



## Reflections on a Year

One year ago, we founded the Machete Group and launched *Machete*. To mark this point in our ongoing experiment, we decided to reprint the Manifesto that we drafted at the outset as well as a critical debate between the Machete Group members on where we currently stand. We would like to thank Jonathan Thomas for instigating this debate by inviting us to make a collective contribution to an exhibit he is organizing at 1419 in Minneapolis under the title "Shoot the Moon." We hope that this marks a new moment in our collective experiments, and we look forward to future opportunities to intervene in new ways in our cultural milieu.

-M.G.

## 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

# One Line Labyrinth

## The Degree Zero of Painting

In writing on one of Zach Rockhill's earlier exhibitions at Crawl Space Gallery in Seattle, I had no idea that the epigraph I employed by Jorge Luis Borges would only come to bear its truth well after the exhibit had come to a close and the spectators disappeared: "I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line."

In his exhibit at FLUXspace, everything begins with the simplicity of a line, with the return to the degree zero of painting. Yet, Rockhill reverses the traditional relationship between artist and tool by making his body into the very instrument of execution. He also seemingly reverses the traditional relationship between will and artistic practice insofar as the artist becomes the unwilling instrument of a handful of spectators (who, in turn, become the artists). These simple reversals invite us to question the role of the artist as it has been constructed in the modern era as a fountainhead of creative ingenuity who thoughtfully and willfully manipulates materials to construct an autonomous work for independent spectators.



However, Rockhill's simple gesture of inversion is not one of an absolute break with the past. By directing the performance and establishing the minimal rules of its choreography, he still plays the role of the near-invisible Wizard behind his orchestrated Oz (an Oz in stark black and white: a clear inversion of the relation between Kansas and the phantasmagorical land beyond). More importantly, perhaps, his return to the degree zero of painting opens onto one of the labyrinthine themes of "modern" aesthetics: the impersonalization of the artist before the anonymous materiality of his or her resources. Does not the black sprawl against the white wall recall Mallarmé's statement regarding the difference between the universe, which is written *white on black* (stellar bodies against the night sky), and humanity, which advances *black on white* (the materiality of the text qua image against the white page)? Doesn't the artist's disappearance into the black torrent of paint invoke Mallarmé's preoccupation with becoming impersonal before the anonymous body of the text? In short, doesn't Rockhill transform painting into poetry, as an inverted echo of Mallarmé's transformation of poetry into painting?



ion in this endless catalog of simple yet labyrinthine reversals is none other than the famous apex of Rimbaud's short-lived project: *je est un autre* or *I am an other*. And it is here that the true political significance of Rockhill's Borgesian simplicity comes to the fore. "I," his poetic gesture of inversion seems to be saying, "am an other: a black body caught in conflict and violently dragged to its foreordained place against its will." The black froth of paint over his white body recalls, in strict counter-point, the white froth of the firehouses used to propel black bodies straight back to where they came from. "But I am also," Rockhill seems to be saying in yet another reversal, "the body trapped within a gallery intent on making connections with the urban outside, the body destined to simply make a minimal artistic gesture within a predefined place." The political orientation of this gesture can ultimately be interpreted in at least two ways, and it's not clear exactly where Rockhill stands on this issue. Is he aiming to bring the black, inner-city struggle surrounding the gallery *into* the gallery space itself by drawing an unexpected but radical line between the two? Or is he ultimately proclaiming the obsolescence of any direct link between the gallery and its urban outside by consciously staging black bodily conflict within the safe confines of the gallery's white walls? Given the constitutive ambivalence of his acts, perhaps he is simply raising the decisive question of what FLUXspace means: what is the political potential—realized or not—of a *space in flux*?



Rockhill's straight line is ultimately a point of anamorphosis, of transformative re-making, that acts as a simple portal into a labyrinth of inverted relations: simplicity/complexity, artist/instrument, will/action, artist/spectator, mind/body, multimedia artist/painter, painting/poetry, I/other, white/black, inside (gallery)/outside, the political/the apolitical.

- Theodore Tucker

# Considering the Alternatives

New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, SF MoMA, July 17-October 3, 2010  
Sculpture Park 2010, Abington Art Center, Dates Unspecified

In 1975 the photography exhibit "New Topographics" first appeared at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The show, which had photographs of suburban sprawl, urban decay, abandoned factories, and so on, is often cited as a paradigm shift in American photography, as the medium went from picturesque landscapes to corroded urban scenes, and from marginal art form to grounded academic discipline. In 2009, the House represented the show and then it traveled west for exhibits at LACMA and SF MoMA.

