machete

VOL. 1, NO 3 DECEMBER 2009

A Fearless Foot and an Unscrupulous Mind (A Scream from the Extremity)

One reason for the asphyxiating atmosphere in which we live without possible escape or recourse—and for which we are all responsible, even the most revolutionary among us—is this respect for what has already been written, formulated, composed or performed, what has been given form, as if all expression were not finally exhausted and has not reached the point where things must fall apart if they are to begin again.
–Ludwig Fischer and Mattin

For all those interested in the perfidy of critique, let me recall an event, an intervention, a date, January 3rd, 2009—in which I, Ludwig Fischer, was less a collaborator than an accomplice, a participant in a kind of cerebral crime. Through a mixture of friendship, convenience and comradely commitment, Mattin solicited myself and one L.F. to play the part of the critic, to be responsible for introducing a critical incision into his performance with Drunkdriver at the Silent Barn.

The occasion for this reflection is the recent release of Mattin's and Drunkdriver's album, *List of Profound Insecurities* by Philadelphia's Badmaster label—a potent document of their shared commitment to those sonic experiments that trouble classificatory regimes and demineralize the obvious. However, despite its many virtues, it could not but be a hopeless substitute for the insecurity and the prevailing sense of threat that pervaded their performances—an impossible record of their essential cruelty, their hunger after life and cosmic strictness, to which I lent a piteous foot. The many joys of the album poorly convey the shear effort of their collaboration, its difficulty and antagonism. Let us recall, invoking one of my many masters, that effort means cruelty, existence through effort is cruel.

It is important not to let the antagonism engendered and internalized between Mattin and Drunkdriver, whose faint echo can be heard on the recording only with immense effort, fade into indifference. Let this little text, however insufficiently, serve to amplify this echo.

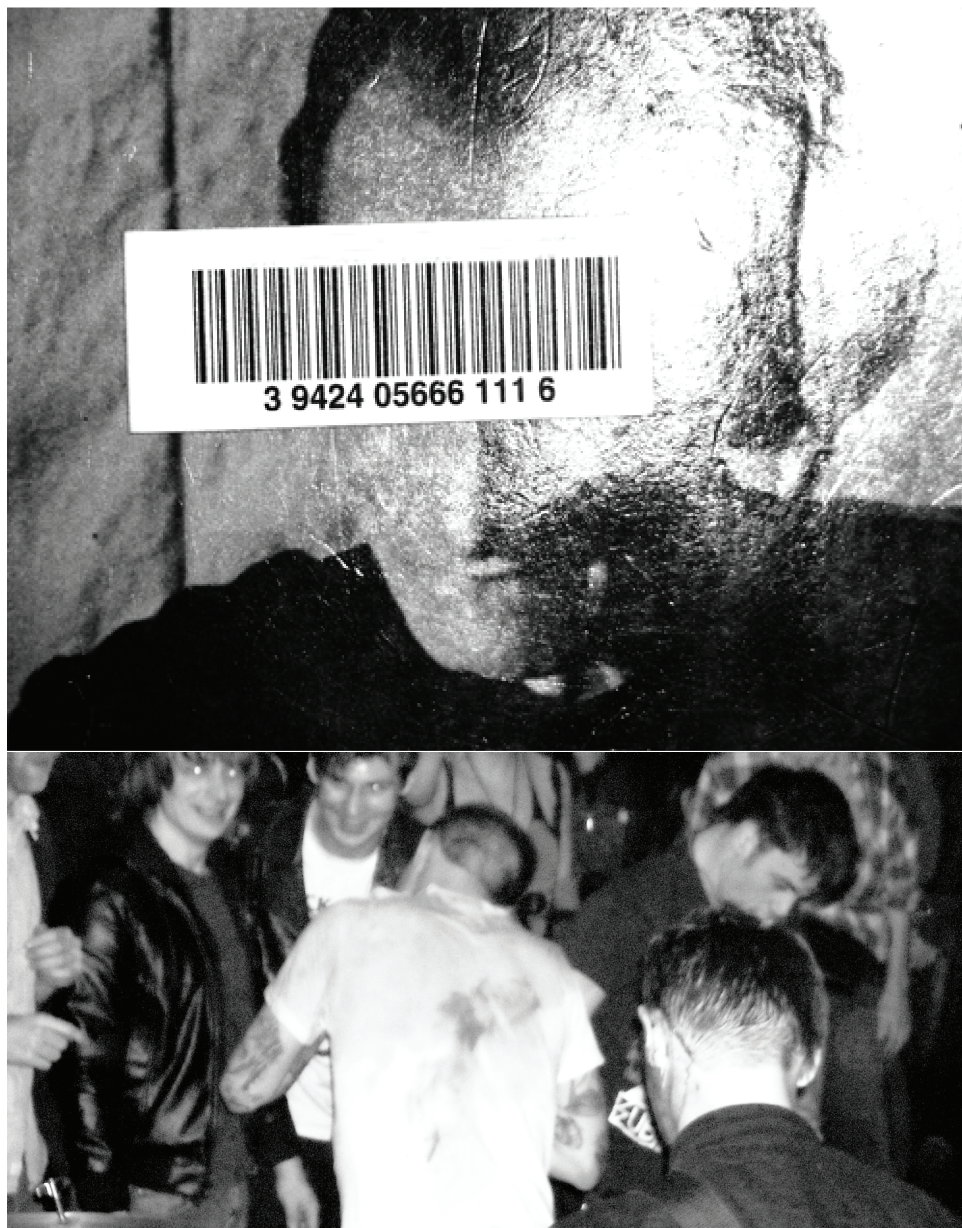
For those familiar with Drunkdriver's refined malevolence doubtless know that the brute materiality of their performance buries all pretension, especially to sense, forcing language to reside somewhere between thought and gesticulation. Michael Berden's microphone seems an extension of a striking fist, a weapon that he frequently swings like a ball and chain or hurls into the crowd, convinced that a performance, like a dream, must be bloody and inhuman in order to unforgettably root in the audience an idea of perpetual conflict. Yet, the addition of Mattin and his fateful instrumentalization of my foot that evening at the Silent Barn, served to reveal that the precedent of their performances and the source of their vitality seemed to lie less within the annals of punk-rock and the proliferation of its sub-genres, as within the tortured screed of the theater of cruelty.

