

machete



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The Dross of Humanity: Justin Matherly at Marginal Utility

The future of the world is not my future.
“Show me a mousehole and I’ll fuck the world.” (Railworker at the soft-coal strip-mine Klettwitz, GDR) – Heiner Müller

You are the excrement which fell on the earth through the Devil’s anus. – Martin Luther

Justin Matherly’s recent exhibition at Marginal Utility Gallery— *Would That You Were The Last Of The Filth Which You Had To Remove / Why Does Your Flesh Shit?*—centers around the sculpture, knowing, even the grass We must tear it up so it will stay green. The fragmentary title of the sculpture alludes to the last lines of the opening choral ode of Heiner Müller’s *Mauser*, whereas the title of the show stages a collision between passages from Brecht’s *The Measure*

of the Painting and Sculpture of the Ancient Greeks (1755): “the only way for us [Moderns] to become great and even, if possible, inimitable, is through the imitation of the ancients.” As is well known, Winckelmann’s concept of imitation (mimesis) does not suggest that we ‘copy’ the ancients literally, for they themselves are inimitable. Yet, at the same time, he establishes the Greeks as an insuperable ideal. For Winckelmann the torso is the perfect embodiment of the ideal unity of sensible and intelligible, nature and artifice. For Matherly, it is not ideal unity that is to be imitated, but its inimitability.

His appropriation of the sculpture does not seek to retrieve its ideality, but rather foregrounds

that we re-imagine the torso as a depiction of Hercules sitting in the filth of Augias’ stable. The sculpture would thus not be an image of repose, but exhaustion and disgust. The task of the *Lehrstück* is to engage actor and spectator in a collective interrogation. In this case, the dialectic between old and the new, classical and modern, is held in suspense. (It is not a question of deciding for the new against old or vice-versa.) Like Müller’s comedy *Hercules 5*, Matherly seeks to interrogate both the need for and the loss of such classical models.

Rather than accepting the loss of such a metric, resorting to an art that strategically maneuvers within the interstices of the market, Matherly attempts to reopen the question of an art



Taken (*Die Maßnahme*) and Müller’s *Hercules 5*. The sculpture itself is based on the Belvedere Torso, whose mold Matherly had a chance to inspect at the museum of the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Art.

The density of references (to the *Lehrstück*, to Winckelmann and German Romanticism, to Sade, Artaud and Eisenstein, if we include the three ink-jet transfer prints) may seduce the spectator into an attempt to fully contextualize the sculpture but in reality serve the purpose of interrupting any tendency to approach the work formally. Already at this level, we see the subversive logic that operates on multiple levels of Matherly’s project.

Most immediately the sculpture reads as a grotesque and even comic parody of a neo-classical gesture: the literal attempt to imitate a classical model—the Belvedere Torso—whose paradigmatic status was secured in the 18th century by the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. However, for Winckelmann the imitation of the Greeks could not proceed literally through the appropriation of the Greek style. As he wrote in *Reflections on the Imitation*

precisely its materiality. In his rendering, the torso becomes a monument to the dross of humanity, to a being whose flesh shits, to a being who is contingent. By translating the sculptural form into his own idiomatic use of materials (cement, the use of tree-gators to create a mold, the adoption of medical prostheses to create a pedestal), he foregrounds the structural fragility of the sculptural body and the inaccessibility of the Winckelmannian ideal. Rather than contemplate the torso with “a quiet eye” in order to discern the “mysteries of art,” Matherly’s idiom highlights what Winckelmann referred to as the sculpture’s “mangled and mutilated” quality. This effect is heightened not only by literalizing its crippled character, but also by hollowing the sculpture out. The torso is less a ruin as a carcass.

Yet, the purpose of the subversion of the Greek ideal is not merely to debase art’s pretension to spiritual elevation. The sculpture is to function, as the title suggests, as a *Lehrstück* (quite literally, a learning piece). For although the title of the sculpture alludes to play *Mauser*, the reference to Hercules 5 in the title suggests

that—in Müller’s idiom—could be *altgierig* (greedy for the old). Matherly’s interest in Sade lies perhaps in his literally depiction of characters forced to consume, to devour, everything—even the undevourable: SHIT.

Matherly, like Müller, remains committed, beyond all belief, to an art that cannot exist, which is to say, survive, without its utopian function. Like Avi Alpert’s description of Ludwig Fischer in a previous *Machete*, this commits Matherly to what Alpert rather perspicaciously, with reference to Roland Barthes, terms the pornographic impulse—an impulse to show everything, to devour everything (to speak with Müller) and which thus shows nothing. But it is precisely in showing nothing that the work enunciates the inexistence of the whole—the inexistence of the very ideal to which Winckelmann calls us. Like the railworker of Klettwitz, Matherly accepts the conditions of his existence for the purpose of finding a mouse-hole.

