



machete

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“Invisible Enemies & Enemies of the Invisible”

We have passed to the other side of the affective mirror where fear 'reflects' only its own Cheshire-cat-like occurrence, at the phenomenal vanishing point, where it is without.

- Brian Massumi, Fear (The Spectrum Said), 2005

The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving. The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification...but... the unification it achieves is nothing other than an official language of universal separation.

- Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 1967

The past is prologue.

A child riding the bus begins to put on make-up. The cheeks become soft-white, clown-like, out of place. The lips are rendered redder and redder. They are not just a stereotype; they are a way of life. The child, they say, is father to the man, and so appears Sanford Biggers, on the same bus, perhaps on the same day, applying the make-up yet again. There is no linear transition here. Time is not the issue. Rather what is at stake is the timeless: the improbable possibility that a series of events could detach themselves from cause and effect, and simply play out again and again. How do we stop them from doing so?

Biggers continues on his journey. He is applying the make-up in the bathroom now; he is ready for the show. “Showtime!” While he is preparing, the smile is hanging in the tree. And next to you, there in the gallery, is another, unnatural tree. Southern trees bear strange fruit. But it is not a body blowing in the breeze, hanging there. It is bright white light bulbs like bright white teeth. It is big red lips like make-up and Bert Williams. We never see how Biggers gets tied up, but all of a sudden there he is, tied to the tree: his enslavement occurring like the cat’s grin – without an actual cause, forced by the structure of a seemingly timeless presence.

Indeed, Biggers’ halved Cheshire smile was not a coincidence in this context, as each work dealt (at some level) with the fragmented effects of unmoored events.

Rakowitz’ piece took its title from the literal translation of the name of the street which ran through the Gate of Ishtar in Babylon. His three-part installation involved an original sound recording, a timeline, and a series of reconstructed artifacts. Each dealt with the looting of treasures from the National Museum of Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Rakowitz attempted to reconstruct, out of papier-mâché, a number of the still missing artifacts, as well as a timeline looking at previous lootings of Iraqi goods, most notably the removal of the Gate of Ishtar itself to Berlin in the early 20th century.

Like Biggers’ work, Rakowitz’ instillation similarly points toward various understandings of the meaning of a grin without a cat. The title provides a sort of mandate against reasoning which proceeds from the precepts of invisibility. Yet invisibility is not what is at stake here. It is not some invisible hand (alone) which has stolen the artifacts from the museum, or rendered America structurally racist. What is suggested here is something more radical. Rather than reading the saying, “the invisible enemy should not exist,” as a military maxim. I think it its better understood within the context of Rakowitz’ work as an ethical injunction: one should not conceive of an enemy that does not exist.

The falsification of the enemy in the political discourse leading up to the invasion of Iraq was precisely the invention of an aggressor in spite of no actual attack. Rakowitz’ timeline, from Berlin excavation to Hussein’s nationalist fabrications to the looting of the museum, is a reminder that although an invisible enemy was constructed, a real force-field of humans, archives and relations exists. That actualized field of interaction is what the presumption of an invisible enemy erases.

The fight against an invisible enemy is perhaps one of the best ways of engaging the work of the show’s

an important frame for the evaluation of his work. Those familiar with Trecartin’s films only from YouTube or Ubu may find the exhibition at the gallery surprising at first. While the trademark video features of speed, cutting, a warm palette, youthful vivacity on the PG side of porn, destruction, over-exuberance, and the attempted hijacking of corporate culture remain, they have also been translated into the gallery space. The solitude of internet immersion is thus pushed into the community of the gallery space, only to refract viewers back into monads – the work is unapproachable except in an individual seat with headphones on.

The space appears as if Trecartin went on a shopping spree at Ikea, tore up the goods purchased, and re-assembled them in a haphazard order. As is frequently noted in the context of his frenetic production, the model of the artist working a year to get the brushstroke or the symbolism just right is laughable. And yet, at the same time, the ready-made is equally disavowed as a limited project that cannot contain the sweep of postmodern capitalist culture.

But if, as I want to insist, there remains something troubling about Trecartin’s work, it is not in the liberatory sense of troubling gender or the market, as his work has frequently been understood. Rather, we have to remember the simple knowledge that it is precisely in the most pernicious forms of capitalism where everything is troubled – where all that is solid melts into air and where transgression at the crossroads of fluidity and creation is precisely the new spirit of capitalism.

Without getting into the regressive debate of a potential “outside” to capitalism, one need only remember the injunction we’ve read through Rakowitz: the invisible enemy should not exist. Capitalism in Trecartin’s work is allowed to stand precisely as a series of affects and gestures unmoored from their actual contexts. Biggers’ examination of the racialized American past and Rakowitz’ reconstructions of archival control and manipulation both show us the body of the cat where we think we only see a grin. They remind us that the supposed fantasy world we live in has in fact been constructed through institutions of power, dominance and often hatred.

Trecartin, meanwhile, is working in the world of grins without cats, effects without causes, affects without agents. There is nothing wrong with this move per se, and there are a variety of appreciative ways to engage the works Trecartin has made viz-a-viz queer politics, media specificity, representations of a contemporary condition, just to name a few. But in the context of a show alongside artists who have taken up and reminded us about such pressing concerns in the present, it seems inevitable that Trecartin’s work be read as I have: as an entertaining, provocative, transgressive but ultimately (and for these very reasons) spectacular exhibition, in Debord’s sense of the term.

The distance between Trecartin and Biggers, for example, is well underscored in the difference between the ends of the two videos. Trecartin’s almost narrative-less party scene looks almost the same at beginning and end – there is just more stuff and it has been re-arranged. Meanwhile, at the end of Biggers’ video Shuffle, the artist, now untied, walks up to the tree where he was previously held hostage, sits down on the grass, and stares at his former captor. Then, without any gravitas, he gets up and walks away. The difference is clear: Trecartin re-arranges the matrix; Biggers and Rakowitz disassemble it. I guess it should be obvious by now who was announced the winner of the prize this past Thursday.

