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When Fox Becomes Polar Bear

Iman Issa
In the fall of 2010, a friend sent me an image of a page from a new Egyptian textbook for learning the Arabic alphabet. The page depicted the fourth letter of the alphabet alongside an illustration of a polar bear with a caption under it: “Fox.” The image was funny. Although this could have been viewed as a simple misprint, it felt more significant—as though it was somehow symptomatic of the carelessness and lack of precision with which forms have come to be handled in the country in recent years. One could imagine the editor of the book happening upon the image and either failing to notice the discrepancy or simply not caring to fix it, for there was a general feeling that, in present-day Egypt, a fox might just as well have looked like a polar bear.

One could view this as the epitome of carelessness and corruption, but for me this image became particularly memorable for being consistent with a feeling I’ve had in recent years, not only confirming it, but taking its premise to a new extreme. As an image, it offered a concrete manifestation of a cynicism that has come to permeate the way most forms in the country are understood and received. It was a material testament to a collective lack of belief in appearances. For perhaps the editor who failed to fix the image was not careless, but rather failed to recognize a difference. His mistake might not have consisted of a negligence that threatens to bring up a generation associating the word fox with an image of a polar bear, but indicated rather that he was the product of a tacit understanding that the children learning the alphabet simply will not believe the images they see to begin with. They will not mistake a fox for a polar bear, but will instead fail to make any association with an external reality when it comes to these images. Their faith in appearances has already been lost, and this might very well make an image of a fox or a polar bear truly indistinguishable—colors and shapes but not much else, and as such, easily and fully interchangeable.

But what could produce such extreme disbelief in appearances? What could so drastically divorce images from what they refer to?

One answer might be found in the extent to which forms have come to be instrumentalized in Egypt in recent years, with few remaining that can be viewed without a suspicion of hidden agendas. Even everyday conventions like one’s tone of speech, dress, and manner have become markers of one’s social positioning and affiliations. For when a door in a building can no longer reference a simple means of entry and exit but a device meant to alter behavior, and when floral patterns on a dress are seen as composite shapes and colors employed to conjure a certain socio-economic class or political affiliation, then a drawing of a leaf might also recall many things, but only the last of these would have any relation to an actual leaf on a plant. Here a drawing of a leaf might just as easily be substituted for a drawing of a lion, dog, building, or anything capable of sending the same desired message of signaling a certain trait, belief, skill, possession, or membership to a certain group.

While this extreme reliance on display as a means of situating oneself could conceivably perform many functions, in the context of Egypt this tendency might be closely linked to the dysfunctional legal or juridical system under which the country has been managed for some time. When one can no longer depend on the law to safeguard one’s rights, other means must be used to produce a favorable result in a given situation. Presentation here becomes tantamount: the
ability to respond to situations by portraying oneself—as an honest citizen, a wealthy or powerful individual, or a pious subject of a certain faith or belief system—will largely determine the outcome of that situation. And it will be the measure of accomplishment for tasks ranging from simple paperwork or landing a job, to securing a business deal or escaping severe punishment for a crime.

Similar to an advertisement, dress, speech, and ornament here become a means of pack-aging and selling whatever is on view, which also means that they will come to be understood in this way, regardless of the intentions behind them. And just as an advertisement announcing a detergent to be the best in the world is not understood as being literally true, we cannot expect anything we see or hear in a similarly motivated context to correspond to a more substantial reality. This is a place where what was once known to be red could just as easily and incontestably be depicted as blue, so long as it said “color,” which it often did.

We may have already learned to decipher the language of politics and commerce in terms of hidden agendas, to look beneath the surface to uncover real motives. But what happens when this ability is extended to encompass the ways in which all forms are perceived? What happens when one can no longer take anything for granted, or believe that anything could not be staged for a specific reason by a specific group? The perceptiveness we find in reading a bright red color in an advertisement as not just red, but a sales pitch, or in hearing a political speech as a careful arrangement of words used in ways that have little to do with their meaning in a dictionary, might also have shifted into full-on paranoia—a paranoia that renders representation an extremely challenging if not outright impossible endeavor.

Can any forms survive this operation? Can any remain neutral in the face of this constant need to anticipate opportunistic agendas within every microscopic gesture? Can any forms still be accessible to a disinterested party, retain an ability to recall a truth, and escape being tainted by the suspicion of intentionally or accidentally serving predetermined personal or collective agendas?

It was in June 2009 that I visited the October War Panorama, a museum built in 1989 by the Egyptian government, with the help of the North Koreans, to commemorate Egypt’s 1973 victory in a war with Israel. On the day I visited, a group of students on a school trip were there as well, clearly ignoring the colorfully painted revolving Panorama. Their teachers were equally dismissive, taking little interest in explaining the significance of the visit or in even referencing the Panorama in any way. Even the military guards entrusted with guarding and running the museum seemed to do it with the utmost carelessness, not bothering to turn off the lights to allow the Panorama’s display to work properly, or to repair parts of the display that were falling apart. I had a feeling on that day that these visitors and museum employees treated the war machinery, paintings, and bronze statues on view as being unworthy of celebration, critique, analysis, and even irony.

This ostensible disregard could be the logical byproduct of a time in which large collective sentiments and ideological convictions have diminished to a point where traditional forms of propaganda—whether the political poster, monument, or historical tale—have little left to offer those with vested interests who might
otherwise want to employ them. Perhaps it was clear to the visitors that day that the paintings and statues surrounding them had long ceased to serve the purposes for which they were intended.

Similarly, the museum’s visitors and employees could have equally understood how little a panorama depicting a national victory could mean to a society that relies on appearances to survive, yet believes in none. For how could one expect a member of such a society to be affected by a monument or a war memorial that is so clearly staged, after having been so thoroughly trained to extract intentions from even the most accidental of forms?

The answer is probably more complicated, for forms function on many levels. One can still be involuntarily touched by the scale and material of a building or statue, can still feel one’s own heart race to the sound of a drum, or experience awe at the sight of a flag blowing in the wind—even while on a conscious level understanding such gestures to be employed specifically to affect sentiment.

Although it remains difficult to fully comprehend or explain the disregard I witnessed at the museum, it remained clear to me that even though the Panorama was there—grand, colorful, and revolving to the powerful rhythm of drums—its symbolic power was not being invoked by anyone. And even if it was, it was clear that no one was watching or listening.

Nonetheless, the Panorama and its images, monuments, and statues were still present, with all of their particular colors and shapes. What to make of these, then?
Lacks Worth Having: William Pope.L and Land Art

Joanna Fiduccia

Figure 1. Pope.L, *Times Square Crawl*, 1978. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY. © Pope.L

William Pope.L’s first *Crawl* took place in 1978 in Times Square. Dressed in a brown suit and a yellow safety vest, Pope.L maneuvered through the crowds on his hands and knees, trailed at some distance by a photographer. The photographer’s lens caught the scene: tourists look on disconcertedly; unflappable locals continue their commute; a cop puts a paternalistic hand to the artist’s shoulder to urge him back to his feet (fig. 1). Pope.L crawls on. *Times Square Crawl* would be the first in over thirty similar actions undertaken by the artist, in New York as well as abroad, alone as well in the company of entire communities—a signature work in Pope.L’s expansive, multimedia practice.¹ Central to his critique of the legibility and visibility of the black body in contemporary discourse and urban space, the Crawls are landmarks in the histories of African-American art and postmodern performance. Yet they also belong to another category in twentieth-century art: the monumental, remote, largely American, and predominantly white tradition of Land art.
It may appear perverse to inscribe Pope.L in a category that is currently undergoing its own dramatic re-inscription. Recently, even the relatively modest sketch of Land art above has been called into question, destabilized by the work of scholars and curators who have expanded Land art’s rosters and challenged its coherence. Following Miwon Kwon and Philipp Kaiser’s landmark 2013 survey *Ends of the Earth,* which featured more than 100 artists from 17 countries, Land art no longer sits so securely within the regional and, to a lesser extent, gendered and racial identity once built around the canonical triumvirate of Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, and Walter de Maria. Just as radically, Land art has been dislodged from its identifying medium. That is, “earthworks” no longer refers exclusively to works “made of earth,” but to a panoply of practices, from urban design to television. The palpable result of this procedural and geographical expansion perplexed some critics, who fretted that the exhibition had stretched the category beyond the bounds of reason. Kaiser and Kwon had made profligate additions to Land art’s edifice, the critics claimed, while failing to address the practical and conceptual consequences on Land art’s foundations. Expanding our notion of what “belongs” in a Land art exhibition, however, is rarely the problem. These anxieties about what might occur when everything is “let in”—to the category, to the exhibition, to the museum—betray what is really at issue when we speak of belonging: exclusion, and exclusion’s capacity to maintain the boundaries of disciplines and institutions.

Belonging can present itself as a merely ontological matter, but exclusion refuses abstractions, for it is not merely a matter of what practices, but also of what *bodies,* must be banned. In recent art history, the topical redress of exclusion was the work done by performance art, in a dual campaign to render visible and render specific these excluded bodies. Performances marked the already marked body—marked by gender, marked by color—and drew attention to those excluded or overlooked by institutions. By a paradox so common as to seem incontrovertible, this marked body is simultaneously the invisible body, lacking a full presence because of too *much* presence of something else. Pope.L’s crawls “belong” to the revelation of this paradox. Like Valie Export, Adrian Piper, James Luna, among many others before him, he challenges the invisibility enforced on him in public space by redoubling his difference through actions considered improper or gauche. The arrival of the cop on the scene of his first crawl testifies to the immediate institutionalized response to this impropriety. For the marked body, this response to *acting out*—acting unexpectedly or wrongly in public space—exposes the fact that such a body should not really be acting there at all.

By extension, these acts critique the presumption of universality in the modern conception of the public aesthetic subject, a presumption that excludes certain identities (non-white, non-male, queer) while veiling the specificity of others (white, male, straight). While this falsehood of universality is exposed with some work in social interactions in urban space, it continues on undisturbed in the sublime, and even finds a tautological justification within it. Everyone, after all, is excluded from the sublime. The severe, inhuman deserts we associate with Land art are this exclusion made manifest and made aesthetic. If this tiger’s leap into Land art seems sudden—if Land art seems hopelessly remote from the tactics and concerns of performance art—this may be because it has been
buttressed by precisely those ideologies that performance art set out to destabilize.

Those buttresses are now crumbling. And it is precisely at this moment, when Land art is considering its own belongings and exclusions, that its connections to performance art become newly visible. More to the point, the shifting, unstable structure left behind is now positioned to reframe performance art’s timeworn critiques, and to speak to that within those critiques which the terms of performance cannot. The discourse of Land art, grounded in histories of modern and postmodern sculpture, gives it the ability to address social invisibility in material terms. The paradoxically marked yet invisible body in performance art becomes the debased or dedifferentiated body, immersed in the (back)ground. By the same token, Land art, unlike performance, has language for the place where a body is not or should not be—spatial terms, that is, for exclusions that performance art can only make visible by inverting or canceling. In what follows, the hole will be one of these terms contributed by the discourse of Land art; immersion will be the other.

The capacity of this discourse to speak formally about holes and immersion suggests a preliminary explanation for the exercise of this paper. My motive here, in other words, is rhetorical rather than revisionist. Temporarily wresting the Crawls from their pertinent context as performance, this paper borrows the terms of one category to reveal the operations of another in a canonical work of performance art. But to take the Crawls out from where they belong, to express an alternative belonging, is also to address what is at stake in the present restructuring of Land art, where anxieties about belonging—and therefore exclusion—disclose its imbrication in twentieth-century spatial politics.

Dedifferentiated Bodies

Land art’s pretense to exclude the body, it should be said, is just that: pretense. The beauty and terror of the sublime landscape provided only the thesis and antithesis to Land art’s “concrete dialectic between nature and people;” the sublime itself was neither its aim nor altogether its effect. In fact, Land art is shot through with bodies—which is to say, firstly, that bodies are frequently in the shot. Figures appear in many of the iconic photographs of Land art, where they serve to mark the scale of the work and distinguish, by dint of contrast, what John Beardsley described as its “essentially horizontal character.” In one photograph of Michael Heizer’s Dissipate 1 (1968), taken by Yale Joel and published in the April 1969 issue of Life, Heizer’s black troughs in the desert floor are joined by a single-engine plane and three men—figures on a desert that had long ceased to signify the sublime no-man’s land, but had rather become the habitat of the military-industrial complex. The presence of these faceless men and their aircraft plucks the scene out of both the time immemorial of natural land formations and the nostalgic time of ruins. For Robert Smithson, this modern contextualization of Land art is essential to its identity. Land art, he maintained, is dialectical rather than metaphysical, and as such, takes as its raw material not the void—not the desert unmarked by modern life, untouched by modern man—but those landscapes already scored by modernity’s interventions. It is significant that Smithson’s exemplar, in the essay in which he articulates the “concrete dialectic” at the heart of Land art, is Frederick Olmsted, whose Central Park...
designs provide for Smithson a proto-form of the Land artwork. Ex–urban quarries and the crackled beds of military test sites were propitious sites for Land art, but no more so than a park at the center of a metropolis.

Smithson’s formulation must nonetheless be set against another, more pictorial presentation of the body in Land art: the Romantic and largely British tradition of the ramble. Richard Long’s *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), produced when the artist was a student at Saint Martin’s, turns the Romantic peregrination into a means of inscribing the land. A photograph documenting his walk shows a straight line, beaten by Long’s footsteps, receding towards a copse in the distance. Long’s body etches the landscape like a stylus; the anecdote of the walk becomes secondary to the trace it leaves, which in turn becomes secondary to the image—a dialectical de-figuring of the landscape through the figure. Nonetheless, the action ultimately emphasizes a pastoral *ground* upon which Long, as instrument, will produce a *second* figure, one that is graphic rather than representational, sublating the performative aspect of his walks into a pictorial framework.

Ostensibly more invested in the performing body (as well as less invested in dialectics), the English artist Hamish Fulton began his walks as a “passive protest against urban societies that alienate people from the world of nature.” Fulton explains, “Walking is about the attempt at being ‘broken down’ mentally and physically…to experience a temporary state of euphoria, a blending of my mind with the outside world of nature.” This ecstatic state of “blending” with nature invokes a pastoral tradition in which the natural world gives respite from the taxing conditions of modern life.

Yet the means by which Fulton’s blending is achieved—extreme fatigue and mental strain (provoked by existential loneliness or boredom, who can say?)—go one further: the walker is not *restored* by nature, but rather *dissolved into it*. Or, as Smithson would put it, he is “dedifferentiated” from nature. Smithson borrows the term from Anton Ehrenzweig to describe the “primary process’ of making contact with matter,” which engenders a sensation of limitlessness, similar to the Freudian oceanic, and marks a convergence point between Fulton’s Romantic model and its poststructuralist American counterpart. Rather than presuppose a stable state-of-nature to which the city dweller may simply return, dedifferentiation requires actions that further degrade that dweller, “breaking down” the artificial boundaries that alienate him from nature, milling man into a substance fine enough to be stirred into nature’s soup. Communion by way of comminution.

The boundlessness that attends dedifferentiation may be demonstrated most dramatically in vast expanses of nature, but the phenomenon itself is social and psychological. Limitlessness is a consequence of the loss of boundaries between the “self and the non-self,” the latter encompassing landscapes as well as what, and who, may be found in them. This connectedness through breakdown or dedifferentiation is how Pope.L describes his Crawls. Following his *Times Square Crawl*, Pope.L began moving not on his hands and knees but on his elbows, dragging himself across the asphalt. Sweating and grimacing, Pope.L’s hyperbolic effort to move across a distance accelerates Fulton’s breakdown. Like Fulton, however, Pope.L emphasizes the positive result of his
bodily mortification in the promise of overcoming alienation—in his case, through both natural and social non-selves. “Crawling brings us back to basics,” he writes in a statement for a 2005 community crawl. “We crawl as small children, not because we are humiliated but because we are learning to be human. Crawling is a way to remind ourselves of our common struggle to be human.”13 Belly to the ground, the crawler is brought back to a prior stage in her social and psychological development, before self-possession and self-differentiation.14 By forsaking uprightness, Pope.L suggests, one asserts through one’s body the connection between standing and standing alone.

We can compare this to Denis Oppenheim’s description of his own walks, immersive experiences that extend rather than diminish his sense of mastery:

“The sense of physically spanning land, activating a surface by walking on it, began to interest me. When you compare a piece of sculpture, an object on a pedestal, to walking outdoors for ten minutes and still being on top of your work, you find an incredible difference in the degree of physicality and sensory immersion.”15

Oppenheim’s immersion here operates paradoxically to affirm his differentiation. It is an immersion less in landscape or in common humanity than in his own quickened body. The persistence of the second-person pronoun—which shifts from a general “you” to one closer to Oppenheim’s “I” (e.g. “being on top of your work”)—locates this quickening within an individual subject, who activates a surface rather than dissolving into space. Oppenheim gains through immersion a sense of extended dominion, of larger mastery, of more certain ownership.

This coordination of physical immersion and mastery is inverted in Pope.L’s Crawls. While Pope.L engages in the bodily mortification of the endurance act that characterize Fulton’s walks, mortification enters his work more directly in its social aspect—that is, as embarrassment. This is produced firstly through the inclusion of the audience as onlooker and potential participant. Documentation of the Crawls is careful to include their audience, whose reactions frequently demonstrate the unseemliness of Pope.L’s actions in acts of concern or confusion (the concerned cop in Times Square is one instance of this; his solicitousness is bleakly, gravely hard to imagine in this day and age). For Pope.L, the transformation of one mortification into the other depends on this external observer, and her eventual responsiveness. The artist explains,

“In a country like the United States, where moral virtue has traditionally been tied to uprightness of body carriage, for a healthy, sane person to choose to give up his or her verticality can be perceived as arrogant and attention-seeking. But I believe this interpretation dissolves or at least becomes less tenable when a viewer/participant watches a crawler for an extended period of time.”16

After an hour or so, Pope.L estimates, it becomes difficult not to empathize, to confront “our contemporary ambivalence toward organic matter, our bodies and the earth. Both are us and nurture us and yet we find them filthy.” Through the concrete observation of a particular body acting against our social expectations
of it, we are led to the broader, grosser fact of bodily existence— or rather, we are led to confront this fact through the concrete observation of a person contravening our expectations and mores. The spectator is a “viewer/participant” not just because she may herself get down and crawl alongside Pope.L, as numbers have been invited to do in his group crawls, but because, as another occupant of urban space, she is always already a participant in its social mechanisms. The recognition of breakdown as a shared or human fact is brought about not through the poetic act of an extended walk nor through allegory, but rather by watching, at length, a specific body who shares your social space in the process of breakdown.

Pope.L’s costumes, the second tactic to produce the Crawls’ politicization of bodily mortification, are integral to this recognition. They mark his body as one that performs, and thus deserves, and accepts, being regarded at length. Pope.L’s attire is selected precisely to ensure that he is noticeable: “He crawls in a suit so he’ll signify, so he’ll be seen as someone who shouldn’t be in the gutter, so he’ll be seen— period.” Pope.L’s attire in the crawls has ranged from a business suit to sports paraphernalia (The Black Body and Sport (crawl), 1999) to a jock strap, a teddy bear, and a giant balloon (Shopping Crawl (crawl with Balloon), 2001). The costumes render the performances absurd or vaudevillian or tragic, invoking Buster Keaton at one turn and the valorized, objectified body of the black athlete at another. Most frequently, they provide a kind of comic affect, undermining the sober, religious intensity of endurance artworks with cartoonish anticness. In Great White Way, Pope.L’s superhero suit is rendered still sillier by a skateboard strapped to his back “for emergency situations,” making him less the American hero than an overgrown child playing dress-up.

That, of course, is the point; as a black man in contemporary America, his costuming indicates, Pope.L is always playing dress-up, even and especially when wearing the attire of a white-collar adult. In 1991, Pope.L executed his Tompkins Square Park Crawl, in which he dragged himself around the perimeter of the East Village park while holding a small potted plant (figure 2). Accompanied by a white cameraman, Pope.L had begun to make progress around the park when he was approached by a couple of young black men. Visibly upset by the performance, one of them confronted the videographer, assuming that he was in charge. When the videographer demurred, the man turned to Pope.L, demanding an explanation. C. Carr recalls the event:

“The irony is that the angry man got what the piece was about...he cried, ‘I wear a suit like that to work!’ And just before rushing off to find a policeman, he got to the heart of what really distressed him: ‘You make me look like a jerk!’”

“What the piece was about,” in Carr’s estimation, was something far more particular than the human ambivalence toward the organic world. Pope.L could not execute the crawl without producing a commentary on bodies like his, the bodies of black men in America. To that viewer, a black man in a suit performing a joke of a task was satire that communicated, quite simply, that
black men in suits were jokes (jerks)—minstrels beneath all their pretensions to middle-class belonging.

The inclusion of that viewer’s body in Pope.L’s act functions by virtue of an exclusion that precedes it—namely, the exclusion of the black male body, which Pope.L calls the “BAM,” from the culture of masculinity. “In our society,” writes Pope.L, “masculinity is measured in presence. However, no matter how much presence the BAM contrives, it will continue to be marked as lack.” Describing the dilemma of the black male body in psychoanalytic terms, Pope.L understands it as marked by its lack of phallic authority, a lack generally assigned to women, but extended to the black male through the fetishization of his body. The hypermasculine posturing of the black male, a kind of emphatic “presenting,” is a compensatory mechanism for this objectification, which constantly works to remove him from the shared space of equal subjects. Because his lack, in Lacanian terms, conditions his entrance into the symbolic order, it operates simultaneously as a principle of negative inclusivity. That is, the BAM’s lack limns the contours of a group to which all BAMs must belong, and secures for the non-BAM—that is, the white male body—the freedom to act as individuals. Thus Chris Burden can crawl through a bed of glass without thereby having to serve as representative of all white men; construed as a pure positivity, his body acts instead as an exceptional figure testing the limits of a quasi-spiritualized mortification, a kind of modern Saint Lawrence on the coals.

The psychoanalytic register of the Crawls makes apparent, finally, the power of their horizontality to effect a broad ontological critique. The
“chorepolitical statement” of the Crawl, according to Andre Lepecki, lies precisely in their challenge to the verticality associated with phallic power. By aligning the horizontality of his body in the Crawl with its manifest lack of social power, he reveals how the very orientation of space is phallocratically determined. For Lepecki, the Crawl produces a Heideggerian “stumble in being,” which reveals the non-coincidence of subjects and their worldly identities. In other words, crawling divests Pope.L of the power associated with personal autonomy while still marking him as an individual, thus throwing into crisis the assumed connection of (male) social power with full subjecthood. In this sense, Pope.L’s own Heideggerian appeal to his audience to recognize their ambivalence with organic life through the commingling of their bodies with the dirt finds itself redoubled by his undoing of phallic subjectivity through the horizontal Crawl. Fulton’s language of “blending” is thereby turned on its head—or rather, reoriented into the present, as a confrontation of rather than escape from the contemporary forces of power in social space.

The models of immersion in Fulton’s as well as Oppenheim and Long’s walks negotiate the dedifferentiation of subjects and environments as positive events that secure a certain pictorial, metaphysical, or psychosocial fullness. Pope.L’s Crawl refuse to solicit this experience, on the basis that the breakdown of the body is immanently political.

The Site of Exclusion

“You make me look like a jerk!” — the exasperated conclusion of the viewer in Tompkins Square Park was that Pope.L’s “acting out” included him, debasing his own body even as he remained standing, excluding him from the social and economic position signified by the suit he wore to work. It was not, as the artist surmised, that his surrender of verticality singled him out, and therefore made him appear “arrogant or attention-seeking.” No, his horizontality was offensive because it incorporated other bodies in an image weighted to make them plummet from the social ladder.

The recognition that the Crawl, by virtue of the BAM’s “negative inclusivity,” simultaneously incorporated these bodies while eluding universal experience eventually worked its way into the staging of the Crawl through the careful selection of their sites. Through this selection, Pope.L drives home that the common struggle to be human invoked by the Crawl cannot be imagined abstractly. The route of artist’s most ambitious crawl, The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street (2001–9), extended the length of Broadway, from the Statue of Liberty ferry to the Bronx (figures 3 & 4). The crawl maps its “common struggle” onto a specific immigrant or outsider experience: an arduous path that leads not to the bright lights of Broadway—the “great white way” as symbol for the American dream, mythically on offer to all its huddled masses—but to the limits of an outer borough. His Superman costume, as mentioned above, ironizes the heroism of Superman, that exemplary American alien nonetheless devoted to love of country and justice, who reassuringly possesses all the racial, gendered, and able-bodied markings of the nation’s powerful. In its place, Pope.L enacts an “everyday heroism” of making it in America: namely, strenuously undergoing any number of humiliations to get from the country’s gate to its segregated and economically underprivileged boroughs. The
“common struggle” of becoming human, his Crawl suggests, is more common for some.

Pope.L’s layering of human ontogenesis (from crawling to standing) onto social progression (from immigrant to Bronx resident) parallels the motive in a number of canonical Land artworks to telescope the natural and urban worlds. This motive has been recognized by recent scholarship that complicates the city/desert dyad that has dominated Land art discourse. By exposing the fiction of the pure or timeless desert where artists could retreat to resist the art market or the forces of modernization, this scholarship emphasizes the imaginative and institutional continuity of remote and urban spaces, and the diversity of Land art practices that explicitly engaged urban grounds. Not only was the desert “sewn into the economies of control, militarization, and capitalist production that played out in city and desert alike,” it was imagined by artists as both a site and a network—part of the gridded and systematized abstractions that increasingly characterized twentieth-century urban centers as well. Land artworks in remote sites therefore reflected these urban models.

Reciprocally, city planning projects and urban development contributed to the production of Land art’s discourse and the formation of its operations. The Crawls have their place in this history as well, where they have been mobilized as a collective response to urban planning. Similar to the Great White Way in the symbolic weight of its trajectory, the group Crawl Bringing the
Décarie to the Mountain, staged in Montreal in 2005, traced a route from the Décarie expressway to the base of Mount Royal. The highway, built for the '67 Expo as a feature of utopian urban planning, resulted in the displacement of a vibrant Montreal ethnic community—one that Pope.L sought to reunite in “one single act of struggle and sacrifice: moving slowly on hands and knees up the side of a mountain.” The symbolic scaling of the mountainside is conducted by the members of the very populations excluded by the Expo's urban formations, confronting with their regressive crawling its progressive (but ultimately detrimental) intentions. Infancy and history meet futurity around the royal figure of the mountain, dissolving the boundaries between natural, social, and urban formations.

Toward the close of his essay on Olmsted, Smithson reflects on the labyrinthine section of Central Park known as “The Ramble.” Central Park is exemplary for Smithson because of its immersion in equal parts natural, social, and urban formations, and in this the Ramble provides something of a master image for this dense and complex network of political and natural forces. Smithson lyrically describes the serpentine paths through the clotted greenery “as they lead one deeper into an infinity of curves,” a description that sits cheek-by-jowl with the observation that “the Ramble has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are ‘hoods, hobos, hustlers, homosexuals,’ and other estranged creatures of the city.” This urban jungle provides a habitat for the outcasts and deviants, immersion for the alienated, seclusion for the excluded. Olmsted’s proto-Land artwork thus offers another form of negative inclusivity at the convergence point of landscape and urban life. The Ramble—that dense network of paths for idling, skulking, lurking, waiting, screwing, and colluding—the Ramble is where the dialectic between nature and people occurs within specific bodies, “dedifferentiated” in its dark and lush convolutions.

The Image of an Empty Place

The BAM is a body dedifferentiated by its lack of phallic power, but it is also a body more likely to be suffer concrete lacks—of economic security, healthcare, legal and institutional protection, adequate nutrition, and shelter. Pope.L’s rhetoric largely avoids these issues, gesturing persistently at the human experience of the Crawls, and their capacity to unite fellow crawlers with one another and with their organic nature. Yet it remains the case that crawling carries lowly social status along with its ontogenesis. Crawling resuscitates a prior stage, before self-mastery and necessarily also mastery, prior to propriety as well as property. The full inversion of Oppenheim’s dominion, after all, is precisely that extreme evocation of Pope.L’s gutter-bound body: the homeless man who owns nothing, who is master of nothing. The pressure on Pope.L’s performing body exerted by the larger social fact of the BAM not only interrupts its capacity to speak to universal mortification, it draws it toward that image of social mortification so absolute that it has fallen through the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy.

The horizontal bodies of the homeless, “crawling through the gutters,” are denied belonging in social space, yet play a consistently vital role within it. Rosalyn Deutsche has narrated how this denial—the exclusion of certain bodies from the presumed vertical occupation of public space—produces both the
construction and perversion of the modern city. Public space, according to Habermas’s formulation, arose out of the distinction bourgeois sociality produced between public and private life. Indoor private truths were created by outdoor public persona, which in turn secured a domain for and practice of republican discourse. With the entrance of other classes into the city and the development of the welfare state, this public sociality began to fracture, and required for its maintenance the constant apprehension and expulsion of some category beyond it—the homeless. The homeless person, who is deprived of the fundamental distinction between private and public personas, thus threatens but ultimately constitutes the public sphere; he or she functions as “a negative image created to restore positivity and order to social life.” As with the Hegelian subject, the homeless other ensures that public space, and its political form of democracy, remain haunted by a sense its own incompleteness.

