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machete

Margin of Utility

The purpose of this column is to explore the aesthetic frame of politics in the broad Greek sense of the term, meaning the structures of perception and discourse that construct subconscious worldviews organizing and orchestrating the realm of political possibility. In this inaugural issue, I propose to examine the discursive nexus acting as the lingua franca of the contemporary political imaginary in order to dismantle five key terms acting as so many lynchpins in the emblematic image of our times as a globalized world in which democracy is battling the evil forces of terrorism in order to spread freedom and prosperity throughout the world.

Globalization

The historical emergence of this monolithic concept can be traced back to the era around the fall of the Berlin wall. With the symbolic “end of the socialist alternative,” it galvanized a new world image of post-Cold War harmony succinctly summed up by Margret Thatcher’s claim regarding the “popular crusade of capitalism”: TINA (There Is No Alternative). Such a prognosis regarding what Francis Fukuyama has called the end of history should be readily recognizable to all of those familiar with the Marxist tradition. Indeed, Marxism, at least in its vulgar forms, was “refuted by history” precisely because of its crude economic determinism and its teleological conception of history in which there “was no alternative” to the revolution. It is in this light that we can begin to see the extent to which the master-concept globalization plays the role of a positive conceptual logo that has actually rebranded vulgar Marxist economism and teleology in order to sell a new world image under the broad heading of a marketable euphemism. The term itself



FISCHER’S ‘DEATH 2+3+’

On August 2 there closed a curated exhibition by Ryan Trecartin at Vox Populi gallery upon which Ludwig Fischer imposed “Death 2+3+.” So far as I know, it received no critical reviews and was hardly noticed by the public or much of the professional art world. This was regrettable because it was an event of considerable importance.

It seemed at first surprising that it was so little noticed, for Fischer has been well known some years now for his “nefarious conceptual dealings” and “corrosive rants,” both as an exceptionally original artist and for his unseemly pedigree. Perhaps it was the bad weather that dogged his showing, perhaps it was the holiday season, but one has strong suspicions that it may also have been part of the apparatus of the “deep freeze” that so frequently attends the early years of a radical and sometimes difficult art.

This most recent of Mr. Fischer’s impositions generated one of the most densely sustained aesthetic ideas that has been come upon in some time. An opiate tranquility threatened the whole affair, engulfed by silence, marred by touches of unexpected excitement, causing stupefaction, even indifference.

Modern Labyrinth

This was not, however, fortuitous. It was, I should judge, induced by the plan and materials of the idea. “Death 2+3+” was a modern labyrinth of narrow cerebral passageways constructed of punctuations, insertions, and repeated burglaries. A commodity, cut wood, vinyl, white paper, an art forum, a printer, ink, an email account and a blog, not to mention a name established an immaterial circuit leading into and out of the exhibition like a crypt (catacomb). Intestinally wound, crass and refined, almost Manichean in its lack of subtlety, which accompanies the imposition of a NAME, which tenuously charts a course between the fragmentary parts. Then the object, less an object than a nodal point for a system of exchange relations, a shrine haunted by a dead god. It is indeed easier to erect a shrine than bring a god down to haunt it.

The dissolution of the object into its context here was unforgettable. Its temporal place within the exhibition unclear, before and after, inside and out a blur... beautiful in that discarded sense of the word, bestowing upon the visitor a pleasant, unsought “grace” of the sleepwalker, blissfully unaware of its hidden machinations. It was startling too, because it was hard to believe that such rubbish was capable