Alexi Kukuljevic

EVIL

I've never understood the concept of being a villain. Y'know, like being a villain for the sake of being a villain. The classic, "I'm a bad guy, just because..." the "I'm gonna blow up the orphanage just because..." Even as a youth I had a hard time wrapping my mind around this concept, which caused me to become quite obsessed with the devil;

"So mommy, the devil is a monster that used to be an angel?"

"Yes, Jayson."

"And the devil lives in hell and he stays down there punishing the people who did bad things while they were alive on earth?"

"Yes, Jayson."

"And he stays down there all day and all night for ever and ever, punishing bad people for ever and ever until forever?"

"That's right Jayson."

"But mommy! If he's always punishing bad people then why is the devil so bad?" "Because he's the devil, Jayson."

"Yeah, but mommy! If he stays down there doing bad things to bad people because they broke God's rules, then devil is really a good guy, right? It's just like how daddy punishes me, right mommy?"

"Jayson, your father is not like the devil (though her opinion would soon change after their divorce, but as always, I digress), the devil is the embodiment of evil, your father on the other hand is—"

"But mommy! It can't be fun living in hell! The devil must care about being good or why would he punish bad people? If he was bad wouldn't the devil give bad people super powers to do more bad things more efficiently? But mommy! All he does is stay in hell punishing the bad people! He must love good!"

"Jayson, go to your room, turn the lights off and don't come out until you hear me call you for dinner."

"But mommy!"

So yeah, I never really could understand arbitrary evil at all.

Admittedly, the devil may be a pretty extreme example of villainy, yet he still illustrates the problem my young mind had with the concept of evil and villains all together. Being an avid lover of super hero comic books during my teenage years, I was a witness to a great many of grand plots contrived by the supposedly mad and genius minds of countless super villains, but all these evil plots seemed to lack any real vision. From Magneto down to Gargamel, none of the greatest villains from the comic book pages or the television screen had anything really planned past the ruling the planet stage. For example, Gargamel was hell bent on capturing 6 Smurfs so he could use them in some alchemical process that would result in the Smurfs turning to gold. Understandably this made sense because there were mad fucking Smurfs in Smurf Village, so one could postulate that if you could capture the entire village full of smurfs and subsequently turn them all into gold, you'd be a rich bastard. But poor old Gargamel couldn't even catch 6 fucking Smurfs and he tried every episode of The Smurfs to do so.



And rather than throw in the towel and be reasonable about his numerous failures, our homeboy Gargamel kept at it like a dog in heat humping on a young lady's calf. I guess there are worse sisyphian stones to push, but goddamn Gargamel, how much gold are you really expecting to get from 6 tiny Smurfs? It couldn't be as much as you could get if you gave up the Smurf chase and got yourself even the most menial of day jobs. Which leads me to believe that Gargamel's feverent need for gold, coupled with his apparent unwillingness to work for gold, leads me to two conclusions that (a) Gargamel never really needed the gold in the first place or he'd just get a job so (b) he was most likely a trust fund wizard and really only pursued villainy out of boredom, which I think is archetypical of many villains and their being evil just because. This being evil without any apparent purpose is the defining essence of the villain, whether super or just mad, and it is this that differentiates the villain from a criminal.

Now criminals are a lot that exist on the complete opposite end of the evil spectrum, if such a spectrum is said to exist, and they are much more easy to understand than the villain. For starters, most criminals are simple in their schemes and want not for the total annihilation of the globe, or for the destruction of the orphanage or to construct a giant laser beam that they'll use in order to inscribe their name upon the side of the moon. That type of shit is just too far out for a criminal, to bourgeoisie for the true criminal mind. Schemes of that nature take tons of extraneous capital to execute, and takes the free time that is normally afforded only to the affluent in order to concoct. And simply put, most criminals are poor as fuck. You know what 90% of criminals want? They want to fucking eat. Literally. Excluding insider traders, child rapists, pedophiles, and serial killers, most criminal activity is born out of varying degrees of desperation which is steeped in an everyday

need for the pragmatic articles of sustenance instead of the large scale and fantastic assertion of one's will over the mass of the population. Often many a criminal will find their way onto the payroll of a supervillain, but it's highly debatable if the criminals share the ideology of their employers who'd soon wipe out their own employees if they could only surmount the main obstacle of their villainous desires which normally comes in the form of the super hero or the UN. And when confronted by the superhero, the criminals in the employ of the villain will put up little or no fight, often feigning defeat as soon as a superhero enters the villain's secret compound, either by falling down at the slightest physical contact with the hero or intentionally missing their shots at the superhero. Shit's really sad, and it is understandable why the villain grows in resentment for the world at large, when not even the proletariat lugs in their employ will put forth an effort worth their wages.