-Avi Alpert



Installation view of Cheshire, 2009, Aluminum, Plexiglass, LEDs, tracer and timer, Courtesy of the artist Courtesy of the artist and Michael Klein Arts, New York

It should not have been a coincidence that the embodied form of Biggers’ techno-smile, turned on its side and cut in half, was among the first things visitors to the Temple Gallery in North Philadelphia would have seen this past month at the Jack Wolgin Fine Arts Prize show. Biggers’ trilogy of works were set beside Michael Rakowitz’ The invisible enemy should not exist and Ryan Trecartin’s P.opular S.ky (section ish) in competition for a \$150,000 purse.

youngest (and only Philadelphia-based) finalist, Ryan Trecartin. Trecartin’s meteoric rise within a consumerist-dominated art market is certainly cause for concern in evaluating his work. But the equally quick backlash to dismiss him just on the basis of that fact will get us nowhere. Trecartin’s position within this show, then, alongside two slightly more mature and constructively engaged artists, provides

The Singular Icon

A series of bold and defiant self-portraits punctuate a recent retrospective at PAFA, adamantly declaring at cadenced intervals through the course of the exhibition: “this is painting!” A resolute iconoclast resisting the movements, modes and fashions of the swings of the art world has been working for years to his own tune, the tune of searing jazz lines, soul groove and Fela-style Afro-beat that breaks with the structured rhythm of the rise and fall of identifiable artistic movements and popular aesthetic trends. The visitor cannot but be struck by the resounding truth of this off-beat, seditious declaration in the church-like silence of the gallery: “indeed, this is painting!”



Barkley Hendricks is the brilliantly endowed artist responsible for this exhibit, the singular force leading the spectator into the very heart of singularity. His refined treatment of texture, his keen use of color and the overall acumen of his execution combine to give the viewer powerful and potent portraits of unique individuals. His precise and perceptive rendering of human physiognomy captures the idiosyncrasies of a gaze, the peculiarities of a



glance. Like Balzac, the careful scrutiny of physical traits reveal the effervescent singularity of the being he has before him. The keen rendering of human

visages is bolstered by the study of revelatory gestures, unique fabrics and fashions, as well as instantaneous reflections of light. Instead of painting conventional impressions or identifiable types, he captures the fleeting singularity of unique human beings.

Hendricks' homage to the singular is of a resolutely iconic nature. His figures are often devoid of context, imposing their gazes and sultry poses as if from nowhere, or rather, from nowhere other than their own uniquely adorned being, carrying the weight of their entire past in a single gesture or glance. These are not simply images; they are icons. However, their status as icons is not due to the fact that they are universalized as types, nor is it due to their 'iconic' stature as well-known figures (such as Warhol's Liz Taylor series). On the contrary, Hendricks presents us with an iconography of the singular, an elevation of the everyday that captures the personalized eccentricities of individuals. His iconographic practice of painting does not transform his models into transcendent, universal forms but rather glorifies the minute singularity of their being to such an extent that it radiates with more power than abstract universals.

Hendricks' valorization of the singular is not simply a stalwart attempt to embrace the fleeting and contingent for its own sake. Echoing Baudelaire, he mediates his search for the purely circumstantial with an intriguing resuscitation and reworking of the “eternal” forms of representation found in the gallery of his imaginary museum: his self-portraits act as curious counterpoints to Rembrandt's, his monochrome backgrounds recall the ground that Manet borrowed from Velasquez, his black frames add a racial dimension to the black frames of Dutch Old Master paintings, basketball lanes are aesthetically aligned on the Islamic Palace of Alhambra, the Portrait of Cardinal Guido Bentivoglio haunts his “Sir Charles, Alias Willie Harris,” his circular paintings recall those of 16th century Italian art, his rendering of “twins” resuscitates the tradition of diptychs, medieval Byzantine religious icons are given a singular new existence as gold leaf emblazons the afro and placid demeanor of “Lawdy Mama”...

It is for all of these reasons that it would be an egregious mistake to simply classify Hendricks—in order to be finished with him—as a painter of “black culture.” It is indeed of the utmost importance that he broke through the repressive filters and oppressive regimes of visibility that have largely excluded blacks from the canvas (unless they were typified blacks). However, he did not simply break through these structures in order to re-essentialize black culture by purporting to provide its true image, its universal icon. On the contrary, his incessant depictions of singular black subjects are a constant

reminder that there is no “black culture” in general. There are cultural practices identifiable as “black” and social struggles over the categorization of these practices, and painting is precisely a cultural practice participating in these struggles. The singular icon resists both the oppressive cultural structures of longstanding white supremacy and the myopic valorization of “true black culture,” which is ultimately only a partial contestation of the structures of racist culture since it nonetheless remains within the confines of categorical thought. Moreover, to invoke Kobena Mercer's insightful distinction, Hendricks' painting ultimately remains irreducible to the framework of social engineering and the attempt to simply present a “positive representation” of blacks and black culture to resist the negative imagery that dominates mass culture. He displaces the logic of social engineering, to take but one example, by ironically responding to the



claim that he is a “brilliantly endowed” artist by a near naked self-portrait taking on the myths of black male physical prowess (a myth that goes hand in hand with the implicit assumption that the black male is not intellectually or artistically endowed...). Hendricks avoids essentializing black culture in order to persistently dismantle the essentialized traits operative not only in mass culture, but also in the art of social representation and the artistic attempts at social engineering. The true political power of his work is his ability to shatter typological representations by taking the spectator into the idiosyncratic singularity of human existence through the production of iconoclastic icons. This is painting!

- Theodore Tucker

Images source
 Left top: Barkley L. Hendricks, Icon for My Man Superman (Superman never saved any black people—Bobby Seale), 1969. Oil, acrylic and aluminum leaf on linen canvas, 59 1/2 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.
 Left bottom: Barkley L. Hendricks, Misc. Tyrone (Tyrone Smith), 1976. Oil and magna on linen canvas, 72 x 50 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.
 Right: Barkley L. Hendricks, Lawdy Mama, 1969. Oil on canvas, 53 3/4 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Gift of Stuart Liebman, in memory of Joseph B. Liebman.

Margin of Utility

The Revolution Is Televised!

The looming anniversary of the 2008 presidential elections and the recent Nobel Peace Prize awarded to President Obama affords an apt opportunity for reflecting on the new image of the American presidency.