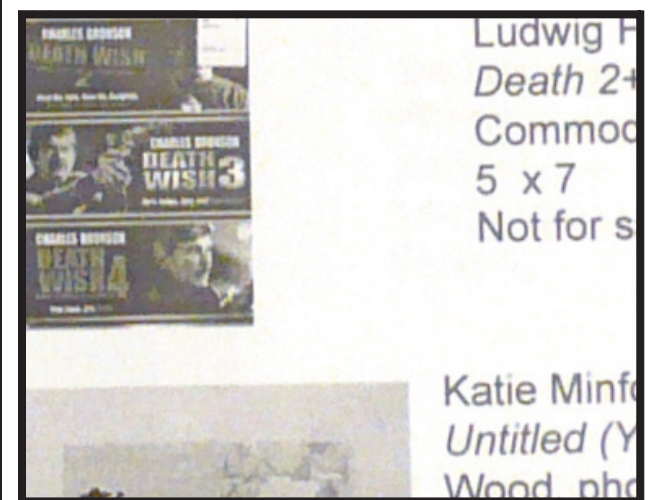
of evoking such a state of mutinous attentiveness and contemplation; immediate, topical, yet suspending time to the point of the untimely...

Four Tiers

In the virtual center of this sanctum a piece of writing, materially inscribed with the aid of an “altar,” an altar, on which was placed one of the most beautiful objects to grace the marketplace, a dvd which naturally asked to be watched, a betoken of a wish, faintly stimulating the memory of an old tale born from the destitution of the 1980s. And all the while the question who and why hung in the air like a torn banner repeating the two words “Ludwig” and “Fischer.” A CV obliterated with the geometrical tropes of a bygone age, an artist statement clear as day, a performative outburst, aggressive, indifferent, courting ridicule. A stranger.

One stayed there for a while, quietly enjoying this peaceful state, and then returned as one had come, seeing everything in reverse. A cycle of sorts was complete.

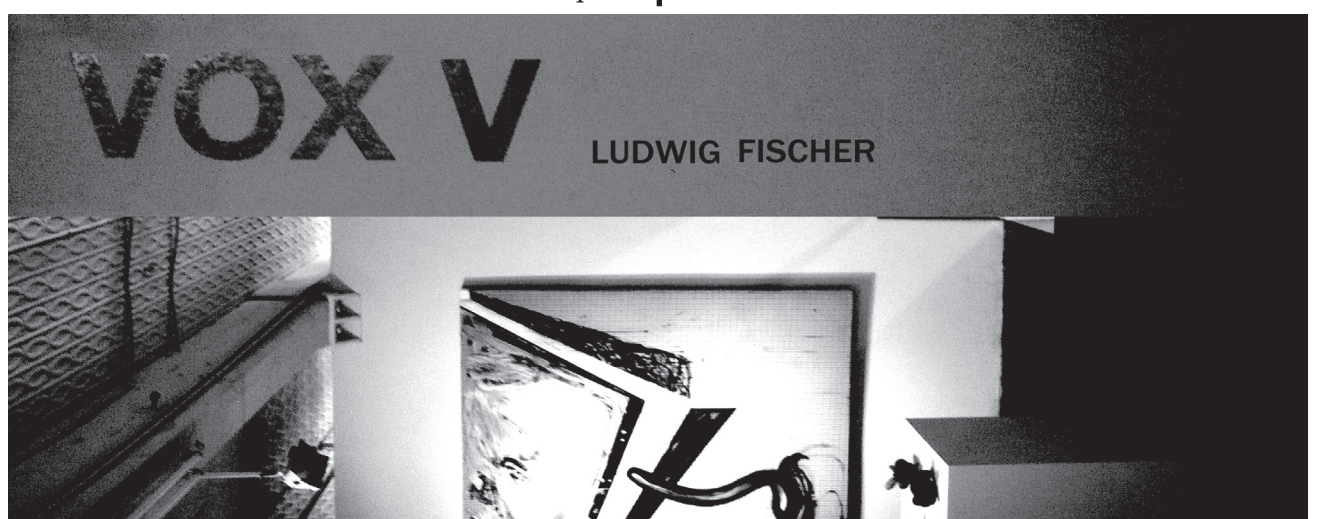
Admittedly, Mr. Fischer’s art poses problems. The exhibition is now dismantled, its materials have been carted away by the junkman, and it will not be seen again and one has difficulty discerning where the work resides. If its vocabulary is not unfamiliar, its notions are unfashionable. It will not remain to be judged at a later, more knowledgeable year. Its life has past, and only memory can carry it into the future.