Yet this incompleteness secures a space for the operations of debate and ambiguity at the center of democratic society. To substantiate this claim, Deutsche invokes Claude Lefort’s conception of modern democracy as something that “draws its power from what Lefort calls ‘the image of an empty place’”—a region of uncertainty where, in the absence of monarchs and ecclesiastical authority, “everything can be up for discussion, including the legitimacy of its own contents.” Lefort theorizes that the demise of monarchical power, in which the body of the prince represented the kingdom as a substantial, unified entity, leaves in its wake an empty place, which becomes itself the locus of power. In contrast to monarchical rule, then, in democracies “the image of popular sovereignty is the image of an empty place,” whose paradoxical consequence is that the content of power in democracies remains empty, at once universal and disembodied. This same bodilessness, however, makes democracy precarious, dissolving bonds previously secured by the social body.

Pope.L’s first crawl was conducted during this dissolution in New York of the late 1970s. His choice of Times Square carries particular significance because of the Square’s failure, now as then, to provide adequate space for democratic assembly. Times Square is a place, in the French sense of place or public square, only nominally; although groups can gather there, their activities are subsumed by the exigencies of commerce, in the steady bustle of bodies moving through the Square, and the supra-human sensory demands made by advertisements. Times Square has lost the “image of an empty place”—not simply because it is, in a basic sense, saturated by advertisements, but because its assault on the senses generally repels locals and deals instead with tourists—not as residents, but as a universal and bodiless quotient, since only the bodiless consumer could withstand this bombardment, and only the universal one could make sense of its indifferent address.

The corporatization of the putatively public space of Times Square thus occurs in concert with the hollowing out of the democratic space of assembly and contestation, assuaging the potential for conflict that Pope.L’s mild crawling threatens to reintroduce. This very potential of disruption, however, is integral to the privatization of the Square. Paradoxically, Deutsche observes, “conservative urbanists promote the transformation of public space into proprietary space—the occupation of public space—by conceding that public
spaces are conflictual not harmonious terrains, yet denying the legitimacy of spatial contests.”37 In other words, public space is conceived as a tense field in which the bourgeois citizen must contend with grit and vagrancy (with “hoods, hustlers, hobos, homosexuals”), precisely because their delegitimized presence authorizes the transition of public space into proprietary space. Yet this tension does not signify a real turf war. Rather, it appears rooted in a source that must be continually apprehended and expelled: the homeless. The homeless person functions, in Deutsch’s words, as “a negative image created to restore positivity and order to social life.” This “negative image of the homeless”—which may, indeed, be extended to any image of the undesirable—thus stands in as a kind of impoverished and serviceable reflection of the “image of an empty place.”

“Blackness is a lack worth having,” Pope.L has proclaimed, a statement frequently read as a tactical inversion of denigration into affirmation, a negative image reasserted as a positive principle. Deutsche’s framework suggests that we might take this lack somewhat differently—as a lack “worth having” because it restores social order. Recognizing this means acknowledging the intimate relationship between undesirable and the constitution of the cityscape as the dialectical resolution to the negation of popular sovereignty. But it also accentuates the paradox implicit in the marked but socially invisible body. This paradox is gathered in the ambivalence of the “negative” as a judgment on one hand, and a spatial condition on the other.

It is here that the history of Land art comes into service. The inversion of the immersed body might bring to mind the clay-dowsed Charles Simmonds, whose trio of films Birth, Landscape-Body-Dwelling, and Body-Earth (1970, 1973, 1974 respectively) depict the artist emerging from a clay pit like some earthen god (fittingly, the series is known collectively as “Mythologies”).38 But perhaps more apt are Land art’s holes for the body or its surrogates, which give sculptural form to this image of empty place. Sol Lewitt’s Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but little Value (1968), Anthony McCall’s 1972 Earth Work, a film culminating in the burial of a box containing the dirt of its own hole, and Claes Oldenburg’s 1967 rectangular, six-foot deep Hole excavated in Central Park are significant precedents for perhaps the most iconic Land art interment, Keith Arnatt’s 1969 Self-Burial (figure 5).39 In a sequence of nine photographs, the artist is pictured as he is gradually buried vertically in the ground beneath his feet, which appears to swallow him whole.40 Arnatt’s dead-panning disappearance act offsets the morbid character of the sequence; the satisfaction of seeing the sequence as whole, when stretched out over the nine days of its broadcast, may have felt considerably more anxious, considerably more doomed—a body condemned to invisibility, a ground stuffed with buried bodies.

One final example may illuminate Land art’s ability not just to represent the body-as-hole, but to suggest the disruptive power of doing so. Gordon Matta-Clark’s Cherry Tree and Time Well (1971) consisted of three trees, planted successively in the basement of a New York City building. After the third tree died from being denied light and open air, Matta-Clark plugged the hole where he planted the trees with concrete. Despite this sepulchral conclusion to his ostensibly ill-conceived dabble in horticulture, the work began with a thought that was neither funereal nor eco-sadist. The artist intended, he explained, “liberate
the building’s enormous compressive, confining forces simply by making a hole.” While exclusion of the homeless or the dead (two non-social non-beings) ensures the compactness and coherence of urban space, the production of exclusion as an image, as a hole, can suddenly ventilate the system. A hole in the city can return to it, if only through the magic of analogy, the exclusions it requires and—here is the aporia—make exclusion a matter of belonging rather than belonging a consequence of exclusion.

Figure 5. Keith Arnatt, Self-Burial, 1969. © Keith Arnatt Estate.

Hole Theory

“Hole Theory is guided/ By a lack to be with/ The world and in so being—/ Be right with the world.” These lines are drawn from the final pages of Pope.L’s 2001 artist book (revised by the artist in 2002) Hole Theory: Parts Four & Five. They go some way toward explaining his assertion that “blackness is a lack worth having.”

“When I say blackness is a lack worth having, I am speaking to the dynamic of pain, loss, joy, radicality, and possibility in the experience of being black. Blackness, if it is anything interesting, has to be determined by and implicated into much more than itself. The true nature of blackness is multiplicity…Lack must be a value worth having cause there is no way to avoid our own stink, our own history. Lack is an essential part of being human. To say lack is a value worth having is to claim ownership of a very intimate problematic.”

Hole Theory is a means for reconciling oneself with lack, with stink, with history. It is also, and perhaps more importantly in this discussion, a means of reconciling oneself with the world through lack. If public space occupied by the rhetoric of conservative urbanists has eradicated Lefort’s “image of the empty
place”—if lack has, in a sense, been left out of the contemporary urban landscape—then lack on an individual level can begin to model that hollow space of ambiguity on a social level in which embodied, democratic action might thrive.

In the chapter “Walking in the City” in The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau explores the possibilities of such action in the tactics of the “ordinary man.” Looking down at Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, he describes the exaltation of viewing the city from the seat of the powers that discipline subjects through the rational organization of space. But on the ground, something else is afoot. When the “ordinary practitioners” of the city move through it, Certeau writes, “their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. . . . They are not localized; it is rather that they spatialize.” 44 For de Certeau, the swarming activity of pedestrians on the street constitutes “surreptitious creativities,” or stable tactics that remain unreadable from on high but proliferate down below, thickening into nodes of resistance within the city’s disciplining systems. Walkers in the city make contact with the urban landscape; they shape it as one shapes words into sentences.

De Certeau’s observations echo the conviction in Pope.L’s Crawl: That bodies—even, and perhaps especially, those denied agency in public space—can produce spatial conditions, and can “work” the urban “earth” beneath them, not in spite, but because of their dedifferentiation and exclusion from the place of power and representation. Would it be too much to suggest that this surreptitious creativity can occur within the powerful representations of a historical discipline as well? If the anxieties about generalized belonging are in fact assertions of specific exclusions, a turn toward specifics might reveal quite a lot about the dominant category—like catching a glimpse of the backside of a tapestry, where the unsightly chaos of fibers contains a map to its assembly, as well as the means to dethread it. To include Pope.L’s Crawl in Land art is both to augment the genre and to puncture it, to clarify its claims and to riddle them with holes. Within this operation is a model for art history that would seek to include the previously excluded without thereby dislocating them from the discourses they’ve helped to construct. History thus develops as a hole theory of its own making, as a way of being right with the world, as the discovery of a lack worth having.

NOTES

1 Times Square Crawl was initiated alongside Thunderbird Immolation, also 1978, for which Pope.L doused himself in Thunderbird wine and sat in a lotus pose outside of the Sonnabend and Castelli galleries on a yellow blanket ringed by matches, recalling the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc’s 1963 protest of religious persecution by the Diem regime. The two works are now grouped together under the title Meditation Square Pieces a.k.a. Gutter Pieces a.k.a. Times Square Crawl and Thunderbird Immolation. See Kristine Stiles, “Thunderbird Immolation: William Pope.L and Burning Racism,” in William Pope.L: Erascism, ed. Mark Bessire (Cambridge and Portland: MIT Press and the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 2002), 36–42.

2 Holert, Kwon and Kaiser refer to the notion of “relay” to describe the relationship between media practice and the sculptural production of Land art—between, that is, media and medium. The

3 See Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974,” *Artforum* 51, no. 3 (November 2012): 269–70; Kristen Swenson, “Land Art for the Media Age,” *Art in America* (October 2012); Benjamin Lord, “Expanding Fields, Narrowing Paths,” *X-Tra* Vol. 15, no. 2 (Winter 2013); Suzann Boettger, “This Land is Their Land,” *Art Journal*, vol. 71 no. 4 (Winter 2012): 125–129. Boettger’s critique is among the more incisive, but should also be distinguished from the rest of the peanut gallery, in that her concern is not that Kwon and Kaiser will damage the integrity of this edifice, but rather that they appear uninterested and/or uneven in addressing the consequences of the expansion. Kwon and Kaiser, as a matter of fact, explicitly locate their interest elsewhere. In their introduction to the exhibition, they maintain that the significance of this exercise of expansion transcends the immediate concerns of Land art to engage the challenges to and transformations of the museum brought by a range of unstable, unlocalizable, untransportable, or uniterable works, of which out-sized and “out-there” earthworks are but one.

4 Ralph Ellison condensed the paradox in the image of funhouse mirrors’ deflections: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.” Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 3.

5 The extensive body of literature on this discussion of the body in public space goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, one may cite quickly, with regard to the significance of this theme in feminist art history, the exchange of Janet Wolff’s 1985 essay “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity” and Griselda Pollock’s 1988 “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity.”

6 Jane McFadden has traced Land art’s intersections with a number of categories associated with performance, notably Fluxus and Group Zero, uniting them on their basis of a general reconsideration of what belongs within the cultural category of art itself. She concludes, “Art of the land thus emerges less as a categorical determinant for work involving land or earth than as a complex terrain of contemporary practice, media, and politics.” While valuable, the broad scope of McFadden’s contribution, and its emphasis on the opposition of art/non-art, risk producing yet another mythology for Land art, disconnected from its particular discursive and formal tropes. In my desire to draw out these tropes further through my own reconsideration of belonging and exclusion in Land art, I am admittedly somewhat Modernist in orientation. Jane McFadden, “Along the Way to Land Art,” *Ends of the Earth*, p. 54.


8 “[L]and art,” writes Beardsley, “is in large measure about the landscape itself—its scale, its vistas, its essentially horizontal character.” Beardsley’s description dovetails with Rosalind Krauss’s contextualization of Land art in a tradition of avant-garde sculpture that rejected verticality as a sign of sculpture’s complicity with the social order, signified by its “uprightness” and claim to a symbolic or transcendental register conferred on it by the pedestal. See Rosalind Krauss, “No More Play,” *The Originality of the Avant-Grade and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), p. 503–33 and *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981). For Beardsley, Romanticism’s sublime landscape is Land art’s primary antecedent. Just as these landscapes required a viewer, in the absence of which the landscape is simply nature, Land art’s horizontal character could only be conceived in contradistinction through the verticality of humankind. John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 100.


10 Qtd. in Beardsley, op. cit., 44.

12 For Smithson, this experience of physical engulfment and unboundedness is primary but not sufficient for the Land artwork, which must then communicate the experience through a “mapped revision . . . gather[ing] in the fragments that are experienced in the physical abyss of raw matter.” Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968),” *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, 103.


14 A similar claim about the effects of spatial immersion on subjecthood was made in a quite different context by Roger Caillois in his well-known essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psycheaesthesia.” The relation of Pope.L’s Crawl to Surrealist experiments in social space, while intriguing, must be left for another time. Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psycheaesthesia (1936),” trans. John Shipley, *October* 31 (1984): 12–32.

15 Qtd. in Tuffnell, opt cit., 61.


18 Ibid., 48.


20 The work in question is Burden’s *Through the Night Softly* (1973).


22 “The awe-inspiring creations of the American triumvirate of Heizer, De Maria, and Smithson continue to hold sway as the leading examples, if not the paradigm, of Land art: permanent monumental sculptures in remote, inhospitable locations that ostensibly escape the art system and demand reverential pilgrimages to experience them in situ. But the power of that discourse . . . has obscured other contexts, approaches, and practices.” Kaiser and Kwon, op. cit, 18–19.

23 In his insightful contribution to the *Ends of the Earth* catalogue, Julian Myers takes up one of the more infamous engagements: Michael Heizer’s ill-fated 1971 *Dragged Mass Displacement*, installed in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts, in which the artist had a thirty-ton granite block dragged across the Institute’s lawn, ultimately both incurring thousands of dollars in fines and occasioning the resignation of curator Sam Wagstaff. Myers attributes the failure of the work to the artist’s misapprehension of the contradictions of urban space, its tendencies to order as well as destruction. In particular, Heizer’s installation had remained tone-deaf to the topical struggles of Detroit in the early 1970s — the rise of violence and economic precarity above all. Julian Myers, “Earth Beneath Detroit,” in *Ends of the Earth*, p. 129–149. See also Emily Eliza Scott, op. cit.

24 Ibid., 132.


26 *Bringing the Decarie to the Mountain* was produced as part of an exhibition organized by the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts. Artist’s Statement, “Décarie,” Liane and Danny Taran Gallery (Montreal: Saidye Bronfman Center for the Arts, April 28 – June 5, 2005).
In the course of describing its construction, Smithson’s essay covers everything from the downfall of the Parks Administration Department under Boss Tweed to the construction of the water pipeline used to fill the Park's lake, enacting in essay-form the same imbrications he demands of dialectical Land art.

Smithson, op. cit., 169.

A census of New York City’s homeless taken in March 2015 showed that nearly 60% of individuals in the city’s homeless shelters are African-American, despite the fact that they make up only a quarter of the city’s population; the majority of these individuals are men. Statistics from the Coalition for the Homeless, http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/. Accessed 8 September 2015.

The artist’s insistence on this function of the Crawls may be both sincere and strategic, staking a claim on precisely those pretensions to universality that are conventionally denied non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male artists.


Ibid., 274.


By contrast, totalitarianism, whether Stalinist or Fascist, seeks to fill up this empty space with an image of the people-as-one. Claude Lefort, “The Logic of Totalitarianism,” The Political Forms of Modern Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 279.

As Lefort observed, once statistics become more important than bodies, politics becomes mere “society,” and the vibrancy of the democracy is replaced by the pursuit of what one calls the good life. The body—or, in other terms, the biopower—by which one measures this good life is thereby reinstated into that empty place where democratic politics once operated.

Deutsche, 276.

Tufnell writes, “In Simonds's fantasy of integration and immersion, the figure of the artist becomes an archetype; streaked with mud, he is literally at one with the landscape, and almost indistinguishable from it.” Tufnell, op. cit, 65.

These photographs were initially made for TV broadcast; each still was shown for a matter of seconds over the course of nine days with no explanation. The work may be seen as an extension of his Liverpool Burial Piece, a “situational sculpture” that was produced with students at the Manchester College of Art. Each participant dug his or her own hole, and were then buried by non-participants. Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 50.

Pope.L Burial (Portland) and Burial (Sweet Desire) (both 1998) point back to Arnatt’s work. In both instances, Pope.L arranged to be buried neck deep in the earth—in the latter performance, in 98-degree weather, with a bowl of vanilla ice cream melting inches from his face. Yet where Arnatt is digested by the earth, Pope.L is in its vise grip, held from his own frustrated promise of sweet digestion. Indeed, the pressure from the earth around his body was so great in Portland that Pope.L had to be extricated and rushed to the hospital.


Partial, Incoherent and Divided Imbeciles: The Situationist International and the Action in Belgium Against the International Assembly of Art Critics

Chloe Wyma

Disperse, fragments of art critics, critics of fragments of art. The Situationist International is now organizing the integral artistic activity of the future. You have nothing more to say.

—Internationale Situationniste 1, June 1958

In approximately 400 scathing words, the Situationists’ tract against the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), published and distributed two days before the organization’s tenth General Assembly in Brussels, denounced their opponents as “mediocrities” and “loyal watchdogs” of a “completely outmoded but still materially dominant society.” A cultural product of the postwar reconstruction effort, AICA was established in 1949 as a specialist organization of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Animated by a fustian humanist rhetoric, AICA shared with its parent organization a faith in the palliative role of art and culture, which, in its appeal to universal human essences, would transcend rivaling ideologies and repair a world torn apart by the catastrophes of the Second World War. Convening at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, the first universal exposition since the Second World War, AICA hoped to identify the discipline of art criticism with the fair’s redemptive program of international humanism and spiritual uplift. For the Situationist International, a politico-aesthetic avant-garde lead by French filmmaker and theoretician Guy Debord, however, the professionalization of art criticism was emblematic of the decomposition of bourgeois culture, the failed promise of modernism, and the alienated division of labor under capitalism. Their statement against AICA, later published in the first issue of the Situationists’ official organ, the Internationale Situationniste, was the polemical centerpiece of the group’s planned offensive against AICA during the opening of the World’s Fair.

In spite of the Situationists’ antipathy towards disciplinary atomization, several theories and practices associated with the Situationist International—particularly Debord’s theory of “the spectacle,” the derive, or detournement—are ensconced in the discourse of postwar art history, having attained a reverent aura of untouchability. In the history of countercultural rebellion, Situationists are remembered as the catalysts of the May 1968 insurrections in France, iconized by a famous, quixotic fragment of Situationist-inspired graffiti: “Under the cobblestones, the beach.” But the SI’s intervention against AICA, carried out less than a year after the group’s founding conference at Cosio d’Arroscia in
Northwest Italy in July of 1957, has received less than cursory mention in art historical literature. In attempting to disinter this hazy event, my aim is less to turn over a rare untouched stone in the SI bibliography than to locate Situationist theory in the aesthetic debates and exigencies of the postwar “free world,” the feverish stakes of midcentury cultural criticism, the vicissitudes of artistic intervention in the public sphere.

While the Situationists’ desire to dismantle the division of artistic labor clashed with the professional discourse of AICA, a historically situated investigation of this polemic reveals some surprising parallels between the SI and their cultural enemies. Namely, both AICA and the SI viewed modern life as constitutively alienated and regarded their organizational activities as a means to redress this problem. Moreover, both groups sought to align themselves with structures beyond the narrow confines of individual artistic creation, turning to collective organization and its attendant program of congresses, meetings, and in-house memos and resolutions in order to legitimize their operations.

Established in 1957 from the splinters of several postwar avant-garde groups including CoBrA, the Letterist International, and the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, the Situationist International launched a rigorous and obstinate critique of the commodification and banality of everyday life under capitalism. Drawing on an anti-Stalinist Libertarian Marxism steeped in the humanism of Marx’s early writings, the council communism of Anton Pannekoek and the young Gerog Lukács, and a tradition of libertine avant-gardism inherited from Dada and Surrealism, the Situationists vehemently rejected the separation of art and politics, aspiring to dialectically supersede and sublate both categories.
into a new form of aesthetic-revolutionary consciousness that would merge the affective potential of former with the agency of the latter.²

The Action Against the Art Critics succeeded a number of the Letterists’ aggressive, Dada-inflected provocations targeting the art world establishment. In June 1956, the Letterist International, with Debord’s involvement, issued a manifesto against a Royal Dutch-Shell sponsored exhibition entitled “The Petroleum Industry Seen By Artists” at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. In November 1957, the group issued a boycott of scenographer Jacques Polieri’s Avant-garde Arts Festival at Le Corbusier’s Cité Radieuse in Marseille, featuring well-known abstract painters including Jean-Michel Atlan, Michel Fautrier, Hans Hartung, and Pierre Soulages. For Debord, French lyrical abstraction associated with the aforementioned artists represented a “false modernism linked to all of the reactionary enterprises.”³ Debord would find belated agreement from Benjamin Buchloh, who critiqued the artists and critics affiliated with Parisian postwar abstraction for their engagement in a futile and “desperate project to restore prewar modernist pictorial aesthetics and establish a credible continuity within the present.” Like its New York counterpart, Parisian abstraction was heralded by its liberal apparatchiks as a “moral and artistic expression of liberation.” While the perceived individualism and freewheeling formal experimentation of American Abstract Expressionism gestured towards a liberal alternative to totalitarianism on the left and right, France’s *art informel* promised freedom from “the fascist yoke of German occupation” and “the reactionary Nationalist culture of the collaborating French Vichy regime,” as well as “from the Stalinist threat which had emerged from within the ranks of the French intellectual and artistic Left.”⁴

The Situationists’ pamphlet against AICA—signed by members Abdelhafid Khatib, Walter Korun, Guy Debord, Hans Platschek, Guiseppe Pinot-Gallизизio and Asger Jorn—attacked the critics as agents of art’s cooption and institutionalization. “Inasmuch as modern cultural thought has proved itself completely stagnant for over twenty-five years,” the Situationists wrote, “its spokesmen are striving to transform their activities into institutions.” The gathering of art critics, “assembling to exchange the crumbs of their ignorance and doubts,” was “laughable” in its timid self-importance, but also “significant,” in that it testified to the reification of culture through professional organization.⁵ The tract went on to indict the critics on the grounds of myopic formalism—their inability to consider or critique “culture as a whole”—as well as their commodification of critical discourse, which peddled “confused and empty babble about a decomposed culture.”⁶ “Vanish, art critics,” the authors declared with the journal’s typical ferocity, “partial, incoherent and divided imbeciles! In vain do you stage the spectacle of a fake encounter.”⁷ If the professional art critics represented the intellectual fossils of the past, the Situationist International would organize “the integral artistic activity of the future.”⁸ The verso of the broadsheet proclaimed, “The classless society has found its artists.”⁹

According to Debord’s original plan, 2,000 copies of the tract were printed in Paris. Debord entrusted the Belgian Air Force pilot Piet de Groof, who engaged in avant-garde activities under the pseudonym Walter Korun, to lead the Situationist’s Belgian faction in distributing the text during AICA’s conference. De Groof and his comrades would storm the press hall during the reception of the art
critics on April 13, throwing copies of the polemic and taking the floor to read the
text aloud. The intervention was to take place on three fronts—in the incendiary
language of Situationist propaganda, in the performed text, and, finally, in its
journalistic documentation in the international press, which, Debord hoped, would
become a succès de scandale and give the Situationist International visibility in
the mainstream media. What actually occurred, however, was less a spectacular
intervention than a protracted series of irritating disruptions.

Shunning traditional models of artistic “commitment”—the social realist
imperative to represent or ennoble the proletariat, illustrate social discontents, or
align oneself with a revolutionary party—the Situationists argued that the role of
the revolutionary artist was to negate the specialized activity of art itself. “A
creative intellectual,” Debord wrote in one of the movement’s foundational texts,
“cannot be revolutionary simply by supporting the politics of a given party, even if
he does so by original means, but must rather work, outside of parties, for the
necessary change of all cultural superstructures.”10 Under Western capitalism,
art, even in its most formally experimental or socially engagé varieties, functioned
as a safety valve for revolutionary impulses, an illusory vision of freedom in an
unfree society. “At one pole,” Debord and Pierre Canjeur wrote in “Preliminaries
Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” “art is purely and simply
coopeted by capitalism as a means of conditioning the population. At the other
pole, capitalism grants art a perpetual privileged concession: that of pure creative
activity—an isolated creativity which serves as an alibi for the alienation of all
other activities.”11 Through the rarefied disciplines of art and criticism, bourgeois
society maintains a “sense of critique and research among a minority,” while at
the same time compartmentalizing this activity in “strictly separated utilitarian
disciplines” and deterring “all comprehensive critique and research."12 Echoing
Marx’s well-known prophecy in “The German Ideology” that, under communism,
an individual might “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the
evening, criticize after dinner…without ever becoming hunter, fisherman,
herdsman or critic,”13 Debord prognosticated that, “in a classless society…there
will be no more painters, only situationists who, among other things, make
paintings.”14 Hypostatizing Marx’s vision of a post-capitalist world liberated from
the alienating specialization and division of labor, the Situationists sought the
liquidation of art as a privileged sphere of production in order for art’s creative
potential to be redistributed in and through everyday life.

The Situationists were hardly alone in advancing an “end of art thesis”
around the midcentury. Postwar anxieties over art’s obsolescence are pithily
encapsulated in the opening statement of Theodor Adorno’s posthumously
published Aesthetic Theory: “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-
evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to
exist.”15 As Anselm Jappe has shown, both Adorno and Debord understood the
foreclosure of art’s emancipatory capacities as a result of exchange value’s total
abstraction of social life, conceived in the former’s terms as the “culture industry,”
in the latter’s as “spectacle.” But while Debord and his Situationist comrades
demanded the negation of art in service of direct intervention in reality, Adorno
arrived at the opposite conclusion, identifying the critical potential of “art”
precisely in its removal from “life.” “There is nothing pure,” Adorno writes in
Aesthetic Theory, “nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law,
that does not implicitly criticize…a situation evolving in the direction of a total
exchange society.”16 “For Adorno,” Jappe explains, “art always embodies a social
critique, even hermetic art, even art for art’s sake—precisely because of its
autonomy and its ‘asocial’ character.”17 Despite Debord’s hostility towards such
practices, a diverse array of neo-dada artistic movements—among them Fluxus,
Happenings, and the Cagean avant-garde—deserve mention in postwar “refusal
of art” problematic in their attempt to diminish the boundary between “art” and
“life,” although largely in non-Marxist terms.

“History has depreciated you”

This Situationists’ ambition to dismantle both professional hierarchies and
the privileged sphere of cultural activity designated by the term “art” contradicted
the aspirations of the International Association of Art Critics, which sought to
define the professional activities of the art critic at a time when, according to
Henry Hughes, author of “AICA in the Age of Globalization,” the “separate
identity of the art critic still stood in need of clarification.”18 Although the European
dealer-critic system had been operative since the emergence of the modern art
market and the periodical press in the nineteenth century, the field of art criticism
still lacked disciplinary coherence. As is still the case today, no institutionalized
training was required for the profession and few critics made their living through
its practice.

AICA’s inaugural meeting convened in Paris from June 21 to 28, 1948,
bringing together representatives from 34 nations, with financial support provided
by UNESCO, the French government, the city of Paris, and a private donation
from art dealer Georges Wildenstein.19 During the organization’s inaugural
meeting, several critics voiced now-familiar complaints about the discipline’s
social and economic devaluation. Belgian representative Leon Degrand, for
example, lamented “the off-hand way in which art critics are treated, morally and
materially.”20 Critics, he said, deserved “the material support that will enable them
to exercise their profession, at a time when the first thing the newspaper does,
when it has to make economies, is to cut back on its art critic.”21 Under the aegis
of UNESCO, AICA would lend legitimacy to the profession and “affirm the reality
of the critics’ new profession and their right to an autonomous material and
intellectual existence.”22

Emphasizing the ennobling power of criticism and “the primacy of the
artist’s integrity and the spirituality of his message,” AICA’s first congress sought
to assuage professional anxieties and establish consensus among a coalition of
professionals united by their common practice and ethical imperative. Interlocutors repeatedly stressed the critic’s pedagogical mandate to inform and
elevate a “profane” and “uninitiated” public.23 In his presentation on the “Social
and Educative Mission of the Art Press,” the critic Michel Stoffel, representing
Luxembourg, affirmed art criticism’s capacity “to rally all men of good will to a
common ideal” and demanded that the discipline receive “recognized status.”24 In
a similar vein, the French critic Gaston Diehl insisted on the social responsibility
of the profession. “The first service the art critic can offer,” he maintained, “is on
the social level, not only in evaluating works of art and communicating with the
public, but in guiding the public and helping it to reach a deeper understanding.”25
AICA, Hughes writes, established in a “brief period of international idealism between the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War,” prized “the power of art to transcend the barriers of political expediency.” To this end, AICA sought to guarantee the integrity and authority of the independent art critic, which, the organization held, had to be affirmed and defended in the face of Stalinist and Fascist policing of aesthetics. As the French critic Raymond Cogniat put it during his introductory speech at AICA’s preliminary meeting in 1948, “In proscribing art criticism, the Nazi and fascist regimes inflicted on art an injury, from which it has yet to recover.”