Most reviews of the reprised show have focused on the question of its relevance – Are these photographs still startling today? Has photography achieved its proper status as art? etc. But one should first note the anachronism of the original show. After all, Ansel Adams' photography already existed within the context of the conversation paradigm enshrined by Teddy Roosevelt and others. The "wild landscape" was already man-altered by the very attempts to protect it. Moreover, as Charles Mann suggested in his synthetic account, 1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus, the manufacturing of landscapes is even a pre-Columbian activity.

"Man-altered," as a paradigm, then, is a difference of degree, not kind. What Frank Gohlke's dry irrigation canal, or empty Los Angeles landscape, for example, shows, is not the tragedy of alteration, but the tragedy of a specific brand of failed intervention. This is increasingly important to recall in the present of what Yates McKee has aptly dubbed "eco-vanguardism," or the elite set of practices which "green" cities at the cost of certain human residents. Sustainability is crucial, no body disagrees, but consider the case of New Orleans, where "greening" was synonymous with "whiting," as new green spaces were unabashedly planned on top of formerly black neighborhoods. Sustainability as a key word is empty without the real lives it claims to be protecting.



My sense of the value of the "New Topographics" show and its second life is nicely condensed in a quote from one of the photographers, Joe Deal: "It was more of an accident that I was up on the hill and looked down and could see the houses in the context of the landscape rather than just singling out the details of the architecture." What this formal point suggests more broadly is the set of relations made possible through the photographic lens. What Deal sees is neither architecture photography, nor a simple "new topography." Instead, it is a photography of relation, a photography which seeks to understand the interactions of humans and their environment without passing judgment.

Philadelphians are not exactly being offered a parallel experience of seeing these classic photographs,



but a corollary take on the "man-altered landscape" is currently on view at the Abington Art Center, where a number of artists both local and national have altered the landscape of the nearby woods. Their "designs with nature" include tree paintings in natural pigments which will dissolve over time by Richard Metz, as well as chainsaw carved faces jutting out of fallen logs by Jay Walker. Walker and Metz are no, say, Bernd and Hilla Becher, but neither are they trying to be. Their aim is less the documentation of alteration than a pleasant attempt at facilitating positive artistic engagements with natural objects.



Machete readers may balk at the show's ideology, as seen in Walker's opening quote: "People used to find gods in the woods, some still do," and with good cause (not only for its vague spiritualism but also for its retroactive romanticism). But be that as it may, walking through the show's wooded path on a sunny Sunday this past month was more of the more unexpectedly pleasant art experiences I've had for some time. "Considering the alternatives" was a phrase George Bernard Shaw coined when he was asked how he felt on his ninetieth birthday. In an era where even the most sane among us seem to believe armageddon is around the corner, we are in something of Shaw's position, looking at a crumbling world but imagining that it still has to be better than no world at all. Given that alternative, some healthy practices of landscape alteration are welcome to even the most cynical.

- Avi Alpert

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.

## Invisible Bridge

The Machete Group Discusses Theory and Practice After One Year of an Ongoing Experiment

AK: The problem of theory and practice is often considered a question of engineering, since the engineer is the figure who is charged with the task of translating theory into practice, of producing an edifice that can resist the various contingencies that threaten its material existence. The engineer is a figure, in other words, that must attend to the difference between theoretical models and their empirical instantiation, a figure transfixed, but not paralyzed by the threat of catastrophe that haunts all attempts to place ideal structures into the contingent world. There is always the potential that the best laid plans will be laid to waste by contingencies that exceed calculation and it is the task of the engineer to take these into account. Our present seems to be enthralled with this figure, gripped by the dual obsession with security (the desire to calculate out of existence contingencies that spell certain doom) and catastrophe (the desire to be present when things fall apart). We do not want our bridges to fall, but we want to present as spectators when they do. If one of our goals is to challenge this facile, albeit classical, model of the relation between theory and practice, we might then question to what extent the critic, as another figure of the link between theory and practice, can be

# Harmony Korine Rubs Up Against The American Nightmare in *Trash Humpers*

compared to the engineer. The critic does not link theory and practice, but engages in a theoretical practice. In this case, the critic would not be a bridge builder and would not then be gripped by the anxiety peculiar to the figure of the engineer, i.e., by the fear of an imminent danger, catastrophic outcome.