But like I said before, criminals just want to eat, not dominate. A stick up kids wants your money and valuables, the possible pistol-whipping of a victim may be a bit on the sadistic side, but all they want is luchini falling from the sky (i.e. the money in your pockets). A burglar wants the same thing, but bad timing will place a resident at home at the same time the burglar is shopping in their home, and hilarity ensues. Most drug dealers, even though they desire the evisceration of their competition, ultimately want this out of security for their conceived drug empire, which really stands for the security of family, while the villain wants the evisceration of mostly everything because, well, just because.

-jayson musson

Broken symmetry
Light heavy
See the abstract form that underlies
Draw form the space between
Walk around move with object the prop moves you
Draw around your objects draw the space between
Turn upside down and sideways
Draw without looking
Show object tell a story
Artist as anthropologist
Place two ideas side by side
What am I afraid of

Find a scene from a film
Play it
Present your version

Talk a bit about parades banners sticks politics etc

Feel the weight of your body
Nothing empty no goal
Raise arms up and down while walking as in series of
stills in a film
Be aware of others in the space
Move in relation to others
Double your speed triple it
Stop

Imagine a floor plan with large shapes move among them
Distance
Signal near and far telepathy magic show
Signal ask a friend to give you a sentence
Add sound
Fragmented crushed turned inside out
Dream
Condensation and displacement

Mask the stage the place write a story
How did we make this just begin
Space of the monitor hidden space

Get long floppy sticks from the lumber yard poles work
with poles with trees
With blocks pieces of wood tied to your feet hold blocks
hit them together overhead

Medium of water move as if at bottom of sea
Great pressure
Blindfolded edge of sea the deep sea

If I could remember it would be simple things

Begin

Mask

Exercises
Exchange stage directions
Draw a diagram of your movements
Ask a friend to give you a sentence
Exchange diagrams
Move among imaginary shapes
Lift throw lie
Work in pairs signal near and far
Do one thing think another
Endings and beginnings
Repeat action with and without sound

Broken symmetry
Drawing games
Folded paper

Ways of drawing
Draw in space on the wall mark as you move
Fold paper
Make a mask
Filmic terms depth of field montage cut edit deep focus
frame overlay dissolve