The Obama Presidential Campaign won the Titanium Grand Prix and Integrated Grand Prix at the Cannes Lions international advertising festival. The Titanium Lion celebrates breakthrough ideas and work that is so provocative that it "causes the industry to stop in its tracks and reconsider the way forward." Replete with slogans like "yes, we can!" and the catchwords "change" and "hope," as well as a charismatic front man whose eloquence and elegance made his presidential predecessor look like a Neanderthal, brand Obama marshaled unprecedented economic means into an advertising endeavor of rare proportions. There continues to be a widespread mythology concerning the number of small donors to his campaign, a mythology that often implicitly justifies a marketplace democracy in which financial donations count more than votes (Obama's unparalleled decision to opt out of the government campaign financing system sets a dangerous precedent in this regard). Only approximately a quarter of his image war chest came from small donors making contributions of \$200 or less (slightly less as a percentage than President Bush in 2004), and Goldman Sachs was his single largest private contributor, along with many other corporate donors. Big business always wins two party elections because it bets heavily on both candidates.

56.8% of the voting population turned out for the election and, of these, 53% voted for Obama/Biden. This means that a little over half of the voting population in the United States actively supported their campaign. This is a significant portion compared to the precedent of past elections, and strategically speaking, Obama no doubt did more to deserve the two Grands Prix from the Cannes Lion advertising festival than he has done to merit the Nobel Peace Prize. It is important, however, to mitigate the administered image of a near unanimous populist upsurge. Indeed this groundswell was itself packaged and sold as the "new image of change" consecrated by the presidential inauguration, which was paid for in large part by corporate contributors (who anticipated—correctly!—that they would be paid back with exponential interest in continued Wall Street bailouts): the managing director of Citigroup bundled \$300,000 for the inauguration, the vice president of Goldman Sachs bundled \$100,000, etc. The "revolution" was indeed televised in the euphoric image of change finally coming to America! And the aesthetics of change, the branding of a new era, was presented as the incarnation of a new or renewed American spirit promising great things.

Symbol and Substance: The Dual Position

Cornel West has convincingly argued that it is imperative to distinguish between the

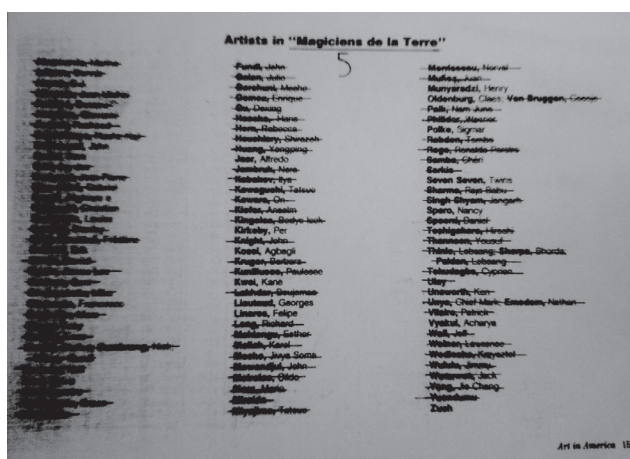
The Whole Earth Show

5

The exhibition, Magiciens de la Terre/ 5, was conceived in 2009 by Jean Fleischer. It restages the original show organized by Jean-Hubert Martin. This show halves the number of artists originally included in the exhibition, reducing the participants from 50 Western and 50 Non-Western artists, to 10 artists from "centers" of contemporary culture and 10 artists from the cultural "margins." This show intends to restage the original show's controversial intention, albeit in smaller scale and to commercial ends, to explore practices of artists in Asian, African and Latin American countries, juxtaposing a selection of work from those cultural contexts with contemporary works from the United States and Europe.

What follows is my translation of a dialogue between myself and Jean Fleischer. While this dialogue expresses our shared concern in what seems to be a long overdue and courageous attempt to depart from the hegemonic and monocentric cultural perspectives of Western European and American institutions and their exhibition projects, it was also inevitable that I would want to challenge some of the underlying assumptions of this exhibition.

—Ludwig Fischer



LUDWIG FISCHER: In discussions of the last forty years, the question of cultural decentralization has emerged as increasingly important. It encompasses efforts to decenter traditional conceptions of the author/subject construction, as well as challenges to the centrality of the oeuvre and to the concept of the work of art as a unified substantial object. But there are broader ramifications: the question of decentralization is related to the on-going critique of the hegemony of the class structure of bourgeois modernism and to analysis of the dominance of the Western capitalist world's cultural production and its markets over cultural practices in the social and geo-political "margins." Cultural decentralization aims at a gradual recognition of the cultures of different social and ethnic groups within the societies of the so-called "First World," as much as at recognition of the specificity of cultural practices outside—that is, in the countries of the so-called "Second World" and "Third World."

Does the project "Magiciens de la Terre/5" originate in these critical discussions or is it just another exercise in stimulating an exhausted art world by exhibiting the same contemporary producers in a different topical exhibition framework?

JEAN FLEISCHER: Obviously the problem of center and periphery has been much discussed in European-American avant-garde culture in recent years, and our exhibition, and our exhibition, "Magiciens de la Terre/5," takes off from those discussions. First of all, from a geographical point of view, we want to treat contemporary art production on a global, worldwide scale. But the questions of center and periphery are also related to issues of authorship and oeuvre that concern us, especially since the artist's role and the object's functions are defined in an entirely different manner from our European way of thinking in a number of the contexts with which we will be dealing. As for the problem of marginality, it is difficult and delicate to include artists from different geo-political contexts in an exhibition of Western (Euro-American) contemporary art, the dominant art of the "centers." But we have come to recognize that in order to have a center you need margins, and the inverse is true as

well. Therefore, "Magiciens de la Terre/5" will invite half of its approximately 20 artists from marginal contexts, and will include artists who are practically unknown in the contemporary world.

LF: How will you go about this project without falling into the seemingly inevitable and worst of all traps—that is, without once again deploying ethnocentric and hegemonic criteria in the selection of participants and their works for the exhibition?

