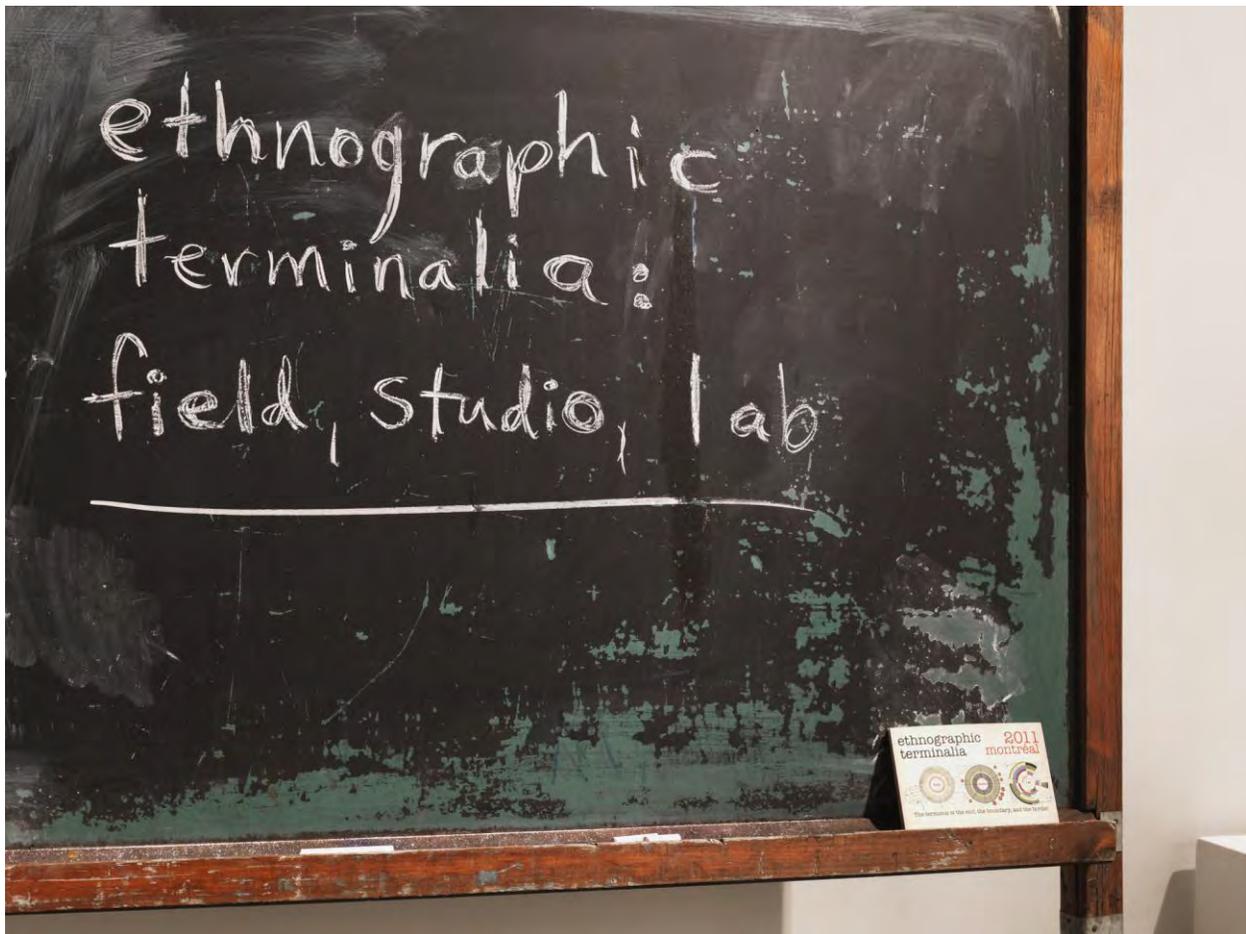


Figure 1: *Ethnographic Terminalia* introductory display. Photo by Rachel Topham. Used with permission.

year's local partnering institution headed by Erica Lehrer at Concordia University.<sup>1</sup> Collaborative engagements, between artists and anthropologists, and between artists and their "research subjects," were evident in many projects. Following gallery conventions, participants submitted artist statements that were available for consultation in a binder in the gallery and posted online.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike previous *Ethnographic Terminalias*, the Montreal show was anchored by one piece: a video of London-based, Panamanian artist Humberto Vélez's performance piece *The Fight*, which was presented at the Tate Modern in London in 2007. *The Fight* was created in collaboration with amateur boxing clubs from the museum's borough of Southwark, along with the street dance company Flawless, with music composed by rap MC Mic Assassin. The one off performance involved two simultaneous processions of local amateur boxers, one led by a bagpiper and the other by two African drummers, traveling via barge on the Thames

river and by foot over the Millennium Bridge, and converging at a boxing ring installed in the “high culture” Turbine Hall of the Tate. The inclusion of a series of choreographed, non-competitive fights by boxers of varying ages and abilities framed amateur boxing as popular dance and art, but also celebrated the energy and aesthetics of a mixed city. To create *The Fight*, Vélez combined fieldwork with artistic vision, researching the local neighborhood, creating relationships with project participants, and facilitating collaborative multi-disciplinary workshops during a four month period. This culminated in a spectacular, orchestrated spatial occupation of the Tate. This sense of research as a process of creation and intervention was highlighted in another piece, *The Tie*, by Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier and Marie-Josée Proulx. Overturning the traditional role of fieldworker as neutral participant-observer, and through brilliant use of technology, the anthropologists staged a virtual musical encounter between a traditional guitarist in Santiago, Chile, and a Cuban