Mattin's cerebrally focused machinations introduced a new tension into their performances that could not but be perceived as a threat to Drunkdriver's organic integrity. Sometimes the critic must risk destroying the object of one's love.

The integrity of Drunkdriver's sound depends upon their ability to generate a momentum that careens centrifugally, always at the limits of control. And Berden's pact is to place himself at the mercy of this limit, affirming the dangerous vitality of a ship manned by a drunken master, kept on course by its own forward momentum. Mattin's interventions that night took aim at this pact by tactically interrupting the momentum, severing Berden from the sound that acts as his rudder.

For all appearances Mattin integrated himself quite well into the band. However, he set strict temporal parameters on the development of the performance. These restraints served to construct a situation that forced the band, Mattin included, to react to conditions that were artificial and designed to challenge the groups organic integrity by interrupting its development and exposing it to the vicissitudes of contingency.

My role was clearly defined. Ten minutes into the performance I had to step onto a pedal that cut the amplification to the guitars, signaling the drummer to stop. Only the microphone was left on. At fifteen minutes, the amplification was to be turned back on and the performance was to conclude at twenty. In the interval, as if to intensify the cruelty of the situation, Mattin planted a heckler, one L.F., to critically malign the performance. The extreme austerity and simplicity of these restraints served to condense the critic's great contempt to the muscular exercise of the foot—a blow I delivered like a nerve spasm that suddenly cut short the life of the organism, opening the band to unforeseen contingencies. This simple exercise shifted control from the band to the audience and suddenly Drunkdriver (Mattin included) had to confront head on the intensities that their sound had engendered. By suddenly cutting all amplification except to the microphone, the band's sovereign, Michael Berden, was cut loose and had to reel independently of the noise colossus that normally steers him. The crowd grew restless as the time unfolded, each second being felt, their ire stoked by L.F.'s aspersions.



By ratcheting up the cruelty to ascetic proportions, Mattin designed a perilous situation, letting loose forces that the band itself could not endure. The drummer broke his commitment to follow the parameters. He began to drum, deploying a ritualistic and clichéd drumrole to anchor Berden's chaotic meanderings. Mattin, struck in the head by the swinging microphone and bleeding, momentarily fled the scene, not before smearing audience members with his blood. The performance continued, but now under conditions that were unpredictable, flawed, botched.