The autonomous, apolitical power of art and its dispassionate contemplation by the enlightened critic offered a pacific antidote to the cultural and political antagonisms that gave rise to World War II. As Hughes explains, AICA, from its inception, “always nurtured universalist ambitions inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of its parent organization and a desire to pour balm on the wounds caused by the War that had just ended, to rebuild the damaged fabric of the old world, and to plan a better future for humanity on the basis of material progress, peace, justice, and liberty.”

In keeping with UNESCO’s mission to “establish the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind,” AICA’s founding members affirmed art criticism’s relevance in a restorative project to salvage a humanist tradition. Political debate was eschewed and no mention was made of the contemporary polemics over Socialist Realism, the conflict between abstraction and figuration, the question of political commitment among artists or intellectuals, or the Marshall Plan’s influence on European culture.

AICA’s humanist rhetoric can be located with a large body literature cultural critic Mark Grief has named “the discourse of the crisis of Man.” “In the middle decades of the twentieth century,” he writes, “American intellectuals of manifold types, from disparate and even hostile groups, converged on a perception of danger…Man became at midcentury the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center, the measure, the ‘root…’ Characterized by a perception of moral emergency and an unproblematized essentialism, “modern man” discourse in the United States, according to Grief’s periodization,” gained urgency in the debate over intervention, expanded once the United States entered the war, reached an intellectual peak by 1951, and, at that point, was popularized and banalized. A child of the United Nations—itself a compromised outcome of the utopian “world government” movement—UNESCO was a “central ‘official’ avenue for the ‘crisis of man discourse.’” Adopted in 1945, the organization’s constitution declares that, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” The document goes on to articulate UNESCO’s mission in ambitious, quasi-messianic terms: “[T]he wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.”

AICA’s international congress of art critics was ludicrous to the Situationists, who ridiculed the figure of the art critic as the very reification of passive spectatorship. In a world organized and overdetermined by social
stratification, alienated consumption, and psychic and intellectual immiseration, the SI—despite several artists’ membership in the group before the 1962 “split” between its artistic and theoretical factions advocated an abandonment of object production in favor of “immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life.” Staging a dialectic between unmediated engagement on one hand and connoisseurial detachment on the other, the Situationists propped up the figure of the art critic as a cipher of non-participation. “The critic is someone who makes a spectacle out of his very condition as a spectator—a specialized and therefore ideal spectator, expressing his ideas and feelings about a work in which he does not really participate,” Debord would write in 1961’s “For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art;” “he re-presents, restages, his own nonintervention in the spectacle.” While art can be recuperated to serve the ruling ideology as spectacle, “art criticism,” insofar as it reifies and displaces the act of spectatorship, is a “second-degree spectacle,” and is thus even more impassive and removed from the immediacy of life. According to the Situationists, even progressive or radically-minded art critics were courtiers of haute-bourgeois reaction: “The point,” they maintained with adamantine negativity, “is not to engage in some sort of revolutionary art-criticism, but to make a revolutionary critique of all art.”

Nevertheless, the Situationists’ original, unrealized intervention at the World’s Fair sounds ironically artistic: an enormous labyrinth in the Parc de Bruxelles, dubbed the Labyrinth Educatif. Composed of several identical corridors filled with consciousness-altering amusements including alcoholic beverages, ambient music, graffiti, and fake windows, this immersive environment was to be populated with Situationist “comrade-geographers,” who were to periodically confuse and disturb visitors by soliciting money and handing them notecards containing upsetting messages. After unsuccessfully petitioning restaurateur Albert Neils to finance this funhouse labyrinth, the Belgian faction of the Situationist International, in collusion with Debord, opted instead to stage the intervention against AICA.

Enjoy your alienation

Organized under the leitmotif “a review of the world for a more humane world,” Expo 58 sought to reaffirm the positivist values of international collaboration, technological innovation, and human creativity that had been shattered by the war. The official program of Expo 58 made recourse to universalizing notions of spirituality and human fraternity in order to assuage technophobic anxieties and lend an altruistic gloss to the machinations of big business and industry. “When we devised this exhibition…we wanted to place it under the banner of the spirit,” the fair’s General Commissioner Baron George Moens de Fernig affirmed in his inaugural speech. According to cultural historian Tom Verschaffel, the fair’s organizers saw “the alienating and problematic nature of scientific and technological progress [as] a consequence of the fact that the spiritual dimension had been either neglected or totally abandoned.” In its insistence on “the defense of spiritual values in the contemporary world,” Expo 58 “implied a new hierarchy of the material and the spiritual: science and technology ought, as had been said, to serve mankind.”

Held between April and October of 1958 on the Heysel plateau, a
purpose-built exhibition park less than five miles north of central Brussels, Expo 58 presented a sweeping “inventory of scientific, technological, and cultural achievement developed by mankind in response to the needs of civilization.” The Belgian, international, and colonial pavilions sprawled out underneath the newly-built Automium, a gigantic steel and aluminum scale model of an iron atom enlarged over 160 billion times. A monument to “the bright future of atomic energy,” this architectural trophy for a peaceful and prosperous new world order, historian Gonzague Pluvinage notes, was erected in the wake of the development of “new institutions of international diplomacy.” Signed the year before the Expo’s opening, the Treaty of Rome consolidated European markets and made provisions for the peaceful development of atomic energy. Though intended to evangelize the peaceful applications of nuclear technology, the Automium—the Expo 58’s “Eiffel Tower”—spoke perhaps too well to contemporary anxieties between humanity and technics, with the balance tipping towards the latter. “There is much gossip here of transcendental matters; and nice, round words, like humanism, progress, and the pursuit of happiness, fill the moist Belgian air,” wrote the Saturday Evening Post’s Ernest O. Hauser. “While man himself serves as a general theme, the atom-symbol of our age-will cast its eerie shadow on the fair.”

Figure 2. Poster for Expo 58, 1958. Brussels City Archives.

Expo 58’s official copy echoes the by-now belated and reified “crisis of man” discourse. By the 1950s, Grief writes, “we can begin to feel even a sentimentalism of man, plucking at the string of mobilizing pity customarily felt for children, the family, and the hearth. Debates about philosophical anthropology,
the shape of history, the justification for any faith, and the distortions of technology could be flattened in favor of man’s characteristics as inflected by publicists for Cold Warriors: natural individualism, natural freedom, even natural American-style capitalism.50 Under the ethos of rehumanization, the “universality of man” functions “as a sentimental antidote to the worries of a nuclear-armed world of US–USSR bipolarity.”51 In fact, despite the fair’s spirit of international détente, both the United States and the Soviet Union viewed Expo 58 as an ideological battleground. The Office of Research and Intelligence of the USIA published a detailed report for the US Congress on “Communist Propaganda and the Brussels Fair.” Citing the report, New Jersey Democrat Frank Thompson urged congress to increase US spending on the fair, fearing being upstaged by the Russians (who were rumored to have spent approximately $60 million). “The Soviet exhibits appear designed to convince visitors that the U.S.S.R. is now the fountainhead of human progress…. the report claimed, “The U.S.S.R. appears to be taking full advantage of the exceptional show window offered by the Brussels Fair to sell the world on the superiority of the Communist social-political-economic system.”52

Introducing the pillars of what would become known as the Marshall Plan at Harvard University's Commencement on June 5, 1947, George Marshall, Secretary of State under president Harry Truman, had packaged his program of financial credits and large-scale economic assistance to Western Europe in terms resonant with the “crisis of man” discourse. “There are concerted efforts to change the whole face of Europe as we know it, contrary to the interests of free mankind and free civilization,” he said in an allusion to the Communist threat.53 Operating above and beyond the framework of the United Nations, the Marshall program would rebuild Europe and secure US power through economic and infrastructural development, liberalization of trade, modernization of industries, and anti-Communist ideological warfare that recruited modern art and culture as banners of the “free world” liberalism. As the Marshall Plan’s deputy director Richard Bissel has freely admitted, “even before the outbreak of the Korean war, it was well understood that the Marshall Plan was never meant to be a wholly altruistic affair. The hope was that strengthening their [European] economies would enhance the value of the alliance, eventually enabling them to assume a defense responsibility in support of Cold War efforts.”54 As historian Frances Stone Saunders aptly puts it, the Marshall Plan—“a package of economic assistance coupled with a doctrinal imperative”— “delivered an unambiguous message: the future of Western Europe, if Western Europe was to have a future at all, must now be harnessed to a pax Americana.”55

Under the Marshall Plan, the United States’ postwar investment in Belgium consolidated the influence of capitalism, “with consumer society as its most visible corollary.”56 Expo 58’s ethos of spiritual humanism didn’t occasion a rejection of commerce. In fact, business was announced as an agent of benevolence and social well-being. National industries including construction and civil engineering, agriculture, food, electricity and hydraulics, forestry, hunting and fisheries, metallurgy, and banking were not only obliged to represent their trades in thematic pavilions, but to “demonstrate how the achievements of their industry can liberate humanity…and contribute to the great Forward March of Progress.”57 To this end, businesses used the platform of the World Fair to rebrand themselves with moralizing slogans that lent an ethical imperative to
their activities. The electrical energy pavilion, for example, labeled electricity as “a vital aid to life,” while—more perversely—Belgium’s diamond purveyors marketed their product with the slogan, “Diamonds lighten the toil of human beings.”

The positivism trumpeted by Expo 58 and its nuclear mascot, however, was accompanied by doubts that the fair organizers couldn’t ignore. World War II had undermined the technological utopianism that had underpinned every World’s Fair since their origins in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1958, the universal exposition felt—to some, at least—like a naïve anachronism. “Are world's fairs obsolescent?” Hauser begins his article. “The people now preparing the Brussels Universal and International Exposition of 1958 have no illusions on this score. Their fair, they know, may well be the last of its kind.” Science and industry—the supposed engines of social well-being—had not created a better world, and the material comforts secured through technological progress were unequally distributed. While “the great majority of the world,” as the Expo’s organizing committee conceded, “[was] still living in poverty, in advanced capitalist economies with higher standards of living, technology had not necessarily made people happier.” In addition to the threat of nuclear annihilation, technology, Verschaffel writes, gave rise to feelings of “anxiety, alienation, and impotence,” all hallmarks of postwar European literature and philosophy. In a surprisingly candid statement, Expo 58’s general secretary Charles Everarts de Velp, citing the Russian Christian existentialist philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, admitted that technological innovation had led to the “dehumanisation’ of life,” as “man is not yet master of the machine he has invented.”

The dehumanization of everyday life was, of course, also a concern for the Situationists. Extending Marx’s critique of the division of labor in production to the superstructural spheres of art and leisure, the Situationists sought the “extension of leisure” into all areas of life as well as its corollary: the abolition of specialized work. For the young Marx, the division of labor demanded by capitalist relations of production found its most potent expression in the soul-crushing monotony of the factory, which alienates and abstracts the worker from the means of production, the products of his labor, and ultimately, from his own person. Capitalist manufacture “converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity…through the suppression of the whole world of productive drives and inclinations…. Not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation.”

In his 1923 “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Georg Lukács expanded Marx’s critique of the industrial workplace, arguing that the “‘natural laws’ of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society.” The atomizing logic of scientific management had expanded into all facets of work, including white-collar labor. “The better we are able to close our minds to the bourgeois legends of the ‘creativity’ of the exponents of the capitalist age,” he wrote, “the more obvious it becomes that we are witnessing in all behavior of this sort the structural analogue to the behavior of the worker vis-à-vis the machine he serves and observes.” For Lukács, the
inversion of subject-object relations that Marx had identified in the commodity form had, under capitalism, come to characterize consciousness in general.

Published in French in the independent Marxist journal *Arguments* in December 1958, Lukács’s essay would prove formative for Situationist theory. By the mid-twentieth century, the Situationists argued, social alienation had colonized not only production but all facets of an everyday life increasingly organized around administrated leisure and consumption. The first world “new proletariat”— the metastasizing class of pencil pushers and middle managers under midcentury corporate capitalism—might have access to consumer goods and services, but their non-working hours were overdetermined by “a vast industrial sector of leisure activities” and the imperative consumption of the “by-products of mystifying ideology and bourgeois tastes.” Even in Western capitalist economies marked by relative affluence and the accessibility of consumer goods, “everyday life,” the Situationists could argue, was “organized within the limits of a scandalous poverty.”

During the Marshall plan years, however, the leitmotif of man’s alienation was discursively inverted as a positive sign of liberation. Under the theorists of New Liberalism, alienation—alienated from its Marxist provenance—stood for the high drama of Western Democracy, a healthy symptom of free consciousness. “Anxiety is the official emotion of our time,” wrote Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., whose influential book “The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom” argued for liberal democracy as a middle way between the totalitarianisms of communism and fascism. “Against totalitarian certitude,” he wrote, “free society can only offer modern man devoured by alienation and fallibility.” Modern Man’s Sturm und Drang—encoded in expressionist modern art—served as a foil to the robotic, unfeeling compliance of “totalitarianism” whose “final triumph has been the creation of man without anxiety— of ‘totalitarian man….’” The totalitarian man denies the testimony of his private nerves and conscience until they wither away before the authority of the Party and of history.

Cold War Modern

A decade after AICA’s inaugural meeting, the organization’s 10th General Assembly at the Brussels World Fair remained committed to the same humanist anti-ideology, emphasizing the educative role of the critic and the palliative potential of art. The meeting’s program dictated that the debates would “be inspired by the general theme of the exhibition: ‘Man in the present world.’ Political and religious discussions,” it dictated, “are forbidden.”

“It is our duty,” AICA president and Guggenheim director James Johnson Sweeney proclaimed in his inaugural speech, “and at the same time the most exciting task which can be imposed on a conscientious critic or observer, to keep constantly abreast the always changing and always fundamentally the same Heracleitian river of aesthetic expression.” In a statement, Belgium’s Minster of Education Leo Collard likened the figure of the critic to a “priest of a religion reserved for initiates,” claiming it was the critic’s mission “to help the public see.” “Plastic forms,” he wrote, “reflected the dreams of mankind and gave body to his myths,” and the critic, by “making art accessible though his
comments,” “strengthened the bonds between life and art.”73 The Belgian critic Rene Dekkers likewise described the role of the critic as one of “great responsibility.” “The success of a form of art was in his hands,” he claimed, “for it [is] not enough for art to exist, it must be brought to the knowledge of every man through the medium of criticism, which also had to mold his taste.”74

Musing that the Expo would not only offer pleasures for the eye, but have “a soul of its own,” Dekkers maintained that AICA’s spirit was reflected in the Expo’s theme, “Man—The Prospects for a Better World,” “for if there was an intellectual activity which served mankind in many ways, it was certainly that of art criticism…due to its influence on the public on one hand, and the role it played in the life of the artist on the other.”75 Sweeney also identified the humanist ideology underpinning AICA with that of the Brussels Exposition. “Superimposing the face of a new world on the ruins of the old,” the fair was “destined to lay the foundations of a character of humanism regenerated by progress, something which always had been a major concern of the Belgian people and which formed the very core of AICA’s being.”76

Figure 3, Julian Key, Affiche pour ‘50 ans d’art modern,’ 1958.

Housed in the Palais de Beaux-Arts, Expo 58’s central art exhibition, “50 Years of Modern Art,” was conceived as a universal tableau of the art of first half of the twentieth century, presenting a triumphalist narrative of modernist painting beginning with post-impressionism and culminating in the “universal language” of international abstraction.77 AICA’s congress was timed to coincide with this important exhibition, which, according to Sweeney, would bear witness to a “new humanism” that found its “most tragic but also most faithful reflection” in the plastic arts.78 If the nineteenth century was an era of Cartesian certainty—in which “science can explain everything”—the twentieth century, he claimed, was marked by crisis and epistemological uncertainty in which “there are no more fundamental truths, only fundamental errors.” In its “supra-rational” nature, modernist painting “gave a concrete demonstration of this confusion in the minds of men by replacing its representation of the objects of nature by that of the
deep-seated nature of things.” However, rather than give in to “the philosophy of despair” espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the survey of the last fifty years of modern art would provide a corrective to the “absurdity and nausea” Sweeney associated with Existentialist theory, renewing “faith in the human being about whom the poet Lucan long ago had said that he should not believe he was born for himself alone, but for all mankind.”

The transcendent, apolitical spirit of cultural modernism endorsed by AICA doctrine and Sweeney’s personal tastes, however, wasn’t as apolitical as its pundits claimed. Once derided by the American political establishment as formally inscrutable and intrinsically communistic (“it is a pleasure to look at the perfection [of the old masters] and then think of the lazy, nutty moderns,” president Harry Truman wrote in his diary in 1948. “It is like comparing Christ with Lenin”), modern art was instrumentalized during the Cold War as a cipher of liberal “freedom of expression” as against the dogmatism of Soviet social realism.80 As Serge Guilbaut has argued in his classic study on the “political apoliticism” of midcentury Abstract Expressionism, the de-Marxization of America’s leftist artists and intellectuals after 1939 paved the way for nonrepresentational American-style painting to become assimilated as a jingoistic symbol of Schlesinger’s “New Liberalism.”81 Eschewing the ideological extremities of the left and right, Schlesinger’s “vital center” would challenge totalitarianism with a “politics of freedom” grounded in the “value of the individual.”82 Clement Greenberg, the philosopher-king of American Abstract Expression, formulated this narrative in triumphalist terms: “Some day, it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.”83

In its exaltation of idiosyncratic artistic vision and formal self-reliance over naturalistic conventions and sociological content, American Modernism became weaponized as a vital expression of “free world” individualism. As Geberault has argued, the US establishment’s acceptance, even promotion, of modern art was
an example of enlightened liberal tolerance. “The avant-garde,” he writes, “even
came a protégé of the new liberalism, a symbol of the fragility of freedom in
the battle waged by the liberals to protect the vital center from the
authoritarianism of the left and the right.”\textsuperscript{64} “A free society must dedicate itself to
the protection of the unpopular view,” Schlesinger wrote. “We need courageous
men to help us recapture a sense of indispensability of dissent.”\textsuperscript{65} Schlesinger’s
“new radicalism,” he wrote, “derives its power from an acceptance of conflict—an
acceptance of combined with a determination to create social framework where
conflict issues, not in excessive anxiety, but in creativity.”\textsuperscript{66}

As historian Frances Stoner Saunders has argued, the association
between Modernist abstraction and free enterprise liberalism was exploited by
the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA’s anti-Communist soft power cartel
financed by a secret $200 million per year slush fund provided under the
Marshall plan.\textsuperscript{67} Run by CIA agent Michael Josselson from 1950 until 1967, the
CCF promoted “free culture” by covertly bankrolling an international network of
journals, books, conferences, seminars, concerts, and awards, as well as a
blitzkrieg of traveling modern art exhibitions advocating a socio-economic
consensus model in accordance with American liberal democracy.

In 1952, the CCF orchestrated its first major propaganda tour, the
“Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century” festival in Paris. Organized by Nicolas
Nabokov, Secretary General of the organization and first cousin to the famous
novelist, the month-long agenda of modern music, ballets, theatre, art, and
literary events was intended, in Nabokov’s somewhat clunky assessment, to
“have an extremely beneficial all-round effect upon the cultural life of the free
world by showing the cultural solidarity and interdependence of European and
American civilization,” offering “a challenge of the culture of the free world to the
un-culture of the totalitarian world.”\textsuperscript{68}

Curated by Sweeney and contracted to the Museum of Modern Art, the
“Masterpieces” fine art exhibition showcased works by European painters culled
from prominent American collections, among them Matisse, Cezanne, Chagall,
Kandinsky, Serault, and Derain.\textsuperscript{69} A member of both the Committee for Cultural
Freedom and MoMA’s advisory committee, Sweeney wasn’t embarrassed by the
show’s propagandistic implications. The artworks, he wrote in the press release,
were created “in many lands under free world conditions” and would therefore
reveal the “desirability for contemporary artists of living and working in an
atmosphere of freedom. On display will be masterpieces that could not have
been created nor whose exhibition would be allowed by the totalitarian regimes
as Nazi Germany or present day Soviet Russia and her satellites.”\textsuperscript{70} While many
later exhibitions organized under the CCF’s auspices tended to evangelize the
virtues of American nonrepresentational painting, Sweeney’s “Masterpieces”
gave Europe a taste of its own Modernism. As Saunders notes, “the fact that all
the works in the show were owned by American collectors and museums
delivered another clear message: modernism owed its survival—and its future—
to America.”\textsuperscript{71}

Often referring to the museum as a “secular temple of art,” Sweeney’s
writings laced the experience of modern art with a universal mysticism, arguing
that the mission of the museum was to give the public “a richer spiritual life,” and
“full enjoyment of the spiritual over the material.”92 Championing the centrality of the visionary artist and the “restorative role of modernist aesthetics,” he considered the ludic effervescence and aesthetic autonomy of Modernist painting as a means of transcending the nulling conformity of midcentury bourgeois society, arguing that “the work of a painter, as the work of a poet, is not to find a formal equivalent to the emotions everyday life, but to transform and enrich them, in an imaginative order.”93

Ironically, both Sweeney and Debord would adopt Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s theory of play, elaborated in his 1938 book Homo Ludens, or “Playing Man.”94 Huizinga proposed that the autonomous, non-purposive, and extra-moral activity of play is a fundamental precondition of culture.95 Lying outside “the sphere of necessity or material utility,” pure play, he wrote, “knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration.”96 Having reached an apotheosis in the Romanticism of the eighteenth century, the play element in culture, Huizinga believed, was sadly on the wane. Man’s noble, enchanting capacity for play had, in the twentieth century, degenerated into adolescent “puerilism,” manifested in “an insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism.”97

Taking up Huizinga’s theory in his 1959 article “Contemporary Art and the Generative Role of Play,” Sweeney proposed that the play element’s most vital contemporary expression was to be found in abstract art and poetry. “Civilization,” he argued, citing Huizinga, “arises and unfolds in play,” which “continually confirms the supralogical nature of the human situation.”98 According to Sweeney, a spirit of childlike playfulness was crucial to the modern art’s creation and appreciation. Without it, creativity is stunted and art ossifies into a “solemn, long-faced exercise.”99 From Mallarmé’s nonrepresentational poetry to Calder’s effervescent kinetic sculpture, it is in the autonomous realm of Modernist abstraction—the arena “beyond the mirror of reflected nature”—that homo ludens can thrive. For Sweeney, the self-referential quality of modern art—its capacity to
play in and through its medium, unbound from any mimetic imperative—revived
the ludic impulse precious to human expression.

While Sweeney’s reading of Huizinga ends in a celebration of the
unfettered expression and free experimentation of Modernist painting—
particularly in the American Abstract Expressionism of Motherwell, Rothko,
Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline—the Situationist theory of play demanded the
dismantling of the “division between play and ordinary life” that posits the former
as an “isolated and provisory exception.” 100 Published in the first issue of the
Internationale Situationniste along with the invective against AICA, the essay
“Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play” also cites Huizinga: “Into an
imperfect world and into the confusion of life, [play] brings a temporary, a limited
perfection.” 101 According to the Situationists, play, rather than becoming reified in
objects of aesthetic delectation, must be “radically broken from a confined ludic
time and space” in order to “invade the whole of life.” 102 The liberating potential of
play would never be realized in the Modernist varieties of painting, sculpture, or
poetry, but in the creation of “ludic ambiances” and “experimental forms of a
game of revolution.” 103 The overall project, simply put, was to “broaden the
nonmediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments of life as much as
possible.” 104

“In vain do you stage the spectacle of a fake encounter”

Hovering between activism and performance, the Situationists’
mischievous intervention in the normative functions of the International
Association of Art Critics instantiates their call to redefine the practice of both art
and politics as playful action. The SI’s chosen method of troublesome interruption
materialized their desire to replace “the spectacle of art” and the attendant
passivity of spectatorship with an aesthetics of “direct intervention.” 105 Indeed,
due to its ephemeral nature, the Situationists’ action against the art critics is a
rather slippery cultural artifact, surviving only in murky and sometimes
contradictory written accounts. The slim art historical literature on the action
relies on a brief postmortem published alongside the tract in the first issue of the
Internationale Situationniste, which describes the event as follows:

Our Belgian section carried out the necessary direct attack. Beginning April 13, on the eve of the opening of the proceedings,
when the art critics from two hemispheres, led by the American Sweeney, were being welcomed to Brussels, the text of the
situationist proclamation was brought to their attention in several ways. Copies were mailed to a large number of critics or given to
them personally. Others were telephoned and read all or part of the text. A group forced its way into the Press Club where the
critics were being received and threw the leaflets among the audience. Others were tossed onto the sidewalks from upstairs
windows or from a car. (After the Press Club incident, art critics were seen coming out in the street to pick up the leaflets so as to
remove them from the curiosity of passersby.) In short, all steps were taken to leave the critics no chance of being unaware of the
text. These art critics did not shrink from calling the police, and used their World Exposition influence in order to block the
reprinting in the press of a text harmful to the prestige of their convention and their specialization. Our comrade Korun is now being threatened with prosecution for his role in the intervention.

Published almost fifty years after the event, De Groof’s account of the Situationists’ activities on the day of the inaugural meeting dampens this narrative of romantic insubordination. His recollections, as told in the 2005 memoir *Le General Situationniste*, reveal the scandal to be a much more disorganized and tepid affair than art historians—and perhaps even Debord himself—had believed.

The night before the inaugural meeting, artist and SI member Robert Wyckaert and de Groof’s fiancée Wilma spent the night prank-calling the art critics and reading the tract. Meanwhile, de Groof and his younger brother Wilfred climbed a building to scatter flyers onto the street below. However, their attempt was met with limited success, as an uncooperative wind blew the flyers right back into their faces.

While the postmortem of the action against AICA published in the first *Internationale Situationniste* claimed that “a group forced its way into the Press Club” during their reception on April 13, it appears that only one infiltrator gained entry. Reluctant to risk the punishment of throwing the leaflets himself, De Groof, in fact, delegated the task to his younger brother, Wilfred. While Piet waited in the get-away car, his brother entered the press hall, tossed a bundle of leaflets on the table of honor and two other bundles into the crowd, and then immediately escaped, pursued by gallery owner and art critic Robert Delevoy and two policemen. Wilfred, a student at the Royal Military School, outran them and escaped to the car. The action culminated in a low-speed car chase through a Brussels traffic jam, which gave the police the opportunity to record de Groof’s license plate number.

That evening, de Groof impersonated an art journalist and infiltrated the Stedelijk Museum before the opening of its “Belgian Painters Today” exhibition, which was to be attended by the same cadre of art critics. He flyered the gallery with leaflets, and—in an act of misguided iconoclasm he would later regret—glued the flyers to a number of canvases, including works by Wyckaert and his friend Serge Vandercam. De Groof’s attempts at subversion didn’t end there: The next day, the critics convened at the Theatre de la Monnaie, where he and Wyckaert bribed the ushers to insert copies of the pamphlet into the opera programs.

The Situationists’ attack on AICA was both a critique of the spectacle economy of the contemporary art world, and—in its performance—an instantiation of the type of ephemeral para-artistic practice that, they believed, should supersede the production and consumption of commodified art objects. “Our central purpose,” Debord wrote, “is the construction of situations, that is, the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature.” In place of luxury products and cultural treasures, Debord wrote, “our situations will be ephemeral, without a future…. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else.”
This invocation of ephemerality, immediacy, and dematerialized experience grinds against Debord’s ambition to create a scandal through the press. In his memos to the Belgian faction during the intervention’s planning stages, Debord repeatedly entreated his comrades to prioritize media attention. Initially, the conspirators even discussed using a group of thirty “pretty girls,” or “Situationist hostesses,” to invade the press hall and distribute the text. “What will send to the entire world an account of the day in Brussels is the success of a gesture of propaganda to the international press,” he wrote to de Groof on April 8. “It is necessary to be the subject of one of these news chronicles.” In the same communiqué, Debord instructed his comrades to take pains to respond to press requests and “send the largest possible number of press clippings” to the Situationist headquarters in Paris.

In its failure to ignite a significant controversy or engage with a wider audience beyond a gathering of nonplussed art critics, the SI’s action against AICA was something of a non-event. Though Debord’s letter to de Groof after the event strikes a conciliatory tone (“We are,” he wrote, “in summary, very happy with the AICA affair”), he conceded that the intervention’s failure to garner media attention should prompt them to reconsider their “methods of scandal” in the future. In fact, it seems that the intervention against AICA caused the Situationists to retreat from the theater of public insubordination and rely on the printed page as their chosen site of political intervention.

As a media stunt, the Action Against the International Associations of Art Critics would prove to be a disappointment. The Situationists’ activities at the Brussels Expo received no attention in any mainstream news outlets, causing Debord to complain of “a conspiracy of silence” plotted by the art critics. Still, Debord hoped that de Groof’s trial might be the source of a belated scandal. In a letter from May 6, Debord implored de Groof to attempt to stall his hearing as long as possible to make time for another intervention that could “unmask the ridiculous pettiness of the critics who have filed this complaint, denounce them before the artistic opinion in their respective countries, and maybe cause some critics to disassociate themselves from those responsible in Brussels.” Unfortunately for Debord, however, de Groof’s case would never go to trial. He was quietly investigated and eventually acquitted of any involvement. A few months later, he was expelled from the SI on account of his involvement in the Belgian military, deemed incompatible with the objectives of a revolutionary cell. In fact, de Groof’s career as soldier would be much more successful than that as an avant-gardist. He went on to enjoy an illustrious career in the Belgian Air Force and retired as a general and attaché to NATO operations before passing away in July 2014.