Instantaneous and Dramatic

Yet I believe Ludwig Fischer’s art is not of itself hard to grasp, right now. On the contrary, its impact is instantaneous and dramatic. It is an art both of high seriousness and of emotional breadth. What does present a problem is its apparent relation to an established cultural tradition deemed morose. One no longer doubts whether this is art, but a distrust and fear of such expressions remains, as though they were subtly calling upon death itself. One cannot comprehend an attitude which bluntly embraces something with all the exclusions that such a position necessitates. Perishable materials, perishable forms, perishable genius; chance, change—all conspire to damn this work and dissolve our values. Far beyond “Death 2+3+”’s actual content and inhumanity stands Fischer’s inadvertent quarrel with all the vapid glories, qualities and eternities which we think are History.

-Paul Kersey, Los Angeles, California



Archeology of Cinema at Vox Populi

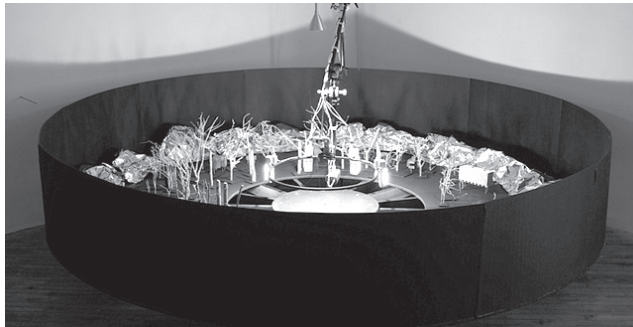
Amongst the potpourri of assorted artistic attempts at innovation, hip euphoria, bar-style virility—as well as the subtle humorous traces and small instances of refreshing displacement in the corners of its back rooms—two pieces resonate in the most recent exhibit at Vox Populi. Intriguing undercurrents curiously link them together as differing attempts to return to the nascent state of cinema in an archeological exploration of the relationship between nature and culture.



Hiraki Sawa's *Eight Minutes* presents the viewer with a series of vignettes juxtaposing serene, abandoned domestic spaces with the uncanny appearance of miniature instances of the natural world: shrubs and trees that act as the decor for a persistent parade of tiny goats. This contrast between nature and culture exhibits the shrunk traces of vegetable and animal life encroaching on the aseptic spaces of household appliances as the domestic is oddly re-colonized by an organic world of feral goats and traces of their natural milieu. Indeed, the domestic spaces themselves are transformed into microcosmic ecosystems haunted by the constant migration of animals headed to an unknown destination. These mesmerizing black and white défilés create a more or less intoxicating phantasmagoria as the untamed forces of nature transfigure the intimate corners of civilization into an aquarium of natural life. The surreal change in spatial scale and apparent critique of the artificiality of culture recall Luis Buñuel's magisterial reconfigurations of space-time and livid critique of the discontents of civilization in *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L'âge d'or* (1930). Yet, the precise orientation of Sawa's practice remains—perhaps charmingly—unclear. His resuscitation of surrealist motifs and preoccupations do not appear to bring with it the critique of repressive society found in Buñuel and Dali, and yet he does seem to be commenting—at least abstractly—on the exclusion of nature from civilization and the former's power of “re-possession.” As the artist's work continues to evolve, the precise nature of this relationship will hopefully be given the same crisp clarity of some of his images. In addition to echoing early cinematic experiments, *Eight Minutes* also recycles Eadweard Muybridge's pre-cinematic studies of movement that were so important for the development of film. The near constant stability of the camera and frame, animated by the ambulatory movements of migration, successfully resuscitates the magical power of film to reproduce a four-dimensional reality by adding time to the photographic image (thereby taking what André Bazin once called the “mummy complex” to the point of embalming time itself). However, the appearance of goats as the animal of choice is left lingering and undetermined. Is this simply to resist what early members of the Frankfurt School would have called the rampant rationalization of civilization? Is it due to the symbolic quality of goats as diabolical animals? Is this a subtle reference to the children's book, *My Pet Goat* (which George W. Bush happened to be reading with an elementary school class when he was informed that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center)? There are many insightful moments, captivating images and a crisp sense of refinement in *Eight Minutes*, but there are also undetermined

elements that leave the spectator wondering if they were intentional, or if the project could migrate to yet a deeper level of insightful production.