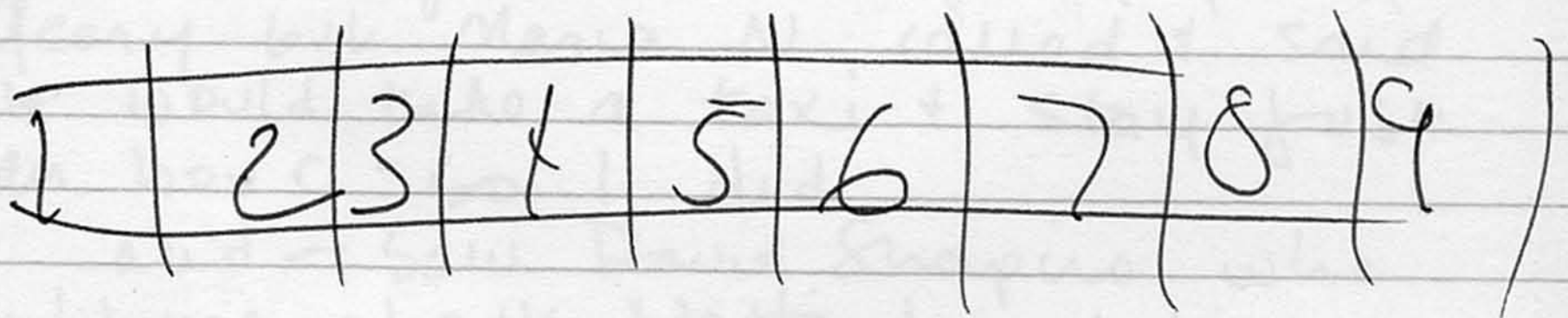
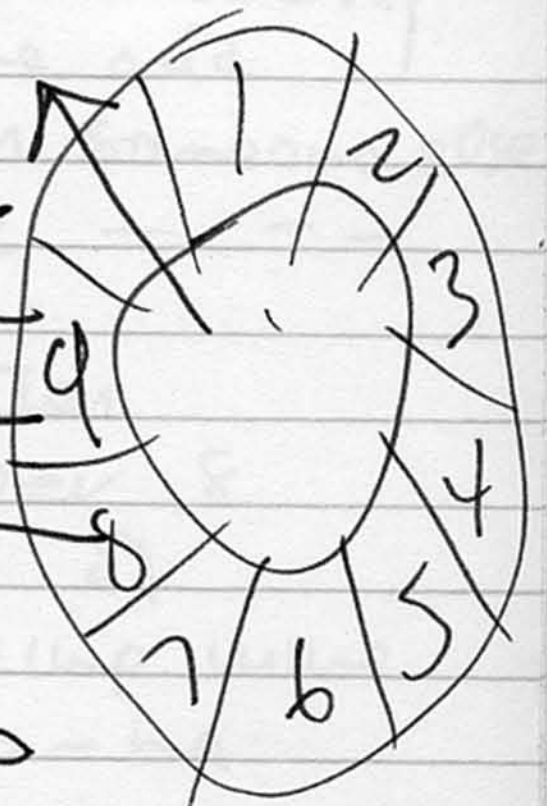
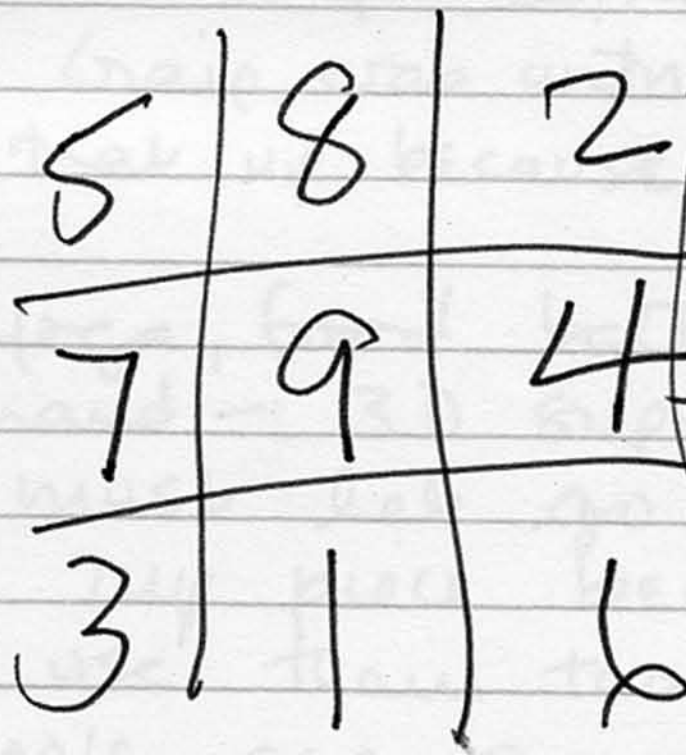
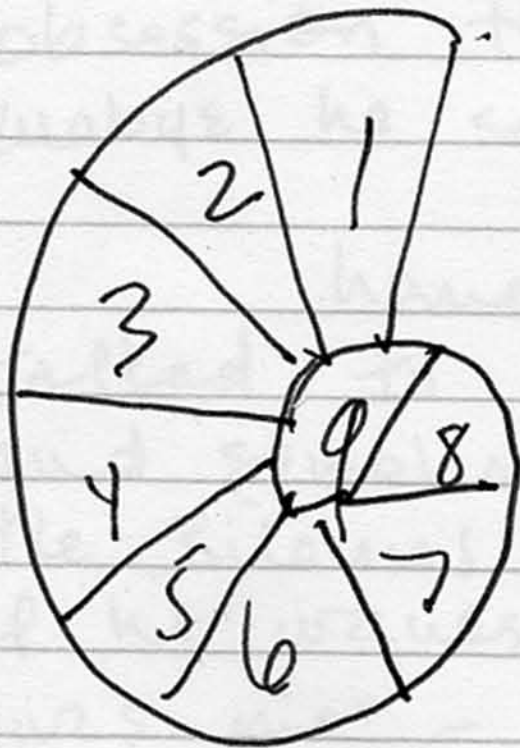
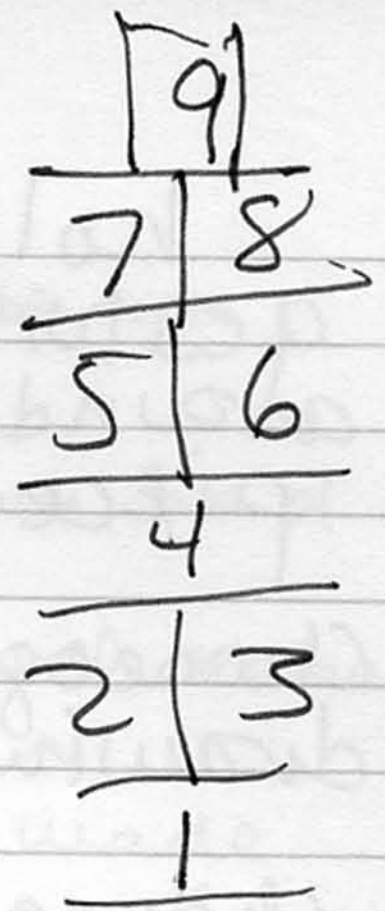
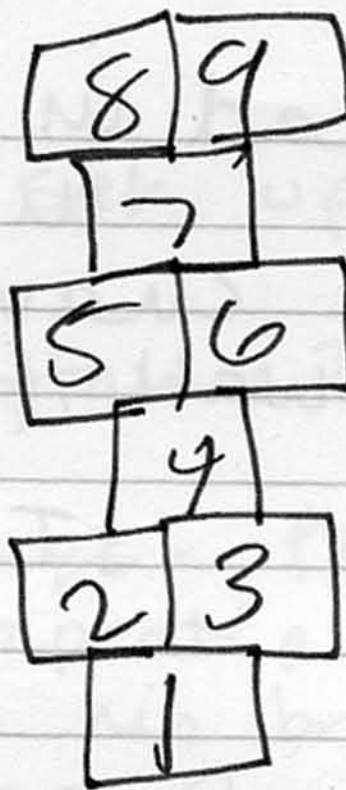