GR: Indeed, theory and practice are not two separate landmasses punctuated by a series of privileged *passerelles*. Theory is already a practice. It is a set of determined activities structured by past actions and institutions that produce material results via concrete modes of communication. *Purely theoretical activity* is, in fact, a conceptual abstraction: theory that is not instantiated in some way remains as imperceptible and intangible as the spirit world of pixies and hobgoblins. Moreover, practice is already theoretical insofar as our actions are inherently structured—whether we are aware of it or not—by a conceptual matrix organizing the field of possibility. The choice we have is whether or not we rely on the implicit theoretical framework of our actions or we critically interrogate it. In the words of Gramsci, we have to choose between the *common sense* of those who take the given order of thought and action for granted, and the *good sense* of those who question the conditions that determine their activities. If we wanted to prolong the juxtaposition of prototypical figures polemically proposed by AK, we could say that the engineer begins with the common sense distinction between theory and practice, whereas the critic ventures out into the *truly precarious* world of good sense in which we recognize that there is no guarantee for our thoughts and actions beyond the values that we ourselves produce. Rather than being in the titillating throws of securitarian anxiety and the *jouissance* of spectacular catastrophes, critics dauntlessly toe the line on the precipice of what Castoriadis calls the Abyss: the absolute groundlessness of human existence.

AA: The origin of capitalism is refounded every time we give way on our desire. To give way is here synonymous with to give in. We give in to a structural desire (a common sense desire) and we give way on a true desire (a good sense desire.) In the realm we are discussing, practice (give in) gets coded as an unreflective act and theory (give way) derided as an impossible instantiation. Capital (a metaphor, to be sure) says: desire truly whatever you want, but you are still subject to time; you cannot withstand. To make time a weapon against capital is not a matter of seizure; it is a question of understanding. (As

In his latest film, *Trash Humpers*, Harmony Korine invents a violent, non-existent, virtually unimaginable subculture and populates it with a strange, repulsive breed of imaginary beings, then presents it with affectionate curiosity, as though he has happened upon the last possibility of true (if admittedly perverse) freedom left in America. Shot on old VHS camcorders, the film purports to be the self-documentation of a group of energetic elderly shit-disturbers as they wreak havoc around the dismal suburbs of Tennessee, eat pancakes topped with dish soap, occasionally murder people, and, of course, dry hump trash cans in back alleys. Played by Korine, his wife, and their friends, all wearing rubber horror masks of old people with burnt or scarred skin, the trash humpers are conceived as mischievous, hyperactive, feral, polymorphously perverse creature-people that enthusiastically seek out constant destructive activity to unleash their seemingly endless reserves of energy. They are defined by oppositions that make them impossible beings, not unlike mythic beasts or horror film ‘monsters’. They are both elderly and youthful, ageless and decomposing; they seem to be driven by pure instinct, but their appetites are entirely unnatural, inorganic even; their desires are unquenchable and incessant, but they are always cheerful and content; their behavior can be brutally violent, but they don’t seem to possess any ill-will, nor to be capable of sustained rage; they proceed with their mayhem unthinkingly and unselfconsciously, yet they possess some awareness of the nature of their existence – this is reflected in their use of language, which for the most part consists of chanting nonsense-rhyme mantras (“Make it, make it, don’t fake it.” “Shake it, shake it, don’t take it” etc.), but occasionally includes rambling quasi-poetic soliloquies reflecting on their marginal status within society.



Thematically *Trash Humpers* doesn’t cover particularly new ground for Korine. *Gummo*, *Julien Donkey-Boy*, and *Mr. Lonely* all portray marginalized characters that lead peculiar, discarded lives on the outskirts of American culture (though set in Europe, this still basically applies to *Mr. Lonely*). However, *Trash Humpers* revitalizes Korine’s central formal and thematic concerns and moves them in significant new directions. Korine has described *Trash Humpers* as ‘Vaudevillian horror’, and the description serves well to underline the differences from his previous work, in which the Vaudevillian comedy and the horror elements had to always remain just below the surface of the essentially realistic aesthetic. The new level of abstraction inherent in the concept of *Trash Humpers* pushes Korine into more explicitly critical territory and enables him to side-step the problems his other films faced at times in establishing the perspective of the film in relation to its subject. At his best, Korine has mined the confrontational tension between provocation/exploitation and recognition/sympathy to create some of the most complex, ambiguous, and strangely exhilarating moments of recent cinema. However, this tension inevitably limited Korine’s ability to critique the conditions that produced the problematic milieu he portrayed because he always had to undercut their disturbing aspects with a ‘non-judgmental’