Though limited and provisional in its execution, the Situationists’ Action against AICA provides a hazy glimpse the hyperbolic stakes of cultural criticism in postwar Europe. While the international umbrella of UNESCO offered AICA a heightened sense of moral consequence, the Situationists’ tightly knit cabal, mirroring the structure of a dissident guerilla organization, lent an air of militancy to the group’s armchair radicalism. Taken together, AICA’s moralizing claims for art criticism’s social relevance and the Situationists’ dyspeptic denunciation of the discipline reveal an urgent need to reconcile theory and practice, art and life.
In the more than a half century since the Situationists’ intervention against AICA, it seems that the twin crises the event indicates—that of art criticism and of critical art—have become even more entrenched and tormented. AICA’s bumptious assertions of art criticism’s ethico-social imperative have given way to a twenty-first century discourse of its perpetual crisis and irrelevance. As Hal Foster has recently charged, postmodern challenges to the authority, judgment, and social positioning of the art critic have flattened into a lamentably “post-critical” situation of moral indifference and political nihilism. “Art criticism is in worldwide crisis,” James Elkins declared in the first sentence of his 2003 pamphlet “What Happened to Art Criticism.” “Its voice has become very weak, and it is dissolving into the background clutter of ephemeral cultural criticism.” With the social function of critique broadly dismissed and the market crowned as the adjudicator of artistic value, art critics, hardly the great panjandrums of the elite cultural establishment, often struggle to piece together precarious livelihoods, supplementing criticism with adjunct lecturing, curating, and other professional activities.

Neither modern art nor its self-immolating negation would dismantle the institutions of bourgeois culture. Far from ontologically oppositional, the Situationist tropes of direct intervention, “momentary ambiances,” and dematerialized performance have coalesced into privileged strategies of contemporary art. Neither art nor its self-immolating negation would dismantle the institutions of bourgeois culture. Instead, an increasingly elastic postwar culture would expand to accommodate the Situationist critique. In fact, Debord’s anxieties over recuperation seem to find belated confirmation in the work of sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, who have argued that May ’68’s “artistic critique” of capitalism’s oppressive bureaucracy and buttoned conformity was absorbed into a “new spirit” of capitalist development. Not unlike Schlesinger’s New Liberalism, which “not only made room for avant-garde dissidence but accorded to such dissidence a position of paramount importance,” the New Spirit of Capitalism consolidated its hegemony by effectively incorporating the values of creative expression, autonomy, and fluid identity in a perverse realization of Situationist polemics.¹¹⁸
Here, we seem trapped in a failed dialectic between the Art Critics’ fetishistic affirmations and the totalizing, programmatic negativity of the Situationists. Grief’s remarks on the debates in twentieth century intellectual culture are worth quoting here: “Universalism or difference, human rights or political liberation, law or critique, normativity or the struggle for power and representation—between these poles the thinker is often asked to choose a whole temperament and style of life...these antinomies turn round and round, until they resemble a pinwheel, exerting a hypnotic attraction.”

One way out of this infinite regress might be to question the very terms of the “refusal of art” problematic by adopting critical skepticism towards the rule of social abstraction hypostatized by the negative triumvirate of Adorno, Debord, and Buchloh, the last of whom methodologically situates his intellectual project between the first’s “Dialectic of Enlightenment” and the second’s “Society of the Spectacle.”

Although Buchloh critiqued the “latent authoritarianism of Debord’s prohibitive doubt about even the slightest historical possibility of any cultural production whatsoever,” he has more generally embraced Debordian pessimism, characterizing the postwar situation “as a negative teleology: a steady dismantling of the autonomous practices, spaces and spheres of culture, and a perpetual intensification of assimilation and homogenization, to the point today where we witness what Debord called ‘the integrated spectacle.’” Elsewhere he writes, “inasmuch as any work of art becomes increasingly superfluous under the conditions of total reification because it has lost its function as a model of critical reflection of social reality, it approaches a state of either mere objecthood or of mere aesthetic voluntarism, i.e., decoration.”

As written by theorists of total reification, the alienated conditions of labor under capital have hardened into a metaphysical ontology that takes for granted the total colonization of reality by abstraction, use by exchange value, being into appearances. To question this nihilist ontology isn’t to make excuses for capitalism or to succumb to midcentury Parnassianism. Rather, according to Gail Day’s helpful critique, “describing an epochal change in which social relations and experience are seen as increasingly abstract...implicitly proposes a socioaesthetic and political destiny—and one which has become part of the problem facing radical thought.” Insofar as they “address social contradictions that they cannot resolve,” avant-garde practices, as Foster and Buchloh have acknowledged, “are structurally doomed to failure.” Or, as Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingrover more dialectically put it, “aesthetic practices cannot resolve social contradictions, and yet artists continue produce in response to alienation.” Rather than hypostatize a seamless capitalism without limits (a position that contributes to the flatness of our “post-critical” moment), it’s helpful to keep in mind Marx’s admonition in the Grundrisse, which Day uses as an epigraph: “It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end.”
NOTES


2 As Debord would make clear in the 1963 text, “The Situationists and New Forms of Action in Politics or Art,” the Situationist position did not recommend the subordination of art to politics. Rather, they believed that only by negating and combining the two could the emancipatory potential of each be realized: “[W]hen we speak of a unified vision of art and politics this absolutely does not mean that we recommend any sort of subordination of art to politics whatsoever. For us and for all those who are beginning to view this epoch in a demystified manner, there has been no more modern art anywhere at all—in precisely the same way that there has been no further formation of revolutionary politics anywhere at all—since the end of the 1930s. The current revival of both modern art and revolutionary politics can only be their surpassing, which is to say precisely the realization of what was their most fundamental demand.” Debord, “The Situationists and New Forms of Action in Politics or Art,” 1963. The Situationist International Archive. http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/newforms.html

3 Debord to Gallizio, January 13, 1958.


5 Action in Belgium Against the International Assembly of Art Critics.”

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


17 Ibid.

18 Hughes, 9.


20 Lassale, 21.

21 Lassale, 21.

22 Ibid.

23 Lassale, 20.

24 Lassale, 20, 22.

25 Lassale, 20.

26 Hughes, 9.


28 Henry Meyric Hughes, forward to AICA in the Age of Globalization, 8.

29 Hughes, 8.

30 In fact, two years before the Situationists’ action against AICA, Debord would identify UNESCO’s commitment to post-ideological consensus with an insidious political quietism. “A ‘free artist,’” he wrote to the art critic Stéphane Rey in 1956, “would not work for the dollars of the pro-McCarthy and pro-Franco UNESCO,” referring to Spain’s entry into the organization in 1952.


32 Grief, 18.

33 Grief, 85.


38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

41 Ibid.


44 Verschaffel, 84.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid. 11.


48 Gonzague Pluvinage, Introduction to Expo 58: Between Utopia and Reality. 11.

49 Ernest O. Hauser’s article “We’ll Go on Trial at the Fair” (Jan 25, 1958) was included in the Congressional House Hearing on February 26, 1958 along with an official report prepared by the Office of Research and Intelligence of the USIA on the “Communist Propaganda and the Brussels Fair.”

50 Grief, 256-257.

51 Grief, 96.


54 Saunders, 26.

55 Saunders, 46.


58 Moreau and Brion, 131.


60 Verschaffel, 74.

61 Verschaffel, 79.

62 Ibid.


64 Georg Lukács, “I: The Phenomenon of Reification: Reification and the Consciousness of the Preliterate,” History and Class Consciousness. 1923. Marxists Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/>


quoted in Grief, 256.

10th General Assembly of the A.I.C.A Program: Brussels, April 14-18, Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, Archives de la critique d’art (Rennes, France).

Discours de James Johnson Sweeny, Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, Archives de la critique d’art (Rennes, France).

Report on the Inaugural Meeting of the 10th General Assembly of AICA, 6, 5.


Hespel, 31.

Report on the Inaugural Meeting of the 10th General Assembly of AICA, April 14 Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, Archives de la critique d’art (Rennes, France), 4.

Ibid.

Guilbaut, 4.

Guilbaut, 2.

Guilbaut, 191

Guilbaut, 17.

Guilbaut, 202.

Ibid.

Guilbaut, 203.

Saunders, 106.

Saunders, 113.

Other traveling exhibitions affiliated the Cultural wing of the Marshall plan included “Young Painters,” devoted to American abstract artists under 35, organized by MoMA in direct collusion with the CCF in 1954. “Twelve Contemporary American Painters and Sculptors,” the first MoMa show devoted exclusively to the New York School opened at the Musee National d’Art Moderne in Paris in 1954. (see Saunders, 269-270)

Saunders, 119

Ibid.

Brennan, 11.

In fact, Debord’s interest in Huizinga predates the Situationist International. In 1955, Debord cited Huizinga in an article in the proto-Situationist journal Potlatch: “The provisional [and] free realm of playful activity, seen by Huizinga as opposed, as such, to ‘ordinary life’ characterized by a sense of duty, is the only possible field of action held back fraudulently by taboos with pretensions of endurance, of true life.”


Huizinga, 132, 211.

Huizinga, 205.


Sweeney, 389.


ibid.

ibid.


De Groof, 255.

De Groof, 257.

De Groof, 256.


ibid.


ibid.

ibid.

Debord to Korun, May 6, 1958, in De Groof, 261 (author’s translation)

Guy Debord to Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, April 15, 1958, excerpted in De Groof, 260. (my translation)
Guy Debord to Walter Korun - May 6, 1958, excerpted in De Groof, 261 (my translation)

De Groof, 262.

Guilbaut, 3.

Grief, 317.


Benjamin Buchloh, “From Yves Klein’s La Vide to Arman’s Le Plein” Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry (MIT Press, 2003), 259.

Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art,” 673.


Day,184.


Randall Halle and Reinhold Steingrover, After the Avant-garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film (Rochester: Camden House, 2008) 11.

Quoted in Day, 182.
A Royal Queer: Hatshepsut and Gender Construction in Ancient Egypt

Kristen Gaylord

Since its earliest systemized study under Napoleon, Egypt has been a popular “other” for modern Western culture. And not the least of its intrigues has been the Egyptian woman, in various Orientalized guises: the beautiful Nefertiti, the seductive Cleopatra, the manipulative Hatshepsut. King Hatshepsut commanded a mighty empire during the New Kingdom, as part of the Eighteenth Dynasty that brought Egypt back from the turmoil of the Second Intermediate Period (during which Egypt was ruled by the foreign Hyksos), and ushered in an era marked by drastic religious and political changes. Hatshepsut managed foreign affairs with neighboring countries, built monuments noted for their innovation and grandeur, and may have waged military campaigns. But, of course, the overriding interest in the king has always centered on her gender.

Scholarship on Hatshepsut traditionally portrayed her gender as a pre-discursive fact, one beyond her control. In a 2005 Metropolitan Museum of Art catalogue accompanying the most comprehensive exhibition ever mounted on the subject of this king, scholars employ phrases such as “presented herself as male;” “the male [image] of her later persona;” and “in the guise of a male king.” And although scholars such as Gay Robins, Lynn Meskell, Lana Troy, and Heather Lee McCarthy have brought much-needed critical perspectives to the study of ancient Egyptian gender, their ideas of gender fluidity have yet to be applied to the embodied lives of ancient Egyptians. For example, Hatshepsut’s “biological sex” is often still invoked as a given, with various motivations theorized for the maleness of some of the king’s visual representation. As Meskell summarizes, “in our archaeological investigations we have...attempted to locate people from antiquity into a priori Western taxonomies: heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, elite/non-elite.” Within this framework, Hatshepsut is female, but chooses elements of male presentation based on political, religious, social, and ritual contexts.

This experiment-cum-paper instead attempts to do a simple thing: use a queered lens to uncover new possibilities for understanding Hatshepsut’s gender identity. It is my argument that even such a limited case study as this demonstrates the benefits that would proceed from utilizing queered methodologies in Egyptology, which has so far been particularly resistant to them. Based on a broad context of Egyptian religious and mortuary beliefs, and looking at just the small sampling of the extant statuary from Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple, Deir el-Bahri, we can move beyond the binary matrix employed for Hatshepsut thus far and use the more nuanced and accurate understandings of ancient Egyptian conceptions of gender, especially the pharaoh’s gender in relation to the role of kingship, to better see this king. This alteration in
imaginative vantage is a subtle one, but not insignificant. The most common
description of Hatshepsut used to be a woman pretending to be a man, and is
now often a woman enacting maleness (with or without the knowledge of all of
her subjects). What other constructions can be uncovered when we interrogate
the very assumption of Hatshepsut’s femaleness?

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Hatshepsut began her life at court as the daughter of King Thutmose I,
although several brothers in line for the throne ahead of her meant that no
records would survive of her childhood (except those she retroactively
commissioned, when king, about her divine birth and destined coronation). As
was common for the Egyptian royalty, she married her half-brother, and when he
became King Thutmose II she was a chief queen, holding the favored title of
“God’s Wife.” As her historians have noted, up to this point she had
demonstrated no unusual amount of power or ambition at court, although
evidence for the period is admittedly scant. But Thutmose II died unexpectedly
only a short while into his reign, and his heir Thutmose III, the son of Isis, a co-
wife of Hatshepsut’s, was not yet old enough to rule. This situation was
undesirable but not uncommon, and often a regent, typically an older queen,
would partner with the new king in power until he was old enough to reign alone.
So Hatshepsut stepped into the role of ruling co-regent with Thutmose III.

She simply never stepped out again. Hatshepsut eventually took on kingly
epithets, titles, and powers. During her reign she directed a significant trading
expedition to Punt and oversaw an extensive building campaign, especially
active at Thebes. Hatshepsut ruled the country alongside Thutmose III for about
fifteen years, but as the more powerful ruler, at least as evidenced in visual
references. For example, in a wall relief of the barque chapel she built at
Karnak, the two kings are shown as identical figures. Yet Hatshepsut has
retained the place of primacy in front of Thutmose III (indicated by her name in
the cartouche). Some scholars have posited that because Egyptian decorum of
representation did not have conventions for representing females “ahead” of
males, Hatshepsut, as the older and more senior regent, had to depict herself as
male in representations such as this, catalyzing her masculine identity.

One factor complicating Hatshepsut’s legacy is the proscription that took
place around twenty years after her death. For reasons still debated, after
reigning alone for some time Thutmose III undertook a systematic campaign of
effacement against his former co-regent. Her monuments, depictions, and
cartouches were all attacked. When possible, another king’s name was carved
over hers (often Thutmose I, II, or III); when not, the representation was simply
chiseled out or destroyed. As part of this crusade, the statuary of her mortuary
temple at Deir el-Bahri was removed and thrown into a few nearby pits. Because
of this ostensibly unfortunate act, much of the statuary survived for millennia
underground; after discovery of the cache by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in
the 1920s, over thirty-five statues were reassembled. Today scholars put forth
many arguments about the reasons for this effacement, attributing it to questions
of legitimacy or representation. Most now agree it wasn’t any sort of personal
vendetta—which was the earlier sensational version imagined by
archaeologists—as indicated both by the two decades between Hatshepsut’s
death and her proscription and by the fact that she and Thutmose III always shared regnal years, dating to the beginning of their co-regency, and Thutmose maintained this link. He also built his mortuary temple astride hers, clearly identifying himself with Hatshepsut through both location and architectural style.

The desire to sensationalize Hatshepsut is self-evident through the pages of her historical treatment, and in the popular imagination she still has many iterations—as a manipulative seducer who got whatever she wanted; as a puppet being directed by shadowy male court figures; and as a powerful ruler who had everything except the freedom to love her chief steward Senenmut, à la Queen Elizabeth. Her character has been flexible, able to conform to whatever interpretation scholars have projected upon it, but her gender has been assumed to be fixed.

Even a short survey of Hatshepsut's statuary representation displays the king's complicated gender presentation. Accounts of the magnificent Deir el-Bahri works have attempted to situate each statue based on taxonomical groupings, which were lost in the pell-mell way the statues were destroyed and piled in the ground. Some scholars (most famously Roland Tefnin) maintain that the "more male" images were created later, as Hatshepsut warmed to her kingly representation, or that they were reserved for the public areas of her mortuary temple and the "more female" ones for the inner sanctum only, returning to the fixation of audience.11 But the use of the qualifier "more" is key here, because the statuary does not fall into the binary provided for it. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition catalogue, Cathleen A. Keller has identified and categorized Hatshepsut's seated statuary from Deir el-Bahri, drawing attention to an intriguing group.12 Some statues, such as works 30.3.3 and 29.3.3 (Figures 1 and 2), depict the king as female, coded in the floor-length form-fitting dress worn by elite Egyptian women and a body type conforming to their representation of females. These statues also include female epithets in the accompanying text. Other statues, such as 31.3.168 (Figure 3), portray Hatshepsut as a traditional male king, with the short kilt, kingly regalia, and ideal young torso of a king, and the text includes correspondingly male titles (as do other statues, such as 30.3.1, see Figure 4). But most interestingly, some statues combine gender attributes, creating something beyond clearly "male" or "female." The pronouns and gendered-endings of the inscriptions variously support, counteract, or complicate the gender portrayed in the visual representation. For example, statue 27.3.163 (Figure 5) portrays a male king, but the inscribed text intersperses masculine grammatical forms with feminine ones. Yet another seated statue, number 29.3.2 (Figure 6), depicts the king with male clothing and regalia, a female torso, and feminine-gendered text accompanying the visual representation. These statues also varied skin tone color, which was another gendered aspect of representation in ancient Egypt.13 Yet Keller still concludes her nuanced exploration of Hatshepsut's statuary with an unquestioned assumption of femaleness: "Her royal titulary remained clearly female, and there was never an attempt to pretend that as an individual she was anything other than female."14

Even this limited selection of Deir el-Bahri statuary applies subtlety, imagination, and innovation to navigate the complications embedded in material depiction of nonstable gender, and those traits are furthered in the myriad other statues, monuments, and wall reliefs of Hatshepsut's building program.15 Clearly...
the king did not see her options of gender representation as limited to one of two categories. Instead, she deployed creative alternatives, combining attributes and paraphernalia to reflect her roles as former queen, current king, and divine protector of Egypt.

**Gender and Personhood in Ancient Egypt**

If we look to other aspects of ancient Egyptian life, especially the conceptions of kingship and mortuary traditions, it is clear that for the ancient Egyptians gender did not comprise two discrete categories. Troy, who has done extensive work on ancient Egyptian queenship, has contended, “[K]ingship was an androgynous construct in which it was possible to identify both male and female models.”

Building on Wolfhart Westendorf’s theory, Troy has posited that Egyptian gender was a continuum that allowed for movement and flexibility, and this continuum is presented in the understanding of rulership. The Egyptians had, she writes, “the...perception of a specifically feminine area of authority.”

The position of power was dual-gendered, both parts necessary for the health of the realm. The male king was the leader of the country who ensured that *maat*, or truth and order, was maintained through ritualistic, administrative, and military responsibilities. The king preserved the relationship between the Egyptians and the gods by keeping cult for their statues or having it done in his name, which involved cleaning, anointing, and offering to them, and he kept order and decorum in the country by protecting it from menacing foreigners (which, when Egypt was a military power, usually meant colonizing and subduing them). The royal women—including, variously, the king’s mother, the multiple queens, the group of women sometimes called the “harem,” and the princesses—provided the same service for the king, safeguarding his health, vitality, and power, as well as bolstering the king’s legitimacy and protecting the lineage by bearing children. They were clearly a step lower in the royal hierarchy, but still necessary: without a queen, especially, the king would collapse, and without the king the gods and cosmos would follow in a descent into *isfet*, or the always-threatening chaos.

This “androgynous totality” of rulership was built into the system, which itself was predicated on the example of the divine realm. The creator god Atum was an androgynous being who begat the rest of creation alone. Atum masturbated, and then swallowed the semen and, playing both roles in the procreative process, birthed Shu, the god of the air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. The remaining gods of the Ennead were also twinned. The children of Shu and Tefnut were Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky, and the children of that sibling-consort pair were Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nepthys. In the famous story of rivalry between these brothers, Seth kills and dismembers Osiris, but Isis and Nepthys recover and restore his body, and Osiris is able to impregnate Isis, who gives birth to the avenging son, Horus. An Egyptian queen served a parallel role to the king as Isis does for Osiris—caring for him and ensuring the continuity of his power and lineage. Without Isis, Osiris would have remained dead and the ascension of *isfet*, represented by Seth, would have been successful.
In ancient Egyptian understanding, personhood was simultaneously divisible and combinatory, as some parts of each individual lived on after death, other parts didn’t, and whole identities could be added and integrated. The Egyptian \textit{ka}, loosely understood as spark of life or soul, would separate from the body of the deceased and inhabit the \textit{ka} statuary, built to last for eternity and protect the owner’s essence. After death each Egyptian’s name was combined with that of Osiris, so that Amenmose became Osiris-Amenmose.\textsuperscript{22} McCarthy and Ann Macy Roth have done fascinating work on postmortem gender fluidity—Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife necessitated regeneration through intercourse and rebirth.\textsuperscript{23} Roth argues that because the exemplary Osiride model of renewal was dependent on maleness, after death Egyptian women became male, even while retaining their femaleness to produce their own rebirth. As proof, she cites the presence of wives in men’s tombs but the absence of husbands in women’s tombs; she infers that an Egyptian woman “acted as her own husband, her own wife, and her own mother” in the tripartite structure modeled by Osiris, Isis, and Horus.\textsuperscript{24}

Beyond the stories of the gods, Egyptians were masters of syncretism, adept at pun and subtext. As previously mentioned, each king had many names, which contained multiplicities and allusions. Robins has investigated Hatshepsut’s royal names for their skillful use of political propaganda.\textsuperscript{25} For example, her First Cartouche name—Maatkare, or “true one of the \textit{ka} of Re”—contains within it both the words for \textit{maat}, previously mentioned as harmony and truth, the elemental responsibility entrusted to the king, and \textit{Re}, the sun god. But its hieroglyphic depiction also resembles the name of a former king, Neferusobek, the most recent documented female ruler (reigning three hundred years prior). The possibilities of both phonetic and visual wordplay have been key to the rich field of Egyptian literature studies.
Figure 2. The Female Pharaoh
Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, MMA excavations, 1926–29
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1929 (29.3.3)
Torso lent by Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden (L.1998.80)
www.metmuseum.org

Figure 3. Lower Part of a Statue (probably Hatshepsut), Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.) From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, MMA excavations, 1926–28 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1931 (31.3.168) www.metmuseum.org

Figure 4. Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.) From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, MMA excavations, 1927–28 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.3.1) www.metmuseum.org
Figure 5. Large Seated Statue of Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, lower court and north of temple, MMA excavations, 1926–27
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1927 (27.3.163)
www.metmuseum.org

Figure 6. Seated Statue of Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Asasif, Senenmut Quarry, and MMA tombs 108 and 116, possibly Asasif, MMA excavations, 1926–28/Lepsius 1843–45
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1929 (29.3.2)
www.metmuseum.org.
Viewed next to these nuanced and complicated examples of rendering gender and understanding personhood, the reductive clumsiness of “Hatshepsut in the guise of a male” becomes apparent. Read within the complexity of Egyptian gender constructs, the disjunctures and nexuses of Hatshepsut’s visual representation prove more generative than the standard scholarly depiction of the king as a female working with the visual traditions available to fulfill a male role. Instead, we might ask, How did Hatshepsut conceive of gender? Did she see herself as a woman resisting the preferred state of affairs, ruling Egypt for years while a male heir waited in the wings? Or did he see himself as a king, who took power when the dynasty was vulnerable, and ruled by the favor of the gods? Or, in true Egyptian fashion, was it a combination? While it is clearly impossible to uncover how Hatshepsut understood her own gender to operate within the social matrix of ancient Egypt—and we should not even pretend that such a cogent thing existed—I would argue that a queer methodology at least opens up the possibilities of overlap, fluidity, and combination that the ancient Egyptians skillfully and regularly deployed. Perhaps Hatshepsut was not only fulfilling the gendered-male role of rulership, with the requisite portrayal of the pharaoh with kingly paraphernalia such as the royal kilt, the crowns of Egypt, and the false beard. Perhaps Hatshepsut was an androgynous being in the model of Atum who was able to play both male and female roles when necessary to ensure the vitality and maintain the stability of her kingdom. As Egyptian kings were semi-divine, tracing their lineage back to Re or, in the case of Hatshepsut, Amun, and serving as a link between the people and the gods, the multivalence of divine gender roles may have been correspondingly more available to the pharaoh.

Once Hatshepsut took on the role of kingship, by year seven of the co-regency, she began to perform the acts of kingship. Those rituals placed the king in a position of maleness, metaphorically and literally serving cult for the gods, administering the bureaucracy, and protecting the country. Years of enacting maleness complicate any understanding of unitary gender. This argument is not one of voluntarism, claiming that Hatshepsut at a certain point decided to become male. Instead, she started to operate as king and that role necessitated a repetition of acts that in ancient Egyptian culture constituted maleness, and as her position of power shifted from queen to co-regent to king, her gender shifted accordingly, as an equally integral factor in Hatshepsut’s identity. In fact, when Hatshepsut took on kingly titles, her only child, a daughter named Neferure, took on the queenly title of “God’s Wife,” which Hatshepsut had previously held as the queen of Thutmose II. This dislocation of the role of queen suggests that Hatshepsut needed a woman—her daughter—to provide the female aspect of rulership as a counterpart to her own male aspect. Yet in visual representations Hatshepsut could portray herself as both biologically and socially female-bodied, in the dress of an elite Egyptian woman.

Hatshepsut’s case was an unusual one, and she is often discussed in the same breath as Cleopatra VII, Akhenaten’s wife Nefertiti, and other women of ancient Egyptian history who wielded uncommon amounts of power. And with good reason. But the alternate understanding of Hatshepsut I’d like to propose is not based solely on the unique morphology of her statuary. Instead, the feasibility...
of her complicated identification was contingent upon the Egyptian understandings of gender in the divine and royal realms, which normalized composite and combinatory formation. This conclusion is not a solution, but a provocation: that a queer methodology may be the only way to reveal ideas of divine and royal gender as nuanced as those of the ancient Egyptians—particularly regarding Hatshepsut, queen, regent, and king.

NOTES


5 Dorman, “Hatshepsut: Princess to Queen to Co-Ruler,” in Hatshepsut, 87.

6 For a study of the familial relationships between kings and queens in the 18th dynasty, including Hatshepsut, and a theory about the consequences of Hatshepsut’s resulting kingship, see Gay Robins, “Problems concerning queens and queenship in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt,” NIN 3 (2002): 25-31.

7 For a thoughtful survey of the visual representation of Thutmose III by Hatshepsut see Vanessa Davies, “Hatshepsut’s Use of Tuthmosis III in Her Program of Legitimation,” Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 41 (2004): 55-66.

8 Cathleen A. Keller, “The Joint Reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III,” in Hatshepsut, 97. For an outline of the conventions of representation used in Egyptian art, see Gay

9 As Cathleen A. Keller points out, the statuary of Hatshepsut (such as that described in this paper) was often unique enough that the common Egyptian tradition of chiseling out a former king's name and replacing it with another's was not feasible. Cathleen A. Keller, “The Statuary of Hatshepsut,” in *Hatshepsut*, 160.


16 Lana Troy, “She for whom all that is said is and done: the ancient Egyptian queen,” in *Ancient Queens: Archaeological Explorations*, edited by Sarah Nelson (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 93.


18 Troy, “Ancient Egyptian Queenship,” 2.

19 This paragraph references concepts discussed by various authors in David O’Connor and David P. Silverman, eds., *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).

20 For more on the multi-generational aspect of female royal power, see Lana, “Ancient Egyptian Queenship.”


24 Roth, “Father Earth, Mother Sky” 199 and Ann Macy Roth, “The Absent Spouse: Patterns and Taboos in Egyptian Tomb Decoration,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 36 (1999). Gay Robins finds that with votive and funerary stelae women are very rarely the sole owners or commissioners, but there are exceptions. See Robins, “Some Principles of Compositional Dominance.”

25 Robins, “Names of Hatshepsut as King.”
Although Hatshepsut was referred to by both masculine and feminine grammatical forms and titular endings, her names—including her First Cartouche name, Second Cartouche name, her Horus name, and others—did not change to take masculine form as her visual representation did. Robins has articulated the brilliant wordplay involved in Hatshepsut’s names, displaying how they referenced her kingly legitimacy and responsibilities while motioning towards goddesses and predecessors in a way that male-gendered constructions wouldn’t have. Gay Robins, “The Names of Hatshepsut as King,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 85 (1999): 103-112.