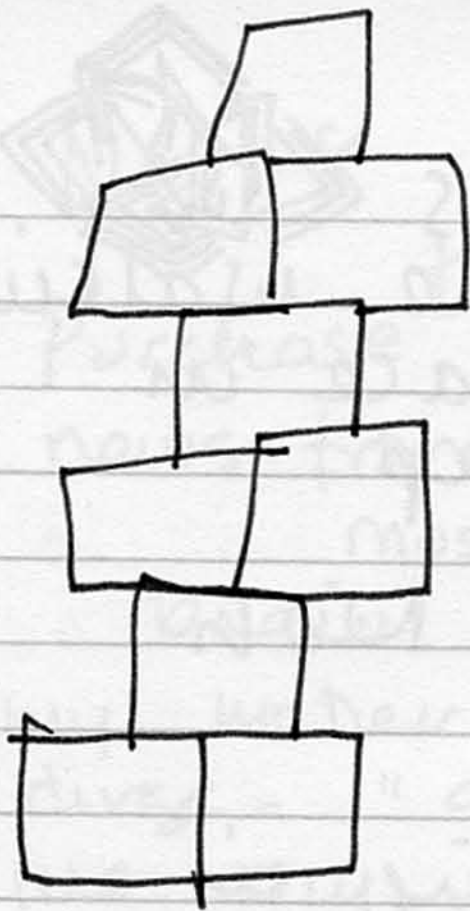
Ways of drawing
Draw for an audience
Draw contours
Without looking
Drawing as icon as emblem as sign group drawings
animals objects diagrams lines and circles
secret drawings
draw with body