perspective. In *Trash Humpers*, Korine can openly present the monstrous elements of his characters and their environments. Meanwhile the intimacy provided by the ‘first person’ perspective ends up creating an uncomfortable familiarity and even affection for the characters, which is always explicitly problematic and disturbing. This allows a degree of distance and critical thought that in the earlier films was often be subsumed by Korine’s constant doubling back between disgust and sympathy. The film usefully brings to the fore the somewhat irresolvable conflict in Korine between his nihilistic despair over the state of American culture and his celebration of the peculiarities and diversities of the parasitic sub-cultures that exist, invisibly or detested, on its fringes. By giving us an imaginary subculture peopled with a non-existent breed of outsiders, and then emphasizing the grotesque and repulsive nature of their perverse form of community, *Trash Humpers* explicitly denies us the comforts of both vague general despair and the sentimental romanticization of outsiderdom (which almost took over completely in *Mr. Lonely*).

*Trash Humpers*, like Korine’s other work, proudly strives to attain a kind of sui generis quality. While the novel VHS format does provide Korine new means of expanding his unique palette of haunting, rough-hewn, seemingly-haphazard sounds and images, the film also wears its influences fairly clearly on its sleeve, and it gains significantly in impact from the reverberations of these various influences as they accumulate unselfconsciously. As in all of Korine’s work, traces of Herzog can be detected, especially *Even Dwarves Started Small*, which, along with Lars von Trier’s *The Idiots*, provides the closest cinematic precedent. With its performative elements, its masked characters, its use of incessantly repeated infantile language, and the toying with affect that results from its grotesque confusion of real and artificial, particularly in relation to the body, *Trash Humpers* is most overtly reminiscent of the collaborative videos by Paul McCartney and Mike Kelley, such as *Family Tyranny* and *Heidi*. Equally significant, if less direct, is the relationship of the film to low budget American horror films of the 1970’s, such as *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Like these films *Trash Humpers* is interested in the wasted, forgotten, ‘nowhere’ regions of the American South and features a quasi-family of grotesque, violent characters. This latter element of these horror films was already an influence on the McCarthy/Kelley collaborations, but Korine takes it in a somewhat different direction. *Trash Humpers* is less concerned with critiques of the family unit as such and more interested in imagining a violent debased sub-community that exposes a kind of underside of American culture, a sub-world that is both an instinctual rebellion against the dominant culture as well as a regurgitation of its most poisonous (unacknowledged) characteristics.

In his influential essay “The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70’s” Robin Wood argued that many of the ‘monsters’ of American horror films could be seen as manifestations of the toxic aspects of their culture (namely, patriarchal capitalism). The trash humpers can be fruitfully viewed as peripherally belonging to the tradition of American horror Wood discussed. Like swamp creatures deformed by a polluted environment, or zombies reared on consumerism, the trash humpers can be seen as horrifying but blameless, indeed innocent in a certain sense. Impulsive, violent, remorseless, and incorrigibly horny, the trash humpers are cheerfully and unthinkingly driven by their need to gratify inhuman desires and to satisfy unnecessary needs; as such they are the unnatural natural inhabitants of a perverse culture, perfectly at home not just in Tennessee but any dismal suburb, forgotten small town, or abandoned industrial corner – any place where the truth of the American nightmare is left to fester uncoined. But if there is something uniquely American about the trash humpers, the cultural void they reflect has broader implications. While these characters are nothing if not destructive, they are not so much examples of the Walter Benjamin’s ‘Destructive Character’ as they are a kind of return of the repressed from a world still haunted by the type Benjamin memorably defined.

- Mike Vass

# Abigail D. Deville's America



Empires can be administered only by those who have convinced themselves that they are indeed a superior people, which means all empires are racist. They can be run only on the basis of military superiority and elitism, and with a professional benevolence which is only another form of violence.

-Felix Greene

America's fatal legacy has always been that it is the despoiler of its own ideals. And yet this deep-seated contradiction rarely imperils the confidence with which Americans feel that the "cause of all mankind," in John F. Kennedy's words, "is the cause of America." It is precisely the wanton hyperbole of America's self-image—it's hilarious and grotesque, albeit devastatingly effective, distortion of the historical record—that engenders the desire to see it destroyed. And Hollywood has been in overdrive producing depictions that at once expose this contradiction (an America threatened by some black seed whether natural or man-made) so as to disavow it and thus successfully purge its effects (an America heroically redeemed by dispelling its nefarious internal threats). America is incessantly depicted as under threat from some imminent catastrophe (whether from within or without) and it is precisely this threat that occasions its redemption. As a result, the fantasy serves to firmly root in the American psyche the belief that the sundry failures of America to live up to its ideals are merely contingent and hardly threaten its core—a core that can always be resurrected through a heroic response to some catastrophic sequence.