Brent Wahl's *Arrivals and Departures* also invites the spectator to return to the nascent state of cinema in order to explore the relationship between nature and culture. His slowly rotating quarter cylinder is a partial recreation of a Zoëtrope, a mechanism often fore-grounded as an important predecessor to film. However, Wahl's Zoëtrope is inhabited by a three-dimensional assortment of aluminum foil forms (including barracks, miniature trees and Le Corbusier's famous vision of communal living), and is



overseen by a surveillance camera that projects images of the tiny tinsel town and landscape on the opposite wall to the soundtrack of tropical birds and distant battle. Weaving together architecture, sculpture, sound montage, video art and cinema in a compelling composition of media, Wahl's piece calls to mind the work of Alain Fleischer, although it lacks the visual richness of the latter's saturated environments. Like Fleischer, he also adds to his installation an implicit philosophical narrative by partially mirroring the story of Plato's Cave (in which prisoners in a dark cavern watch the projection of shadowy images whose origin they cannot see, and which they come to mistake for reality). His skillful orchestration of diverse media suggests a circular History (the turns of the Zoëtrope) marked by a repetitive battle between the violent forces of humanity (military bunkers, the sound of battle) and the bucolic qualities of forests and tropical birds. Le Corbusier's attempt to architecturally harmonize the life-world of human beings appears to interrupt this strong opposition and suggest one of two things:

- either art can intervene to diffuse the incendiary relationship between the violence of humanity and the peaceful serenity of the natural world
- or art can not intervene successfully and Le Corbusier's project—with its reputed failure—confirms this inability.

It is unclear where the artist stands on this issue. It is worth noting, moreover, that the representation of the natural world is itself artificially produced out of glitter and recordings, suggesting that perhaps nature is always already colonized by the manipulative powers of homo sapiens, and that the pastoral narrative of a possible escape from civilization is an idyllic myth tantamount to the images of Plato's Cave. Moreover, since the source of these images is presented to the spectator (unlike Plato's prisoners), it is perhaps the case (Wahl does not give us enough to know with certainty) that the installation is ultimately suggesting that it is the repetitive loop of imaginary, artificial forms—i.e. our cultural inculcation through the repetition of imaginary narratives—that create our vision of History as a simple battle between nature and civilization.

This is not insipid work. Archeologically exploring pre-cinematic experiments to draw out the threads of the complex relationship between nature and culture, both of these pieces show the potential of artists capable of captivating the spectator and engaging the viewer both aesthetically and intellectually. They illustrate the extent to which the archeological reinvention of the past can paradoxically be one of the most productive ways for moving into the future.

- Theodore Tucker

immediately conjures up an image of sophisticated, civilized and progressive worldliness, complete with the background music of the 1985 multicultural hit single “We Are the World!” It is a welcome antidote to any of the nefarious connotations linked to a neo-liberal economy that has sabotaged social welfare, extended a plutocratic empire throughout the entire world, and drastically increased the gap between the rich and the poor.

Democracy

The contemporary use of the term democracy is not unrelated to the worldview associated with globalization. Through a repetitive use of analogical reasoning, it has often been suggested that the liberalization of markets equals the emancipation of people (who are then free to choose the products sold on the open market, including candidates auctioned off through costly campaigns), or even that a free market produces a free people due to a natural synchronicity between economics and poli



tics. However, this connection is based on a simplistic linguistic analogy, and it is ultimately founded on nothing more than free association. If we are not content with this pop psychology that receives so much airtime thanks to the mass media, we would do well to consult Karl Polanyi's powerful classic *The Great Transformation*, in which

he provides a detailed historical account showing that “Laissez-faire was planned; planning was not.”