waltz
ritual
through a lens
camera as pencil
list wooden bird milk cow dung grass bl
involuntary sculpture
blood sky
imprint
clay dough desire pleasure pain flour meat rice butcher

exchange movements she flaked along hesitating almost
clumsy never completing a gesture
body part by part
where does it take you
weight lean fall

warm up relax

-Joan Jonas



Ten Theses on Precision (A Draft)

Definitions:

- A) Imprecision is to be considered as any practice which relies on an inchoate assemblage of elements in the hope that they generate meaning.
- B) Precision is here understood as practices whose meaning is generated (though not contained) by the specifics of their representation and enunciation.

Theses:

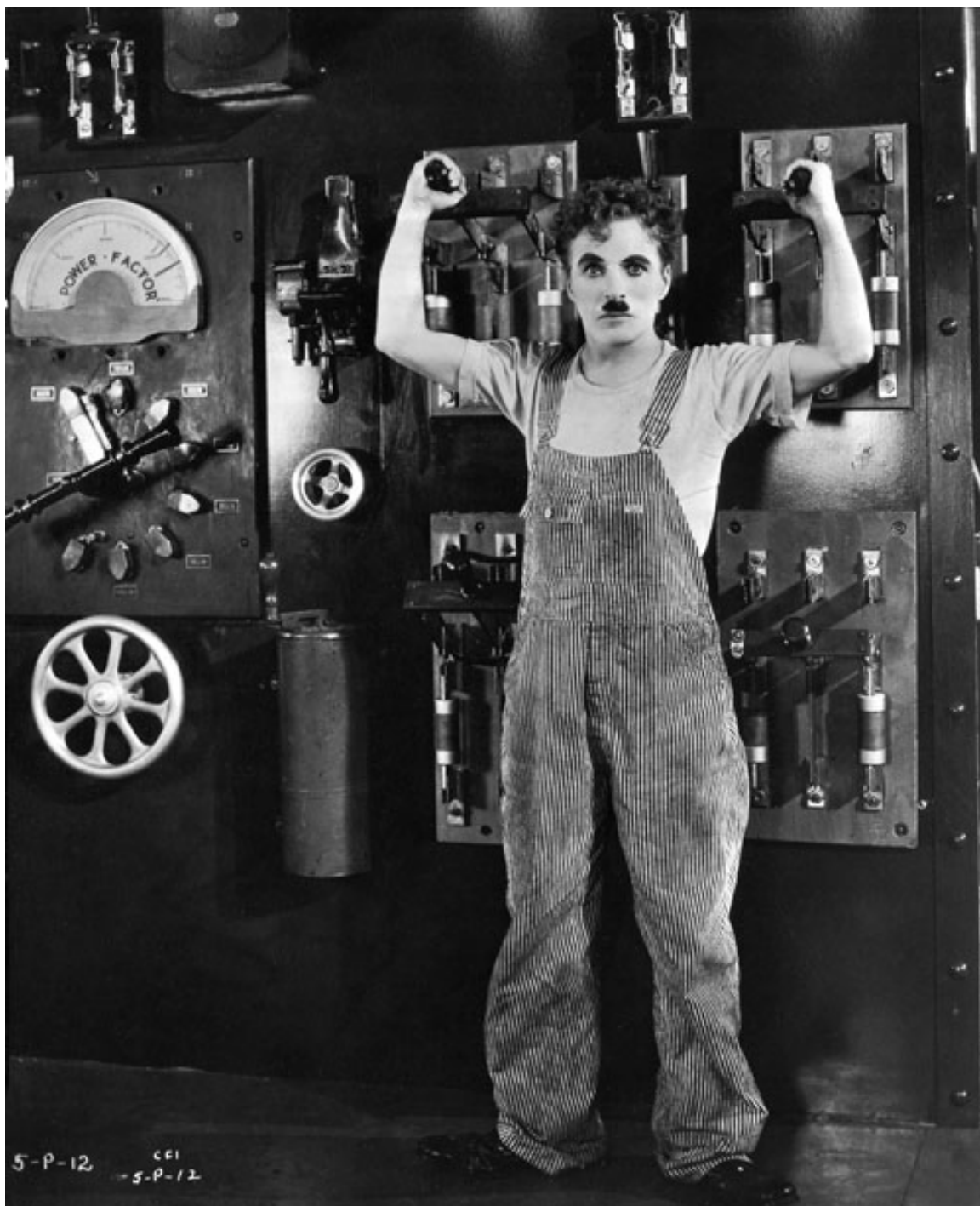
1. The imprecise is never to be discarded. Allowance is to be made for the fortuitous moment of insight which the haphazard combination may bring forth.
2. The imprecise, is nevertheless, to be called into question as concomitant with an incapacity to properly abstract from the present.
3. Given that immersion is by definition non-reflexive, imprecision is a submission to the present against the freedom of rupture and abstraction. The imprecise is the unfree. Since the unfree is the only position from which to speak this unfreedom, the unfree retains the necessity of witnessing. Imprecision then does not raise the question; it gives testimony to the necessity of the question.
4. Neither rupture nor abstraction is to be treated as a good in itself; it is only the condition for the possibility of the precise. Precision claims neither immanence nor transcendence; indeed it has no interest in such claims. Rather, it uses the ability to abstract from a given situation as a moment in consciousness which can be leveraged toward the end of a richer and thicker description of a given situation.
5. Imprecision is an answer to a question of which it has forgotten the question. The question proper is posed by precision. In posing the question, precision's analysis is formally prepositional:
 - a. through. precision operates by seeing through the present moment to

the set of geographic, temporal and binary codes embedded in it.

- b. between. precision does not take sides – it moves between sides towards the very condition of decision.
 - c. for. the analytic of precision is also founded in a responsibility for a thought-action it makes possible.
6. "Thought-action" implies precision's refusal not of a binary (thought/action), but, more precisely, of imprecision's reliance on this binary. Imprecision presupposes that there is a complex unit of thoughts and actions whose corollaries cannot be traced. (Imprecision here is a pernicious skepticism.) Precision, while accepting the skeptic's challenge of the relation between self/world/language, and acknowledging the originary incommensurability of each of these terms within itself, ultimately finds this point painfully obvious. Precision, following Cavell, only finds scandalous the skepticism which enables defeatism. Precise analysis finds it more profitable to work though the "thought-actions" in such a way as to create a livable set of social relations (and with a mild gesture towards utopia). Thought-actions, then, name the historically available

continuities between self, world and language whose manifestations cluster into intensities across the three spectrums, in different yet integrated ways.