Figure 2: Installation view with Ian Kirkpatrick’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (2011) at front-center, video of Humberto Vélez’s *The Fight* (2009) at rear-center, Andrew Norman Wilson’s *Toy Boat Task* (2011) at left, and Stephen Foster’s *Remediating Curtis: Toy Portraits* (2011) at right. Photo by Rachel Topham. Used with permission.

trumpeter who has lived in Montreal since the age of 12. Presented in a small dark room, the media installation created a delicate atmosphere, positioning the audience between projections of the musicians who performed physically alone, yet were virtually and musically connected. Boudreault-Fournier and Proulx refer to their fieldwork as an “echo lab,” alluding to the uniqueness of their intervention.

*BioARTCAMP* documented a hybrid laboratory and artistic project that took place in Banff National Park, Alberta in 2011, facilitated by Jennifer Willett, head of INCUBATOR: Hybrid Laboratory at the Intersection of Art, Science and Ecology.<sup>3</sup> *BioARTCAMP* brought together scientists, artists, filmmakers, and university students to participate in a biological science lab (constructed in the field) and to create ecologically-oriented art. The projects ranged from rigorous inquiry regarding local pollutants to photographing a campy female model and nude mannequin “in nature.” At *Ethnographic Terminalia*, visitors gained only a brief impression of *BioARTCAMP* based on three framed photographs of participants and Boy Scout style “biocamp” badges, bearing the slogan, “A Rocky Mountain Adventure in Art and Biology.” In contrast, Public Laboratory for Open Technology and Science – an organization that develops open-source, do-it-yourself tools for the investigation of pollutants in everyday environments – used the gallery as its field and laboratory.<sup>4</sup> Visitors could interact with a Spectrometer and a Roomba Indoor Air Quality Monitoring system designed to explore the gallery. The devices attracted casual attention (they did not seem to always be functioning), but one imagines a very different outcome when the tools are used by local communities with pressing health concerns and activist aspirations. In the gallery, the tools were perceived as aesthetic curiosities and playful novelties.

Sound and visual installations transported audiences to a stunning array of elsewhere: by donning headsets, a visitor could eavesdrop on everyday life in Greece (Luc Messinezis); listen to a religious festival in rural Italy (La Cosa Preziosa); and witness a filmic meditation about a rare stretch of public shoreline in New York City’s Jamaica Bay (Sarah Christman), to name a few examples. Other videos – particularly those associated with CEREV – consciously explored epistemological, personal, and ethical issues involved in engaging legacies of Argentinian political repression (Florencia Marchetti); the Israeli-Palestine conflict (Joseph Rosen); and narratives of Holocaust memory (student work from a public history course at Concordia). The density of experiences and stories revealed by installations in *Ethnographic Terminalia* was remarkable and demanded a willingness to listen and watch attentively. This depth was especially engaging in CEREV’s component of *Ethnographic Terminalia*, reflecting its success as a *humanities lab* that fosters dialogue, exchange, and the vetting of curatorial projects amongst affiliated researchers and students around the theme of memories of violence.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3: Installation view with photos from Jennifer Willet's *BioARTCAMP* (2011) at left, Laura Malacart's *Parliament* (2011) hanging at upper-right, and posters from Monica Eileen Patterson's *Constructions of Childhood in Apartheid South Africa* (2011) on the rear right wall. Photo by Rachel Topham. Used with permission.



Figure 4: Installation view of Luc Messinezis's *Eavesdropping Greece* (2011). Photo by Rachel Topham. Used with permission.