Mary Ann Eaverly argues vehemently against such a possibility, and instead suggests that Hatshepsut was trying to “feminize” the role of king, or even “normalize” the idea of a woman king. I have many problems with her analysis, not the least of which that this seems a wishful and contemporary way of understanding women’s achievement. Mary Ann Eaverly, *Tan men/pale women: color and gender in archaic Greece and Egypt, a comparative approach* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 65.

Although not speaking about Hatshepsut, Meskell makes this point: “Gender identity should be seen as a complex assortment of networks of signifying practices, varying for individuals over time, as it intersects with other networks of signifying practices located in such concepts as class and race.” Meskell, “Archaeologies of Identity,” 29.

Although we now know of the existence of so many other chromosomal possibilities than XX and XY, I am here following the general distinctions of female-bodied and male-bodied in Egyptian representation, usually indicated by the corresponding secondary sex characteristics.
The end of 20th-century military dictatorships in Latin America triggered an obligation to commemorate the fallen and to warn the survivors of the threat of moral corruption that looms over modern societies. Unfinished and partial projects of national modernization faced the need to teach audiences about their past mistakes. "Interrupted Stadium" deals with this issue by asking how these new pedagogical demands are incorporated into the rationalized space of the Modernist project. The National Stadium in Santiago de Chile constitutes an ideal example of this problem, because it is a piece of public infrastructure that contains the premises of modernity of a state that intended to renovate society. It is not only a building but a whole site devoted to educating the “new man” in terms of physical, moral, and civil health.

Throughout its existence, the National Stadium worked as a shelter for citizens, a sports ground, a cultural space, and a stage for Chilean politics. However, in 1973 the educational function of the Stadium lost its civilian constitution and became a site of imprisonment, torture, and death. Although this cycle lasted only 58 days, it was an interruption that initiated a long period of decadence for the main building and the whole site. Thirty years later, in 2003, the site was declared a historical monument by the Council of National Monuments. Six years later, in 2009, the Stadium began remodeling to meet the spatial standards imposed by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), a process that involved the “construction” of a memorial inside of it. In this context, the National Stadium became an exemplary case of the superposition of two almost antagonistic uses: sport as spectacle, and the memorializing of the military dictatorship’s victims.

In more than seven decades of existence, the National Stadium has been subject to hundreds of architectural and urban plans that range from ambitious master plans to redesign the whole 158-acre site to interventions as specifically focused as solving the structural bonding between a beam and a chair. Journalists, athletes, academics, poets, musicians, neighbors, former prisoners, and politicians have written about it for as long as it has existed. Visually, the stadium has inspired artists, photographers, graphic designers, and performers, leading to a vast array of works produced about the sports complex. “Interrupted Stadium” delves into this legacy, using material traces, finished buildings, architectural drawings, historic magazines, photographs and urban projects to analyze the relationship between the Modernist ideal behind the National Stadium’s project and its subsequent ruptures.
Despite the abundant material around the National Stadium, no cultural history about the building had been written; “Interrupted Stadium” is a step into that direction. At the beginning of this research, one very important milestone was missing from the debates around the sports complex: the original plan for the National Stadium. The discovery of the original set of architectural drawings for the stadium and the Olympic sports complex—conserved, but spread out in two different archives—played a central role in this research. There are several differences between these drawings and the building, suggesting that intermediate construction plans and plans as-built might exist for the National Stadium, although they have not yet been found. This paper combines both original drawings and actual buildings, as well as the gap between them, to construct its evidence.

**Modernity Reaches the Masses**

The construction of the National Stadium can be situated in a period defined by the “coupling” between a Modernist style imported from the European Modernist movement and a deep industrial modernization process underway in Chile. It can be stated, then, that the National Stadium is a modern work—a reflection of the coupling period between the Modernist movement and the country’s modernization—due to its appearance and its content. While its appearance is almost the product of chance, the result of the travels of some modern pioneers, its content—which includes its structural system and the incorporation of modern sports programs—is derived from a society undergoing a modernization process.

![Figure 1: The western facade of the National Stadium, photographed in 1943. As part of a book that commemorated the four hundredth anniversary of Santiago, the photo portrays the building as a symbol for the modern capital. Source: VV.AA. (1943) Cuatro siglos de la historia de Santiago. Zig Zag: Santiago. Archive: www.archivoestadionacional.cl.](image)

While the first modern works of architecture were presented as extravagant constructions for the elites, executed by European-influenced architects, the Chilean State was undergoing profound changes that would lead it to combine its modernization process with the Modernist movement through its
public buildings. In the late 1920s, faith in progress dominated Chile, a feeling that saw industrialization as instrumental to achieving the country’s modernization. The state became more active in the economy, fostering productive infrastructure and restricting imports. This led to an increase in public spending based on the growth of external debt. This model faced a deep crisis after the crash of the New York Stock Exchange in 1929; according to the League of Nations, Chile was one of the worst-hit countries in the subsequent Great Depression.

The drive for modernization that had been truncated by the 1929 economic crisis was resumed by the second administration of President Arturo Alessandri Palma (1932-1938), who consolidated the effort by empowering the state as an instrument of social balance and progress. In 1933, Chile resumed its role as exporter of minerals and agricultural products, working to meet the demands of a world economy on the mend. Chile also resumed the repayment of its external debt via an economy led by construction, which, alongside industry and mining, managed to reduce unemployment. Eduardo Cavieres speaks about the 1930s: “It is the modernization of the mass culture, the modernization of reform, and the modernization of nationalism. With its limitations and ambiguities. A small-scale modernization, but also a human-scale modernization.”

Alessandri’s government set in motion a number of public works, including the National Stadium; all of them were Modernist, aimed at civic education, and monumental in scale. The transformation of modern architecture—from specific elite intervention to mass demand—was fostered by the state, in the context of an ambitious public construction plan intended to stimulate the economy and lay the foundations of a public institutional order independent of the political vices of the oligarchy. The institutional changes that the country was experiencing in the 1930s opened up new professional avenues for architects, which allowed them to take on the social role demanded by the ideals they admired in the Modernist movement. Emboldened by the growth of this activity, in the early 1930s—and even before—many architects began joining public organizations, while others collaborated with the state by participating in public competitions. The state-Modernism entente was not peculiar to Chile; on the contrary, Adrián Gorelik argues that the communion between the state and the Modernist movement was a constitutive element in most Latin American countries in the mid-1930s.

For architects Humberto Eliash and Manuel Moreno, avant-garde architecture penetrated the country through private practice, “because the change had less inertia to fight against;” however, before incorporating modern architecture as the dominant state practice, the state experimented—as private architects did—with the techniques of modern construction. As a result, in the mid-1930s state intervention helped to consolidate modern architecture, which reached the masses and became an urban protagonist.

It is worth asking why, in the 1930s, the state embraced the aesthetic, constructive, and functional canons of the Modernist movement. There are at least two types of explanation, one functional-symbolic and another political-cultural. On the one hand, the bulletin of the Architecture Office of the Ministry of Public Works described the functional and symbolic reasons quite precisely:
“the functional and symbolic reasons quite precisely: al. On the one hand, the bulletin ’s institutional order, austere, conceptually transcendent, materially lasting, spatially functional, flexible…respectful of the cultural traditions of our society and of the landscape where it is located. It accepts no trends, superfluous decorations, or extravagant elements that entail physical or conceptual risks.”

On the other hand, the political-cultural explanation for the state’s adoption of the modern style was based on the political premise of establishing an institutional order, away from the tendentious image that the oligarchy had acquired. The new state had to be constitutional and modern, but at the same time, in the context of the country was based on the poli austere. In addition, it was a time of increasing middle class participation in consumption, production, culture, and politics, which led to the emergence of a political force that would later govern the country. The middle class was sympathetic to modern architecture, because it was a way for them to distance themselves from the land-owning aristocracy. President Alessandri knew well that the country’s political future was in the hands of the middle classes, and so probably did not hesitate to cater to their aesthetic tastes with his program of public constructions. As the modern pioneers proclaimed, public architecture sought to consolidate a new national identity through new techniques, spaces, and aesthetics. This is the background of the National Stadium lic conststate-owned, mass-oriented, and middle-class.

Figure 2: An aerial view of the newly built National Stadium in Santiago de Chile. The photograph is taken from the southwest in 1938. Source: Archive of SALFA Construction firm, 1938 Archive: www.archivoestadionacional.cl.

Four Breakdowns of Modernity

“Interrupted Stadium” defines four turning points in the reality of the modern utopia proclaimed by the creators of the National Stadium. The first point concerns the incompleteness of the original work. Just as the project of
modernizing the country would be left incomplete, its main stadium would never be finished. Second, we will note how the expansion of the stadium in the 1960s not only distanced itself from the task of completing the original, but also reduced the clarity, quality, and harmony of the original project. Finally, the use of the National Stadium as a concentration camp in 1973, along with the memorial of Escotilla 8 (Hatch 8) executed in parallel with the remodeling commissioned by the Ministry of Public Works in 2010—in third and fourth place—will complete the dissipation of the stadium’s Modernist ideals.

I. New but Unfinished:

“The National Stadium has greatness. And we are not referring to its large size, but to the majesty that springs from its whole form, to the suggestiveness that surrounds its vast stands, to the ambitious lines that open to host immense crowds. The athletes that enter it will feel the weight of its dominion and the emotion of its strength. As figures grow when they stand out against the evening sky, athletes in the Stadium will feel examined under a magnifying glass, as if standing on a pedestal. The spacious construction multiplies the importance of the sporting spectacle. It ennobles, heightens, provides peak sensations.”

Published on the day of the inauguration of the National Stadium, December 3, 1938, the above-cited article characterized the new National Stadium as an echo of the Roman circus and as an heir of the Greek gymnasium. The newly inaugurated work consisted of an Olympic Stadium—because it could host multiple disciplines such as soccer, athletics, and cycling—and three entrances: north, west, and east porticoes. Between the porticoes and the building, there was a garden with plaques and classical sculptures of athletes and of the ideal human being. Like the porticoes that architectural historian Andrés Téllez describes as a characteristic of modern residential neighborhoods, those of the National Stadium are located on the edges of the site, while the building is set back in the center of the northern part of the site (see figure 3). The simple and modern lines of the porticoes mark the Stadium’s Modernism and function as a facade and a sign of what awaits inside.

Figure 3: Porticoes on the main entrance to the National Stadium, from Avenue Grecia. 
The outer body of the Stadium is an enormous elliptical volume three stories high, supporting the slab of the spectators’ stands. This element is completely functionalist, made of exposed, reinforced concrete on both inside and outside, with a symmetrical radial structure in both axes, north-south and east-west. When the Stadium was inaugurated in 1938, the facade was still incomplete; what would later be white stucco was then exposed reinforced concrete. The stands are designed as two rings separated by a great corridor around the perimeter, connecting the whole Stadium and establishing a continuous relationship between the second floor, reserved for spectator services, and the spectacle on the pitch. Connecting the first ring to the second were zig-zag staircases, one of the Stadium’s trademarks (figure 4). Although the composition of the stands as superimposed rings separated by a corridor was not a typological invention of the National Stadium—it had already been used in Berlin’s Olympic Stadium in 1936—the zig-zag staircases appear to be original.\textsuperscript{14}

The spatial decompression provided by the perimeter corridor, together with the lightness of staircases that function as structural elements, surprise a contemporary eye; the space is not only functional, but also innovative, and that innovation constitutes an integral part of the modern content of the work.

The final building has four more elements which distance themselves from the functionalism already described: the decorative accents at the top of the building in the north, south, east, and west. Each introduces, with varying success, ornamental and classical elements; only the marquee building manages to fuse coherently with the stadium. The ornamental elements of the work, which make reference to classical antiquity, are the friezes of the western facade and the statues, which—shaped like Mapuche\textsuperscript{15} chiefs and Hellenic figures—populate the gardens around the building (figure 5).\textsuperscript{16} The conjunction of these two sources of influence is not resolved; rather than engaging in a dialogue, they are superimposed on a building dominated by its exposed reinforced concrete structure. The effect is of an ascetic functionalism merely ornamented with classical references in certain specific points.

So far, we have analyzed the National Stadium mostly on the basis of its external facade, but a look inside completely changes the situation. What President Alessandri inaugurated on December 3rd, 1938, was little more than the building’s structural work. There was no finishing, much of the necessary electrical and sanitary work had not been done, and the whole third floor was unfinished. The closed rooms on top of the building, which originally included...
planes of glass, had not been completed; even the Presidential Stand, where the authorities sat, was only structurally finished.

The plaque that identifies the National Stadium as a work carried out by Alessandri's government states:

“NATIONAL STADIUM: built during the administration of his excellency Mr. Arturo Alessandri Palma. Work began on February 25th, 1937, the Minister of Public Education being Mr. Francisco Garcés Gana and the Minister of Finance being Mr. Gustavo Ross Santa María. Inaugurated on December 3rd, 1938, the Minister of Public Education being Mr. Guillermo Correa Fuenzalida and the Minister of Finance being Mr. Francisco Garcés Gana.”

However, the inscription had to be updated by Alessandri’s successor, and so the following was added: “Work continued during the administration of his excellency Mr. Pedro Aguirre Cerda with his Ministers Messrs. Juan Antonio Iribarren and Rudecindo Ortega M.”

The imminent end of his government led Arturo Alessandri to inaugurate an incomplete work, which forced his successor to finish it without a special budget assigned. Some of the unfinished work was completed during Aguirre Cerda’s government—mostly sanitary and electrical fittings and partition walls to make it suitable for public use. But the third floor, along with the partition walls of the Scoreboard Tower, the western side, and the northern entrance were never completed. Not even the expansion carried out for the 1962 World Cup, or the remodeling started under Michelle Bachelet's government, took into account the more than 107,000 square feet left unfinished and underused within the country’s main sports arena (figure 6).
II. More Spectators, Less Architecture

Chile hosted the 1962 FIFA World Cup thanks to the work of Carlos Dittborn, administrator of the Chilean Soccer Association, who presented the project to FIFA. Additionally, the political instability of Argentina, Chile’s rival in the election, helped Chile’s bid to host the tournament. Sports journalist Daniel Matamala\textsuperscript{17} notes that without the rise of political violence, which in the late 1950s weakened Argentina’s international image, Chile would not have hosted the World Cup. Chile was no match for Argentina: the only stadium of a size adequate for the World Cup was the National Stadium, while the rest were just promises made by Dittborn. Chile’s insufficient sports infrastructure was compounded by a president—Jorge Alessandri—who, unlike his father, was ascetic and uninterested in sports. In addition, the apparent legitimacy of investing state funds in the World Cup was undermined by the reconstruction efforts required after the Concepción-Valdivia earthquake in May 1960. According to Matamala, the reason for the mediocrity of the Chilean World Cup was the 1960 earthquake: “Because on May 22nd, 1960, in just a couple of minutes, Chile’s great Football World Cup collapsed. It never rose again.”\textsuperscript{18} The original plan for the Chilean World Cup was approved—three years late—in 1959, and it included five venues in addition to the National Stadium. After the earthquake, the only reason why Jorge Alessandri’s government did not withdraw funding for the National Stadium was that work had already started in 1959, and, in his opinion, leaving the construction unfinished would have been more wasteful than completing it.

The organization of the World Cup, conducted against the clock, under economic hardship, and in an environment not conducive to its success, had direct consequences on the project executed in the National Stadium. Of the 24 proposals to extend the Stadium presented to the Ministry of Public Works, the most austere one was chosen—but even it was still impossible to implement. It was intended to increase the Stadium’s capacity from 52,000 to 120,000 spectators by replacing the velodrome with a new grandstand and adding a new ring of seats on top of the building. The chosen proposal, designed by members of the Architecture Office of the Ministry of Public Works, had only 365 days to
complete the task. Lack of time was one reason for the failure of the project; it only managed to add 11,000 seats, not the required 68,000. The four lighting towers, which should have been ready for the opening match, were not set up, so the old lighting system had to be used. Also, the Olympic Village, where foreign delegations were to stay, was not ready. The history of 1938 repeated itself, and once more the National Stadium project was left unfinished.

The 1962 project eliminated the velodrome, which had traversed the perimeter of the central pitch and occupied the lower edge of the stands, thus truncating the original conception of the building as a multidisciplinary Olympic stadium. This initiated the progressive “soccerization” of the National Stadium, which is still happening. Not only was a discipline eliminated from the stadium and moved to an autonomous building, it was replaced with deficient stands that lacked a full view of the soccer pitch (figure 7).

![Figure 7: Sticker album of World Cup Chile '62 candies. Text at bottom reads, “Sports and cultural competition for the Chilean youth. Collect the idols of world soccer.” Source: Private collection of Rodrigo Millán Archive: www.archivoestadionacional.cl.](image)

The second operation conducted by the 1962 expansion was the occupation of the corridor around the perimeter of the stands. This continuous space for spectator movement, marked by a series of expressive zig-zag staircases, was filled with seats in a structure superimposed on the original staircases. As a result, the relationship of the second floor with the galleries was reduced to a series of doors, which, due to their relative distance, cannot generate continuity between the interior and the exterior, as the 1938 building had been able to.

While these two operations—the elimination of the velodrome and the corridor along the perimeter—were concentrated on the existing volume of the National Stadium, the third and last attempt to increase its capacity involved an increase in height. A new reinforced-concrete structure, which supported 12 new rows of seats—accounting for most of the building's increase in capacity—was added above the top level of the stadium. According to the original architectural drawings, it is a structure that rests atop the Stadium's structure, located over its top cornice. The anchoring between the two structures was executed hurriedly and with no attention to the details of the joints, resulting in a rough and poorly
accomplished contact between the extension cornice and the top structure of the National Stadium.

These three operations—the elimination of the velodrome, the occupation of the perimeter corridor, and the increase in height—took away from the original project its volumetric purity, its spatial amplitude, and its proportion. In addition, the most characteristic and innovative element of the National Stadium—the perimeter corridor—was covered, and so the typological creation of the Stadium was buried under the new stands. In spite of the extreme new density of seats, the lack of space did not manifest itself in the interior areas of the Stadium, which remained intact and unfinished, as they had been since 1938.

On May 30th, 1962, the day the Jules Rimet Cup was inaugurated, President Jorge Alessandri gave a brief and humble speech, in which he said:

“It is possible that our country may not provide all the comfort and advancements that others may offer. There may remain some deficiencies that we may have been unable to overcome, despite our efforts. But what I can assure you, and you can be certain of this, is that in this far-flung corner of the world there is sincere thankfulness for having chosen us to host this championship (…)“  

Against the clock and lacking funds, the expansion of the National Stadium for the FIFA World Cup not only failed to increase the number of seats to 120,000, but the 11,000 places that were added had poor visibility, were overcrowded, and damaged the original building. The attributes that made the National Stadium an accomplished example of Chilean Modernism were obstructed in order to deficiently increase its capacity. Although I have pointed out that even the 1938 version of the National Stadium was an unfinished promise of modernity, the 1962 expansion initiated its physical deterioration.

Figure 8: President Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez (on right, in black coat) and Cardinal Raul Silva Henríquez (left) assisted at the reopening of the National Stadium after its renovation for the FIFA World Cup of 1962; this photograph records their tour through the marquee sector. Source: Photographic Archive of the Library of National Congress, Chile. Archive: www.archivoestadionacional.cl.
III. Concentration Camp

The next blow to the truncated modernity of the National Stadium was landed by the Government Junta, when it used the site as its main center for imprisonment, torture, and death during the first months of the military dictatorship. For 58 days, the full 158 acres of the National Stadium site stopped being a sports ground and hosted the victims and the perpetrators of a dictatorship that was to remain in power for 17 years.

The National Stadium was a component of the first stage of the dictatorship—its rise to power—in which a number of spaces were employed—the National Stadium, the former Government's seat (La Moneda Palace), and the UNCTAD III Building—to transmit a single message: in order to exterminate the Marxist cancer, the government was willing to violate all the constitutional rights of Chilean citizens. As a result, 10,000 people—Chileans and foreigners—were detained in the National Stadium with no charges, trials, or clarity regarding the detention procedure.²⁰

The “monument to national sport” was profaned and reduced to a makeshift prison (figure 9). Its potential dungeons, the panopticon-like Press Gallery in the marquee, and the control of the flow of people that the spatial design of the National Stadium facilitated, appear to be the main functional arguments—though they were never declared as such—that led the military to use it as a prisoner camp. But the Stadium’s visibility, its role within the city, and the identification of the site as a place for recreation, fun, and spectacle, were the symbolic reasons to transform the National Stadium into a prison camp. As a visual example of military authority, the transgression of the National Stadium was repeated through speeches and images throughout the country and abroad. Functionalism and symbolism combined to form the largest prison camp operated by the military regime. After its transformation into a prison camp, the National Stadium was opened to local and foreign press and photographers on more than one occasion. Photographers like Marcelo Montecino (Chile) and Koen Wessing (Holland) registered those visits and published their material abroad.²¹ Additionally, Costa Gavras’s film Missing (1982) was based on the disappearance of American journalist Charles Horman, who was imprisoned at the National Stadium.²² These images, among many others, crossed the Chilean dictatorship’s borders and transformed the National Stadium into an international symbol of Pinochet’s regime.

Figure 9: Political prisoners being held in the stands of the National Stadium during the military occupation of the sports complex. The National Stadium was transformed into a concentration camp during the first day of the military coup, and remained militarized until November 9th of 1973. In the foreground we can see a young conscript on guard. Source: Photograph by Marcelo Montecino. Archive: www.archivoestadionacional.cl
During its first months, the military dictatorship was not concerned with hiding human rights violations; on the contrary, the intention was to exhibit what was happening inside the stadium in order to intimidate the rest of the country. The same logic lay behind the disproportionate bombing of La Moneda Palace (the seat of government) and the president’s residence, the book burnings, and the painting of walls with partisan slogans. While the expansion for the 1962 Soccer World Cup violated the spatial modernism of the National Stadium, its use as a concentration camp divested it from the values of social modernity that permeated its original design. The cult of the body and the defense of the race, the creation of a type of politics that embraced the working and the middle classes, along with a social policy based on the granting of citizen rights in matters of health, housing, education, and recreation, came to a sudden end with the use of the National Stadium as a place for imprisonment, torture, and death.

After 58 days, the National Stadium regained its intended use, with the famous match between Chile and the Soviet Union on November 21st, 1973, part of the qualifiers for the following year’s World Cup. With the Soviets having refused to travel to Chile due to the anti-Socialist regime imposed by Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean team, alone on the pitch, scored a cinematic, almost fictional goal to win 1-0. In spite of the intense use that the dictatorship would make of the stadium, its deterioration had set in—a phase of progressive physical obsolescence that reached its climax in the mid 1990s. The heavy propagandistic use of the National Stadium by the dictatorship, along with its conversion to a concentration camp, corrupted the promise of liberating modernity that the work had represented for most Chileans.

IV. The Past Takes Revenge

The return to democracy in Chile was celebrated on the central field of the National Stadium, with a huge inauguration event led by president-elect Patricio Aylwin in 1990. Although a large flag was used to cover the whole pitch, this exorcism failed to halt the Stadium’s trend of deterioration. At that time, the sports ground was fragmented through franchises, rentals, and leases, all of which affected its unitary composition.

As previously mentioned, the whole site of the National Stadium was declared a Historical Monument in 2003, a decree that provides special safeguards for the Stadium’s building. This decision functioned as a detonator for a series of projects and opinions—both public and private—that were discussed throughout the country in national newspapers and magazines. The contradiction between making the building a piece of Chilean heritage and its deep physical decay eventually led, in 2009, to the presentation of a state project to remodel the stadium. The project, launched by Michelle Bachelet’s government, included the substitution of individual red seats for the old stands, the construction of a moat to eliminate the fences, the renewal of toilets and dressing rooms, a new coat of paint for the facade, and a modern drainage system for the pitch. However, 915 square feet were left untouched. In this fenced area, the old stands were kept as a memorial to those imprisoned and killed by the military dictatorship, and, in the hatch that connects these stands with the outside, a photo exhibit was put in place which displays the National Stadium’s past as a concentration camp (figures 10 and 11). The intervention
was not limited to conservation; it also introduced weathered wood and similar materials to produce a false historical effect.

Figure 10: Hatch 8 Memorial, seen from the opposite stands during the reopening of the National Stadium in 2010. Source: Photograph by Valentina Rozas Krause.

This memorial presents the National Stadium’s past in a material and concrete way, which brings the Modernist ideals that had created it to an end. A memorial placed in the midst of a work devoted to the modern cult of the body, reason, and spectacle is—in the view of Modernist precursors—a contradiction. Although for modern dialectics the cult of the past is substantial, the staunch Modernists who propagated the modern style as a law were part of a cult of the future that allowed for no reminiscences of the past.

At this point, the road to the de-modernization of the National Stadium reached a point of no return. The original modernity of the project was truncated by its incompleteness; then its modernity was lessened—at the spatial level—by the expansion for the World Cup and—at the symbolic level—through its transformation into a concentration camp. However, the creation of a memorial—or monument—to the victims of the dictatorship within it sets the past in opposition to contemporaneity and symbolic representation in opposition to functionalism.

In the early modernity of the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche issued a warning about the danger of the monumental contemplation of the past. In addition, he noted the incompatibility of modernity with the monument, because while the former is constantly mutating, the monument remains static, unable to change. Nietzsche coined the term “monumental history” to refer to the kind of history based on the search for reference points of honor and bravery in the past. In this view, monuments are the constructed form of that monumental
history which is opposed to the critical method for surveying the past that the author proposes: “But the fiercest battle is fought over the demand of greatness to be eternal. All the other living beings exclaim, ‘No!’ ‘Out with the monuments’ is their slogan.”

Maurice Halbwachs, author of the concept of “collective memory,” points out, contra Nietzsche, that the original aim of the monument is to safeguard, watch over, and disseminate a certain memory; but because there are as many memories as there are human groups, monuments are immersed in a constant process of re-appropriation and re-signification. For art historian Aloïs Riegl, the monument is understood as “a work constructed by human hands and created with the specific aim of keeping individual feats or destinies (or a set of them) always alive and present in the consciousness of forthcoming generations.”

According to Riegl’s categorization of monuments in three groups, Hatch 8 Memorial is an “intentional monument,” a work produced by the will of its creators in order to recall a given moment of history.

A few years later, during the first decade of the twentieth century, one of the most radical theoreticians of architectural modernism, Adolf Loos, expanded Nietzsche’s warning about the past, pointing out that, in order to attain modernity, human beings must live in the present, without nostalgia about the past. The modern human being is not anchored to the past, because his duty is to constantly seek to overcome the present. Modernity values the modern just because it is new, and so the past is regarded as an oppressive burden from which the culture must break free in order to fully comprehend the real spirit of its own time. It is important to stress that, despite their contempt for the eternization of the past, the precursors of the modern movement did build monuments, although only, as Rosalind Krauss points out, monuments that made reference to themselves. For Krauss, these modern monuments are unable to engage in a dialogue with any events outside themselves.

Although it may seem contradictory, Adolf Loos had noted in 1910, “Only a very small part of architecture belongs to the domain of art: funerary and commemorative monuments.” The importance that Loos grants to the monument as the only resource independent from its usefulness, and, therefore, from the course of history, connects it with the idea of the permanence of architecture advanced by Sigfried Giedion:

“[M]onuments are human landmarks which men have created as symbols for their ideas, for their aims, and for their actions; they are intended to outlive the period which originated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations. As such, they form a link between the past and the future…Monumental architecture will be something more than a strictly functional endeavor; it will have recovered its lyrical value.”

Christian Norberg-Schultz states that one of the first Modernist theoreticians to demand a “new monumentality” was Giedion, in the 1940s. Staunch functionalism had shown its defects, giving rise to the need to refer to the past and to the transcendental. With the creation of a monument inside it, in this case a memorial to the victims of the dictatorship, the National Stadium lost
the functionalist modernism of the original project, but—as Giedion35 would put it—it gained transcendence.

Conclusion: Interrupted Modernity

The National Stadium is part of two fundamental dimensions of Chilean modernity. On the one hand, it was designed following the premises of local Modernism, and, on the other, the project was in tune with the social function of the endeavor to modernize Chile. The educational function of the building responds to a special idea of regeneration, which sought to defend “the Chilean race” from its baser instincts through a rationalization project based on the promotion of sports. Focused on a healthy and vigorous youth, the stadium was intended to instill new cultural values in the whole of the population rather than on a part of it. True to its project, the building was surrounded by monuments that evoked an edifying corporeality and by gardens and bodies of water (figure 12).36

![Figure 12: Inauguration of the National Stadium, December 3, 1938. Source: Revista Crack Archive: www.archivoestadionacional.cl](image)

The National Stadium was a State precursor of the modernization that never fully established itself in Chile. The result of a sum of travels to Europe, the work is a stain of modernism within a country on the road to modernization. Additionally, the original National Stadium is a lesson in the vicissitudes of early Modernism in 1930s Chile. Although its overall conception is functionalist and modern, some neo-traditional elements emerge which reference classical antiquity. As we can see, Chilean Modernism did not need to wait for the “new monumentality” described by Giedion 37 in order to acquire transcendence; instead, it was forced to engage in a dialog with past references from the start.