JF: I agree that this is the first trap one thinks of. But I would argue that it is actually an inevitable trap. It would be worse to pretend that one could organize such an exhibition from an "objective, unacculturated" perspective, from a "decentered" point of view. Where could one find a "correct" perspective? By including artists on a proportional scale? Or by basing the selections made by cultural functionaries in each country, functionaries whose principles are infinitely less elaborate than ours? Or by political commissaries from UNESCO, and according to the size of the population of each country?

I have therefore argued for the exact opposite: since we are dealing with objects of visual and sensual experience, let's really look at them from the perspective of our own culture. I want to play the role of someone who uses artistic intuition alone to select these objects which come from totally different cultures. Thus my approach will also be the opposite of what you might have suggested: I intend to select these objects from various cultures according to my own history and my own sensibility. But obviously I also want to incorporate into that process the critical thinking which contemporary anthropology provides on the problem of ethnocentrism, the relativity of culture, and intercultural relations.

LF: If I may interrupt here. It seems evident that your problem is characteristic of all modernist art history, which has traditionally contemplated only objects of high culture, even though modernist avant-garde art was in fact constituted in dialectic relationship with mass culture from its very beginnings. The objects and users of mass culture—if considered at all—were at best compartmentalized into a different discipline (sociology), or more recently into the area of mass cultural studies. In the same manner that traditional art history has always excluded the plurality of cultures within "bourgeois" culture, your attempt to select only the "highest artistic quality" from the cultural practices of "the Others" runs the risk of subjecting them to a similar process of selection and hierarchization.

JF: Works of art are always the result of a ritual or a ceremony, and that is just as true for a famous painting of the 19th century, where in a manner of speaking, we are also looking at a "mere residue." One always speaks of the problem of "context" when it comes to other cultures, as though the problem did not exist for us in our confrontations with a medieval miniature, or even with a Rembrandt painting, when we visit the museum. Only a few specialists really know anything at all about the contexts of these objects, even though we would claim that, after all, they are part of our own cultural tradition. I know that it is dangerous to extricate cultural objects from other civilizations. But we can also learn from these civilizations, which—just like ours—are engaged in a search for spirituality.

LF: This concept of an abstract transhistorical experience of "spirituality" seems to be at the core of your project. In that respect, it reminds me of the "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art" exhibition, which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984. There a presumed spirituality was also placed at the center of the exhibition and considered to be operating regardless of social and political context, and regardless of the technological development of particular social formations. Don't you think that the search for the (re-)discovery of spirituality originates in a disemboweling of the politics of everyday life?

JF: Not at all. As you will recall, the main criticism leveled at the "Primitivism" exhibition at the time was that it was a formalist project. To me, it seems important to emphasize the functional rather than the formal aspects of that spirituality—after all,

magic practices are functional practices. Those objects which have a spiritual function for the human mentality, objects which exist in all societies, are the ones of interest for our exhibition. After all, the work of art cannot simply be reduced to a retinal experience. It possesses an aura which initiates these mental experiences. I would go even further and argue that it is precisely those artistic object which were created 40 years ago by artists with the explicit desire to reduce the auratic nature of the work of art by emphasizing its material objectness that now appear as the most spiritual ones. In fact, if you talk to the artists of that generation, you will often hear about their own involvement with the concept of the “magic” of the work of art. We have to admit that there is a sphere of social experience which has taken over the space of religion, and while it does not fulfill religion’s communal functions, it does involve large segments of our society.

LF: It sounds as though you were arguing that the failure of the artistic practices of the 60s to emancipate art from ritual (what Benjamin called art’s parasitical dependence) could now be compensated for best by ritualizing these practices themselves. Inevitably your project operates like an archeology of the “other” and its authenticity: you are engaged in a quest for original cultural practices (magic and ritual), when in fact what you will most often find, I presume, are extremely hybridized cultural practices in their various stages of gradual or rapid disintegration and extinction—a condition that results from their confrontation with Western industrial media and consumer culture.

-Ludwig Fischer

Like a Nightmare on the Brain of the Living

With *Back to Earth*, Oct. 15-Dec. 5, 2009, Fleisher Ollman Gallery has assumed the cripplingly ambitious task of revisiting the infamous exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (Magiciens de la Terre), which opened at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989 (the same year fall of the Berlin Wall). That such a show demands revisitation is by no means in dispute. *Magiciens de la Terre* has become an important historical reference point, being the first truly international exhibition of contemporary art. Situated within the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exhibition, like that symbolic event, appears to have ushered in within the art world the era of globalization now familiar.

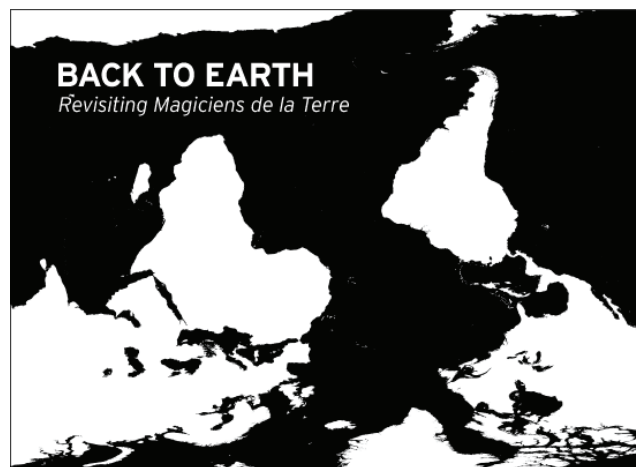
Since Fleisher Ollman Gallery situates its own artistic concerns quite explicitly within the set of problems that Jean-Hubert Martin intended to raise with his initial curatorial effort, it makes perfect sense for the gallery, upon *Magiciens de la Terre*’s 20th anniversary, to reflect on the exhibition’s legacy. For the gallery no doubt identifies with Jean-Hubert Martin’s vision to establish a cultural dialogue that transgresses the geo-political borders between east and west, north and south and the economic and racial divisions between the 1st, 2nd and 3rd worlds.