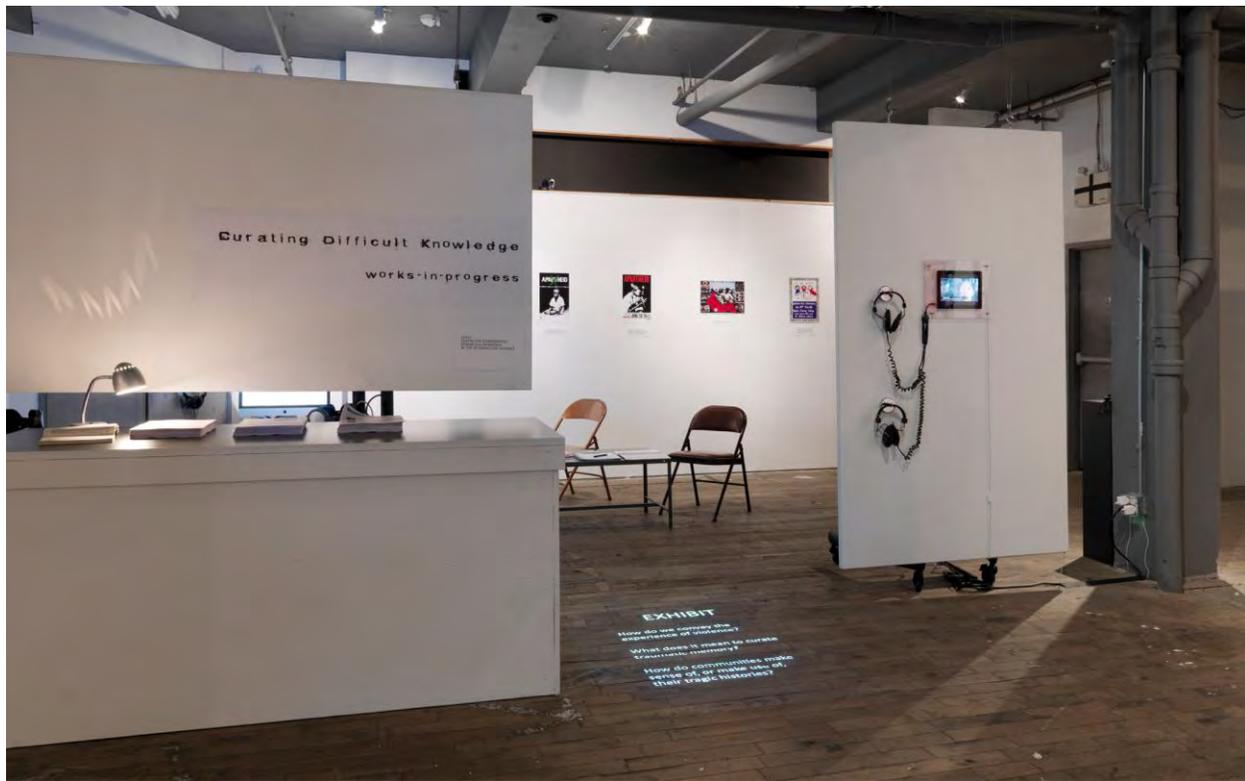


Figure 5: CEREV works in progress. Photo by Rachel Topham. Used with permission.

As in reflexive ethnography, artworks and installations in the exhibition made productive use of personal experience and everyday material artifacts. Animations of Romanian communist-era domestic objects (miniature cookbooks, porcelain figures, a schoolgirl's uniform) were juxtaposed with video interviews with Bucharest residents recollecting their past (Alyssa Grossman and Selena Kimball); recordings of sounds and voices from a Radio-Canada newsroom were used by Chantal Francoeur – a seasoned reporter herself – to explore the meaning of media convergence for the national public broadcaster; Erin Newell's poetic video made use of fragments of old family footage that documented her maternal grandfather and kin crossing the Atlantic (USA-Ireland) in the 1950s, creating a meditation on landscape and attachment; as a self-described “mixed-race mixed media artist,” Chantal Gibson used an outdated Canadian history book to evoke notions of cultural visibility and invisibility. By juxtaposing a photo of the artist's mother as a young black girl with a chapter about British Loyalists who settled in Nova Scotia in 1783, Gibson pointed to the absence of any attention given to the difficult experiences of 3000 Black Loyalists. Gibson describes her work as privileging “texture over text,” a provocative statement for an academic audience.

A roundtable discussion held at the gallery with local artists and scholars from the fields of anthropology, art, communications, and history addressed the tension between art's emphasis on experience, affect, and evocation and textual ethnography, which is more suited to didactic museums than galleries. Reflecting an illustrative, more textual approach, Monica Eileen Patterson's display of posters of children in Apartheid South Africa offered a succinct account of key moments in the complex history of competing constructions of childhood. In contrast, conceptual art such as Stephen Foster's multi-media exploration of early ethnographic images of American Indians and their impacts on popular culture relied on affect and evocation, rather than narrative and explicit analysis. Working in an ironic mode, Foster presented miniature toy Indian figures (made in Germany) on pedestals, and hung luminous portraits of the toys in light boxes, mimicking movie advertising conventions. The portraits also referenced early ethnographic photography by Edward E. Curtis, though only the title of the piece, *Re-Mediating Curtis: Toy Portraits* hints at this artistic intention. In response to a question regarding the exhibition's conspicuous lack of labels on individual works, curator Kate Hennessy described the curatorial team as "children of MOA," referencing the University of British Columbia, Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology (MOA), an institution that honors the aesthetics and cultural power of Northwest Coast First Nation art. By steering *Ethnographic Terminalia* in this direction, the curators challenged academic desires for coherency and comprehensiveness; consequently, it was not always easy to "make sense" of pieces on display. Attempts to transport visitors acoustically into "the field" were reminiscent of anthropology's calls for reflexive experiments in "writing culture" to draw attention to the fieldwork process. Many artists presented fragmented images and sound that immersed visitors in a moment – an experience – as opposed to offering a classical, linear ethnography. As a teacher working with difficult histories in Canada, such as the marginalization of black and aboriginal cultures, I appreciate that artistic interventions can focus attention on the material objects of everyday life (toys, books, photos) in profoundly moving ways. But I want art to be placed amongst, or against, historical artifacts and framing texts. Foster's piece, for instance, would take on greater resonance if it were displayed in the First Peoples Gallery of the Royal British Columbia Museum, where segments of Curtis films show continuously.