7. "To summarise the first, cardinal point of method, I may say each phenomenon ought to be studied through the broadest range possible of its concrete manifestations; each studied by exhaustive survey of detailed examples." Malinowski continues, the precise analysis leads out into the totality of the social system. Moving beyond Malinowski, precision moves from the specific situation under analysis to the planetary system and stretches as far as it can. Precision is not narrow. It is only precise.
8. Precision does not have a corollary image representation, but it finds its closest kinship in the map or the diagram. Precision does not demand clarity in representation, only that the claims made present a specific logic for their mode of expression.
9. In the realm of aesthetics, precision accepts Heidegger's hypothesis that the art-work discloses a world. It departs immediately, however, in denying Heidegger's self-understanding of historical time. If, for Heidegger, truth is historical to the extent that it manifests itself over time towards the culmination of a people's destiny, for precision, truth is historical in the sense that it can never arrive at such a destiny. Truth is neither unconcealment nor unfolding; it is the exposition of a concept, analysis, representation, experience, event, situation, and so forth, which enables a comprehension across the given possibilities for thought-action.
10. Precision understands Marx's statement "philosophers have always sought to interpret the world; the point is to change it" to imply a formal corollary between the two sides of the equation. There is no truly precise analysis/language which does not enable one to change the world. There is no truly precise event which does not enable the world to change the subject/language. There is no truly precise individual who does not change language/the world.





Machete Group Meeting

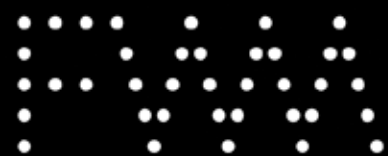
On Appropriation

December 18th 2010

8-10 pm

319 North 11th st. 2nd flr, Philadelphia PA

Building on Debord's notion of detournement in his chapter "On Negation," the Machete Group will address the theme of appropriation. In this turn a new set of problems emerges: Does appropriation name a useful tactic in the recuperation of genuine critique? Is appropriation ever able to truly wrest the taken image from the dominant culture? In what ways can appropriation serve as a regressive move – in the colonial encounter, for instance? The discussion will be framed with theoretical readings from Isabelle Graw, Benjamin Buchloh and Homi Bhabha, and will be presented by Avi Alpert, Alexi Kukuljevic and Edward Schexnayder.



Joan Jonas: *Reading Dante II*

Special Live Performance:

Saturday, 11 December 2010, 7 p.m.

Reception starting at 6 p.m.



The Fabric Workshop and Museum

1214 Arch Street Philadelphia, PA

RSVP to michele@fabricworkshopandmuseum.org
to reserve a seat for this special one-night performance.

Photographer: Greg Weight
Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York

Machete Interview with Nathalie Heinich

For a Comprehensive Sociology of Artistic Imaginaries Part II

Gabriel Rockhill: In the modern reconfiguration of the social imaginary of art, you have argued that beauty has largely been discredited as a criterion of evaluation, in favor of aesthetic criteria based on the historical evolution of the arts. You have even claimed that artists today are incited to ‘make history,’ to intervene in their specific conjuncture in such a way that they leave an indelible mark on the march of art history. This suggests that modern artists are working within a novel regime of temporality in which their inscription in history is of central importance. Do artists today have a new relationship to history? Do modern artists—and their critics—need to justify their practices by producing historical narratives that situate their activities in a temporal trajectory giving meaning and value to their work?

Nathalie Heinich: Once again, the blurring of the criterion of beauty is proper to contemporary art rather than to modern art. In modern art, the main criterion—though rarely explicated as such—is the expression of the artist’s interiority (Kandinsky’s famous “inner necessity”). In contemporary art, the systematic game with common sense expectancies towards the very nature of art automatically brings out an ostensible indifference or even antagonism to the value of beauty – just think of Duchamp’s *Fountain* or of Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista*. A much more relevant criterion today is that of meaning, signification – whatever its modes of expression. This is why the most common comment on contemporary art work is not “it is beautiful,” but “it is interesting.” The “meaning” may be related either to the artist’s biography, or to the general state of society, or else to art history. Young, unexperimented or bad artists try to provide their own discourse on the “meaning” of their work. The best ones are clever enough to leave this work to specialized commentators (art critics, curators, art historians), as Duchamp did for his readymade. Contrary to a commonplace quite frequent even in art history books, Duchamp never said or wrote “*ceci est de l’art*” (this is art) about his readymades – he just let it be assessed by those who have the authority to say so, even if he had to wait almost forty years.