Yet, its legacy is by no means without contestation. On the surface the exhibition appeared to challenge the cultural hegemony of the West—the latter’s near total neglect of “80% of the earth”—by trying to establish a non-hierarchical exhibition space in which the dominant and the marginal (Western and Non-Western) were equally represented and thus equalized by the sheer fact of their co-habitation. The spectator as she moved throughout the exhibition would encounter unlikely juxtapositions that occasioned, at least in theory, a reflection on the shared aims of these radically divergent practices. Rather than emphasizing divisions and conflicts, Martin envisioned the exhibition as a space in which the shared animus of the artists and their objects could be contemplated—an animus that Martin posited in magic and ritual. All the artists in

the show were thus cast as magicians, embarking through their creative labours upon a kind of transcultural spiritual quest. Yet, the principle of selection that guided the decision as to what objects to include and what to exclude unapologetically assumed aesthetic criteria commensurable to the tastes of a Western aesthete. The exhibition thus seemed to romanticize the shamanesque, archaic spiritual forces purportedly discernible in cultural regions yet untouched by the ravages of modernity, while establishing a safe, contemplative space that would not challenge in principle the Western aesthete’s sensibilities. It both fetishized art objects and their producers. It was for these reasons that the show was viewed as utterly reactionary, despite its apparent progressiveness.

Martin, and now Ollman, quite explicitly wager on the strength of non-Western cultural objects to hold up to the intuition of the Western aesthete. Like Clement Greenberg, Martin shared the confidence in aesthetic judgment to discern across ethnic and regional barriers the good from the bad. As he put it in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in *Art in America* (May 1989), “I want to play the role of someone who uses artistic intuition alone to select these objects.” Yet these objects only “hold up” through their capacity to communicate in a “visual-sensuous” manner to a Western spectator. Such a spectator provides the social criteria of their selection. As a result, precisely the structural relations (chiefly social) of those who are called upon to mediate through their judgment the differences between these art objects remain unquestioned.

Even though these assumptions now more than ever need to be questioned with renewed vigilance, Fleisher Ollman’s revisitation appears strangely indifferent, almost oblivious to the controversy that has wracked the exhibition’s effective history. The only effort at contextualization is a wall installation of images cut and rearranged from the catalogue for *Magiciens de la Terre*. The catalogue itself is set upon a wall mount whose height more befits an object of contemplation than a book to be read and studied. This serves to underscore that what we are seeing is an homage, a fetish, not a site for historical reflection. If the failings of the original were tragic, those of its revisitation verge on farce.



For *Back to Earth* cultivates the same kind of spectator that *Magiciens de la Terre* played a hand in engendering. It is hard to not see in retrospect that the spectator that Martin’s exhibition helped to produce is the globetrotting aesthete, the urbane cultural consumer armed with the comforting notions of multi-culturalism and democratic capitalism. In short, *Magiciens de la Terre* foreshadowed the new breed of 21st century flaneur whose tastes are engendered less by museums and more by the international circuit of Biennials and art-fairs. A flaneur whose tastes echo the sentiments—rather than disturb the agenda—of a good neo-liberal who identifies freedom, equality and above all democracy, with “equal” access to new markets.

In short, although the show is framed as a historical reflection, as a return to earth, it seems rather to be oddly suspended in time, strangely abstracted from the history that it attempts to make more concrete. The image of an inverted world that accompanies the press release thus appears to be strangely apt.

-Alexi Kukuljevic

symbolic importance of electing a mixed-race candidate to office and the substantial changes he has or has not introduced. Obama’s election surely introduced important symbolic shifts in American politics (it is essential to recall, at the same time, that George W. Bush’s administration was arguably the most multicultural in American history). Moreover, Obama is clearly a more interesting candidate than John McCain, and in comparison to the man ironically marketed as the quintessential maverick, the election results need to be applauded.

At the same time—this is the necessary dual position—the substance of Obama’s actions need to be submitted to severe scrutiny rather than allowing ourselves to be blinded by the pop-psychological “positive thinking” that dominates so many well-meaning liberals. Let us consider a few key features of his presidency to date:

Economics: Obama is not only a longstanding supporter of neo-liberal economics, but his economic team is composed of Friedmanites from the Clinton administration, many of whom are directly responsible for the current economic crisis due to their stalwart support of the deregulation of the banking industry. The repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999, which had prevented co-ownership of commercial banks and investment banks, was one of the key moments. Then Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers rejoiced over the bill repealing Glass-Steagall: “With this bill, the American financial system takes a major step forward toward the 21st Century—one that will benefit American consumers, business and the national economy” (NYT, Nov. 13, 1999). In spite of the fact that



the repeal of Glass-Steagall—which had been enacted after the Great Depression to avoid similar calamities in the future—precipitated the current financial crisis, Obama appointed Summers as the director of the White House National Economic Council.

The Military Industrial Complex: The man awarded the Nobel Peace Prize has deployed more U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan than any time under the presidency of George W. Bush. Obama recently signed a record \$680 billion War Bill, the largest

Extended Listening

military spending bill of its kind, and extended the military commissions system (with some modifications that still fall short of the Geneva Convention). He has also continued the drone raids in Pakistan and the policy of privatizing the military and secret services.

Civil Rights: The Obama administration has sought to renew three key parts of the PATRIOT Act, which allow the government to collect a wide range of financial and personal records, as well as spy on individuals with roving wiretaps. The administration has also continued the practice of extraordinary rendition (an extraordinary euphemism for illegal international kidnapping by the U.S. secret service) and has yet to shut down Guantanamo Bay and the network of secret C.I.A. prisons.

Health Care: Although Obama has claimed that he would be in support of single-payer healthcare if he were starting from scratch, he has half-heartedly argued for the weak position of a public option (that has already failed at a state level) while spearheading a program that will force many Americans to purchase private health care (a windfall for the insurance companies).

In these domains and many others, Obama is a perfect presidential commodity in the current political marketplace: he satisfies the consumers' desires for the "new" by putting a shiny veneer on the same old things. Moreover, he gives an eloquent, multicultural facade, a readily acceptable aesthetic image, to an economic and military empire. Rather than the bare hand of brute and vulgar force, Obama is "putting the gloves back on." There have been, and there will continue to be, some "positive" results from this. However, softer blows can also serve to lull the population into the comforting conviction that "it could be worse!"