In the 1980s, Chilean architect Cristián Fernández Cox38 coined the concept of “appropriated modernity” as the attitude of Latin American architects towards the events of modern architecture. Appropriated modernity is that which is adapted to Latin American reality—“appropriated” both in the sense of being made its own by the continent in opposition to international influences and in the sense of being of Latin American origin. Temporally, the National Stadium belongs to the decades of early imitation of the European modern movement, and so its eclecticism can be regarded as a defect in this disciplinary context. However, it can also be argued that the adaptation of the pure European functionalism to Chilean reality by including references to transcendental
classical ideals is a first nod to the “appropriated modernity” discussed by Fernández Cox in the late 1980s.

Whether its modernity was imitated or appropriated, the National Stadium was led on a path of progressive de-modernization. The original work remained forever unfinished and the expansion for the World Cup condensed the Stadium’s stands, obstructing the spatial achievements of the original. Spatial de-modernization was followed by symbolic de-modernization, which turned the temple of modern sport into a temple of horror in the memories of most Chileans.

Later, the monumentalization of horror made its way into the entrails of Modernism, through the Hatch 8 memorial. The most basic function of the National Stadium—as a venue for spectacles—was distorted by a monument that restricts attendees’ use of the building. The absence of the past which generated the first signs of rejection to the tabula rasa imposed by the early modern movement also reached a crisis point in the National Stadium, with a significant coincidence: the emergence of horror. Although the events which occurred in Chile and in Europe—the military dictatorship and the Second World War—are incomparable, we must bear in mind that the National Stadium is the inheritor of the modern horrors of the Second World War, of the USSR, and of its own history of human rights violations during Pinochet’s dictatorship. This situation makes it impossible to maintain the self-referential Modernist purity of the National Stadium, and prompts the incorporation of symbolic references to account for lessons from the past.

NOTES

1 In parallel to this research, and together with Rodrigo Millán and Camilo Yáñez, we initiated the collaborative project “Archivo Abierto-Estadio Nacional,” which is a digital archive of images and visual material that covers the more than seven decades of history of the National Stadium (Rodrigo Millán, Valentina Rozas Krause, and Camilo Yáñez, “Archivo Abierto Estadio Nacional,” Digital Visual Archive, Archivo Abierto Estadio Nacional, accessed September 3, 2015, http://www.archivoestadionacional.cl).

2 The original master plan for the National Stadium can be accessed here: http://www.archivstadionacional.cl/archivo/plan-maestro-del-estadio-1937.

3 VV.AA., Cuatro siglos de la historia de Santiago (Santiago, Chile Zig-Zag, 1943).


5 Humberto Eliash, Arquitectura y modernidad en Chile / 1925-1965 : una realidad múltiple, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Serie arte / arquitectura (Santiago, Chile Universidad Católica de Chile, 1989).


7 In parallel with the Chilean state’s building boom in the second half of the 1930s, Brazil witnessed a deep alliance between the state and the modern avant-garde, intended to represent the ideals of modernity, unity, and territorial conquest necessary to deal with the new industrialization processes and the emergence of an integrated economic system.
Eliash, Arquitectura y modernidad en Chile / 1925-1965, 120.

Ibid., 130–132.

Humberto Eliash, Arquitectura moderna en Chile 1930-1960: testimonio y reflexiones (Santiago, Chile: Industrias Metálicas Chile, 1985).


Asociación de Arquitectos de Chile, “Revista Urbanismo Y Arquitectura,” 1940.


The Mapuche are a culture indigenous to South America

Daniel Matamala, 1962 : el mito del mundial chileno (Barcelona: EdsB, 2010).

Ibid., 119.

Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez, “Discurso Del Presidente de La República En La Inauguración Del Mundial de Fútbol [Speech by the President on the Inauguration of the Football World Cup], Santiago de Chile” (Documento del Departamento de Prensa, Oficina de Informaciones y Radiodifusión, Presidencia de la República., May 30, 1962), no page number.

Named after the first conference it hosted: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Building III


Alois Riegl, El culto moderno a los monumentos : caracteres y origen, La balsa de la medusa 7 (Madrid Visor, 1987), 23.


35 Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me; the Diary of a Development*.

36 “Revista Crack,” Editorial Zig-Zag II, no. 61 (December 9, 1938).

37 Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me; the Diary of a Development*.


“My Body as a Memory Map:” Embodied History in Ralph Lemon’s *Come Home Charley Patton*

Doria E. Charlson

I begin with the body, no way around it. The body as place, memory, culture, and as a vehicle for a cultural language. And so of course I’m in a current state of the wonderment of the politics of form. That I can feel both emotional outrageousness with my body as a memory map, an emotional geography of a particular American identity...†

Choreographer and visual artist Ralph Lemon’s interventions into the themes of race, art, identity, and history are a hallmark of his almost four-decade-long career as a performer and art-maker. Lemon, a native of Minnesota, was a student of dance and theater who began his career in New York, performing with multimedia artists such as Meredith Monk before starting his own company in 1985. Lemon’s artistic style is intermedial and draws on the visual, aural, musical, and physical to explore themes related to his personal history. *Geography*, Lemon’s trilogy of dance and intermedial artistic pieces, spans ten years of global, investigative creative processes aimed at unearthing the relationships among—and the possible representations of—race, art, identity, and history. Part one of the trilogy, also called *Geography*, premiered in 1997 as a dance piece and was inspired by Lemon’s journey to Africa, in particular to Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea, where Lemon sought to more deeply understand his identity as an African-American male artist. He subsequently published a collection of writings, drawings, and notes which he had amassed during his research and travel in Africa under the title *Geography: Art, Race, Exile*. The second part of the *Geography* trilogy, *Tree*, took Lemon to Asia, where he investigated ritual, modernity, culture, and cultural practice. *Tree* premiered as an evening-length dance work in 2000, followed by publication of the journey’s collected ephemera in book form in 2004. The focus of this paper will be the final part of Lemon trilogy, *Come Home Charley Patton*, both the full-length dance, which debuted in 2004, and the volume of letters, photographs, notes, and drawings related to the creation of the dance, which was published in 2013. Performed by five dancers, and comprising six sections, *Come Home Charley Patton* is an artistic manifestation of Lemon’s travels to the Deep South, recreating the path of the Freedom Riders, the Civil Rights activists who protested racial segregation by riding integrated buses through the Jim Crow South in the summer of 1961.

*Come Home Charley Patton* is the nexus of Lemon’s identity and the history that he has both constructed and experienced of African-Americans in the rural South—the tension between past and present is palpably felt in the
multimedia performance through not only his choreography, but in Lemon’s theatrical, musical, and cinematic choices. For this piece, Lemon’s body acts as a literal map—charting, documenting, and archiving his journey through choreography and written accounts. Lemon’s writings, which accompany this piece and document his artistic process, are an exploration of trauma, memory, and the human body as a site of history and a tool for historical preservation, and they highlight the burden of representing such a charged history on stage. This paper will document three techniques that Ralph Lemon employs to embody this history and to cultivate both kinesthetic and emotional responses to the work that prompt a renewed look at the status of African-Americans in present society: choreographic transference, “scriptive things,” and aural tradition and internalized rhythm.²

Choreographic Transference

I propose the use of the term “choreographic transference” to help understand the ways in which Lemon was able to embody and recreate in-body traditions connected to the African-American experience in the South during the civil rights movement. Choreographic transference refers to the process of engaging in the tradition of learning or observing movement in an informal setting, the choreography of which may then be found in the body of the observer. Choreographic transference resembles, but differs from, mimesis in that this process demands a proximity to and relationship between the dancers. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, in her work The Archive and the Repertoire, writes: “repertoire…enacts embodied…all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”³ Dance, embodied knowledge, and behaviors fit squarely within the repertoire, and choreographic transference requires kinesthetic intelligence to be able to see and then reproduce the movement patterns and cadence of another. Taylor further notes that “the repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being part of the transmission…The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”⁴ Indeed, a large portion of Lemon’s project for Come Home Charley Patton is unearthing and reproducing “choreographies of meaning” from different geographies in the Deep South and from diverse histories within the framework of the African-American experience in the 1950s-60s.⁵

From the beginning of his documentation of the creative process for Charley, one can see that Lemon is deeply invested in and preoccupied with honoring the choreography of his ancestors and their contemporaries. In a letter to his sister dated February, 1999, he writes, “Dear Anita, I dreamed last night that I was dancing with Papa Satterwhite. It was the second time. He had a wide-legged step, low to the ground and rhythmic. I danced alongside him, and here’s the strange part, I was invisible. Interesting, right?...Love, R.”⁶ The base movement of Charley, as seen in almost all of the group section, has traces of Lemon’s dance with Papa Satterwhite. The unison section of “Mississippi/Duluth” could very well be a direct citation of Lemon’s dream—the dancers’ movements are weighted, originating in the hips. Their steps are wide, mimicking the description of Satterwhite, and their lower bodies are extremely expressive.⁷ Meanwhile, their footfalls create distinct rhythms in conjunction with their breath. The dancers execute the movement in unison; however, none of the dancers are
facing the same direction and their eyes never meet. The dance occurs at the same time, and yet there exists a bodily and emotional distance between the performers, a parallel to the “invisibility” between Lemon and Satterwhite. Though Lemon’s dream was a private, internal encounter, the connection between past and present through the physical embodiment of this exchange provides a clear example of how the body can become a site of history and transgenerational knowledge. In re-creating the gestures, phrases, and qualities performed by his ancestor in his body, in public and onstage, Lemon honors the history and movement traditions of his past in the present moment.

For Lemon, the journey to the South with his daughter was of immeasurable importance, not only because of the people he encountered, whose stories they shared, but also for the physical act of reclaiming sites historically fraught with trauma in African-American history. Dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster postulates that each body is imbued with history. It is built in every act we perform—our muscle development, our posture, our interactions, and our identities are inextricably linked to our physicality. To better understand our history, she writes, “[A] historian’s body wants to inhabit these vanished bodies for specific reasons. It wants to know where it stands, how it came to stand there, what its options for moving might be. It wants those dead bodies to lend a hand in deciphering its own present predicaments and in staging some future possibilities.” In reenacting the route of the Freedom Riders, Lemon’s journey charts locations of trauma and provides an opportunity to literally walk in the footsteps of those who came before him, placing him in the role not only of a choreographer, but also of a historian. Lemon as a choreographer-historian uses both embodied and written knowledge to document his experience through dance, writing, and drawing. Susan Foster notes that “if writing bodies demand a proprioceptive affiliation between past and present bodies, they also require interpretation of their role in the cultural production of meaning: their capacities for expression, the relationships between body and subjectivity they may articulate . . . the notions of individuality and sociality they may purvey.” For Lemon, it seems, his mode of “cultural production of meaning” relies on movement that oscillates between the individual and the social—the desire to embody dance and physicality on an internal, almost psychic level, coupled with the need to share that in-body knowledge and engage with it on the level of the communal. The internalization, on the level of the individual, and the externalization, on the social level, of movement generated by Lemon’s journey presents itself throughout the work and will be highlighted throughout this paper.

In many instances, particularly in sites of direct violence against African-Americans, Lemon began to dance. Whether as a way of reclaiming the space or as a way to physically internalize the landscape and submerge him into an immersive experience, Lemon turns to physicality to memorialize the past. He writes of his pilgrimage:

“I found confused and fleeting ways to make my presence known in these highly charged spaces that are not the same spaces of forty years ago. That have elusive memories...Capturing evidence that these personal events/actions did happen, and with some specificity...The self-consciousness of these private acts created
a radical pedestrian quality. I did not want to disrupt the communal ecology of these spaces.”

The “radical pedestrian quality” infuses the stage performance as well. The vast majority of the work can be characterized as pedestrian, with variations of walking, standing, sitting, and other quotidian and ambulatory movements compose significant sections of the piece. The unassuming and ordinary nature of such movements expands the audience’s ability to connect to the performers on stage. Because they can imagine themselves conducting those same gestures, walking those patterns, or sitting on that table, the spectators are able to develop more empathy with the dancers and the narrative created by Lemon.

A connection can be drawn between the walking, running, and other pedestrian movements found in Charley and Diana Taylor’s notion of “trauma as a durational performance.” Taylor, in writing about her experiences visiting a concentration camp in Chile, describes the need to reenact through walking and revisiting a site of trauma as necessary for the preservation of history, for the “instruction” of others, and possibly to “externalize the pain associated with a place.” For Lemon, the reenactment of the Freedom Rides allowed him to gain perspective into the physical environments and sites of societal trauma and transformation. In many ways, the journey was also an act of redemption and reclamation. The act of walking in the path of his forbears was moving and intriguing for Lemon, and he writes “Ground (Hallow?)/ Memorial (Counter)” as “keywords to generate movement.” Lemon uses the body to investigate the embodiment of trauma not only by visiting sites of memorial, but also through the physical act of walking and dancing on hallowed ground. Using his experience in the South as a genesis of certain movement phrases in the piece, Lemon once again connects geography with the dancing body. Here, André Lepecki’s notion of the “will to archive” provides another constructive tool in understanding Lemon’s process of retracing the steps of his forbears, Lepecki notes that the will to archive is a “will to re-enact, thus indicating the body as the privileged archival site. In its constitutive precariously, perpetual blind-spots, linguistic indeterminations, muscular tremors, memory lapses, bleedings, rages, and passions, the body as archive re-places and diverts notions of archive away from a documental deposit or bureaucratic agency dedicated to the (mis)management of the past.” Lepecki’s theorization is particularly fascinating and apt in the context of a past that involves the ultimate act of disempowerment and submission: slavery. The reclamation of sites and histories fraught with pain and trauma, then, occurs not only in the form of creating different associations with a place (i.e., through dancing at the site of Medgar Evers’ home), but also in the form of taking one’s history out of the hands of the system that encouraged slavery and segregation and into the domain of one’s own body where it can be guarded, preserved, and honored.

In addition to the influence of the empowering act of revisiting physical sites, Lemon’s encounters with individuals along his journey greatly influenced his choreography. One example can be found in his notes of a conversation with a man named Walter Carter. Here, Lemon recounts that Carter explained:

“We’d go to [Skippy James’] place to frolic...Frolickin’, jukin’, dancin’, havin’ a good time...dancin’. The waltz...the one step...two
step...the slow drag.' He gradually stands, unexpected, surprising everybody. Standing still for a few seconds, outside of remembering, and then he starts to move, mostly his legs, sliding without bending any limbs, announcing then moving from step to step. First the one-step, then the two-step, then the slow drag. His body thin as a rail and light, stiff, shining. Arms rounded...”

By watching Carter dance like he used to decades before, and by learning his movements through observation and repetition, Lemon becomes privy to a new brand of corporeal knowledge. The particular flavor of the “frolickin’” and the “jukin’” was necessarily unique, as it had never been taught to him before and it had been developed in a completely different milieu. The section “Nigger Story” includes phrasing and sequences that look to be inspired by Carter. At this point in the piece, dancer Okwui Okpokwasili has just recounted to the audience a story in which a classmate of hers called her a nigger. This emotionally charged term paired with video footage of a man’s home and his gun collection cements the relationship between race and violence for the audience. It is in this context that the quintet for Carter begins. Okpokwasili begins onstage with a video of a man playing the drums behind her. She repeats a rhythmic one-legged chug and is joined by two male dancers. They perform a series of embellished pedestrian dances and are gradually joined by two more dancers; then they all break into a circle with high-energy clapping and stomping, this rhythm providing the music for the male dancer in the center. His choreography—high legs, bent knees, a lightness of body and extended limbs—reminds the spectator of energetic, twentieth century social dances such as the Lindy Hop or the Jitterbug. The quintet looks to be “having a good time...dancin’”—they then break into a stylized unison phrase also marked by rhythm and punctuated with pauses. The group’s limbs are heavy as they glide and shuffle across the stage, in some phrases with their “arms rounded,” the last section with extended arms and legs that trace the space around them. It is in this performance learned from Carter that Lemon translates and transposed history from one location to another, from the South to Brooklyn, from aging, laboring bodies to professional dancers. Through the weight of the limbs, the arc of the arms and the configuration of bodies in space and in time with a rhythmic beat, Lemon takes the audience to a particular location and moment in time and forces us to recall a specific point in history.

Lemon’s use of choreographic transference does not solely manifest in learned movement phrases; it can also be located in movement stemming from particularly moving encounters that created in Lemon a profoundly emotional response. A recurring motif throughout the piece has Okpokwasili, clad in a red dress, spinning with her arms extended wide to her sides. While this movement elicits different responses at different points in the work, the image itself resonates with an entry in Lemon’s notes from his sojourn. Towards the beginning of his quest, Lemon realizes that he needs to reorient himself in relation to the means by which he obtains information and the substance of what he is searching for. In a conversation that was less fruitful than expected with some folks in Virginia, Lemon writes:

“I distract myself into another dreamy revelation...an affirmation really, for full-blown racial injustice or integration as I see it, and my confusion with what to do with this modern-past inequality and
faux-freedom, what I witness, right here, better to create concepts that I can play with, ideas mythical, empowered, distracted...like flying back to Africa with wings, real ones that sprout from the shoulder blades...”\(^{17}\)

Particularly in the final section of the work Okpokwasili seems to embody the strong, empowered woman Lemon describes, her arms outstretched and her body spinning out of control as if she might take off in flight for a distant place and time.\(^ {18}\)

**Scriptive Things**

While the choreography of *Charley* allows the audience a view into Lemon’s Freedom Ride by giving us a visceral and kinesthetic connection to his travels, he further deepens this connection through his carefully curated use of “scriptive things” during the performance. In her essay “Dances with Things,” historian Robin Bernstein discusses the powerful agency afforded to material objects and how these inanimate objects elicit animated responses from the living body. At least part of the object’s agency, Bernstein asserts, comes in the form of historical context and socialization; in essence, the history of an object helps to script our relationship with, reception to, and usage of that object in the present. Lemon’s intentional use of props in *Charley* shows his recognition that “when a thing scripts actions, it manifests the repertoire of its historical moment.”\(^ {19}\) A particularly poignant example of a “scriptive thing” in *Charley* is the horseshoes that Okpokwasili uses at different points throughout different monologues in the piece. In the horseshoes’ first appearance,\(^ {20}\) Okpokwasili walks towards center stage with a Western-style shirt buttoned up over her dress and the score of old cowboy movies playing over her walking. At first, it seems as if the horseshoe is alluding to a campy, Western scene. With one move of the arm, however, the horseshoe becomes metonymic as she places it around her neck, a stand-in for the shackles worn by Africans and African-Americans during slavery. Bernstein notes:

“[O]ne gains performance competence not only by accruing contextualizing knowledge but also, crucially, by holding a thing, manipulating it, shaking it to see what meaningful gestures tumble forth. Ultimately, historians must place our living bodies in the stream of performance tradition. The archive then becomes a ghostly discotheque where things of the past leap up to ask scholars to dance; and we listen, accept the invitation, and, hearts pounding, step onto the floor.”\(^ {21}\)

Okpokwasili does step onto the floor. The monologue she delivers is the aforementioned “Nigger Story,” and the symbolism of her sharing her experience with a racial epithet while literally bearing the weight of her ancestors in the form of a metal horseshoe is not lost on the audience. The horseshoe not only scripts the audience’s response to its presence, perhaps through a feeling of discomfort, an aversion of the eyes, or a more careful listen to the words of the monologue; it also dictates Okpokwasili’s movement and choreography. Later in the work, the horseshoes appear again and their impact on the body is more pronounced.\(^ {22}\) As she layers four horseshoes upon her neck, the weight of them causes a shift in
her posture and cadence. Both she and the spectators immediately revert back to a particular historical moment in which African-Americans were not able to walk free from the confines of slavery and oppression, and, in this way, the use of props dictates not only a response from the performer, but also a distinct and predictable response from the audience.

Other instances of “scriptive things” might be less pronounced; however, the impact of the material on Lemon’s creative process manifests in the final performance. The concepts of architecture and the materiality of delineated space are particularly interesting to Lemon and he plays with the physical and emotional responses associated with spatial division. During the process of creating Charley, Lemon was inspired by the work of Bruce Nauman; he muses, “what specifically interests me about [Nauman’s] Wall-Floor Positions23 beyond its obvious relationship to art and the body...is the not so obvious parallel realities of a period in time, of ‘a white art freedom’ and the black civil rights movement. Body as art material...And the invisible body as chattel. Where and how did these forces intersect beyond an inanimate sociology of walls and floors?”24 In Charley, Lemon sets out to explore that “sociology of walls and floors”—what do walls divide? What do they support? In the piece, two male dancers interact with large sections of plywood siding, creating both divisions and support systems between the stage, themselves, and each other.25 Given that Lemon’s sojourn was undertaken in the context of the Freedom Rides, the premise of which was to eliminate divisions of public space because of race, the walls do suggest a connection between the white boards and the racial segregation of black bodies. The section “No Room Story” begins with one of the male dancers balancing the wallpapered plywood on his back—and provide an example of how the physicality of the dancers is heightened by the scriptive props, even if the objects aren’t the focus of the scene.26 The solo male dancer performs a series of gestures: grabbing and struggling against his wrists, as if fighting with his own body, followed by more effeminate gestures framing his face. His solo ends with a salute and then the collapse of his upper body. Another dancer replaces the first. He begins to use the wall as a backdrop for his own gestural sequence, starting with exaggerated laughing and followed by specific framing of the face and neck. The next series of movements mimics hair braiding, an image made more striking by the fact that the dancer’s head is shaven. These gesture phrases embody the “sociology of walls and floors” described by Lemon in his notes. Ranging from the mundane (hair braiding) to the violent (miming punching an invisible figure), the solitary black dancers set against the light wall evoke senses of vulnerability, confinement, judgment, and interrogation, as if each action in African-American daily life is under a new or specialized form of scrutiny. Similarly, the floral wallpaper creates the environment of a home, a safe and personal domain. The intrusion of a public audience into the private interactions and emotions of the dancers in the home provides an equally poignant statement about history and memory: that in order to share and remember one’s history, it is necessary to delve into the intimate, sometimes painful and private lives and stories of others.
Aural Tradition and Internalized Rhythm

The collapse of the public and private spheres is presented, too, through aural traditions, such as storytelling and music, which Lemon uses throughout the piece to further connect his audience to a specific time and a particular African-American history. From slavery to the present day, music and storytelling have held a sacred place in the lives of black Americans. P. Sterling Stuckey, writing on the essentiality of music and dance in African-American history and culture, in addition to the role of art in African-American spirituality, notes: “Slaveholders never understood that a form of spirituality almost indistinguishable from art was central to the cultures from which blacks came. Distinguishing between the two for the African was like distinguishing between the sacred and the secular, and that distinction was not often made. . . . This quality of culture helps explain why, for the descendants of Africa in America, the sacred so easily satisfied the deepest ‘secular’ needs, and the two long remained the same when that which was sacred was labeled secular by outsiders.” 27 For Lemon, highlighting aural traditions of music and storytelling, in addition to the internalized and embodied rhythm of music in the body, became a central component of the final production of Charley.

Music and rhythm in the body is a recurring motif throughout the work and, though these phrases evoke differing emotions depending on the context, each iteration of the body as an instrument for rhythm provides the audience with a sense of grandeur—as if this body were connected to another body in another time. Although there are dramatic and moving moments of silence in the piece, Lemon’s notes and the final work are full of references to and clips of diverse musical scores. But it is to the blues and jazz that Lemon keeps returning. The blues and jazz, two musical traditions steeped in and woven into the history of African-Americans, provide the backdrop for many instances of embodied rhythm through both improvisation and choreography in Lemon’s work. During his research, he writes of a particularly memorable evening in which he found himself performing “[a] dance that had no steps or shape, like the music. No longer research. I disappeared, rhythmically, without discrimination. But not in the way I had dreamed a few years back, conjure-dancing with Papa Satterwhite. There were no grandfathers or great-grandfathers ghosting this dance . . . Just me, barely me. I danced, with bended knees. . . .” 28 While there are direct references to the influence of the jazz in the piece (such as Okpokwasili singing a rendition of “Little Girl Blue” by Nina Simone), there are other instances of rhythm that have evoke a more visceral kinesthetic response from the audience. In the section “Mississippi/Duluth,” for example, following an acoustic accompaniment of the first quintet of the piece, the music drops off and the dancers begin to create the score with their bodies. 29 What begins with whistling quickly accelerates into a driving rhythm created primarily from gasped breaths and vigorous slaps of the hand on the body, which increase in intensity, and is punctuated with a body’s collapse onto the floor. It can be difficult to separate the choreography from the image of a whipping, particularly in the case of the male dancer in center stage who uses his extended arm to beat his leg with tremendous intensity. In this way, Lemon creates a soundscape that both instrumentalizes the human body and preserves its history as a black body. To use Foster’s logic, the effect of beatings on the African-American body can be seen through its history, which Lemon materializes on the stage.
“Nigger Story,” a full section of the work, also uses the body to connect storytelling, rhythm and history for the audience. The opening scene, set to muted, bucolic music, morphs into a session in which the audience literally partakes in the transmission of history through Okpokwasili’s telling of her experience of being called a nigger in the fourth grade. The audience now becomes invested in not only the information the performer is conveying, but also the manner in which she tells the story. The spectators find themselves in a position that has historical roots: the receivers of knowledge through oral history and transmission. Okpokwasili moves from upstage-right to center stage as the music swells and she paradoxically cements herself as the protagonist (her body language suggests a comfort afforded to one who has told this story many times) and also as a victim (this is when she places the horseshoe on her neck like a shackle). Music, too, plays a huge role in this story and highlights the ambivalence that Okpokwasili embodies. Her fourth grade teacher is introduced as one who always plays the djembe, a traditional African drum, which irks Okpokwasili because all she wants to listen to is Verdi. The struggle between Western classical music and traditional African drumming symbolizes, perhaps, the uncomfortable and confusing identity of a young African-American child growing up in a primarily white, middle-class town. When discussing the incident of Dawn calling Okpokwasili a nigger, cymbals crash from a dancer upstage, muffling the sound of the word, although we all know what was said. As the tempo and frequency of the word “nigger” increases, so, too, does the rhythm of the cymbals creating a brass cacophony that drowns out the voice of the storyteller. Here, we see music’s ambivalent identity as an antidote to racial unrest. On one hand, music is a source of pride and empowerment for the African-American community, and on the other, its popularity and prevalence masks deeper, untreated issues that gnaw at the psyche of the black community.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes Ralph Lemon’s work *Come Home Charley Patton* through the lens of choreographic transference, scriptive things, and aural tradition and internalized rhythm in an attempt to understand the ways in which Lemon is able to embody the painful history of African-Americans living in the South during and prior to the civil rights movement. The process for garnering material for the piece involved a retracing and recreation of the Freedom Riders in addition to engaging with members of the African-American community in the South to experience firsthand the sites and personal histories of this difficult past. *Come Home Charley Patton* explores the complexity of trying to parse out and make sense of the African-American identity as it confronts concepts of identity, history, memory, and trauma. Lemon uses the body as a site of memory and empowerment—through embodied traditions he explores the past and, by performing on stage, he brings the legacy of that past to life in the present, calling for a renewed look at the position of African-Americans in the United States through choreography. Watching *Come Home Charley Patton* in 2015, in the context of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the epidemic of murders of unarmed African-Americans by law enforcement, the spectator revisits race, trauma, and identity through the lens of the present and through the embodiment of historical memory on stage. Over the past year, #BlackLivesMatter protestors have been staging “Die-In” demonstrations in which participants lie on the ground in silence for forty-five minutes, the amount of time that Michael Brown’s body lay
on a Ferguson sidewalk after his death—a somber memorial to the teenager and a stark portrait in light of the racial violence steeped in which America’s history is steeped. While Lemon’s work highlights energetic movement, storytelling, and music, the focus of both Charley and of the Die-Ins remains fixed on the physical black body. Through the process of creating Charley, and through its performance, Lemon investigates the black body as a site of history and as a memorial, while also acknowledging the body’s resilience, freedom, and importance as a vehicle for storing one’s culture and identity.

NOTE


2 "Scriptive things" are material objects which prompt or "script" specific actions on the part of humans. Bernstein proposes that "agency, intention, and racial subjectivation co-emerge through everyday encounters with the material world" and that the racialized history of Americans can be viewed through our performance (i.e., interaction) with material objects. Robin Bernstein, "Dances With Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," Social Text 101 Vol. 27, No. 4. (2009): 67, accessed 24 November 2014.


4 Ibid.

5 Although much of the choreography and the history of Charley stem from the South, the piece is inherently intranational and extends far north of the Mason-Dixon. Lemon himself is a native of Minnesota, and the piece ultimately concerns the lynching of a man in the North. The section of the piece entitled ‘Mississippi/Duluth’ provides one example of the ways in which Lemon suggests that African-American culture and identity share an inescapable history stemming from slavery in the south.