A key piece, *We Have Never Been Modern*, by artist and graphic designer Ian Kirkpatrick, was inspired by the artist statements submitted for *Ethnographic Terminalia*. Commissioned to create a brochure or catalogue for the exhibition, Kirkpatrick instead built a fascinating fold-out cardboard model of the Tate Modern, incorporating texts from the artist statements, as well as imagery from the Tate and an array of other sources, including Pablo Picasso, Walter Benjamin, Bruno Latour, local street art, Roy Lichtenstein, and iconic landmarks such as the Louvre.<sup>6</sup> Visitors could open the model mini-Tate to look at the Turbine Hall, the space



Figure 6: Installation view with Ian Kirkpatrick's *We Have Never Been Modern* (2011) at front-center, Siraj Izhar's *Tent X: Democracy Village, Parliament Square* (2011) at left, Andrew Norman Wilson's *Toy Boat Task* (2011) at rear-right, as well as Chantal Gibson's *Historical In(ter)ventions: Altered Texts & Border Stories* (2010) and Momentech's *International Public Space Library* (2011) at rear-left. Photo by Rachel Topham. Used with permission.

where Vélez originally staged *The Fight*. Kirkpatrick's piece brought home the academic, research-driven nature of much of the art on display at *Ethnographic Terminalia* by way of its complex intertextuality. For instance, Laura Malacart's artist statement, for her photographic portraits entitled *Parliament*, cited philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour as a source of inspiration. This led Kirkpatrick to read Latour and title his piece after the author's seminal work (1993). Is it by chance, by clever design, or due to membership in a shared community of discourse that Latour's role as an ethnographer of science labs and his sensitivity to hybrid social and political forms resonate strongly with *Ethnographic Terminalia*?

Kirkpatrick's own meditation focused on the question of what art is today, as he evoked competing art histories and the varying role of museums as commanding temples or forums of open communication and grassroots occupation. His piece was provocative for its visual

intricacy and its “full” narrative, which was greatly enriched for this viewer by hearing the artist discuss his work. This experience pointed to the challenge of opacity in much contemporary art, an issue that is mirrored in critiques leveled against theoretically-dense ethnography that can seem inaccessible to some audiences. For many anthropologists, exhibiting their work in galleries is a form of public scholarship, an attempt to make their work more accessible. Yet art does not necessarily “speak for itself” and the pedagogical and affective power of hearing artists speak about their work should not be underestimated. The same can also be said of the process of witnessing others respond to art, which is a significant part of the sociality of gallery visiting.

Kirkpatrick’s piece also alluded reflexively to “the museum,” which became a kind of “fourth space” in *Ethnographic Terminalia*. A public discussion on research, ethics, and community led by Emelie Chhangur, Assistant Director and Curator of the Art Gallery at York University, introduced visitors to Vélez’ more recent work, which resulted in a similar collaborative, choreographed, and highly-energetic spatial occupation of the Walker Court in the Art Gallery of Ontario by local First Nations and Toronto’s Urban Runners (parkours).<sup>7</sup> Other pieces in *Ethnographic Terminalia* focused on exhibitions and self-display as tools for promoting public engagement. For instance, MomenTech’s *International Public Space Library* displayed books with *ex libris* stickers pasted inside that invited visitors to take them. This is part of a global interactive project in which anyone can donate or take books wherever they are circulated. Siraj Izhar’s *Tent X: Democracy Village, Parliament Square* presented crumpled sketches of slogans from the Occupy movement in London in an effort to evoke, in the artist’s words, “the topology of signs at the encampment” as an inclusive, “post-political space.” In these and other instances, the meaningfulness and politics of civic public space, as well as exhibitions, were amplified. Whereas the 2010 *Ethnographic Terminalia* in New Orleans was closely linked to post-Katrina local art activism, a similar sense of community engagement was lacking in Montreal.<sup>8</sup> It would have been enriching to include art that interacted with Eastern Bloc’s mixed-income, culturally- and linguistically-diverse neighborhood, and its struggles against development and gentrification. Or, could there have been a gesture toward the nascent Occupy Montreal movement? Digital technologies and art making can document contemporary developments such as these much more quickly than traditional academic publications.