Hans Haacke's "Star Gazer" (2004)

Cynicism or Realism?

Many readers will surely dismiss the position I have outlined here as a cynical denial of the only real possibility for change in America. On the contrary, I would argue that it the true cynics are precisely those who believe that "Obama is the best possible option"! They have sacrificed realism, that is, the dedication to real change, in the name of feel-good defeatism

On the evening of October 17th Philadelphia Sound Forum, an organization dedicated to presenting concerts of experimental music and run by Jesse Kudler and Ian Fraser celebrated its first birthday at VoxPopuli gallery. Joining established organizations such as Bowerbird and Ars Nova Workshop in showcasing both local and touring musicians, Philadelphia Sound Forum is now contributing to a healthy scene here in Philadelphia.

This occasion is worth marking because experimental music, a term loosely grouping together various appropriations and fusions of avant-garde rock, post-free-jazz improvisation, psychedelic mind-destruction and the classical avant-garde, is rarely visible within either the art or music world. Although consumers of contemporary art have long been accustomed to contemplating (and "understanding") visual and spatial abstraction, an analogous large-scale recognition of the validity qua art of abstract sound has not followed. The same can be said for the record-buying public as a whole, even those who get off on relentlessly searching out the latest indie-rock darlings or hipster dance phenomena. Musicians exploring the nature, limits and potential of abstract sound decoupled from both the "natural" requirements of harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, temporal, decibel, affective and instrumental legibility and of the overly academic formal experiments of much of the 20th Century avant-garde exist, for the most part, in oblivion, victims of an impoverished aesthetic ideology (one curious exception to this rule is the recent attention paid to the "noise" "genre" by the Pitchfork set. Arguably, though, this attention is not because of noise's admirable affirmation of and willingness to tarry with all that is shitty about contemporary life but rather for the unfortunate way its focused brutality and mystique can produce frivolous incredulity, life-style scenesterism and communal outbursts of machismo).

We should not be quick, however, to chalk the lack of recognition of experimental music up to a genuine lack of criteria as to what constitutes the success or failure of the organization of abstract sonic elements, one sentiment voiced by some at the concert. Though prima facie, many performances or recordings of experimental music might seem like chaos, undifferentiated blocks of noise, or mere screwing around by technology obsessed gear-heads, this opinion is simply false, and the four sets of the PSF first birthday concert, each occupying its own distinct sonic domain and aiming at its own distinct musical ends, should be enough to refute it. The first performance, for instance, was by Kudler and Fraser themselves, both established local musicians. Their set was a practiced, if often tentative piece of abstract duo improvisation. Just as much as traditional jazz-based improvisation has always aimed at producing the "new" in music through the interactions of musicians operating without a given roadmap, abstract improvisation seeks to create a contingent and collective musical happening, here and now, through the selections and choices made by individually autonomous players. Though not revelatory this evening, at their best the pair's juxtaposed layers of sound did produce a sense of reassuring, unanxious tension.

Another, different example of what this music can do was provided by the duo of Jim Haynes (San Francisco) and Murmur (London). An education in experimental music opens the ears up to an infinite world of sonic detail and put us in relation to the everyday sonic environment that we largely ignore. On this occasion, the two visiting musicians crafted a world in sound, a perpetuum mobile built up out of layers of tuning fork, prayer bowl, bells, metal balls, the sound of crashing waves and desiccated electronic drones. This sound universe took on a fragile life of its own, presenting, as it unfolded over an extended period of time, a shifting multiplicity

of aspects. Increasing the full sense of immersion within a three-dimensional sound environment, were the bells placed throughout the audience. The performers also invited the participation of those sitting and standing at the back of the space by pouring out bottle caps and metal balls onto the wooden floor. Soon these objects were being tossed and rolled around, the dull sound of rolling balls mimicking waves as the twinkling caps blended indistinguishably with the chiming bells. Although this sonic sleight-of-hand served to remind us that no, we had not been transported out of Vox's post-industrial gallery space to some idyllic garden by the shore, it gave the gallery back transformed, now a place teeming with sound.

West Philadelphia's Beemask, on the other hand, provided the audience with a sort of auditory endurance test (not unlike watching a horror-film and wondering just how bad things are going to get), easily the most physically punishing set of the night. At first, the audience was maliciously lulled into thinking the set would be a mellow cheese-fest: think worn-out beats pillowed by happy, friendly drones. Happily, the music soon exploded into an lsd-nightmare of high-pitched pulsating energy occupying a volume-level well beyond the comfortable. Fingers were in ears in short order, only the most masochistic (and reckless) abstaining. All this would have been a bad thing had the music not been worth the pain, and if only the pretty can be beautiful; however, after wallowing in the shimmering tones filling up the gallery and playing tricks on the eardrums, one felt a sense of loss when they began to disappear, slipping away gradually over the course of a long outro, never to be heard again.

The closing set of the evening, a duo by headliners Brendan Murray (Boston) and Richard Garet (New York) was a virtuoso collaboration, presumably enough to convince even the most skeptical of the validity of abstract music. Whereas the sound world of Haynes and Murmur had seemed like a living entity unfolding according to its own law, its existence only contingent upon the length of time its authors wished to maintain its perpetual creation, Murray and Garet were not content to simply let theirs unfold organically. The pair pushed each other to re-invent their musical gestures on each occasion that the present juxtaposition of warm drones and electronic hums had taken its course. Often subtracting the primary element served to bring new elements previously serving merely as subtle details to the fore, accomplishing a novel reorganization of the sonic field and showing each musician's respective technical ability and collaborative sensitivity.

Although obscurity can be salutary for the health of a genre (experimental musical practices are rarely if ever inserted into the vast art-school/museum/gallery institutional network, allowing for true creative "freedom") it creates illegitimate barriers for a larger reception. Moreover, the fact that abstract experimental music exists, as a rule, off of aesthetic map only reinforces our own general inability and/or unwillingness to comprehend any organization of sonic elements not given in the form of the pop song. Owing to groups such as Philadelphia Sound Forum, Philadelphia is more and more becoming an exception to the rule. www.phillysoundforum.org.