Terrorism

With the withdrawal of the Cold War opposition between democracy and communism, a new enemy was required in order to clearly frame world politics in terms of the colossal battle between the forces of good and evil. Democracy, as a value-laden concept largely devoid of analytic purchase on reality, continued to carry the “torch of freedom”—whose conflagrations have kept flames burning around the world—and needed a night by which it could prove its illumination. “9/11” provided the solution (not to be confused with Latin America’s September 11th, when in 1973 the United States assisted Augusto Pinochet’s coup d’état against the democratically elected government in Chile). Now the opposition should be clear: we mobilize the most sophisticated military industrial complex in the world to bring the flame of freedom—the freedom of enterprise, including military contractors, oil companies, forced privatization, etc.—to burn in Iraq (our former ally in the Iran/Iraq war), Afghanistan (where Osama bin Laden and his associates had been trained by the C.I.A.) and elsewhere; they lurk in the shadows of the nefarious organization “Al-Qaeda” that Jason Burke has convincingly argued largely disappeared with the death of the suicide pilots on September 11th, 2001. We release into the streets of Miami (on April 19th, 2007, the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing) Luis Posada Carriles, a convicted terrorist for the only midair bombing of a civilian airline in the Western hemisphere (Cubana Airlines flight 455 in 1976); they dare to accuse us of not respecting democracy and human rights when we

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

Putting on the Frock: Jeff Wall's Talk at the PMA

Jeff Wall's inaugural lecture at the 1st Annual Anne d'Harnoncourt Memorial Symposium at the PMA marked another step in a retreat from his exacting attempt to come to grips theoretically and artistically with the void opened in the late 70s by the crisis of the neo-avant-garde and by the failure of conceptualism's attempt to "write out" the work of art. For the reader familiar with Jeff Wall's attempt in the early 80s to forge an artistic position whose historical viability consisted in neither ignoring, accepting nor jettisoning the critical radicality of conceptualism's cult of negation will no doubt find his recent attempt to define the criticality of his work as "a militant exploration of the legitimacy of tradition" a tad disappointing if not downright repugnant. Wall's struggle to articulate this artistic position was evident in his conflicted attempt to bind his interests in the great works of the past—the masterworks of the museum—to a keen sensitivity to the importance of ideological critique. The new stance articulated in Wall's lecture effaces the importance of critique in favor of the authority of tradition.



The retreat, if I may be permitted to put the point polemically, takes the form of a kind of Neo-Greenbergianism in which, through a tortuous theoretical trajectory whose logic I cannot here trace, Wall claims to have resolved the conflicts that cleaved his earlier work and initiated his turn to the light-box. This resolution now allows him to return to a notion of art based on a concept of "aesthetic pleasure" rendered more complex, but by no means ineffectual, by its critical demolition by the avant-garde. Given that his project now attempts to revitalize a conception of artistic practice dependent upon the claim to art's autonomy vis-à-vis social and historical determinants, the Duchampian legacy of the Ready-made doubtless provides the greatest challenge to the legitimacy of Wall's artistic project. Hence the suspect character of Wall's thesis concerning the historical importance of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*.

In all brevity, Wall's thesis essentially claimed that the function of *Étant donnés* as Duchamp's second masterwork (the first being the Large Glass) served to restore the historical viability of the masterwork

as such, whose legitimacy the Ready-made had jeopardized. Strategically, Wall's central thesis must be read as a brilliant tactical gesture whose consequences effectively neutralize Duchamp's critical legacy and the exemplary role he plays for the neo-avant-garde. By reading *Étant donnés* as the definitive overcoming of the deleterious and corrosive effects of the Ready-made on the artwork's autonomy from social, institutional, historical and economic forces, Wall has effectively resituated his own practice as an historical heir to Duchamp's own restoration, that is, after the Ready-made, of the legitimacy and authoritative status of the tradition of masterworks. Wall can thus acknowledge the Ready-made's, and indirectly the neo-avant-garde's, historical importance without grappling with their essential problematic, which according to Duchamp's own authority has been rendered moot, a matter of scholarly interest but no longer a viable artistic position.