The interest of Abigail D. Deville's exhibition, *Gold Mountain*, at Marginal Utility Gallery, in my view, lies in her refusal to cloak her monstrous and comic fantasy of America's imminent destruction—an America on the verge of being sucked into a black hole—in any kind of redemptive narrative. Her catastrophic vision grimly depicts an America on the brink of implosion, destitute and without the hope of resurrection. She thus forces us to consider the cost of America's maintenance of its highest ideals.

Her installation depicts America as an ailing giant, likening the Empire in decay to a super red giant imploding through its nuclear consumption: the black hole of American excess. The very ideals of America, for which the flag stands, are perched on the event horizon, their destruction secured, but eternally suspended.

The scene is presided over by a single figure—that of a black woman adorned with the heads of pigeons. This lone and singular spectator gazes into the darkness, indifferent to America's collapse. She is a figure of the oppressed and excluded—a figure whose presence spells certain doom for the ideological fantasy from which she has been excluded and for the fantastical ideal that refuses to acknowledge her presence. The fact that she now appears in an act of self-assertion imperils

the system that erected itself on the basis of her exclusion but is also a harbinger of better days. Deville's *Gold Mountain* refuses the kind of redemptive narrative that might make the ideal real for everyone and that would thus provide a justification for the ideological fantasy that espouses such ideals. Instead, it reverses the logic of redemption characteristic of the phantasmagoria of Hollywood and of political rhetoric by risking the following thesis: the collapse of the ideal is also the collapse of the logic of exclusion on which it feeds. This pigeon-crowned woman is the one who is left standing in the prosaic halo of a lampshade when the flag and all it symbolizes get sucked into the void.



It is a strange and uncanny beast of an exhibition—a black lit fantasy that strips the magic from magic mountain, leaving nothing but gold, the source of a dark and caustic radiance.

- Alexi Kukuljevic

James said, there is nothing wrong with the way we think, only with the way we think we think.) Time dissolves desire only when desire is conceived of as a reflective wish which requires actualization in practice. But one must recall that desire is just another name for the thin threads of signs sewn into our souls. Good sense desire is not wishing; it is the naming of these signs. Articulation is not the postulation of an encompassing system or enveloping discourse. It is the alignment of signs towards an understanding of true desires. To speak or write is never to abstract, it is to fumble towards a meaning that can only be known in interaction. It is not to build a bridge; it is to realize that the bridge is there but cannot be seen.

LF: Unfortunately, caution has become the critic's lodestar. So quick to disavow the avant-garde's taste for negation and its purportedly catastrophic implications, these last men want nothing more than to blink when confronted with the nullity of existence, to revel in their melancholia and to find solace in victimhood—all too willing to prostrate themselves before some traumatic event, to make it into a veritable transcendental before which one must kneel. Our times demand ruthlessness, not caution. We should not so quickly forget the severity of Marx's critical adage. The *ruthless criticism of everything existing* seems a quaint ambition in an era buried by reams of critical drivel that fears its own conclusions and avoids at all costs conflict with the powers that be. Yet, for artists and theorists that are still gripped by this anachronistic passion it seems necessary to awaken the demon of negativity.

ED: You sound like a band of ailing nostalgics chanting the rhythmic hymns of yesteryear, which are less likely to awaken the quiescent world from its dogmatic slumbers than lull us all to sleep with the canonical drumbeat of Marx, Gramsci, Althusser... Marx, Gramsci, Althusser...! The critic's starting point must be a *critique of the tradition of critique*, including Marxian critique, avant-garde criticism, and so on. In our rejection of the present dystopia, we mustn't forget the powerful forms of recuperation that have transformed the fundamental structures of the Marxian narrative into a new teleology that is also 'determined in the last instance' by the economy: the teleology of neo-liberal capitalism to which "there is no alternative"...