The collaboration went awry. But by maintaining oneself within this prolonged lacercation something was touched upon that no party could really sustain or maintain. Mattin was less a transient member of the ensemble than a rogue particle, a foreign agent that MUST be expelled by its host. The violent intensity that their collaboration fomented could neither be sustained by Mattin or Drunkdriver, for it was bent on their mutual disintegration. Such is the end of all vital collaborations.

Mattin's interventions, like my own, proceed at times with surgical precision and others with the crudeness of a cranial blow from a battleaxe. There are no doubt times and situations appropriate to both actions. At the Silent Barn, he swung the battle-axe. Yet, the failure of the performance exposed the radical difficulty, the inhuman effort required of us critics who seek to question structures of mastery. I for one share the conviction that the present state of society is iniquitous and ought to be destroyed.

If Mattin's unflinching commitment to improvisation is a certain gust of fresh air, situating his experiments in the interstices between performance, punk-rock, noise and electro-acoustic improv, it no doubt due to the innocence with which he leaves formal concerns to the aesthetes, to those eardrum sophisticates whose erstwhile commitments amount to little more than the institution of a new form of decorum.

With an untroubled insistence Mattin refuses the autonomy of the auditory, inscribing it at all times within a social apparatus that the musician whether consciously or unconsciously performs. Decorum is not merely an external ornament, but an affective regime that one internalizes and then performs. And music, as with all of the arts, is worth little if cannot interrupt this process that leads to new forms of consensual judgment, to new forms of mastery, serving as a new stimulus to good taste, confirming rather than challenging the established order. It is thus above all in the performance that Mattin seeks to dislocate, disturb, or at a minimum expose the mechanics of aesthetic refinement, reminding himself as much as his listeners of that now ancient adage: To be done with judgment!

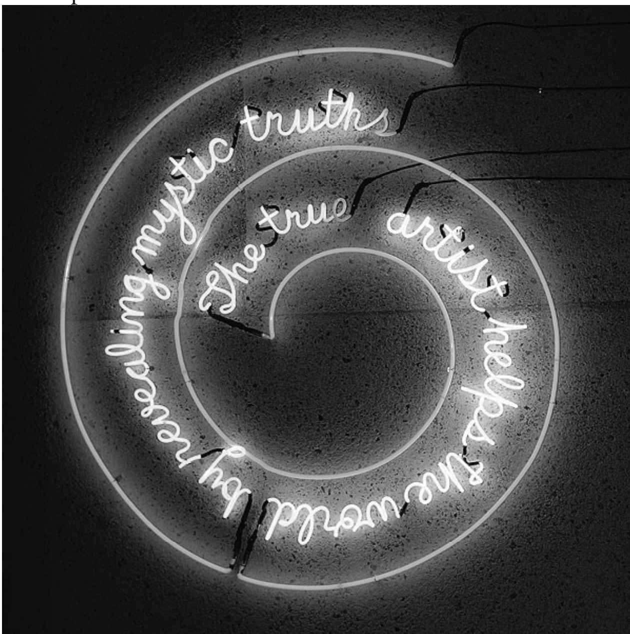
One must treat *List of Profound* as a literal record, a document not simply to be listened to, but read. If most improvisation labours over the introduction of a little necessity into contingency, obsessing over compositions perilously perched at the very edge of disappearance, Mattin perverts this procedure, accelerating the contingent, the random, the chaotic in order to make thought coincide with actions. One should attend to those moments in the record when the machinic crackle of Mattin's laptop obliterates the difference between foreground and background, the structure swallowing that which it structures, the master exposing his bloody head.

In such rare moments the guiding proposition of Drunkdriver's and Mattin's short but intensely agonistic collaboration becomes discernable:
Ah, that's it, that's life! Well, it's a mess.

-Ludwig Fischer

Leaving No Maggot Lonely: Bruce Nauman at the PMA

Currently on exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art are the two site-sound installations, "Days" and "Giorni" (2009), that debuted at Bruce Nauman's installation "Topological Gardens", which won the Golden Lion at the 53rd Venice Biennale and was organized by Carlos Basualdo and Michael Taylor of the PMA. One can only admire the wit, rigour and humor of Bruce Nauman's work, the strange and untimely vitality of which is fore-grounded by the presence of such early works as "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" (1967) and "Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)" (1968). Through these varied media (video, neon and sound installation) Nauman persistently returns to the problem of how sense and meaning is effaced by the literality or materiality of its performance, inscription or utterance.