Acute intelligence put to a perfidious end is of course nothing new. However, Wall's case is particularly odious in my view because of the continued vitality of his initial struggle to articulate a critical artistic position that neither accepted the cynical defeatism or abject melancholia that seems to plague those practices that identify criticality with negativism tout court, nor the wholly

reactive artistic position that became dominant during the last market swell and that allows the market to provide a "benevolent" umbrella to all and sundry. Wall's previous attempt to question the assumptions upon which conceptualism labored prefigures Jacques Rancière's recent attempts to rethink the very concept of modernity outside the rather wooden and hackneyed identification of representation and figuration. For Wall's early attempts to recast the problem of modernity in distinctly Baudelairian terms (the painter of modern life), viewing the present less as a rupture with the past than as an occasion to rethink the relation to the past, remains a vital site of contestation for those invested in

thinking the present. Yet, the astuteness with which Wall charted the artistic conjuncture in the 1980s with all its productive tensions and contradictions has apparently dissolved into a discourse that can only be called reactionary.

This does not by any means necessitate joining the chorus of those who see the museum and various other institutions as nothing other than mausoleums for urbane judgment. However, it seems particularly important in the critical desuetude of our present to remain faithful to the enduring importance of the Duchampian legacy of the Ready-made. Duchamp's continued importance for the art of this city—which has so rarely heeded his exemplary radicality—lies in "his impulse," to appropriate words that Duchamp himself reserved for Picabia, "to defrock himself, to remain a nonbeliever in those divinities that are too lightly created for social needs."

-Alexi Kukuljevic

establish a network of secret prisons, illegal rendition and a torture regime to protect ourselves and our freedom from "the terrorists."

Freedom

The comedian Bill Hicks formulated the slogan of our era with surprising concision and logical coherence: "You are



free to do whatever we tell you!" And what we tell you first and foremost is that "you are free!": free to choose the private health insurance plan that you cannot afford in the first place, free to pick candidates preselected by the advertising machine of campaign financing, free to choose—if you're fortunate—between an array of jobs below a living wage, free to watch your home be foreclosed on as your tax dollars are funneled into the coffers of those responsible for the foreclosure, free to define your identity by adorning yourself with an endlessly renewable and disposable assortment of personalized products made by the invisible sweatshop labor of the "globalized" world (as in Honduras, where the recent neo-liberal coup d'état has been supported by the apparel industry—including Russell, Fruit of the Loom and Hanes—, which is now free to lower the minimum wage after the forceful removal of President Zelaya), free to shop in depleted urban sinkholes filled with malls and fast food restaurants, free to eat any assortment of processed or organically modified food-like substances, free to enjoy a chemically saturated environment in which the natural world is sold on the open market and occasionally

preserved as a trite tourist attraction, free to think that others are guaranteeing your freedom by making sure your choices are in their own best interest...

Economic Prosperity

The “financial crisis” a year ago appeared to arrive with the catastrophic fury of a natural disaster: from unknown or unfathomable depths, the cherished system of free enterprise was suddenly on the brink of a complete disaster and required a swift intervention comparable to all of the political and juridical changes after the attacks that “came from nowhere” on Sept. 11th, 2001.

Just as exceptional measures were necessary for the “War on Terror,” extraordinary acts were required to save banks that were “too big to fail”: the government, with the stalwart support of many former employees of Goldman Sachs and staunch



deregulatory Clintonites, had to step in and bail them out. The “free market” system required governmental intervention—again recalling Polanyi’s masterful analysis—and the rapid redistribution of tax dollars to the wealthiest percentages of the population. To keep this

Tim Rollins + KOS @ the ICA

Back in the 80’s, deeply entangled within the thriving Lower East side art community Tim Rollins co-founded the overtly political collaborative team Group Material. This coalition of artists counted within its ranks notable individuals such as Felix Gonzales-Torres and Julie Ault. Reflecting upon the group Rollins states that ‘we organized exhibitions that weren’t about works of individual artists or groups, but addressed social themes and subjects like alienation, consumerism, fashion, music, and gender.’ Within the ferment of this moment Rollins established the Art and Knowledge Workshop in ’83 at a local community center. Out of this workshop the collaborative project “Kids of Survival” was created.