TF: You are absolutely right, but the *critique of the tradition of critique* does not require that we throw the baby out with the bathwater. We can obviously learn from the Marxist

# That's Nasty

tradition while nonetheless being critical of it. Ultimately, critique is also a form of collective pedagogy and experimentation. Isn't this one of the explicit goals of the Machete Group? Instead of dogmatically asserting the truth of Marxism or any other doctrine or faith, it is a matter of putting a series of objectives "to the test of collective actualization." Unlike many of the avant-garde manifestos of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which tended to be axiomatic and dogmatic, I take it that disagreement, experimentation and collective pedagogy are inscribed in our manifesto. Fallibilism is one of its fundamental features! In fact, even the staging of this exchange performatively manifests an essential element of our collective ethos: there are no purely objective truths or values, there is no such thing as 'authentic' or 'beautiful art,' there is only the *concrete objectivity* of truths, values and judgments that have been collectively arrived at through social struggle and negotiation.

HM: Machete and the Machete group consist of a highfalutin monthly art/theory/philosophy zine, and a series of public conversations held in a small art gallery on the edge of center city Philadelphia. The projects that have been injected into the community attempt to provide bridges between academia and practicing artists. Audiences have thus far consisted of students, professors and artists that are working in Philadelphia and New York. The discussions are graduate level or higher, and at times I wonder what we hope to achieve by providing a monthly theoretical fireworks show that often seems to be incomprehensible for a sizable portion of the participants/audience (not to mention the people who live near the gallery). Are we providing the art community in which we are entangled the tools and interpretive mechanisms to make the distinctions between *common sense* and *good sense*? Are we genuinely offering guidance on the application of theory to an interpretation of art and art history, as well as the unfair distributions of rights and privileges we encounter in life? Or are we at times talking past part of our target audience that do not have the requisite accumulated knowledge and education that can only be realistically gained from years of hard and serious work in prestigious and exclusive universities? Can we hope to find a gathering of autodidacts that have a solid and working understanding of Kant and Hegel's aesthetics? Have we come to rely solely on the bleak assumption that the few stunned, intimidated, angry, or quiet participants will glean some operative nuggets of wisdom from the torrid of obscure ideas that we release onto the city? Is this a hopeless gap, or does there remain the possibility for a real connection between our conversations, art-making,

Out there in the internet ether one can find a video of good ol' Jack Dickson (a child that lives on a farm) pouring a bucket of cold water onto a dead pig covered with maggots. The pig covered with maggots is the Philadelphia art world, and criticism is the cold bucket of water.

*'Today we are going to see what happens when you dump a whole bucket of water on maggots, with the pig'*

**Criticism:** Something vicious has been let loose within this city. A splash of cold water in the form of lazy and mean spirited criticism has released the once dormant furies. Folks are really ripping into one another with their blogs and fake websites.

Complaining is not criticism. Bitching and moaning about the petty details of gallery management, articulating grievances such as "there are no placards" or "the gallery is only open on the weekends" serves the role of being a pernicious superego figure that enforces clichéd commercial gallery etiquette at the cost of productive messiness and an unorthodox vitality.

Criticism has in other historical moments and situations sketched out the vague contours of what is, and what is not expressible in a given historical moment. Think of contributions of Baudelaire and Greenberg. The horizon of what can be thought, encoded and decoded in our particular place (Philadelphia) and time (now) needs to be considered and worked out. This is something that

**Regionalism:** Many younger and emerging artists in Philadelphia appear to be striving for a kind of practice that does not bear the marks of local and embedded considerations. These concerns are banished for a 'universal' style in the hopes that they will find a glass slipper (being represented by a New York gallery), pay their student loans and get the fuck out of town.

If one spends a pleasant Saturday afternoon gallery hopping in our fair city, one mostly faces a tepid tidal wave of work that looks like copies of installation and video art that can be found on the pages of Artforum. In many art schools, students are instructed in the dejour and de facto codes of international art world etiquette and little else. Not enough emphasis has been placed on developing a situated practice that embodies a sense of context and place. Ambitious young artists are eager to uproot themselves and collect stamps in their passports. As attractive and rewarding as this may be, it may be at the expense of finding and cultivating an intellectually and emotionally enriching community that's rooted in a particular milieu.

Regional styles and considerations need to be supported and nourished. I don't mean the kind of regionalism that's associated with American Social Realists and the WPA, but one that seriously considers Philadelphia as a site for artistic production and reception. There seems to be no sense of caring for what is unique to this city. How do artists living in this city respond to the palimpsest of architectural styles found



criticism could work towards.