The great intelligence of "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" (1967) lies in the economy of its critical gesture. The sense of the neon sign, what is written, is short-circuited by means of how the language is literally presented. The media—the neon sign whose chief referent lies not in art but in the commercial realm—serves to pervert, even negate, what is signified. The cliché and hackneyed romantic notion of the artist as sage is exposed as an idea that serves commercial interests (the peddling of artistic wares). What is expressed (the artist as genius) is thus precisely the inverse of what is literal written; the literality of the linguistic presentation serves to debase the value of what is expressed; the meaning of the content negated by its means of expression (the reduction of art to commercially produced sign of itself). The mystical truth that is here revealed by the artist Nauman is that there is no mystical truth. Art like all other forms of sense is inscribed within a social context that imperils its signification. Such a brutal demythologization of artistic practice and the role of artistic subjectivity was equally explored in works such as "Failing to Levitate in the Studio" (1966). In "Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)" (1968), one of the Philadelphia Museum's recent acquisitions also currently on display, Nauman painstakingly and repetitively walks with a hyperbolically stilted gait. Precisely choreographed, Nauman lifts each leg, straightening it before letting it drop. Rather than walking, gravity seems to force him to lunge forward, propelled along by physical forces rather than some shadowy will. His balance is always precarious, as if each step did not take place within, but displaced space with each step. The strangeness of the walk is heightened by the position of the camera, which is laid on its side, creating the illusion that Nauman is slowly traversing the wall of his studio. The glorious illusion of the weightless artist is shattered by the crude matter of factness of its presentation and the grueling nature of Nauman's performance. Similarly to "The True Artist...", in "Slow Angle Walk" the literal performance of means serves to undermine the purpose or meaning of the act; here the walk serves to destabilize the one who acts, just as the content of the signified in "The True artist..." was undermined by its manner of presentation.

As in these previous works, Nauman in "Days" and "Giorni" redeploys the strategy of forcing signification to plunge back into the materiality of the means of its expression. The site-specific installation, whose dimensions vary depending upon where it is installed, is composed of a colonnade of disembodied voices that repeat ad infinitum in shifting cadences and accents the days of the week. As the spectator proceeds through the passageway, the structure and sense composed by the iteration of the first set of voices collides with a second and then a third, etc. The structure and its meaning quickly becomes unstable, chaotic. Sense is revealed to be a comforting, and yet nonetheless tenuous, artifice. As the various utterances intersect, the structure is complicated and the sense made more tenuous. The repetition of the days of the week, which at first seems to provide a secure structure through its continued reiteration, seems to be threatened rather than secured by this proliferation.

The late Harold Pinter famously praised Samuel Beckett for his courage and remorseless. Pinter's following description is as apt for Nauman—a great admirer of Beckett—as it is for Beckett himself: "the more he wipes my nose in the shit, the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden path, he's not slipping me a wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy—he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not—he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely."

-Alexi Kukuljevic

Margin of Utility

Aesthetics of Historicity

In the first installment of this column on the aesthetics of politics, I proposed an analysis of five key terms acting as so many lynchpins in the contemporary political imaginary: globalization, democracy, terrorism, freedom and economic prosperity. The goal of this analysis was to dismantle the image of a globalized world in which the positive forces of democracy battle the evils of terrorism in order to encourage freedom and prosperity around the world. In the second installment, entitled "The Revolution Is Televized!," I examined the unique aestheticization of politics operative in Barak Obama's rise to the presidency and recent acquisition of the Nobel Peace Prize. I dismantled the "image of change" as being little more than a logo used to assuage the public into believing that business as usual is much more palatable when it is repackaged by an eloquent leader than when it is shoved down their throats by a belligerent half-wit.

Guido Van der Werve, *Het werd later en nog een keer*, 2002

For this third installment, I would like to concentrate on another aesthetic dimension of politics: the spectacular, presentist images of political, social and economic events that detach the instantaneous present from its historical inscription. Just as I invited the reader to break with the contemporary political imaginary and demand real change as opposed to the pseudo-novelty of the political marketplace, I would here like to encourage the reader to break with the myopic mentality of the media industry and the short-sighted agendas of political coups de force in the name of re-inscribing the present in the historical trajectories that give it meaning. Excavating and foregrounding the depths of time can, as we will see, be an important source of critique.