For contributors to *Ethnographic Terminalia*, Eastern Bloc Gallery offered an intimate yet public space to explore processes that are often hidden from view and clouded in mystique (those which take place in the lab and studio), or can become lost in translation (the dynamics of field experience which exceed academic texts). In response to the thematic of “field, studio, lab,” contributors offered hybrid pieces that were conceptual, poetic, subtle, and fragmented – as well as documentary and activist-oriented. As an ensemble, the

exhibition challenged not only textual anthropology, but also the notion of a pristine art gallery.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> See <http://cerev.concordia.ca/>, last accessed May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://ethnographicterminalia.org/>, last accessed May 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://incubatorartlab.com/>, last accessed May 2013.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the conceptualization of a *humanities lab*, see Hiatt (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Kirkpatrick, personal communication (April 7, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> *The Awakening Giigozhkozimin* by Humberto Vélez was commissioned in conjunction with *Humberto: Vélez: Aesthetics of Collaboration*, Art Gallery of York University, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For more on *Ethnographic Terminalia* in New Orleans, see Brodine (2011).

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# BookReviews



## **Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics**

Shannon Jackson

New York and London: Routledge (2011)

ISBN-10: 0415486017

### **Rebecca Uchill**

In his 1960 radio address and essay “Modernist Painting,” art critic Clement Greenberg advanced a strategy of emphasizing characteristics specific to each artistic medium as a means of resisting devaluation and assimilation to the culture industry. Greenberg wrote:

The arts could save themselves from [post-Enlightenment] leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained by any other kind of activity.<sup>1</sup>

Greenberg’s appraisal of medium-specificity as enabling the autonomy of painting – independent from sculpture, as from representational bridges to the lived world – essentialized an expressive platform in order to investigate that which could be expressly enabled and delimited within it. One half-century later, Shannon Jackson’s timely *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011) offers a contemporary examination of the power and limits of supporting structures for cultural expression in the expanded social and institutional spheres. Though this focus immediately appears to resist Greenberg’s boundaries between art and its contingent arenas, it may also be understood as indulging a type of Greenbergian logic, in the treatment of institutional and social engagements that have been theorized more recently as mediums unto themselves. A distinguished scholar of performance, Jackson compares these developments in the visual arts with parallel approaches and discussions in theater and performance studies. She defines social practice with recourse to Nicolas Bourriaud’s *relational art*, in which intersubjectivity acts as a necessary substrate.<sup>2</sup> In the works Bourriaud valorizes, the artistic medium is comprised of a rhizomic and unwieldy social sphere, to which, Jackson recognizes, it is infrastructurally bound as a “support” mechanism. Accordingly, Jackson’s analysis favors heteronomy and

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<http://www.macs-review.org/>

entanglement over autonomy and transcendence – though she provides an ample historiographic spectrum of positions on the social entrenchment of art.<sup>3</sup>

The objects of Jackson's analysis are works that "provoke reflection on the supporting infrastructures of both aesthetic objects and living beings," a maneuver that she traces to Bertolt Brecht in theater and Marcel Duchamp and Minimalism in the plastic arts.<sup>4</sup> This is one justification for the book's cross-disciplinary approach. *Social Works* also explains its use of a performance studies lens for viewing projects more conventionally sited in the visual arts on the basis of common tools for project execution (i.e. production documents) and comparable modes of reception (durational assembly).<sup>5</sup> The book presents instructive state-of-the-field style juxtapositions, as in the introduction's presentation of Maria Lind and Hans-Thies Lehmann as spokespersons for non-object based durational art and post-dramatic sculptural theater, respectively.<sup>6</sup> A chapter on theatricality in Institutional Critique demonstrates how theater studies and art criticism might interpret the same work differently – with William Pope.L's crawl pieces provoking a "choreographic" read by performance scholar André Lepecki compared with an "interventionist" analysis by curator Nato Thompson.<sup>7</sup> The book navigates its multidisciplinary territories with dexterity and clarity. Jackson's impressive command of current conversations in the visual arts is relayed in tandem with elucidating parallels in the arena of performance studies. For example, her overview of the Claire Bishop/Grant Kester debates over contemplative versus dialogical provocations in relational art opens a discussion of related writing on community theater, published by Sonja Kuflinec and Sara Brady in performance studies publications.<sup>8</sup>

The case studies in *Social Works* are selected on the basis of exposing their supporting structures, with Jackson arguing that such demonstrations help to reveal the parameters of institutional and social systems.<sup>9</sup> The chapter on theater groups The Builders Association and Rimini Protokoll thus opens with a discussion on networked globalism and immaterial economies via co-authored writings by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. The chapter on Santiago Sierra and theater group Touchable Stories introduces various theorizations of critical assembly, from Kester and Bishop/Kuflinec and Brady, as well as from Brecht and Theodor Adorno, Bourriaud, Jacques Rancière, and others. A monographic chapter on Mierle Ukeles dedicates slightly lengthier analysis to her work within art institutions (the Wadsworth Athenaeum, *Art Journal*) than to the artist's extra-museal undertakings such as *Touch Sanitation* (1977-1980) or *The Social Mirror* (1983), which might be more likely subjects for a book focusing on social engagements of art. By looking at the theme of "care" in Ukeles work as conveyed from domestic to museal to civic contexts, *Social Works* may suggest a parallel between one exemplary career in socially-engaged art and the legacy of Institutional Critique as theorized

by Brian Holmes: one shifting the object of engagement from institutions of art to what Holmes calls “Extra-Disciplinary Investigations” of the institutions of life.<sup>10</sup>