Gabriel Rockhill: Against the various descriptions of artistic modernity or post-modernity as an era of pure liberation and unbridled experimentation, you have argued that the “vocational regime” of the modern era is structured by clear criteria of evaluation that are neither arbitrary nor ephemeral. Do you find that there is a stable and consistent social imaginary behind what is often seen as the anomic free-for-all of contemporary artistic production?

Nathalie Heinich: There is indeed a common misunderstanding about the artists’ freedom in the modern and contemporary art world: the idea that they would be allowed to do “*n’importe quoi*” (“anything goes”), because their works do not respect the traditional rules of depiction or even art. In fact, the rules of the game are

quite strict: in order to deconstruct the traditional forms of an art work, one has to understand (even if it is not conscious) the implicit rules, and to possess a certain knowledge of the previous deconstructions in order not to repeat what has already been done – because originality has remained a major criterion since the “regime of singularity” imposed itself in the course of the 19th century. Once an artist is accepted inside the field of contemporary art, a lot of possibilities are offered him – though they tend to be reduced with the passing of time (the spectrum of possibilities was enormous in the sixties, when contemporary art came out; it is much smaller now). But for a beginner, it is quite difficult to be recognized as a “contemporary artist”: it requires an excellent intuition of what may or may not be done – an intuition which is mainly sociological: I regularly say that contemporary artists are the best sociologists, but through their acts rather than through their writings.

Ordinary people usually ignore this set of constraints: it is as if someone were watching a chess game without knowing its rules, without even knowing that it’s a game – he or she would



believe that the two people sitting there were just pushing the pieces randomly (“*n’importe comment*”), or freely (“*en toute liberté*”). Moreover, I do think that artists today are unconsciously invested with the task of embodying a collective phantasm of total freedom, of “*toute-puissance*” (“omnipotence”). They are somehow like those children who are allowed to do whatever they wish, because adults perceive them as embodying the very personal freedom they long for. This is why, I guess, the illusion of the artists’ “total freedom” is so strongly grounded in so many minds.

Gabriel Rockhill: You have boldly affirmed that the avant-garde dream of uniting aesthetics and politics is a myth because it purports to resolve an irreducible “objective contradiction”: aesthetic avant-gardism is linked to the autonomization of art and tends toward elitism, whereas political avant-gardism implies artistic heteronomy and tends toward populism. Does this mean that social practices, on your account, abide by the strict logic of conceptual oppositions, and that artists are thereby forced to choose between the purity of their art and the sincerity of their

political commitments? Doesn’t this presuppose an *a priori* distinction between art and politics? If so, what are we to make of the various aesthetic practices that appear to be part and parcel political, such as national anthems or the tradition of protest songs?

Nathalie Heinich: The very fact that you are not convinced of the distinction between art and politics clearly demonstrates the strength of that modern belief in the necessary conjunction of artistic and political aims – a “myth,” as you say, that emerged during the second half of the 19th century and flourished during the whole 20th century, as I demonstrated in *L’Elite artiste*. Such a belief has almost no grounding in reality (except for the Surrealist and the Suprematist movements, for a few years), but it has solid axiological reasons: after the French Revolution, the privilege bestowed on artists (creators) in place of aristocrats had to be compensated by their marginality in order to match the democratic values of merit and personal achievement. Marginality meant either the famous “*vie de bohème*” (“bohemian lifestyle”), or a political involvement on the side of poor people. The problem is that the poor do not understand or appreciate avant-garde art, because they lack the cultural clues for it; and that avant-garde artists are in greater need of the approval of their peers and of specialists than that of the general public. This is why politically involved art is usually considered “bad” art, whereas “good” art (that is, innovative art) only meets with the misunderstanding or even disdain of the “*peuple*,” the lay people with or for whom politically engaged artists dream of working. It is a kind of “tragedy of culture,” as Simmel would have said – a tragedy that may find a solution only in phantasms...

As for “protest songs,” we move from major arts to “popular culture.” They are obviously not the core of the ideal-typical concept of art in our societies. Instead, they constitute a rather marginal (conceptually), though quite massive (numerically) expression of a political commitment through artistic tools. The singers who grounded their careers only on protest songs are quite rare, if not totally unknown: a protest song is rather a special genre inside a much broader repertoire. Using this genre, singers try to combine their political commitment as citizens with their artistic aims. This is a quite respectable desire, though one might just as well consider that these two aspects of a personal identity—citizenship, professional competence—belong to different arenas and do not have to be mixed up. This is indeed my position as a social scientist, and I strongly stick to it. This is also the reason why I am so skeptical in the face of the discourse on “political art”: mixing up two very different values has never been the best way to achieve both. It is much more efficient to separate them and try to do one’s best in each respective domain. But people commonly consider plurality as a flaw, and unicity as something to long for – probably an old inheritance from monotheism...

- This interview was conducted in Paris, France in October, 2010.