*'A'ight, Now we gonna watch good ol' Jack Dickson dump a whole bucket of water on a maggots'*

**Curating:** Many reputable arts organizations in this city are serving as proxy avatars for the individuals that manage them. Curating is similar to an artist's studio practice, and curators need not only represent artwork that mirrors and affirms their own assigned and chosen subject positions. This becomes boring and predictable. When one scans over a curator's past projects, and the artists chosen look, act, and think like the curator (or their ego ideal), it appears to be narcissistic. We should applaud exhibitions like 'Women and Pop' where the curator stepped outside of the assumptions of the prevailing doxa and provided visibility for artists who occupy different subject positions than his own. Philly needs more of this.

*'Aww, look at dat, aw aw.. aw-ha-ha, look at dat, aw aw aw, look at dat... ah ah-haha... look at dat people, that, THAT is nasty! Haha holy jeeesus! Woo!'*

in the buildings, lampposts, signs etc., that one finds while walking through the streets and alleys? Where is the artwork and public discourse that sheds light on the racial divisions between neighborhoods and within our own art community? How do the colors found in the ever-changing trees or aging facades of the city's row homes affect the palettes of those that live here? Where are the projects that discuss the undulating boundaries between affluent and struggling neighborhoods?

If Philadelphia is to be an internationally recognized city of home grown artistic merit, it may be helpful to isolate and identify what shared themes artists are reckoning with that address what it means to live here, as opposed to intellectually and manually copying what is in art magazines and imagined to be elsewhere.

-Holly Martins

# If The War In Iraq Was A House Party



(Phone rings)

Iraq: Hello?

America: Yo son, I heard you was having a house party!

Iraq: Who is this?

America: America!

Iraq: (silence) I... I don't know who told you that b..because I'm not having a party.

America: C'mon son! Everybody knows you're having a party tonight, I saw it on your facebook!

Iraq: Are you sure you've got the right person? Maybe it's Iran you're thinking of? Or North Korea? I'm definitely not having a party tonight man.

America: Why you lying for? You don't like me or something? You got beef?

Iraq: No! Not at all! It's just that I'm not having a party! I mean, I've got like 2 friends over, but we're just sitting around playing Super Mario Galaxy... I'd hardly call that a...

America: PARTY! I'm coming over! Actually, I'm outside already! Let me in!

Iraq: NO! Its not a...

(America hangs up, the doorbell rings instantly. Iraq stands silently in his living room)

America: Come on son! I know you're in there! Don't let me crawl in through the mail slot! You know I'm that crazy!

(Iraq makes his way to the front door and begrudgingly opens it)

America: YEEEEEEEEEAHHH BOYEEEEEEE!!!

Iraq: W, wait! Who are these people with you!

America: Chill the fuck out Iraq! I didn't bring no strangers! It's just England and Australia, I mean, we've been here before.

Iraq: Yeah, I remember that time and I didn't appreciate you crashing my grandmother's birthday party like that, god bless her soul.

America: (looking around) Wait a sec... I thought you said you had some friends over playing videogames? I just see one controller out...

Iraq: Well, I, uh, my friends left just before you got here.

America: C'mon Iraq! You don't gotta lie! I called you from your porch and I didn't see anybody leave. Dude, if you need some friends to start this party off, you know America has some friends nigga! Yo England! Call up Netherlands, Denmark, Japan, Poland, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, Norway, South Korea, Singapore, Macedonia, Latvia, Armenia, Mongolia, Philippines, Honduras, Thailand, Ukraine, and who ever else you can think of and tell 'em that Iraq is having a party and they need to roll through!

England: Should I invite Iceland?

America: Fuckit, why not?

Iraq: Jesus Christ.

(10 minutes later)

Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!

America: HOLEEE SHIT! Look at Singapore go!

Singapore: I'm faded son... think... I'm gonna... puke...

America: Here, puke in this.

Iraq: No! Not in my grandmother's urn!

Singapore: BLERPHGH!!!

America: Too late!

Singapore: I feel better!

Iraq: (violently shaking in silence)

America: Aw, c'mon Iraq! Loosen the fuck up! Go talk to a girl! Check out Iceland. She keeps looking at you. I think she likes you.

Iraq: Y..You think so?

America: Iraq, this is America you're talking to. I know chicks, and let me tell you Iceland is all about some Iraq right now!

Iraq: Well, uh.. I

America: Stop being a pussy and man up!

Iraq: Well... she sure does have those wonderful blue eyes... they're almost like crystal prisms...

America: Don't tell me that! Tell her!

(Iraq slowly approaches Iceland and speaks)

Iraq: Youhaveeyeslikeaglassprison.

Iceland: What? What the fuck does that mean?