The “Kids of Survival” program took a two-pronged approach toward reaching educationally-challenged and at-risk students. Rollins simultaneously encouraged his students to read and gave them a much-needed means of personal expression by assigning them projects in which they created paintings based on narratives of authors such as Franz Kafka’s *Amerika* and Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Rollins was associated with Group Material in a ruggedly fairytale-like time when critical theory and philosophy were seen as complimentary, or even crucial for the reception and production of visual art. Having participated in many critical and altruistic projects within that moment of history, Rollins’ work and motives appear to be sacrosanct. To criticize these situated artistic procedures from the perspective of our current market driven and celebrity dazzled art world seems out of line. Tim, we’re on the same team right?

.....
Skulking through the opening of the Tim Rollins + KOS historical survey exhibition at the ICA, I felt the pressure to speak only with a hushed voice and scan the room with downcast eyes. The galleries had the sad and mournful tone of an unintentional wake. It seemed like a wake for an undead author.

Collaboration within the field of visual art has the potential to explode an artist’s centralized sign-identity that’s been formed and reinforced through a notion of singular authorship. The thing that has always bothered me about Tim Rollins + KOS is how Rollins may force the identities of his students to collapse by renaming them of the Kids of Survival, while Rollins retains his own name recognition and singularity. Have KOS not earned the right to claim full partnership in their collaborative projects? Do the students only win back their names after graduating from art school?

What kind of collaborative model is Rollins deploying with his choice of nomenclature? Roberta Smith states that ‘their approach upsets the myth of the isolated artistic genius prevalent since the Renaissance.’ This claim

makes sense when considering Rollins’ work with Group Material where the name of the collaborative team blended the authorship roles of the participating artists. Their reasons for this blending of identities was that they ‘were put off by the competitive art system in which an individual usually had to develop a signature voice’ and that they ‘were not so interested in promoting individual members or naming [themselves] very precisely.’ The participants of Group Material performed authorial seppuku.

The idea and act of killing the author drains the cultural text of any biographical inflections and insights into those who initially compose the work of art. The author’s deeds and misdeeds become irrelevant. The

text is cut from the moorings of the ‘isolated artistic genius,’ and sent out into the indeterminate sea of free-floating signifiers and textual equivalence. This stripping of the work from its biographical crutch is anti-patriarchal, as well as slowing the wheels of an art market that attributes value based on the signature style of an ‘isolated artist.’

Group Material changed course due to what I’m assuming was the result of the pressure from a field that quietly insists on individualist careerism. Julie Ault states that:

In 1985 with, again, Americana at the Whitney, we established that the Group was not necessarily made up of everyone who came in for a project or participated in an exhibition. We identified the core collaborative that conceived and organized the projects: me, Doug, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins. Thereafter, we listed who composed.

By listing the names of those who composed, they surrendered their assault on the ‘myth of the isolated artistic genius,’ thus admitting that they were merely a coalition of re-animated authors.

Within the projects that Rollins works on with KOS, Rollins takes the position of a living author with all of the advantages to be gained from the competitive art system that rewards the conventional ‘signature voice’. Curiously, Rollins kills the authorship of his students by blending their identities and representing them only as a group of unnamed and decentered subjects.

When the author is dead, the original writing of the text becomes secondary. The notion of active reading becomes fore-grounded. Active reading occurs when the life experiences and knowledge bases of the readers shape the messages that are received from a text. The textual strategies that Rollins deploys with KOS can be seen as the active reading of dead authors.

Their process of active reading is what they call ‘jammin.’ Jammin occurs when ‘Rollins or one of the students reads aloud from the selected text while the other members draw and relate the stories to their own experiences.’ These drawings are assembled and adhered in a grid formation onto canvases, and then delivered to an art gallery for collectors to collect.

