

What Is Your Evacuation Plan?

Of the various universalizing clichés we might append to artistic production, evacuation is probably one of the least romantic. It comes not only with the inherited memory of so many forced movements, but also the process of bodily cleansing which one prefers to think of as little as possible. But as the relationship of art production to the space (both bodily and geographical) in which it is produced becomes more pronounced in the viscera of the ever-expanding American city, perhaps it is worth considering the relationship between the two:

-1. Egological. Art is the evacuation of the subject. Or, more commonly stated, art is the expression of the artist’s spontaneous mind (Romanticism, etc.)

-2. Sociological. Art is the representation of evacuation. Or, art is the analysis of the social conditions which enable some to possess and some to be dispossessed, i.e., evacuated (Brecht, Althusser, etc.)

-3. Scatological. Art is evacuation. Or, art is the removal of bile and the humours (Aristotle, Serrano, Ofili, etc.)

-4. Eschatological. Art is the evacuation of the human. Or, art is the (failed) elevation of the Gods and the beyond (Plato, Rafael, etc.)

-5. Political. Art is the evacuation of other subjects. Or, when the artists move in, the rent goes up, and the neighborhood moves out (Deutsche, Smith, etc.)

We will not look at all these here (certainly not the eschatological and hopefully not the scatological). But in a city with a burgeoning art scene like Philadelphia, the thematic question of art and its relationship to housing is bound to be pressed, and if only because artists, in ways very similar and very different than the working class, are always in the process of themselves being evacuated as higher rents drive a need for new places to work, eat and live.



Indeed, whatever difficulties may exist in the space between art and gentrification, it does not mean that spaces in the city are not trying to critically confront and come to terms with these problems. A stellar example was provided by the Slought Foundation this past summer, with their “Into the Open” exhibit and series of events. Into the Open showcased a history of architectural projects designed to either work within available government resources or to fill in the gap between the public and its officials.

Into the Open existed precisely at the point between art as sociological and political, while retaining vestiges of design and expression. There was, for example, the Spatial Information Design Lab’s (SIDL) beautifully rendered “Million Dollar Blocks Project,” which spoke to the evacuation of millions of urban black men from their homes and into prisons. The SIDL found an astonishing number of blocks (really one is itself astonishing) where the state was spending over \$1,000,000 a year to keep former residents in prison, while scarcely a dollar of funding for social programs was present in the community. Slought’s show also displayed a number of optimistic and forward-looking projects, such as the reconstruction of Greensburg, Kansas. Greensburg was nearly destroyed by a tornado in 2007, and through the sharp work of both local government

and non-profits, the citizens restored their homes and buildings at the level of LEED-platinum design. Unlike the case of New Orleans, Greensburg showed the potential for speedy, effective recovery after mass evacuation.

While Slought thus sought to reconfigure the space of the gallery to include such projects, a more subtle, more traditional, and perhaps more accidental intervention was staged this past week (September 16th) at a photography gallery in Philadelphia’s first neighborhood touch by urban renewal in the 80s: Gallery 339 in Rittenhouse Square. The exhibit of all Philadelphia-based photographers found the themes of concern highlighted by the work of Nadine Rovner. Rovner’s set of five photographs explored the relationship between interiors and exteriors, reality and reflections, and, if I may be so appropriative, housing and its discontents.

In the photograph whose composition I liked least of the five but whose details most strongly spoke to me, Rovner’s apparently suburban New Jersey shot Someone Knows, figures a young woman leaning discontentedly on a rusting American car parked in a driveway. The bumper sticker on the right of the car has a small nuclear symbol and the words, “What Is Your Evacuation Plan?” In these times, the Cold War words ring as hollow as the woman’s malaise.

Yet, at the same time, they speak profoundly to the totality of the contemporary situation, where a series of conflicting evacuation plans undergirds the unfurling art system: the evacuation of people from their housing; the (feared) evacuation of criticality from the art object; the evacuation of one space after another and the concomitant planning for the next site of reconstruction. It is almost as if a nuclear holocaust has already happened, and we live in a condition of such structural precarity that planning itself becomes the only security.

This is, at least, one way to read several of Rovner’s other images, where figures look out into unknown and unwelcoming spaces in moments of transition. In One at a Time, for example, a young girl dressed as little red riding hood blows off the seeds of an aged dandelion as, no doubt, the wolf who has told her to pick the flowers goes off to eat her grandmother. Few other stories in the Grimm oeuvre testify as much to the necessity of the evacuation plan: the wolf’s for the home and the clothing; the hunter’s for the wolf’s belly.

Just next to Someone Knows we find All the While, a photographic portrait of a woman seated on a bed as she puts on her blouse. Her look is off into the distance, and I think I recognize in her confounded disinterest the eyes of the farmer on the lower terrace in Brueghel’s The Fall of Icarus – which is, of course, the story of one of the greatest failed evacuations in the history of narrative. But though I see this in her gaze, it simply cannot be, for in this indoor scene there can be no man falling from the heavens to perplex the woman. One is left to wonder whether her countenance thus presages a desire for an evacuation that will not come, an outside that will never appear, or if it is simply a glance, an unaffected look into the distance as she prepares for the day to come.

If I might, unfairly, read this ambiguous gaze allegorically, then I would do so in response to this generic condition of evacuation, and of the unsure stance art takes in its movement towards the evacuation of others, as it, “all the while,” prepares for its next departure as soon as the rent rises, as soon as the scene runs cold, or as soon as money is in fact made. Are we on the precipice of a fall? Or are we looking for a fall when, in fact, all there is is the quotidian? Though, of course, as a critic, my evacuation plan remains simple: see how someone else decides to do it, and then point out how they did it wrong.

-Avi Alpert