6 Lemon, 10.


9 Ibid., 8

10 Lemon, Come Home Charley Patton, 27.


12 Taylor, 275.


17 Lemon, *Come Home Charley Patton*, 34.
19 Bernstein, 89.
21 Bernstein, 90.
23 *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968-9) is a sixty-minute video performance piece exploring the variations of the connection the human body can have with walls and a floor.
26 Ibid., 42:42.
On Curating “Irregular Rendition:” Exhibition-Making as Public Address

Lucy Hunter

In February 2015 I curated “Irregular Rendition,” an art exhibition commissioned by the Legal Medium conference at Yale University and staged at Fred Giampietro Gallery in New Haven. The Legal Medium explored intersections of art and law, and its organizers conceived of an accompanying exhibition within that framework. When I accepted the invitation to curate, though, I chose not to focus on acute engagements between artists and legal systems, but instead began from an expanded definition of law, taking it to include not only jurisprudence, but also principles of math and physics, common knowledge, accepted norms—universal truths, writ large.1 The 14 artists in the exhibition collided, through diverse practices, with a range of large-scale systems: Narcissister’s two-channel video of women in her trademark mask walking topless through New York City, navigating the space between social taboo and legal right; Alexandra Lerman’s ceramic interventions into the arcane principles of “management,” salvaging remnants of the first anti-fatigue factory flooring from the defunct Packard plant in Detroit; Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s parade in Givors, France, for the vital, but rarely celebrated, emergency response services that form a constant though inconspicuous municipal safety net. I hoped these varied approaches would denaturalize the supposed certainty of “law” in all its breadth. They might dislodge, or articulate, embedded inequalities that rest below the threshold of visibility, disparities veiled by the pretense of certainty and normalized to the point of non-existence.

The exhibition’s title reflects this aim. “Irregular rendition” is the term of art for federally-sanctioned U.S. abduction and extradition of suspected terrorists without due process. I had misgivings about choosing such a loaded term for an exhibition title, fearing it might de-emphasize or aestheticize the severity of extra-legal extradition. However, I was struck by the bureaucratic—and, as I will discuss later, visual—euphemism that worked to mitigate the violence of this contentious practice. In emblazoning this term in size-200 letters across the display wall of the gallery, I hoped to renew attention, as do the works in the exhibition, to regular, quotidian encounters that are no less structured by subtle insinuations of authority. “Irregular Rendition” comprised a lateral indictment of systemic inequality, and in what follows I discuss how my curatorial choices, whether or not they succeeded, inform an ongoing question: How can curators enunciate a politics of resistance through the exhibition medium?

“Irregular Rendition” came together in the midst of a national crisis of law. Police homicides of unarmed people of color—including Eric Garner on July 17th,
Michael Brown on August 9th, Akai Gurley on November 20th, and Tamir Rice on November 22nd—renewed attention to the persistent threat of police brutality against black lives, a peril concealed as “law enforcement” and sustained by the apathy of white majorities. Legal statutes justified these people’s murders and immunized their perpetrators, the gulf between law and justice revealing itself in a string of non-indictments.

It was evident to me that an art exhibition about law could not occupy a merely hypothetical register in a moment so urgently calling for a shift in white consciousness. In the 10 months I worked on “Irregular Rendition,” I thought constantly about an exhibition’s capacity to sustain a workable politics, specifically a politics addressing systemic violence as advanced by the #blacklivesmatter movement. My initial and most sustained concern, drawing on decades of discourse around art’s ability to intervene in social life outside itself, was structural, if not existential. Tethered between the commercial Fred Giampietro Gallery and Yale Law School, funded by private donors and Yale grants, “Irregular Rendition” converged two formidably exclusive fields: the art world and the academy. How could these rarefied spaces convey the omnipresence of law as a regulator of human life, and in particular the lives of the disenfranchised, marginalized, and systematically oppressed?

The most readily available approach would be to put political activism on display in the exhibition, gathering works of art that explicitly addresses systemic inequality, police brutality, and state violence. There have been a number of such exhibitions dealing with this subject matter in both historical and contemporary registers, from MoMA’s “Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art in the 1960s” to this summer’s “Posters + Politics: The Art of Activism in New York” at the Museum of the City of New York. I moved away from this approach for three reasons. First, I did not want individual works in the show to have to convey or represent what the entire exhibition might be “about.” This would amounts to a curatorial deferral—shifting the burden of communication onto artists, and in particular, artists of color, who in the art world are too often expected to metonymically convey the experience of their entire communities. Not only does this overlook an artist’s individuality and agency within her practice, but also it seems to absolve white people, myself among them, of their responsibility to be allies in combating white supremacy. Second, this literalist approach participates in what Hal Foster has called the “realist assumption” that art must access the “real”—the immediate, the social, the on-the-ground action—in order to be the site of political transformation. Not only does this implicitly disavow art’s political capacity, taking for granted that it must be literal or outside itself in order be effective, but it also “fail[s] to address structural effects” of, in this context, the persistence of inequality within the art world itself.

This leads to my third issue: The implied silence of the curator when the art is presented as an instrument of rhetoric. Art’s multiple strategies for both contemporary and historical political resistance generate foundational and provocative discourse. Less emphasis is placed on curators, meanwhile, who facilitate encounters between viewers and art in specific spaces—institutional, art-world, or otherwise—and who in the process necessarily, one hopes deliberately, mount some argument of their own. I directed my efforts to navigating this indeterminate space: to be present as a curatorial author without
shouting over the constituent works of art, and to reap the benefits of institutional context (money, prestige, publicity) while maintaining enough distance from Yale to avoid undermining or sabotaging the exhibition's claims to political intervention.

My first priority was to establish critical dissonance between myself, the exhibition, and its host institutions. While I appreciate the ambitious program of the Legal Medium, its aims and mine were distinct. I screened Mary Ellen Carroll’s 24-hour durational video Federal on the day of the symposium at Linsly Chittenden Hall on Yale campus (Fig. 1). Federal comprises two videos screened simultaneously in adjacent theaters, one depicting the north face, the other the south face, of the federal agency office hub in Los Angeles. The voyeuristic center of governance is seen in all its banal glory from the perspective of a stable camera on a tripod that does not move for the entire 24-hour video. Federal is located at the uneasy crossroads of dueling tensions: the invisible regimes of power under which we become muted, complicit subjects, and the radical gestures like Carroll’s that convey an urgent need for visibility and recognition.

![Federal](imageurl)

**Figure 1.** Mary Ellen Carroll, *Federal* (still), 2003, two-channel video.

I thought that Federal could generate a kind of restless periphery encroaching on the slick and professional feel of the symposium, a humming and persistent refusal to be recuperated or ignored. This pushback extended, in my mind, to the subtle yet ubiquitous structural inequality perpetuated at Yale, against which I hoped to position “Irregular Rendition.” Certain of Yale’s policies effectively segregate New Haven, including its aggressive real estate consolidation and a robust, gun-carrying police force patrolling its borders. Federal reminded me that the appearance of banality, peace and calm, even
boredom, is anything but. An example: the orientation of one-way streets around campus, innocuous though it may seem, produces an exasperating inversion of an ancient saying, “All roads lead away from Yale.” In order to correct a missed turn, one must navigate a full mile around the outer perimeter of campus. Fred Giampietro Gallery is located on one of these centrifugal streets, a few doors down from the University’s art institutions—Yale University Art Gallery and the British Art Center—and the rest of the campus, where exclusion and belonging are constantly if imperceptibly enforced.

One is tempted, given these unremitting issues, to dismiss the possibility of critique altogether. What could be a more powerfully overdetermined context than the intersection of Yale University and the commercial art world? The historical templates at a curator’s disposal include, most notably, Institutional Critique, whose strategies—perhaps equally notably—have been absorbed and canonized by the very institutions they once sought to take down. Hal Foster writes: “[a]n artist today may seek to work with sited communities with the best motives of political engagement and institutional transgression, only in part to have this work recoded by its sponsors as social outreach, public relations, economic development … or art.”7 While I take issue with the implied cynicism that institutional framing could precede and constitute art, I do feel that a curator’s work is particularly vulnerable to the kind of “recoding” he describes. In contrast to an artist’s studio practice, curators’ work is necessarily sited within the venue for art’s display; whether or not they are employed by a given gallery or museum, a curator’s work is inevitably hitched to that space with all its baggage.

I prefer an approach that resists the blanket pessimism that would foreclose interventions before they begin. This is why I favored a nonliteral approach to the politics of systemic inequality in selecting artists and objects for “Irregular Rendition.” Art has a unique capacity for conveying ideas through nonliteral, un-explicit, mediated gestures. This power, I believe, is no less “real” than direct political action simply because it operates on a different register of engagement than sit-ins or marches. Moreover, setting aside one’s anxious imperative to be directly, explicitly political resuscitates the claustrophobic Catch-22s of institutional critique, identity politics, and the like. For this reason, I decided on the thematics of denaturalization: it is not an explicitly political concept, though it always deals on some register with frameworks of officialdom. “Denaturalization” opens up any number of activities that pick at the hem of and expose loose threads in the fabric of stability. The point was not to activate a specific result, but to suggest that wherever there is authority, there is also fallibility.

This fallibility also provides room for levity, fun, and play, as demonstrated by Park McArthur’s brilliant Jump Instructions (Fig. 2). An isometric floor plan of New York’s Abrons Art Center is overlaid with handwritten instructions for hopping the Center’s gate. The gate is adorned with animal-shaped cutouts, so the directives include phrases such as “R foot rabbit’s butt” and “L foot on flower.” The Center had raised concerns over the security of the handicap-accessible entrance, which McArthur needed to use during her residency there. Fearing that the automatic trigger would allow the door to close too slowly, and invite possible trespassers, administrators attached a weight that made entering and exiting difficult for McArthur. Jump Instructions is a riposte to these measures: the
artist’s friend climbed over the gate with relative ease, and dictated the steps involved. McArthur conveys the absurdity borne of two competing regulatory modes: on the one hand, to enhance gate security, and on the other, to remain ADA compliant. Her work complicates pat notions of “accessibility” by calling attention to its inextricable converse, exclusivity. The two form an uneasy pair; the more accessible, the less exclusive, and vice versa.

The artist stipulates that this work be installed in place of city-ordained signage or permits. In the “Irregular Rendition” exhibition space it was hung by the door, where one might find a fire-department maximum occupancy notice. The replacement of one bureaucratic intervention with another performs exactly the kind of denaturalization that I wanted the show to provoke. I loved that it functioned as a kind of gateway to the exhibition, guiding entrants into the gallery space and the range of institutional dislocations I had attempted to establish therein.

Figure 2. Park McArthur, Jump Instructions, 2013, drawing.
The question remained, for me, how not to overlook Foster’s “structural effect,” by which art perpetuates its own overwhelming elitism, Western-centrism and marginalization. How does an exhibition itself encourage active reception, questioning, resistance? I worked from a distinction between an “audience” and a “public.” The former is passive, the latter active. I wanted the show to address publics, not audiences. Politics belong to publics, because publics have a will to action. By contrast, art encounters are often framed around an audience. Consider the language of “observers,” “spectators,” a self-selecting group set at a remove, watching from a distance. For “Irregular Rendition” to advance a politics, it would need to address a public.

My strategy was to cultivate a liminal coherence, a marginal legibility. “Irregular Rendition” was not particularly concise; I think it waded slightly into the abstruse, more than I would have liked. But I can say with some certainty that the central thrust of the exhibition wasn’t obvious. Legibility, I came to think, was the knife-edge of representation, of reduction, of metonymy. I am suspicious of representation, which assumes that a part can stand in for, i.e. re-present, a whole. This cannot be so: consider, for instance, a token character in a sitcom. Heterogeneous perspectives cannot be funneled through a single representative, a one-dimensional character; tokenism serves to pacify and reassure those in power that alternative experiences are fully available, intelligible, to them. Representation also implies stability, homogeneity, which serves exactly the kind of naturalizing procedures that I hoped “Irregular Rendition” would address.

To create liminal coherence in the show, I invited an eclectic grouping of artists from disparate conversations, places, and media. They were related insofar as you took my curatorial statement at faith. This isn’t to say that the only way to understand the show was by reading my press release, but rather, that I intentionally diverged from any normative or historical grouping: for instance, figurative painters, New York–based sculptors, or radical artists of the 1980s. This approach got a lot of negative feedback from friends and strangers alike who didn’t understand how the works related to one another or enjoy their juxtaposition.

Brock Enright’s Dragon Scaled Lemon Battery (Fig. 3), with its resolute physicality, affirmed the ability of art to oscillate between formal and conceptual registers, and to maintain a political tenor without addressing the social as such. Enright’s sculpture is a golden egg covered in imbricated half-moon scales; it glinted, alluring and seductive, atop a tall plinth under a spotlight. The material fact of the object: Brock covered a lemon in gold-colored thumbtacks, a radical deflation of the piece’s own aura. Enright’s sculptures pronounce their dual existence as sacred and profane, as gorgeous art object and drugstore-purchase assemblage. Enright’s sculpture functioned differently in “Irregular Rendition” than it might have in another exhibition context, and I appreciated this fluency; the work challenges the “realist assumption” identified by Foster, that art must take situate itself somewhere “outside” in order to enact political transformation.
Returning to the title of the show: “irregular rendition” employs strikingly visual language to refer to action shrouded in secrecy. *Rendition* means a visual likeness, reproduction, or re-staging of a performance. Its place in extradition terminology likely comes from the French etymology—*rendre* means “to return.” I was struck by the phrase “irregular rendition”—as well as by its sometime variant, “extraordinary rendition”—for the forceful, though unintentional, conflation of a thing and its likeness. This challenges the de-facto separation of art and its politics, between representation and the “real.” What if art weren’t forever inured to its relegation as metaphorical, standing outside and parallel to the world and its issues? David Joselit spoke to this question in a recent interview in *Dis* magazine:

> We need to change our habit of thinking that art objects stand for something else; that their primary function is to represent. Instead, these objects act in various ways, including provoking future events or effects. Representing is always retrospective: something has to pre-exist the art object in order to be re-presented. I think art’s special capacity is, on the contrary, its futurity.  

If Foster calls attention to the presumed site of political transformation as “outside” of art, Joselit sees possibility in a temporal framework. Rendition, I found, addresses these objectives, presenting a model that exceeds representation. Moreover, taken in the context of “irregular rendition,” this word implies an immediate and urgent injunction toward visibility.
Mary Ellen Carroll’s *Federal* is perhaps the most precise realization of the chasm between visibility and power that “Irregular Rendition” sought to counter. In addition to projecting the piece’s durational video, I installed Carroll’s series of 24 stills, taken hourly during filming, in a grid on the gallery’s largest display wall (Fig. 4). The tedium of institutional authority is thrown into high relief by the repeated image of the building, identical except for the changing light conditions through the cycle of the day. Compounding this tedium were the months of correspondence with the FBI, security clearances and statements of purpose, required to film the exterior of the building from 100 yards away. I compiled these documents into a catalog distributed free at the gallery, opening what I hoped would be another channel for engagement with the exhibition (Fig. 5). I also elaborated on my own motivations behind the exhibition in an included interview with Nicolás Guagnini. The book was meant as a supplement for viewers who wanted to delve in on a textual level, but was certainly not required to enjoy or understand the exhibition. This essay, written nearly a year after the show, serves a similar function.
I sought with “Irregular Rendition” to enact a politics, by challenging representation through liminal incoherence, and to resist institutional complicity, by establishing my voice as curator as identifiable and distinct. I hoped that satisfying these conditions would make possible a public address, a meeting of the public on its own terms: multitudinous, shifting, dynamic, and unrepresentable as such. I tried to avoid foregrounding any stable narrative or trajectory, so that there would be no obvious “elevator pitch” or one-liner to summarize what Irregular Rendition was “about.” I sought unexpected juxtapositions and loose themes to elicit individual and conflicting takeaways. These strategies were also meant to challenge my own authority as curator. If the show claimed to be comprehensive or coherent, my voice risked becoming the only voice, the omniscient narrator whose word is taken for truth. It was important to me to remain subjective, to present my own take on “Irregular Rendition” as just one reading among many. This may be the crucial point for a politics of curatorial enunciation, and one I feel requires more discussion. I have heard many curators explicitly reject the notion of a curator’s authorial voice, as they feel theirs would disrupt or upstage artists’ works. I disagree. Art is not so fragile that it will collapse at the first instance of curatorial intervention. Curators should not underestimate art’s capacity for impact and address—and neither should they underestimate their own.

NOTES

1 Text paraphrased from the press release for “Irregular Rendition.” That full text is available on the exhibition’s web site, with the full roster of artists in the show: http://www.thelegalmedium.com/exhibition/

2 These are just two of countless exhibitions of activist art. Other recent examples include “MANIFEST: JUSTICE” (2015), an exhibition and programming series in Los Angeles, and “ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993” (2009) at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.

3 Foster advances this argument in an essay on ethnographic and anthropological trends in contemporary art production, specifically within postcolonial contexts. His argument parallels Walter Benjamin’s 1934 “The Artist as Producer,” where Benjamin indicts artists for fetishizing the proletariat as a conduit for the “real,” Foster claims that the ethnic and racial other comes to occupy a similar position for Western artists working in “global” conversations. In contrast, my argument applies not to artists but to curators, and to a specific 21st-century context in which the radical art of the 20th century has been historicized and recuperated by institutions. “Irregular Rendition” sought specifically to address domestic racial politics and systemic inequality. See Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” in Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts, ed. Jean Fisher. London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994. pp. 14.

4 Recent texts on postwar art’s interventions in politics include: Claire Bishop’s Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (Verso, 2012) and T.J. Demos’s The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis (Duke University Press, 2013). Texts on the politics of race, postcoloniality, and visibility include Kobena Mercer’s Welcome to the Jungle (Psychology Press, 1994); Darby English’s How
to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness (MIT Press, 2010); and Geeta Kapur’s When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India (Tulika, 2000).

5 This is not to minimize the work being done on political curating across a number of venues. There has been a surging interest in exhibition history in the last decade, indicated by the re-staging of landmark exhibitions, such as Harald Szeemann’s 1969 “When Attitudes Become Form” (Fondazione Prada, 2013) and Kynaston McShine’s 1966 “Primary Structures” (titled “Other Primary Structures,” Jewish Museum, 2014), as well as symposia like CUNY’s “Exhibit A: Authorship on Display” (2014). These investigations intermittently focus on the political interventions made by exhibitions, and the strategies employed by curators toward that end. Direct investigations into this topic include the 2010 Frieze Talk in London, “Exhibition Making as Activism—Whose Politics?” A wealth of texts addressing curatorial politics were published at the turn of the 21st century, frequently in regard to emerging “internationalism” in the art world. Jean Fisher edited the 1994 text from the INIVA symposium, Global Visions (op. cit.), which includes curatorial reflections from Elizabeth Sussman and Fisher. The catalog from Documenta 11 (2002) is another important text from this moment. Today, the journal The Exhibitionist is a continuing and vital forum for discourse around contemporary curating.

6 In January 2015, Charles Blow committed a column in the New York Times to his son’s recent detention at gunpoint by a Yale police officer. Blow’s son, who is African American, was accosted while leaving the library because he “fit … the description” of a burglary suspect. As Blow argues, such incidences are not isolated or anomalous in police encounters with young African-American men, but the display of force on a college campus is particularly disheartening. Charles Blow, “Library Visit, Then Held Up at Gunpoint,” The New York Times, January 26, 2015, Op-Ed sec.

7 Foster, pp. 13.

Review: Zero Tolerance

Gemma Sharpe

The miscellaneous historical, formal and geographical range of Zero Tolerance—a survey of activist projects within contemporary art between the 1960s and the present—has been roundly slated by critics, despite the relative strength of the work included. Given that the exhibition’s hook was resistance to authority, its unanchored curatorial approach could have looked like an egalitarian gesture. However, Zero Tolerance was both too big and too small to fulfill such a gesture—too amorphous to attend to affinities between works but too small to avoid the production of fatal gaps within its framework. Despite a stellar roster of artists, from Francis Alys, Öyvind Fahlström, and ACT UP New York to Song Dong and Sharon Hayes, the exhibition’s miscellaneous nature performed a peculiar violence to its content; every piece became an outlier against the rest, establishing detachments instead of establishing kinship or solidarity.

The outsourced muteness of Rirkrit Tirivanija’s Demonstration Drawings (2008) and the ambivalent narrativising of Harun Farocki and Andrei Uijca’s found footage documentary Videograms of a Revolution (1992) offered poignant re-presentations of protest and revolution. But both works appeared languidly disengaged when compared to pieces by Pussy Riot or Ahmed Basiony, for example, artists who, with tragic consequences, have confronted the very real dangers of direct action. The potency of Tirivanija and Faroki/Uijca’s work was put into backslide by comparison to these more forthright forms of activism, while the effectiveness of Pussy Riot’s and Basiony’s work as art conversely began to crumble in the face of more cerebral and analytical examples of political art practice.

This mutual antipathy was compounded by the exhibition’s treatment of history. Joseph Beuys’s Democracy is Merry (1973) and Yoko Ono and John Lennon’s Bed Peace (1969), for example, extended the exhibition’s historical timeline but also became outliers because of their temporal displacement. Indeed, the timeliness of Zero Tolerance was a central issue. In an interview with The Creators Project, curator Klaus Biesenbach noted that Zero Tolerance was conceived roughly three years ago—putting the inception of this show in the year that the “Arab Spring” began to escalate, that Pussy Riot and Ai Weiwei were arrested in Russia and China, and that Jack Persekian was sacked from his position at the Sharjah Biennial, among other petition-arousing conflicts that “shook” the art world. In the very summer of 2011 Okwui Enwezor would write in Artforum that the art world’s response to these events was “decidedly autumnal,” a blinkered and culturally patronizing wake-up that was already belated then. It is no surprise, then, that Zero Tolerance had an odd sense of time. Representing an exhibitionary addition to the petitions of 2011, it also attested to how much PS1 struggles to fulfil its mandate as the more nimble and “contemporary” partner to the Museum of Modern Art.
But beyond Zero Tolerance’s various self-destructive formal oppositions, its liberal “interestedness” was the foundation of its undoing, failing at the very point that it attempted to become an activist gesture in itself. With its rabble-rousing curation and didactic rhetoric, the exhibition’s eager need to produce liberal camaraderie and imply that the exhibition was itself a site of protest had a dangerously colonizing effect, an effect further emphasized by its recourse, in the show’s very title, to New York’s “zero tolerance” policies of the 1990s. Zero Tolerance reiterated par excellence the lack of cultural and geopolitical complexity for which Enwezor reproached the petitions that circulated in 2011, knocking at the door of the trauma of others in order to bear witness to that trauma, swell with the warmth of “understanding,” and then move calmly on.

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NOTES


2 Okwui Enwezor, ‘Spring Rain’, Artforum, (Summer 2011), p75.
Roundtable Discussion on the “New Whitney” - August 7, 2015

The Whitney Museum of American Art was founded in 1930 by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney with the primary intention of serving artists. The original space featured art studios, a school, and a recreation lounge where artists could socialize with one another. In 1966, the Whitney moved to Madison Avenue and E. 75th St., where it became neighbor to world-class art institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The Whitney’s uptown home was designed by Marcel Breuer and has often been compared to a fortress, because of its domineering concrete exterior and its placement among the crowded high-rises of the Upper East Side. After five years of construction downtown, the museum has finally moved into its new space on Gansevoort Street, in the Meatpacking District, where it sits at the intersection of New York’s blue-chip art galleries and the high-fashion district which has recently descended on the cobblestoned area once defined by the Hudson River’s port factories. The “New Whitney” opened to the public on May 1, 2015, with a debut rehang of its permanent collection that occupies four floors and is entitled “America is Hard to See” (May 1—September 27, 2015).

Allison Young: One interesting way to start might be to compare the experience of entering and moving through the space. What’s different about your experience as a visitor to the new space on Gansevoort, as opposed to the Upper East Side?

Julia Pelta Feldman: Well, it’s impossible to avoid how much more commercial the new site is—the “largo,” as they optimistically call it—in which you actually see the restaurant before you realize you’re at a museum.

Dana Liljegren: It’s true. I agree with that.

AY: I think that Untitled, the restaurant in the old building, was only created fairly recently, too.

JPF: Well, they had a café before then. But it was clearly not a space that had been designed for a restaurant.

DL: Exactly, and it was tucked away. It wasn’t one that greeted you on your arrival the way it happens in the new space.
JPF: Exactly. It’s obvious enough that museums have, for whatever reasons, increasingly had to emphasize things like restaurants. The museum is no longer even primarily a space to see art. It’s a place where maybe you’ll see some art, maybe you’ll see a movie, maybe you’ll get dinner, maybe you’ll meet a friend, maybe you’ll buy a book.

DL: It’s true. I think back on the time when museums were once on a similar level as libraries, for instance, as a space that one would enter with a degree of reverence and quiet contemplation, reflecting on what’s around in a solitary, meditative state. With this new emphasis on social spaces, and places where you can see and be seen, it feels as if that museum-going experience is being replaced by something dramatically different.

JPF: And always in the name of being nicer to the public and giving the public what they want.

AY: I have to say, though, that even with the presence of the café on the top floor, and those commercial spaces below, one of my first impressions of *America is Hard to See* was that the top floor actually did feel very quiet and contemplative. Of course, it inevitably will feel different from the contemporary art floor, where you hear the clanking of the Joan Jonas video and the loud TVs, so this might just be a marker of how art has changed at the same time as museums have evolved. So when we’re seeing art that was created before the commercialization of museums and the art world, that art necessarily brings you into more of a contemplative space.

JPF: Well, I will say that I was very impressed that the installation was clearly very sensitive to the kind of work being displayed. There was not only one format or one idea of how a group of paintings is supposed to look. Even the fact that the eighth floor is a smaller scale is really nice, so that basically everything pre-Abstract Expressionism is not hung in the giant airplane-hangar spaces that predominate downstairs and that have become the default for contemporary art spaces. Earlier works look ridiculous and tiny in those spaces, since, of course, artists wouldn’t have conceived of them when they were working in the 1910s.

DL: I think that’s a great point, actually. The spaces in which art lives are evolving in the same way that art itself is. And the dialogue that exists between a work of art and its home, so to speak, is changing in that same fashion.

JPF: I thought the question had been settled when the new MoMA building opened in 2004, and it became clear that this was a building for a very particular kind of art—giant contemporary works—that struggles to do justice to anything else. It seemed that the art world had finally gotten the message when, for example, the Drawing Center decided not to move into a brand-new building, to
keep their small, adapted space, which was universally lauded. Now it seems to me that the Whitney hasn't learned much from the Taniguchi problem. Which is to say that this building mostly seems designed for the particular art of the moment, and will likely seem dated in five years. The best example with MoMA is its atrium, which never made any sense to me until I realized that the big show when the new museum opened was the Richard Serra show. And if you're planning a giant Richard Serra retrospective, as Kynaston McShine was at that point, then of course you want this giant space—but everything else that hasn't been directly commissioned for it looks ridiculous. To one degree or another, every new museum building I've seen suffers from the same shortsightedness. Architecture can't afford to be so trendy.

**DL:** I would actually argue that the Whitney does a better job of this. For instance, just looking around at the space when I was in it, it was clear to me that on certain floors, they were making good use of temporary walls, which looked specifically constructed or adaptable for a given hanging.

**AY:** I'm curious about how the gallery space will be adapted in the future. The galleries are so beautifully light-drenched; but it will be necessary for curators to have the option of creating different configurations of spaces, such as more black box spaces for films and videos. But that expansion in the sheer amount of square footage is certainly one merit of the new building. You finally have the space to devote whole rooms to installations like Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al.* or Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency.*

**JPF:** You're right, that's something they couldn't do in the old building. It didn't really have the space for exactly the things that you mention, the Hans Haacke or Nan Goldin. But those were really rare, actually. Overall, you mostly encounter a single giant room, with a few partitions, and I found it really disorienting. One of our topics for consideration was the relative freedom or closed-ness of the circuit. To me it's a little too open. You're sort of wandering from space to space. It's almost like you can wander forever.

**AY:** This made it difficult with regards to the chronological hang, because there was the narrative that began where you would exit the elevator, and there was the narrative that began when you came inside from the outdoor terraces.

**DL:** Exactly. I felt that my experience of moving from top to bottom, floor to floor, made the chronology of twentieth century American art legible. Then on each individual floor, there were pockets that, as you mention, seemed to want to guide you in a specific way. But throughout, as in the sixth floor, which featured Pop Art and Minimalism, there were sequestered rooms, like the one devoted to RAW/WAR. And this light-drenched quality, I think, is such an interesting way to compare and contrast the Breuer building with this new space, because it's such
a prominent feature of the new space. In these terraced, sun-filled spaces, you feel naturally pulled in that direction, as the work that’s installed on those terraces also wants your attention.

**JPF**: There’s a lot of lip service given to free circulation. But who actually wants that? Who are these people, who are so sick of “chronological exhibitions”? I love them! I love them as an expert on the art I’m seeing, and I love them when I’m completely ignorant of the art I’m seeing. I am very pleased that the hang was so coherent chronologically, that it grouped things together by time and space.