Readings like this are highly idiosyncratic and far removed from rigorous explication, or historically contextualized interpretation. It is a classroom feasting on the carcass of a dead writer. By reading and devouring, KOS produce works that are excessive and sovereign. This activity is where the group finds its nourishment and strength. Rollins states that ‘the impetus to paint images of our own making—to vandalize and commemorate these texts at once—came from the students’ delight in transgression.’ By reading outside of the confines of literary analysis, and asserting their own subjectivity onto the texts, they confront the viewer of the work with a practice that attempts to slip their throats out from under the boot of the means and ends ethos of contemporary life.

Even though these lessons that Rollins provides for his students and art audience are important, the questions remain as to when and if the students will regain their birth names and reanimate their singular authorship? Roberta Smith asks, ‘will some of the members go on to become artists in their own right? (Money from the sales of their paintings is already putting a few of the older Kids through college and art school.)’ I am wondering if the students that do integrate themselves into the art world (a field that is still contaminated by hidden divisions of race, class and gender), will they retain a fidelity to the radical practice of working from a position of destabilized authorship and subjectivity, or will they mimic the steps of their teacher and re-assert their claim to signature singularity and the myth of the isolated artistic genius.

- Holly Martins

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THINKING THE PRESENT

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free system of global democratic prosperity in place, socialism is required: plutocratic socialism. If the end of history does not naturally unfold out of the free forces of the global marketplace, than the powers that be must intervene to guarantee us that *there is no alternative!*

- Étienne Dolet

Y E S T E R D A Y
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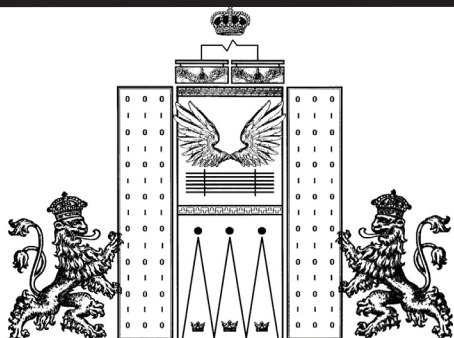
Manifesto for a Margin of Utility

The dearth of critical voices in the current aesthetico-political matrix serves as a silent imperative to all of those who strive to articulate an alternative set of aesthetic, political and theoretical practices. The silence of this imperative resounds with increased urgency in times of a consensual progressivism intent on meager reformism, which is nothing short of a brief distraction in the obdurate apology for the systems in place. It is the explicit goal of the Machete Group to give voice to the resounding silence of this imperative by breaking with the dominant social and political imaginary through the creation of public forums for articulating alternative collective discourses and practices. We hold these truths to be the most worthy of being put to the test of collective actualization:

- theory without practice is empty and practice without theory is blind
- the present is only a myopic mirage if it is not inscribed in history, and it is devoid of interest if it is not interrogated from the point of view of possible futures
- the facile opposition between an absolute revolution and acquiescence to the present state of affairs is a mere subterfuge that plays into the hands of revolutionary nostalgics and the corporate executors of the present
- aesthetic practice is inseparable from political stakes, and politics constructs regimes of perception that shape the world and frame its possibilities
- works of art are not autonomous instances of creativity originating in a subjective void but are decisive modes of intervention into the shared fabric of our world
- artistic and theoretical practices are not exempt from incisive critique and must not be protected by the superficial niceties of good taste or the debilitating accoutrements of socially refined behavior
- education is a collective and dynamic process unrestricted to the formal hierarchies and bureaucracies of academic corporations
- it is imperative to jettison quietism and indifference in the name of cutting into the present and assuming the consequences of one's position, with all of the requisite exclusions that such a commitment entails
- there is a margin of utility that can and must be made use of!

The Machete Group

A.K., D.D., E.D., E.R., L.F., G.R., P.K., T.T., Y.Y., Z.R.



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