- Chris Noble

'grinning from ear to ear': The Year of the Wolfbat at Space 1026

Dennis McNett's images of predators and skulls have been visible in the skateboard world for a while now. I have been skateboarding for more than twenty-five years (sigh) and I should like this kind work, but I just can't identify with it. This antipathy becomes pronounced when the images are presented in a gallery setting. When McNett's images are ripped out of the context of skateboard culture, and hung on a gallery wall for purely visual contemplation I am at a loss to find an angle for a critical approach.

It's difficult to address the 'Year of the Wolfbat' in terms of contemporary art due to McNett's seeming lack of interest in the history of avant garde tactics and strategies. Does this body of work profess a working understanding of the Hegelian 'end of art', or the self cannibalizing gestures of Institutional Critique? Absolutely not. In fact it appears to be anti historical and seems to have a following based merely on its ability to reflect the superstructure's belched out manifestations of hipster lifestyles.

Formally, McNett's signature style consists of hard edge woodcuts that are similar to 'jail house' tattoos with their dynamic shading from multiple light sources as if his raptors were flying through a sky that's illuminated by multiple suns. McNett's chisel work is highly mannered, where the marks are of similar lengths and widths. This gives the rendered objects a machine made quality that sacrifices the varied shimmer that can be found in the heterogeneous cutting of the American woodcut artist Leonard Baskin. The feathers of McNett's eagle retain an even grey tone due to the repetitive white line cuts and the relatively even distribution of black shapes and negative spaces. The feathers on Baskin's Crow are more naturalistic and visually interesting due to varied chisel work where one can't immediately see what width tool was used. Baskin's work comes from an historical awareness of the richness of heterogeneous mark making found in the drawings of DaVinci and Rembrandt. McNett is drawing from the relatively younger lineage of 'punk album covers and skate graphics', and it shows in the lack of compelling marks and shapes that could hold one's interest.



Leonard Baskin, Crow

McNett's images function like street signs, where the strong outlines and forms of the shapes indicates what they are, images of predators. The artist uses these animals as allegories for the ethos of the outlaw, the loner who feeds off the weak on the edge of the pack. This imagery makes sense for skateboarders, considering that what initially drew me in was that I could ride by myself, on my own schedule spending countless hours in empty parking lots lost in my own head while learning how to do a kickflip.

Even though I find it difficult to address this work in terms of a serious artistic project, McNett has produced graphics for the skateboard company Antihero, and to me, this gives the work immediate credibility. Antihero is the Hell's Angels of skateboarding, and their boards and logo present a challenge that claims that one must be worthy to use their products. I have never, or will never, ride an Antihero board because I am weak. It is like wearing a red bandana in a Crips neighborhood. Unlike other lifestyle activities such as riding a fixed gear bicycle or a Harley, where all one needs to do is purchase the gear and rock the fashions, with skateboarding, as soon as one pushes or 'drops in' everyone within viewing distance knows if one is for real or not.

The company was founded in the early 90's by the San Francisco based skater Julian Stranger, and

counts within its ranks legends such as Tony Trujillo, Peter Hewitt and John Cardiel. Antihero is known for hard living and heavy skating. Their image has been carefully manicured to project a mystique of the rebel without a cause/anti-authoritarian attitude. McNett's interests are in line with the Anti hero image when he states that:

when I see some 60-year old guy on a motorcycle speeding at 90 mph, no helmet, and with a week's worth of filth over his skin grinning from ear to ear or just somebody going for it-or some weird spot someone put together on the side of the road.... I'm attracted to how alive they are and relate to their characters.

The Antihero logo has become sign for the outsider, the marginal, and the pariah. Antihero is an exclusive group of professional skateboarders. This insular team has a public presence in magazines and videos. Their public image has been carefully engineered in their ads that look like ransom notes or the collages of a serial killer, as well as videos that present Nan Golden-like glimpses into a life of drinking, heavy drugs, and living dangerously.

Skateboarding has made its way into mainstream culture with events such as the X-games and Fuel TV. It is used to promote sports drinks, hygiene products and video games. Many professional skateboarders have lost their credibility amongst their peers by collecting endorsement checks from these companies. Antihero's image stands in opposition these alien corporations' acts of co-opting the activity that defines and supports them. It's one marketing campaign against another. McNett's graphics emblazoned across the bottom of skateboard decks are utilized to articulate Antihero's posture of resistance.



Dennis McNett

Regardless, what is most irksome in McNett's work is the conflation of Norse mythology with skateboarding, and how this ties into the outcast ethos of Antihero's image. McNett states that 'I was really drawn to the Norse folklore because of the rich characters and imagery that is conjured up when reading it ...battles, magic, monsters, giants, gods, [and] adventure.' It's troubling considering how this Teutonic imagery was mobilized in the 30's and 40's, and that these themes could shamelessly be used in art again simply because they are appealing. Historical amnesia, as opposed to barbarism (or at least I hope), enables these messages to consciously or unconsciously be encoded into unreflexive artworks and finding wide dissemination without anybody blinking an eye or making a fuss.

Mired within a 24-7 now-time mentality, where the weight of history is seen as oppressive, it may feel that it is better to ignore these documents of barbarism for the sake of one's own health. Formally and thematically, McNett's work appears to rest in blissful ignorance of the history of the use of these themes. In our current moment of the 'passions', where hate crimes are on the rise, we must question the traces that re-emerge from the debris of the horrors of the past.

When skateboard graphics are utilized for their original intent, McNett's images are as ephemeral as scratch off lottery tickets. As soon as the images are excised from their original context and displayed within the discursive space of an art gallery, the subthemes within the work become visible and hopefully foregrounded. It is left to viewer to decide how to respond to these messages, and the outcome of these exchanges is an indicator of the seriousness of the Philadelphia art community.

-Holly Martins

that dismisses anything outside of the administered options as impossible. In the face of this cynical satisfaction with the status quo, it is necessary to affirm that real change is not only possible but it happens all of the time! Even for those who are convinced that the two-party system is the only option, it is essential to foreground the presidential candidacy of Dennis Kucinich, a democratic congressman whose campaign was severely marginalized by the mass media in spite of the fact that he regularly won public opinion polls based solely on policies (as opposed to media image). His stance on Iraq clearly illustrates what "real change" might look like even within the two-party system: there would be a total withdrawal of troops, the U.S. would pay war reparations to the Iraqis (like Germany after WWII) and the U.S. would not have the right to have an embassy in Iraq (a common excuse for maintaining troops in a country).