*Social Works* offers a rich multidisciplinary groundwork for theorizing the infrastructural support systems that convey objects, ideas, and publics as components of cultural productions. Some readers of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* may feel that Jackson does not go far enough in this respect: despite the book’s stake in investigating an “infrastructural aesthetic,” it rarely expounds the orchestrations of the museum curatorial endeavor in particular, such as the institutional dynamics of caring for works that occupy the public sphere (Mass MoCA’s \$1 purchase of Pope.L’s *Black Factory* [2004-2005] in order to carry its vehicular insurance) or the artistic production of alternative institutional models (art collective Temporary Services’ non-normative donor relationship with a benefactor who provided the community art space Mess Hall for \$1 annual rent). Production infrastructures are most extensively reported in the book’s final chapter on visual artist Paul Chan’s staged production of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007), presented with a short comparative history of the WPA Federal Theater Project. Here we learn about the particulars of the curatorial assignment, of local distributions of capital, and of community stake-building, as they are conceived as part of the artist’s conceptual intent; Chan himself illustrates his project’s alignments with government, media, and other local entities in an organizational map.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Jackson situates art and theatrical works within the infrastructural complexes of political economies. For example, Elmgreen and Dragset’s *Welfare Show* (2005-2006), is read against the backdrop of 1980s and 90s welfare retrenchment in Western Europe. Jackson argues that this environment simultaneously fostered concern about the notions of “‘institution,’ ‘system,’ and ‘governance,’” alongside “telling if not fully processed attachments to concepts that could occasionally be placed as their opposite – say, ‘flexibility,’ ‘resistance,’ and ‘agency.’”<sup>12</sup> Scholars of social practices of art and the institutions that support them will recall that this same context produced a number of critical reflections on the challenges of reconstituting museums as critical spaces for producing culture and convening heterogenous publics.<sup>13</sup> In comparison, Jackson’s book is less invested in examining the institutionally-produced public sphere as such; the author is primarily concerned with the institutional support of artistic work, and treats the “supporting publics” of the subtitle through the range of claims to audience engagement made by creative producers while being supported by public agencies. In this sense, Jackson’s methodology is one that pursues an artist-first scope of inquiry that also treats institutional contexts.

The book’s engagement with pressing debates in contemporary art and theater – over the conflicting tendencies to resist deskilling in theater circles and to embrace that same strategy in the visual arts, over the efficacies of audience activity, over the exigencies of institutional

engagement – positioned it at the center of these discussions immediately upon its publication. The contribution of *Social Works* can thus be productively illustrated with a brief description of two other authors' projects that bracketed it. Art theorist Claire Bishop's *Brooklyn Rail* article on deskilling in December of 2011, published shortly after *Social Works*, made explicit a particular tension growing between theater and the visual arts' radically different respective tendencies to abhor and embrace deskilled performance.<sup>14</sup> In that piece, Bishop suggested that the "best" forms of deskilling cleared a space for a "productive" viewer engagement with spectacle. More recently, Bishop returned to the question of audience engagement with a critical eponymous history of the "Artificial Hells" of the active audience.<sup>15</sup> Art historian Martha Buskirk's *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (2003) chronicled conceptual artworks that necessitate and complicate institutional support; in the months following the publication of Jackson's book, Buskirk's *Creative Enterprise* (2012) reframed that inquiry in business terms – showing how the complicities of cultural infrastructures allow for highly specialized art business practices.<sup>16</sup> Jackson's book constructively compares performance with visual art (not delimited to performance art) in order to argue for public engagement that is both socially and aesthetically meaningful, and for a more nuanced critical mode of address to the complexities of infrastructural resonance.

*Social Works* suggests that the current zeitgeist of performance and social practices in the visual arts can be productively considered through performance studies approaches to "avowals of support" made complicated in modernism's wake. Jackson offers this framework as a means for understanding all cultural works that address ontologies of infrastructure; one could imagine these as useful stakes in unpacking contemporary artistic endeavors beyond those given in *Social Works*, such as David Levine's *Actors At Work* (2006), a play for which Equity actors were hired to "perform" (and receive union credits for doing the alienated labor of) their day jobs, and artist Fritz Haeg's insistence on budgets with zero values listed for line-items that demand volunteers, donations of supplies, or other assurances of community buy-in. These projects, and others like them, could be grounds for a development of Jackson's rubric beyond works that expose (or embrace) their structural systems, to ask how distinct expressions of support might succeed or articulate differently. For the museum worker or scholar of curatorial work, that line of inquiry may include asking how the museum could be better understood as the heterogeneous entity that it actually is. How might institutions assert their inherent flexibilities, contradictions, or poetics? Such questions, embedded in *Social Works*, open up the possibility of viewing interdependency as a medium and heteronomy as a strategy, both possessing unexpectedly productive, liberatory potential.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Greenberg (1993), page 86.