Iraq: (shrugging shoulders) Never mind...

(The doorbell rings)

Iraq: Ugh! Who is it now!?!)

(Iraq marches to his front door and violently pulls it open)

Iraq: Listen motherfucker! This isn't a par...

Iran: Hey man, calm down!

Iraq: Oh, sorry Iran... I'm having a rough night...

(Iran looks over Iraq's shoulder and takes notice of the crazy party in progress)

Iran: Whoa, what's going on here?

Iraq: America invited himself over again, and he's totally trashing my house!

Iran: Dude, you just can't let America come over here anytime he wants to! You gotta stand up for yourself man!

Iraq: I try... (sound of glass breaking in the living room)

England: Oops! My bad Iraq! That wasn't valuable was it mate? I'll leave £20 on my way out.

Iraq: ...but America has more friends than me... what can I do?

Iran: Don't you worry old buddy, Iran has your back...

Iran has some friends... I'll be back in 20 minutes.

Iraq: Uh, okay.

(20 minutes later. Bricks come flying in through the windows in the living room as a gang of strangers lead by Iran bursts through the front door yelling at the top of their lungs)

America: Holy shit!

Iraq: WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?

Iran: Helping you out! America thinks his friends are the craziest lot in town, but I do decree that Iran and his

cousins are the funkiest bunch this side of the Tigris River! Okay cousins! Let's get this party started right!

Iran's Cousins: (indecipherable yelling)!!!

Iran: Let's... (picking up couch) get... (tossing it onto an old oak dresser) this... (placing Iraq's flatscreen on the floor) party... (breakdancing on it) started... (kicking Iraq's wii across the room) quickly! (lighting a portrait of Iraq's grandmother on fire)

(Iraq and America's friends (a majority of which have run out of the party in fear Iran's volatile cousins) stand silently in disbelief as Iran and his cousins lay waste to Iraq's home)

America: Dude... do you want me to do something about this?

Iraq: Do!!? Do something!?? What can you DO!? This is all your fucking fault!

America: I know, I know... listen... let me... I can fix this Iraq. Please, trust me.

Iraq: (silent for a few moments.) Okay... just do something, get them out of here, and you have to leave right afterward.

You and fucking England both have to go. This is a nightmare.

America: No problem. I'll be back in 5 minutes.

Iraq: Uh, okay.

(America runs out the front door. Iraq curls up into the fetal position as Iran and his cousins tear Iraq's home asunder.)

Iran's Cousins: (indecipherable yelling)!!!

Iraq: I just want to die.

(Suddenly, a Ford Bronco comes crashing through one of the walls of Iraq's living room killing several of Iran's cousin as well as England. The Bronco then proceeds to do donuts in Iraq's living room.)

Iraq: WHAAAAAATTTTT THE FUUUUUUCKKKKK!!!!

(America pokes his head out of the Bronco's window and yells over the combined noise of the engine's roar and of stuff breaking even further)

America: NOBODY STEALS AMERICA'S THUNDER AT HIS OWN PARTY!

(Iran reacts to this by hurling himself onto the hood of the Bronco)

Iran: THIS IS IRAN'S PARTY AND ALL THE THUNDER THAT EXISTS IN THE SKY IS MINE BY THE GRACE OF GOD'S WILL!

The Remainder of Iran's Cousins: (indecipherable yelling)!!!

Iraq: I just want to die.

-Jayson Scott Musson

and the politics of everyday life?

TT: Collective experiments can never predetermine their results. All of the scenarios you evoke are possibilities, and there are surely others. Unlike the teleological manifestos of yesteryear, we do not have a single goal that we are aiming to achieve by force of will. On the contrary, we are creating an alternative space—outside the academy as well as the market-driven art world—and putting forth a series of concrete propositions for collective debate and exchange. It is above all a question of carving out a *margin of utility* in a world in which many have claimed that there is no

longer any alternative to the status quo of late capitalism and its

*The Machete Group is an international consortium of artists and intellectuals based at Marginal Utility Gallery in Philadelphia. The Group runs the magazine Machete, offers seminars on current issues in the arts, and is invested in developing new collective forms of artistic and intellectual practice. Its members include Avi Alpert, David Dempewolf, Etienne Dolet, Ludwig Fischer, Alexi Kukuljevic, Holly Martins, Gabriel Rockhill, Theodore Tucker, and Yuka Yokoyama. For more information on the Machete Group and its activities, see*

*<http://www.marginalutility.org/category/machete-group/>*



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