Ultimately, the very cynicism of the blind believers in a pseudo-democracy based on political marketing and the private hijacking of the political has to be called into question in the name of imposing strict regulations on the economy, developing exit strategies from the military industrial complex, re-establishing basic civil rights that have been lost in this country, and demanding the single-payer healthcare system that has worked so well in every other industrialized country. These are not blind utopian claims: they all have clear precedents in other countries around the world! We mustn't let the televised "revolution" dupe us into thinking that the fundamental features of the pseudo-democratic system have been changed! On the contrary, this novel aestheticization of politics clearly shows what change really means in this system: repackaging the standard commodities of marketplace democracy so that people don't see what they are really buying!

-Etienne Dolet

YESTERDAY
HE WAS A
DECENT MAN
LIVING A
DECENT LIFE
NOW HE IS A
BRUTAL
SAVAGE WHO
MUST
SLAUGHTER
TO STAY
ALIVE



Machete Interviews Jacques Rancière

First Installment

Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence

Machete: You have convincingly argued that theory and practice are closely intertwined in the recent history of the arts. Your own theoretical practice is one that attempts to intervene in consensual systems in order to displace them, whether or not it be the discourse on artistic modernity, the discourse on the avant-garde or other such examples. Could you discuss the nature of your theoretical practice as a polemical intervention? Are there aesthetic practices that try to do something along the lines of what you do at a theoretical level, i.e. intervene in order to displace the consensual framework of the sensible?

Jacques Rancière: What I try to do is to intervene in the space connecting what is called aesthetics and what is called politics in order to question forms of description and interpretation that have supposedly become self-evident. For instance, this is why both in what is supposed to be a political book like *Hatred of Democracy* and in what is supposed to be an aesthetic book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, I targeted more or less the same kind of discourse, which is very powerful on both sides: the discourse on the spectacle and the idea that we are all enclosed in the field of the commodity, the spectator, advertising images and so on. This is because, on the one hand, this discourse generates a kind of anti-democratic discourse and the incapacity of the masses for any political intervention and, on the other hand, it nurtures a discourse on the uselessness of any kind of artistic practice because it says that everything depends on the market. For example, there were all of these reactions when I made an interview with *Art Forum*: "But there is the market, and it's true that the market..." But it's necessary to get out of this discourse, which is a discourse of impotence, which nurtures, at the same time, forms of art that are supposed to be critical, projects and installations that are supposed to make us discover the power of the commodity and the spectacle. This is something that nobody ignores anymore. This discourse generates a kind of stereotypical art with all of these installations presenting displays of commodities, all these displays of images of sex or gender identity, etc. So what I try to do is really to target certain topics that both create some kind of discourse of political impotence and, on the other hand, either generate an idea that art cannot do anything or what you have to do is reproduce this stereotypical criticism of the commodity and consumption.

Machete: These stereotypical responses within the art world could perhaps be identified as avant-gardist or neo-avant-gardist attempts to critically respond to something like spectacle culture. You seem to be suggesting that there is a type of critical art that is more productive as an intervention or as a critique of contemporary society, a critical art that avoids the more stereotypical types of art that remain ensnared or entrapped in the logic of consumerist spectacles. Given your critique of modernism in the attempt to reopen the question of the aesthetic outside of the avant-gardist paradigm, how do you at the same time identify

certain normative critical structures within the arts? Is there ultimately a normative aspect to your discourse?

Jacques Rancière: I think that the critical spectacle has nothing to do with the avant-garde tradition because the avant-garde tradition is a tradition of art creating forms of life, and not of art as a criticism of social stereotypes. I think that political art is itself something of a kind of leftover from the real political avant-garde tradition. This being said, I don't have a fixed idea of some normative form of critique. What I mean is that I don't think that there are normative forms so that you could just refer to them and establish a way of doing real political art. I just observe forms of



"The Fadl Fakhouri File." sample page from the notebooks documenting the make of cars used in car bombs during the civil war. The Atlas Group.

displacement, breaking in some respects with the consensual way in which things are presented, told and made in the mainstream system. That's why I emphasize, for instance regarding the so-called problem in the Middle East, the way in which Israeli filmmakers, Palestinian filmmakers



Film still from Elia Suleiman's "Divine Intervention" (2002)

or Lebanese filmmakers, try to displace the situation of the victim. In Lebanon, for instance,

when the Atlas Group invents fake archives, it is a way of breaking the kind of division that consists in saying that fiction is for the rich and documentary is for the poor. And when you invent fake archives in a land that is supposed to be a victimized land, you displace the representation of a situation. I think that this is also the same case for the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, who plays with Palestinian being, questioning the way in which Palestinians themselves get more or



Alfredo Jaar, "Real Pictures" (1995)

less ensnared in the position of the victim or the question of the nostalgic. There are many examples. I have discussed, for instance, the way in which Alfredo Jaar dealt with the massacre in Rwanda and how he escaped the discourse of the unrepresentable. He doesn't show images of the slaughter, but he creates an installation in which what he makes visible is the look of people or simply their identity. For instance there is an installation with black boxes where images were hidden in the boxes, but there were descriptions of the contents of the images on the boxes. There was thus an identification of the person, which means that he emphasized the fact that all those people have names and a place in history, whereas usually the victim is the one who has no name and no individuality (only an image as the victim of the slaughter). He breaks, in this case, with the partition between the part of the world that is constituted by individuals and the part of the world that is constituted by anonymous masses. However, I am not presenting a normative idea of what art has to do. I really don't think that there is a good practice of art. The relation between the consensual image and subversive images is constantly shifting so that you have to, at each moment, displace the displacement itself.

To be continued in the next issue of Machete

-This interview, conducted on October 30th 2009 by Gabriel Rockhill and Alexi Kukuljevic, was transcribed and edited by Emily Rockhill