<sup>2</sup> Bourriaud (1998), page 34.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson's list includes Greenberg's criticism, Frankfurt school debates, and contributions from broader fields such as disability studies and critical geography.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson (2011), page 39.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson (2011), page 41.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson (2011), page 2.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson (2011), page 142.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson (2011), page 57. For more on the debates, see Bishop (2006), Kester (2006), Kuftinec (2003), and Sara Brady (2000).

<sup>9</sup> Jackson (2011), page 60.

<sup>10</sup> <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/holmes/en>, last accessed July 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson (2011), page 230.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson (2011), page 188.

<sup>13</sup> As in many of the contributions to the volume edited by Nina Möntmann (2006).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/12/art/unhappy-days-in-the-art-worldde-skilling-theater-re-skilling-performance>, last accessed July 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Buskirk (2003 and 2012).

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## **Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places**

Edited by Erica Lehrer, Cynthia Milton, and Monica Patterson

New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2011)

ISBN-10: 0230296726

### **Robyn Autry**

The essays in *Curating Difficult Knowledge* ask important questions about what makes some historical materials difficult for audiences while others go unnoticed. This edited volume builds on the wide range of research in museum and memory studies that investigates the public representation of past violence and conflict. The case studies in this collection all center on questions about curating such difficult knowledge, including the categories, motivations, receptions, and limits of curatorial work. The chapters are empirically diverse – taking us from the commemoration of the Rwandan genocide to the memorialization of Peru’s civil war – and are just as varied in their theoretical and stylistic approaches.

The volume is divided into three parts: “Bearing Witness between Museums and Communities”; “Visualizing the Past”; and “Materiality and Memorial Challenges.” While all of the sections deal with issues around curation and community on some level, the first section tackles the ways that museums and memorials have become public spaces for bearing witness to traumatic histories. Heather Igloliorte’s discussion about exhibiting Inuit experience in the Canadian residential school system presents a particularly revealing account of how dilemmas of representing historically-marginalized groups intersect with the practicalities of museum work. Herself an Inuk curator and art historian, Igloliorte shines a light on how legacies of oppression complicate why and in what manner Inuit people might participate in the exhibition “*We Were So Far Away...*”: *The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools* (2009). She explains that she and the exhibition’s other producers sought to be attentive to varieties of indigenous experience in Canada generally, and to the schooling system in particular. The primary innovation at the exhibition was the broadcast of previously unknown, repressed, or ignored histories about the mistreatment of Inuit children at boarding schools and the untold pain they carried with them decades after leaving the system. Accordingly, the exhibition offered to participants of an oral history project free

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mental health consultations and referrals that animated the museum work, as well as visitors at the openings.

Igloliorte offers a fascinating account of the ideological, discursive, and material challenges of representing a difficult history, but she seems to take the memorializing project itself for granted. The idea for the exhibition was not self-determined by the Inuit community, but was produced by Igloliorte with backing from a nationally-funded foundation, itself a type of symbolic reparation whose mandate is to support community projects that address the history of abuse at residential schools. Igloliorte comments most thoroughly on the silencing that occurs at the national level, which is an important concern, but this focus tends to bypass how various Inuit community members have grappled with their difficult histories at other scales, both personal and collective, and through mnemonic practices other than exhibitions. Without calling into question the origins of the project and the normative framing around issues of public testimony and display, the essay characterizes the exhibition as an inevitable outcome in the healing process. Amy Sodaro's contribution, "Politics of the Past: Remembering the Rwandan Genocide at the Kigali Memorial Centre," similarly interrogates processes of memorialization at the national level, but in Rwanda. Sodaro briefly discusses the range of local sites that have been created across the country, usually where mass murders took place. She contrasts them to a state-of-the-art facility being built in Kigali and designed by two brothers from the UK with experience in exhibiting difficult histories associated with the Holocaust. Sodaro seems to value the new project because of its location on neutral ground, unblemished with the taint of genocidal murder; in addition, it fits the violent past to a narrative and situates it within a wider discussion about the value of democracy. All of these features of the Kigali Memorial Centre are incredibly complicated and layered, but the author's presentation of the new institution as inherently valuable, or more beneficial and better-managed than the community sites, speaks to perennial tensions between official and vernacular expressions of identity and memory.