**AY**: Right. I think that by moving chronologically in this way, the curators allowed the timeline to really open up and reveal its hidden crevices. We might think that a chronological hang in this instance would be equivalent to a hang according to the development of style, but those are, of course, two different histories that are usually mapped onto each other when we tell the history of art. So when you’re looking at any decade, obviously there are some art historical “trends” or dominant styles, but there’s also a visual culture of the political and the vernacular. There are artists who are not canonical who are creating posters, who are taking photographs for advertisements. We’re able to see, now, how we’ve mapped art history over the twentieth century, but also to see what gets forgotten or covered up.

**JPF**: Yeah, exactly.

**AY**: It’s also a question of whether the Whitney can tell the story of Modernism and a regional story of artistic development.

**JPF**: That’s a big question.

**AY**: Holland Cotter, in his review of the new Whitney, points out that the exhibition opens with a pair of Marsden Hartley paintings, which betray the influence—on an American artist—of what he saw in Berlin. The exhibition opens with the complex question, it seems, of American art’s relationship to European Modernism at large. Yet several works nearby tell a different, more local story, of America’s own “machine aesthetic,” and the impact of industry on the city and on the rural landscape. This really brought to light the competing ambitions of a museum whose collection overlaps with those of modern art museums like MoMA or the Tate, but which is restricted geographically, in this case to American art. Perhaps “defining America” can be the next topic. How can the Whitney tell a social history at the same time as it chronicles the development of Modernist and post-Modernist style, which is an inherently international history?

**JPF**: I’m not very concerned by the omnivorousness of the way they answer the question of what defines an American artist, as long as it doesn’t become
nationalist. Or about claiming, for example, that Lyonel Feininger is *either* a German artist or an American artist. It shouldn’t be a competition.

**DL:** That's another thing I noticed about the eighth floor; there were a number of European-born artists represented, who expanded their careers in the US and died in the US and therefore fall under this umbrella of American art.

**JPF:** But those artists remain less “controversial” as Americans than . . .

**AY:** Nam June Paik?

**JPF:** Paik is a great example! Paik, I think, is quite interesting, because he had a retrospective at the Whitney in 1982. That was an early moment for the Whitney to be saying that this Korean-born, Japanese- and German-trained artist was now an American! And there’s something to be said for that. As long as it doesn’t become about how great America is.

**AY:** I don’t think they have any interest in doing that. It seems, at least, from their new hang of the collection, that there is such an emphasis on how decidedly un-great America can be sometimes. This is reflected in the Whitney’s own institutional history, which has been progressive at times, as the curators are eager to remind us.

**JPF:** I wasn’t crazy about the way that they present their own history. It seemed unnecessarily self-aggrandizing. They do have a wall text which mentions some of their own exhibitions, which I think is legitimate, because this kind of exhibition history is inevitable in any big rehang like this. But they ended up suggesting that everybody who criticized their controversial shows, like the 1993 biennial or *Black Male* (1994), was simply uncomfortable talking about race. And this is just not true; not all the criticisms leveled against those shows were illegitimate. Roberta Smith, for example, had a very evenhanded review of the ’93 biennial.

**AY:** In that review, she also contemplated the changing relationship between politics and art in the midst of an enormous shift in contemporary art. That show really challenged the orthodoxy of what viewers were accustomed to seeing in museums. In hindsight, the Whitney had really embraced, against popular taste, art that was political, art that commented on social topics, art as protest.

**JPF:** Which was very much on view here, on every floor, and I did appreciate that.

**DL:** I was pleasantly surprised to see the number of women artists represented in the current hang. And again, this is maybe an obvious comment, but I did find it
fascinating that we see an enormous Lee Krasner hung opposite a relatively small Pollock.

**JPF:** That was one of those statement moments where the thesis was clear: “Sorry! Sorry! Here’s our giant Krasner!”

**DL:** I think that strategy was apparent throughout other groups.

**JPF:** Something that they did quite admirably on every floor was to combine the must-see “greatest hits” with works that they have rarely or never shown. Like the Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists, as well as some things I’d never heard of before. And they did so in a sensitive and thoughtful way that made those works shine. They had Cy Twombly next to Alma Thomas. Susan Rothenberg in the center of the wall with Neil Jenny and Philip Guston on either side! When would you ever see that?

**AY:** And artists who we think we know are now presented in different ways. When you bring up Guston, for example. I tried to count how many times I saw his work on different floors, in different groupings and contexts. He’s presented as an Abstract Expressionist, he’s presented in protest of Jim Crow–era lynchings and in solidarity with the civil rights struggle, and he’s presented alongside contemporary painters like Elizabeth Murray and Chuck Close!

**JPF:** Yeah, absolutely.

**AY:** It was clear from this installation that we really do a disservice to artists when we place their work into such strict art-historical categories. Artists develop and change, and may participate in many different stylistic and social movements.

**JPF:** I was thinking about exactly that when you mentioned some of the “pleasant surprises” of the chronological hang before. One of my favorite passages was the pairing of a Lee Bontecou with a Louise Nevelson, which first of all just looked fabulous together. For me, that was a great moment, because I’m accustomed to thinking of those as two completely separate generations: Abstract Expressionism, and then Post-Minimalism or whatever that is—Bontecou’s really doing her own thing. But the Nevelson is from ’59 and the Bontecou is from ’61. Those works are done almost at the same time. And they absolutely belong on a wall together. It’s a lovely thing to see.

**AY:** That was one of the sections—“Scotch Tape” on the fifth floor—that also made a great effort to bring out similar formal operations made in very different mediums. It was not a pre-packaged movement. They also presented reactions against the kind of consumerism on display in the Pop Art section directly adjacent to it, to show that these artists perceived the downside of the postwar
economic boom, of all the junk that was accumulating, all of the political strategies and secrets that were hidden behind our prosperity as the Cold War was developing. So it was cool to see these kinds of formal comparisons that link artists we don’t normally draw together, here connected in terms of their use of constructions and assemblages, but at the same time, also on this point of social reaction. Some of the spaces maybe did a better job of that than others, combining the stylistic and historical.

**JPF**: I thought that was done well. What did you both think, since we’re moving in that direction, of the Pop Art installation?

**DL**: My first thought was of, as you mentioned earlier, the “greatest hits.” In the Pop Art installation, of course, you have a couple of iconic Warhols, as well as a Rosenquist, and a lot of it has the sheen of advertising. That particular aspect is front and center. There’s the Oldenburg cigarettes, along with a Wesselman on the opposite wall. But I think there’s a pleasing visual collection going on, even if it’s just in the form of flattened images, the use of primary colors, bright colors. A lot of things fit together, even if it’s just in a formal way.

**AY**: Weren’t there also some surprises? For example, that day-glo painting by Peter Saul, which was right across from Romare Bearden and Yayoi Kusama. Those potentially fit our understanding of Pop Art but aren’t examples that would normally come to mind. They were responding to the everyday environment in ways that were a little bit radical, that departed from the surface engagement with advertisements and consumer culture that has come to dominate our textbook definition of Pop Art. The Whitney seemed to want to push the edge of what Pop is or was. And I thought that the Warhol works in particular were used in order to emphasize its multifarious nature.

**JPF**: That's a good point. I’m sure they have other Warhols they could have shown.

**AY**: Yes, and hanging *Before and After* right next to that Malcolm Bailey was provocative.

**DL**: That was an interesting juxtaposition.

**JPF**: That was an interesting juxtaposition, yeah. I don't know Bailey’s work, and I wondered: Is this really Pop?

**DL**: I had the same reaction.

**AY**: But the sight lines were on point in that gallery.
JPF: They were.

AY: Standing in front of the Peter Saul, with its fluorescent palette, you could see a Keith Sonnier neon sculpture to the left, which served as a kind of formal echo. But that was also the first time I spotted the Malcolm Bailey, which I hadn’t seen before. I was looking at this painting that was such a hallucinogenic and psychedelic image, referencing the Vietnam War and acts of sexual assault, some very heavy issues; and then I saw this somber, almost diagrammatic piece that also presented a troubling social critique, but in a completely opposite formal language.

JPF: You could also see George Segal from there, though he was kind of pushed off to a corner. I don’t want to be too critical about this, because it’s very easy for me to be too critical, but I did think that the Pop installation was, to a certain extent, a missed opportunity. It’s a great example, along with Abstract Expressionism, of a very New York-centric, very familiar, easily postage-stamped movement that has a standard story, and they troubled it a little bit, but not really as much as I think they could have. They showed a Marisol; the fact that they had Romare Bearden there was interesting; and, Kusama, as you said, Allison, was another very interesting choice. But almost all of those artists were part of Ann Temkin’s reinstallation of Pop Art a few years ago, after she became head of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA and reinstalled their permanent collection galleries. The Whitney galleries strike me as following her model, in which the permanent collection is installed as an exhibition, but instead of one big wall text and then a chat label for every work, each room has a short wall text that brings a lot of works together, and then just a few of those works get a longer chat label. I think it’s very effective—and I must admit, I would fall on my sword for Ann Temkin, I think she’s great. But I wasn’t seeing anything new developed from her new model of Pop. Having the Robert Bechtle there, having that one canvas of Photorealism there, made me think, Where is the rest of this? Photorealism is a great example of an American art movement that has been ignored by museums and scholarship, and I bet the Whitney has more work they’re not showing. Because it was so hot for a minute. I did feel that the Minimalism room was more effective in disrupting expectations. It was a lovely integration of Donald Judd with Alvin Loving, Thomas Downing, David Novros . . . Even John McCracken rarely gets to be part of the Minimalism conversation. And only a small Sol Lewitt, which was kind of an unusual piece for him. Another thing that’s really interesting is looking at the acquisition dates for all of these works, because some of it was quite telling.

AY: Were there any examples in particular?

JPF: Well, something they had there that I thought didn’t quite fit was Ann Truitt. I think Ann Truitt is a great artist, who frankly has not gotten a fair shake, not only
because she’s a woman but also because her work is rather unique. It looks like a lot of things without actually fitting into any of those things. But I happened to look at the wall label and notice that the Novros was acquired in ’69, the year that it was made, and that this Truitt sculpture from the ’60s was acquired in 2006. Obviously they are trying to make up for past mistakes here, but I do think it’s important to remember that the Whitney’s collection did have a lot of oversights, and that not all of those have been rectified. But as I said, there were some wonderful choices. I loved seeing Chamberlain in Abstract Expressionism. That gallery was not exactly revolutionary, but it was great to have a small Pollock dwarfed by a giant Krasner being given pride of place, as Dana pointed out. And while they have some great David Smiths, and I’m certainly glad that they were there, it was also nice that those works weren’t given center stage. Instead, at the center of the gallery, you saw Mark di Suvero—and why is he never talked about in terms of Abstract Expressionism?

**AY:** And they had it very obviously echoing the Kline.

**JPF:** Which was wonderful.

**AY:** It was a really great cue to highlight something that a lot of people are not taught to notice, so I thought that was a really important juxtaposition. And seeing those different sculptures in the context of the views of the city, outwards, I felt that the city changed when you saw it through the lens of Abstract Expressionism, and then again through the lens of Minimalism. In fact, I think the relationship between the building and the city is magnificent, and prompts some reflection, where relevant, between the city and the artworks themselves. The Whitney’s marketing banners and subway advertisements—which claim that American art is “at home” now in the Meatpacking—clearly encourage this line of thinking. It’s true, absolutely, for some of the collection; when I saw *Shapolsky et al.*, with one image after another of New York City buildings, suddenly I thought the exterior stairways that connect the Whitney’s outdoor terraces looked strikingly like fire escapes. There were several such moments in which the collection was in dialogue with the building and its views of the city, which, from this particular vantage point—where you can see both Gansevoort Market and the loading decks of Weischel Beef, one of the last surviving meat purveyors in the district—really emphasize the historical and architectural layers of New York.

**DL:** I think that’s an interesting point to think about, and furthermore it leads me to consider the ways in which the Whitney’s collection relates to New York as a city. Abstract Expressionism, for example, emerges around the time when the “capital” of modern art was essentially moving from Paris to New York, marking one of the first purely homegrown American movements.
**JPF:** That’s actually not quite fair. It is, rather, one of the first American movements to become popular and important in traditional art historical terms…Which leads me to another question: Is this an exhibition of American art, or of New York art?

**AY:** Well, this issue has certainly been raised in some reviews of the “New Whitney.” Christopher Knight, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, mentions the absence of Color Field painting and Light & Space, which is true. We don’t see Turrell, we don’t see many “Finish Fetish” works. It’s dangerous to dwell on omissions, but West Coast artists like Kienholz could have easily been included in the “Scotch Tape” gallery.

**JPF:** Kienholz is a surprising omission.

**AY:** In a sense, though, the Whitney is debuting a new space in New York City, where the museum has always been sited, and it can’t include absolutely everything. And the East Coast emphasis might also give some context to many of the postwar generation of artists migrating from Europe, most of them probably congregating in New York.

**JPF:** I hesitate to point out what was excluded because it seems unfair—of course you can’t include everything. And there were plenty of things even from New York that they didn’t include. Actually, I thought the complete absence of Fluxus was a little surprising.

**AY:** Although they did have that one John Cage…

**JPF:** Yes, and like you, I loved that “Scotch Tape” room, but the Cage had no business being there.

**AY:** I thought so, too.

**JPF:** It was completely irrelevant. It did occur to me that, in terms of Fluxus, they may simply not have anything. Because museums weren’t collecting Fluxus in the ’60s and ’70s when it was made. Then again, it’s also a legitimate curatorial choice. Overall I found myself thinking about what it means to be an American artist, and the museum’s clear effort to put all this diverse art in a context that is kind to it—in the sense of showing it to advantage. But it’s much easier for the Whitney to create that context with work from New York, or by an immigrant to New York, or even just a foreigner briefly visiting New York, than it is with regionalism. A friend of mine referred to some of those works on the seventh floor as “American folk art,” and we’re talking about artists who are formally trained.
AY: Like Hopper?

JPF: No, these were names that I don’t even know... The triptych with people working the land... This is exactly the stuff that is hard for people like us, who are professionally trained to not know anything about it, because so few people take it seriously. It isn’t even a criticism of the Whitney, really; I think it’s very hard to tell a story about that work in the context of the dominant story, the Europe-in-New York story.

AY: That’s a great point, Julia. Along those lines, I think the museum actually did a great job of broadening a story that we often tell mainly through photography. While painting and sculpture are usually the “dominant” mediums, with photography or ephemeral material supplementing those narratives, we actually know the New Deal in art primarily through the work of Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans. Now, suddenly, we see painters, and maybe to a lesser degree sculptors, who were responding to the same circumstances and set of issues, to life in the country. Again, it’s also the later Beat artists—mainly photographers—who capture scenes of rural America, and they were actually quite cosmopolitan artists merely traveling through. So it was great to see some of that “folk art,” if you will, hitherto unknown to many of us, and to see painting supporting photography.

JPF: I thought some of the most interesting, innovative, and meaningful curation was happening on that seventh floor. Starting with the brilliant move, very subtly done but very effective, to claim Hopper as an American Surrealist. It’s not my period, so perhaps it’s not as innovative as I think, but it makes so much sense. For a long time, in the old building, Hopper was relegated to a corner of the Whitney’s permanent installation, because they didn’t seem to find a way of putting him in context with the art they wanted to show. Almost pretending that he doesn’t exist.

AY: Or that he’s singular.

JPF: Yeah! Which is always a damning move. And putting Cornell and other American Surrealists in that room allows Hopper’s work—which we are accustomed to interpreting as completely realistic—to acquire a patina of strangeness that gives it a whole other dimension.

AY: A de Chirico kind of strangeness.

DL: Yes, exactly.

JPF: It made me like Hopper more than I ever have.
AY: The section that they called “Fighting With All Our Might,” which was where we encountered some really moving and troubling images of the Jim Crow era and the Great Depression, was stunning and stopped me in my tracks. I can't believe I've never encountered some of those works in a classroom before. It made me want to bring them into the classroom! I think that while we definitely are more comfortable with political art today than we were a few decades ago, we still need to make a case that socially engaged art can be visually poignant. To declare that it can be significant in its artistic merit as well. And I think that they were very cognizant in showing this.

JPF: If we’re going to make a case for a uniquely “American” art, then that art from the ’30s—that New Deal stuff that nobody likes—is great work, and such a strong political legacy that is sorely needed now.

AY: And it's so topical. It’s amazing that so much of this art resonates powerfully with struggles that are still before us, in terms of the economic and social disparity that America currently faces.

JPF: And the exhibition is a reminder that art is part of that.

AY: Art is absolutely part of that. Which is why it was striking, also, to find that the grouping called “Course of Empire,” where the exhibition culminated with the art of our current era, was almost exclusively political! As soon as you walk past the Paul Chan, you were in that room on the 5th floor seeing artists who were working with newspaper headlines and with photographs of 9/11 and Abu Ghraib, building a complex picture of our times. Which I thought was bold, because that’s very much not the only type of art we see today, but it’s what they decided to show.

DL: I've been thinking about those newspaper headlines, with Rashid Johnson, for example; I think that telling the contemporary story in that way also creates ties back to the chronology that we’ve just come down from on the upper floors, making that a useful way to present those works.

JPF: A meaningful way.

AY: I was struck by the Sam Durant piece, which reproduced a photograph of the May 1968 student protests. I thought, at first, that it might have been a more recent photograph, and then it turned out to be an echo of an earlier era.

JPF: It’s still to a certain degree innovative, and certainly difficult, to present work that we consider contemporary art as being historical in some way. And I think that was done beautifully. Again, I think Ann Temkin at MoMA was among the first curators to look at the ’80s and ’90s as if that work belonged to art history, as
if there was a perceptible continuity between the past and present, not a sharp line between “now” and “then.” I liked the way that younger artists were combined with current work by older modern “masters”—for example, there was an Ed Ruscha from 2004 in the same room as a Rachel Harrison from 2007.

AY: You get to see how Ruscha’s practice both has and has not changed.

JPF: And there were very sensitive, thoughtful presentations of political and identity art from the ’80s and ’90s. I thought it was very brave to spotlight Nan Goldin’s *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. For me, it almost became a metaphor for that whole half of the floor, in showing that this era is not ours anymore.

AY: That work in particular absorbed the frenetic energy of all of the very loud video works in the gallery that you emerge into from the elevator, but also reflected the elegiac, mournful quality of the gallery immediately adjacent to it, which presented so many sobering, poetic works themed around the AIDS crisis.

DL: Thinking again about that constellation of video works presented together, how did you feel about the ways in which the audio elements of the works permeated the galleries? I know that’s not unique to the Whitney, but I wonder how deliberate that kind of installation is.

JPF: I think there was even visual bleeding. This kind of slippage that allows you to move however you want through the galleries, I found it really disorienting. And it reminded me of what I like about Dia:Beacon, where these concerns were taken seriously. Robert Irwin was hired by Dia to redesign that building, and he did a beautiful job of helping visitors to orient themselves in an enormous, largely open space. For example, he chose different colors for interior versus exterior walls, and it’s not something you need to pick up on intentionally as you move through the space, but it helps orient you. Somehow you just always know where you are, and it feels good to be at Dia:Beacon, right? I had the opposite feeling at the Whitney. Even with the outdoor galleries, the city views didn’t help orient me. They built big walls in front of most windows, so I didn’t actually have any idea where the city was. It felt almost more like being at an art fair, moving from booth to booth, because there aren’t clear boundaries from one area to another.

AY: So you didn’t think it was seamless, between outdoors and indoors?

JPF: I didn’t find it at all seamless. And speaking of which, we’d be remiss if we didn’t talk a little bit about things like circulation in this beautiful new building. I’d say it’s objectively a disaster. It’s very confusing to find the stairs and the bathrooms, every passageway is always clogged, and the only defense I’ve heard from Whitney staff is that they didn’t expect so many visitors.
AY: That's why they moved downtown!

DL: And that’s the reason that the gallery spaces look the way that they do, and feel the way they do, because they’re meant to accommodate a certain volume of people. It’s surprising that the other essential spaces don’t.

JPF: You can’t make a big, new museum today without recognizing that what you’re doing is creating an attraction. You’re creating a spectacle. And you are now, to a certain extent, in the business of moving people.

DL: And how do you both feel about how the museum-as-spectacle relates to the new location in the Meatpacking District? Earlier, we touched on the fact that the museum is now nestled among designer shops and the High Line. My question is whether the Whitney is trying to embrace that part of its new location, and create a deliberate connection to the glossiness of those relatively new attractions, or if it’s trying to be something else.

AY: I think it’s part of why they left the Upper East Side. It’s too quiet, it's not trendy enough, it's not young enough. They must have been aware of joining in this “market” environment.

JPF: Yes, what’s interesting is that I’ve heard people at the Whitney talk about accessibility to groups that don’t get to see enough art, because the Upper East Side can feel fairly closed to outsiders. And yet, the old building was two blocks away from a major subway line, and it seems unlikely that school kids in Harlem are going to have an easier time getting to the new building.

AY: And getting through the cobblestones with a wheelchair would be extremely difficult.

JPF: By the way, they did not build a single bike rack, which is simply ridiculous. It’s a small point, but I find it incredibly annoying.

AY: It definitely feels like a leisure area, in that regard, somewhere to join tourists who are strolling around the neighborhood.

JPF: If the museum has really become—and this I mean as a serious question—primarily a perfect location for your selfie, is that someone’s fault? And if so, whose?

AY: I don’t know if it’s anybody’s fault. I think this is a sign of our times.

JPF: Well, I don’t know. A zeitgeist is not something that descends on us like a disease—
AY: Selfie sticks, however, might be. . . .

JPF: That's true. But museums have the power to encourage or resist certain trends. Some institutions find ways to engage visitors without the theme park flash, and others seem to encourage viewers to think that artworks aren't good for much more than selfies and themed merchandise.

DL: Right. I think that perhaps you’re rephrasing my question about whether the Whitney is resisting this or is complicit in it.

AY: Well, the views are so photogenic, I think the outdoor space is definitely designed with Instagram and selfies in mind. In the galleries, I took a lot of photographs in preparation for this discussion, and nobody stopped me.

JPF: Of course my impulse is to condemn the art selfie. But I try to escape that, because if this is the way that people can engage with art—if taking a picture with a work of art allows you some access to it—then I’m all in favor of that. We want people to come to art museums, we want everyone to feel welcome.

AY: And you don’t photograph every work, you photograph those that resonate with you or that you recognize.

JPF: Totally. It’s how many people learn to think through works of art. But outside, I noticed people mostly just looking, not using their cameras.

DL: There is something to be said for the truly spectacular views.

JPF: Which are brand new views.

DL: Exactly. And the public cannot access them from any other landmark in Manhattan, and the architecture seems to keep that in mind.

AY: That's very true. We can see all the layers of the city that have built up over time, how architecture has changed.

JPF: Speaking of how architecture has changed, what do you both think about the building itself, as a work of art?

DL: I think it's pretty successful. I happen to like the use of steel, for instance. I think the steel staircases that connect a number of the floors from the outside are a great choice. I believe other critics have commented on the fact that this use of steel is a structural choice as well as an aesthetic one, and in that sense, I appreciate it.
AY: I thought the exhibition spaces were quite beautiful; I love the pine floors, and the finishes are really nice. Light is always going to present some difficulties with artwork, so while I appreciate how light-filled the spaces are, I’m sure that it might place some restrictions on what can be displayed or for how long.

JPF: Not a lot of photography or works on paper.

AY: All things considered, I do think the new building is a welcome addition to the city. The new neighborhood brings it into a more cutting-edge space than it was in the Upper East Side. The collection looks beautiful, and it was great to see some new things, so I’m excited to see what else they have in their vault.
Yo soy Guadalupe

Josh T. Franco

Figure 1. Hector Sanchez altar for La Virgen de Guadalupe. Marfa, Texas, 1997. Photo: Nerin Kadribegovic.

Preparation:

This piece is meant to be spoken.

It was prompted by an invitation to the Ends of American Art Conference hosted by the Art History Department at Stanford University in November 2014. While senior scholars presented full-length papers, we graduate students were given the following parameters: one image, 5 minutes. The results were electric. My peers rose to the occasion with style and verve. Cheers to them and to the inventive organizers.
One senior art historian—not a conference participant—has since identified my performance as prosopopoeia. I hear him, but I disagree. Prosopopoeia names the ancient Greek concept of speaking as an object, a thing. Here, the thing is not the central action, not the locus from which the voice emanates. For communicability between materialists and art historians (all people who need and love our things), I offer the image of this plaster construction crafted in an attitude of utter devotion by a man and continuously sweated over by a family and pilgrims. But this is not the thing speaking. It is the transcribed voice of a goddess of the Americas. Not prosopopoeia, but inhabitation, presence, blessing. It is appropriate to light a candle (preferably red) before reading aloud and to blow out the candle following the last word.

Y ahorita, La Guadalupe:

Yo soy Guadalupe.
I am Guadalupe.

In one legend of my birth—my transformation 500 years ago into a goddess of the Americas—I spoke to a bishop through Juan Diego, a dark-skinned poor man.

Here I also speak in partnership with a brown-skinned boy, un hijo mio.

But we do not address a bishop today. Today, we speak to guardians of faith in something else, something called art. Their faith is in crisis.

From where I live in this plaster form, sheltered by this altered bathtub...this altered bathtub...mounted on rocks, I have come to know something of the art you guard. (This speaking boy loves it, too.)

How did I come to know?

Por que yo soy La Guadalupe de Marfa, Tejas. I am the Guadalupe of Marfa, Texas.

I first heard this place in the prayers of la familia Sanchez, appearing first to the father, Hector. (Why am I always revealing myself to men?) The Sanchez family lives in this house. They take care of me.

This boy who speaks has a grandfather. The grandfather was himself a boy in this yard.

I called this speaking boy back to this dirt-grass patch of ancestral land. I called him because I wanted to know more about this vecino, my neighbor.

First: What is his name? The boy gives two syllables:

“Don.” Y “Judd.”
I cannot believe that is all.
My own name goes on forever in comparison: Coatlicue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteotl-Tonantzin-Coatlaloquh-Morena-Guadalupe…

“But he’s not exactly your neighbor,” says the boy. “He died. About three years before you showed up here. But those are his things you look at all day. And all the people coming in and out of those gates are here because of him.”

“Oh,” I sound. I know what it’s like to have pilgrims. Mine come less now. I was more popular when I was new in town and living as a flicker in the trunk of this tree here. I was in the newspaper and everything.

El Vecino Judd’s pilgrims come every day. I watch them walk around his things. Those blocks are so tall. It must hurt their necks to look up. Some pilgrims fit inside them standing. The blocks are made of concrete, so similar to what makes me in this form.

I watch the blocks change from almost white to dark gray every day. Sometimes red, when the sun is red, but then everything is red, even the yellow grass.

The blocks sit so still. They make shadows that split the light around them sharply. Every edge a sundial.

At night they are lit by the moon. The sky is clear most nights in this desert. The boy tells me El Vecino Judd loved natural light. He would never flip a switch if he didn’t have to. Did he know that the natural light at night comes from my daughter Coyolxuaqui? I don’t look upwards so much (the prayers at my feet keep me busy), but I know she’s there by her light.

People leave my neighbor’s place with all kinds of faces. Some are so happy! Like they’ve never seen such things with their eyes, but they already had in their hearts. Plenty leave angry, muttering under their breath, “That is not art…” They all leave different than when they entered.

I wonder if people think I am art? People are led to me by their spirit, not necessarily their eyes (though much effort was given to make me beautiful, and I thank the Sanchez family for that). The boy read me a passage once, some words of El Vecino Judd’s, all about things like the blocks and the spirit world. I remember a little bit:

“…All forms are spiritual…Art must…be general, but at the same time out of the ordinary….”

I don’t think I am very ordinary, so I must be art? But perhaps I am not general enough. Maybe you can tell me, guardians. I am curious, if not terribly concerned. Let’s let some nights pass. I am here for a while, cemented and sun-baked in place.

I notice something: The other pilgrims leave no ofrendas! No talismans for mi Vecino. No food. No little tin drawings. Not even a little pile of rocks. They do take: They take pictures.
Are they pilgrims if they leave nothing? Ofrendas remind me what people pray for: the little girl a flower for her lost cat; the old man a cigarette’s worth of tobacco for a job. What kind of blessings do El Vecino Judd’s pilgrims ask?

But I guess he’s not there to receive prayers. The boy says he didn’t really believe like that, he thinks, anyway. But who really knows? Mi Vecino’s body resides in a simple pine box further out in the desert. Like the furniture in his casitas, the pine box was made by those who knew him well. Putting things together like this—with materials from nearby and all by hand and learning as you go…El Vecino Judd’s daughter calls it “DIY.” I call it “rasquache.” Rasquachismo built my own little bathtub-house.

So my neighbor is gone, and we will never meet. In town are just his things. Not “just....” They are interesting things. They give me a lot to think about every day.

REFERENCES


*Allen’s research brought out the otherwise unpublished Dutch interview in which Judd discusses spirituality and states, “All forms are spiritual....”
Colors,
Lines,
Numbers,
Symbols,
Shapes,
and Images

Iman Issa
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