The other two essays in this first section of the volume are explicit about the values that motivate the curation of some embattled histories. For example, Vivienne Szekeres, the former director of the Australian Migration Museum, acknowledges her commitment to social history as a method for contextualizing the past as she chronicles shifts in representation at this national museum. Funded by the government, Szekeres explores how the state's involvement affected the museum work, and convincingly demonstrates how shifts in public mood and the politics of multiculturalism influenced the narration of migration as a "dangerous" national phenomenon. She also discusses how curators emotionally grappled with difficult materials that relate to the migration of Aboriginal populations and their exclusion from national histories. Szekeres endorses the power of letting go of curatorial authority, of no longer controlling the narrative in "blank" or empty

spaces (here located within the confines of the museum) where community members enter to stage their own exhibitions and perform their own rituals. Monica Eileen Patterson's chapter that follows Szekeres' appropriately reveals how the Jim Crow Museum in Michigan, a less public space, is similarly forthcoming about the founder's personal motivation for creating the museum: to display racist memorabilia that he had been struggling with since childhood.

Through critical discussions about the power and presentation of visual materials, the second section of the book considers how different museums set the stage for difficult conversations about the past. The three essays consider how photographs and art galleries provide settings that seem to provoke more emotions than traditional history museums do. The editors boldly situated Tamar Katriel's essay on Israel between Darren Newbury's and Erin Mosely's examinations of (post-)apartheid South Africa, a comparison that has been broadly and productively building momentum in discourses that are critical of Israeli occupation. Newbury's discussion of the Kliptown Open Air Museum in Soweto includes brief but important comments about the history of the photographs on display, in addition to the aesthetics and visual narrative of the images. For example, he mentions that the museum's exhibitions include information about how images were collected at the height of apartheid repression and how they have been preserved, remarking that "the survival of the images across time and space is itself a narrative of struggle."<sup>1</sup> The museum, he explains, provoked controversies over public memory that drew the attention of state agencies and corporations, many of which propagate neoliberal conceptions of state democracy that are far-removed from the former socialist tendencies of the African National Congress, which in 1955 famously demanded democracy for everyone in South Africa. Indeed, all three of the authors in section two of the book critically examine artists and images that support liberal democratic visions and movements. Katriel studies exhibitions that commemorate activist groups who blame the Israeli state (but not individual soldiers) for years of Palestinian oppression. For example, the women's group Checkpoint Watch (CPW) has monitored military activities and sometimes "intervene[s] directly in the soldiers' activities to prevent harassment, or intercede[s] with higher military commanders to overrule decisions and practices at the observation site."<sup>2</sup> Katriel characterizes the public presentation of CPW testimonies to be performative and democratic invitations for further critique of Israel military operations, rather than static representations of the women's activism.

The final section of the volume offers some of the strongest essays that theorize the relationships between time, space, and memory through empirical applications. Latin American historian Cynthia Milton presents a fascinating account of the multiple lives of the *Ojo que llora*, a memorial to the victims of Peru's long internal war. Although a private monument tucked away in a rugged landscape, the memorial has sparked heated debate

about the nature of the war, the definition of victims and perpetrators, and ownership over the past. Along the way, Milton rethinks how vandals who have defaced the memorial on multiple occasions can be understood as curators of sorts. She therefore contributes a transnational corollary to Andrew Herscher's chapter that opens this section of the book, entitled "Points of No Return," in which he argues that resistance and vandalism against preservation projects in post-war Kosovo are evidence of a heterogeneous population. For both Herscher and Milton, the populations in question have competing and at times incompatible memories and styles of remembrance. The embeddedness of stylized remembering in the physical landscape is the focus of Slawomir Kapralski's powerful essay about evidence of Jewish history and experience in Poland. Kapralski compellingly argues that we – academics as much as the general public, it would seem – tend to turn to space as the embodiment of memory, which means that we search for material evidence about the past at ruins and memorials or within the architecture of old buildings. He argues that a lack of physical traces of the Jewish past in Poland translates to a lack of cognitive understanding about a millennia-long history, which includes but does not end with the Holocaust. Kapralski concludes by suggesting that more spatially-embedded reminders of Jewish history in Poland will forestall collective amnesia or revisionist tendencies, a position that will surely provoke further debate. We might anticipate what he will say about the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews that recently opened in Warsaw, an institution that renowned museum studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is helping to produce. Indeed, Kapralski's study, along with all of the essays in this section, pushes conversations about memory and memorialization outside of conventional and sentimental terrains.

The volume concludes with a brief statement by Roger Simon about curatorial work as a form of pedagogy. After reflecting on the challenges of working with difficult histories and difficult knowledge, Simon urges museum professionals and academics to use a pedagogical framework to think about curation, noting that the difficulty invoked by the book's title is not an essential property of any particular artifacts, but it persists in the emotions and interpretations that they provoke and unsettle, given the manner in which they are presented. Surely, his call for a reflexive approach to curation holds for the study of museums, memorials, and other sites of memory construction.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson (2011), page 103.

<sup>2</sup> Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson (2011), page 111.



On the cover: *In the Eye of the Beholder* (2013) by Stephen Crowley.



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