State Consolidation of Class Power

The widespread discussion of the possible "end" of the "economic crisis," should encourage us to return to its supposed "beginning" and reflect more generally on the role of this crisis. In the summer of 2008, president Bush repeated on numerous occasions that the foundations of the economy were solid. Then, suddenly, in the fateful month of September, as if we were faced with an "economic hurricane" that was more or less unexpected, he demanded 700 billion dollars to avoid a severe economic meltdown. It was, as the public was incessantly reminded,

SPORTS + FINAL

SAVE INSIDE 150

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S NUMBER ONE NEWSPAPER

TERROR AT LAGUARDIA

Hero cop tells Michael Daly: 'He closed his eyes and hit it ... It felt like sticks of dynamite. I felt I had a bomb'

Suicide Bomb Scare!

looney-toon bomber had ticket to... the FUTURE

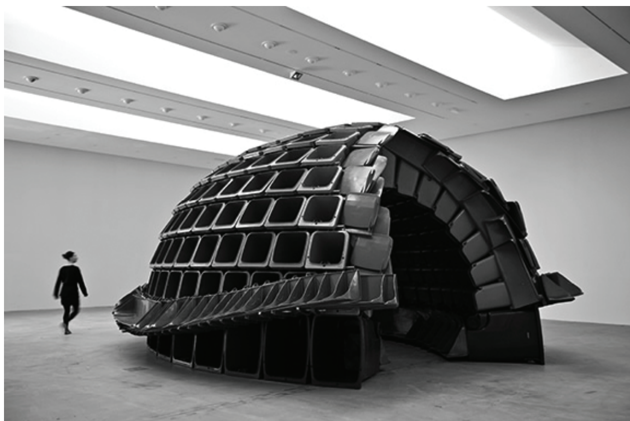
details on pages 4-5

Image designed by Zach Rockhill, an artist living and working in Brooklyn, NY,

Collage from Chris Marker's "La Jetée" and a Daily News cover story

Fossils from Our Future

The natural history of consumer culture is on display in Washington D.C. The fossilized plastic of Samsonite suitcases takes on the form of archaic animals vaguely resembling alligators, ostriches and armadillos. Plastic trash cans repose in an enormous tortoise-like shell. A unique assemblage of white plastic chairs forms the apparent skeleton of a gigantic whale. The artifacts and remnants from our world are exhibited as so many monolithic monsters from the past in an astounding show at the National Museum of the American Indian. As with the dinosaurs, the question of their extinction remains unresolved.



Brian Jungen is the artist responsible for this exhibit, appropriately entitled "Strange Comfort." By bending, folding, cutting and rearranging the raw materials of consumer culture, he masterfully transforms its objects into cultural artifacts. He thereby reverses the traditional lens of ethnology and anthropology, two disciplines developed through the course of European colonization as an attempt to explain "them" (history and sociology are, of course, the parallel disciplines used to understand "us"). Yet, this ethnology of ourselves not only disturbs the distinction between the disciplines for "us" and those for "them" (echoing Jean Rouch's masterful portrayal of an African undertaking an ethnological study of the French by asking them insipid questions concerning their daily routines and trying to measure their skull size). It also calls into question the very idea of cultural purity. The fossilized objects of consumer culture include sports bags become totem poles and sneakers magically transformed into masks resembling those of the aboriginal Northwest Coast. These appear to be the obverse of the statues that "also die" explored by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais in the 1950s. Rather than objects that have lost the soul of their cult value by being removed from their original context and exhibited for cultural voyeurs, they are "prototypes for a new understanding" that stage both the historicity of culture on the American continent and the thin veneer of the soul-less value system of its contemporary form.

What are we to make of the Native American imagery that punctuates his work? Jungen carefully avoids the pastoral or nostalgic appeal to the purity of the Native American, and seems to question the multicultural valorization of true Indian culture. At the same time, he is clearly not playfully recycling indigenous forms to celebrate the apotheosis of postmodernism and the idea that "everything can be played with." Jungen walks a very fine line between mythological purity and postmodern playfulness, rejecting both the idea of unsullied indigenous culture and the embrace of cultural relativity. He is clearly critical of the commodification of culture and the ways in which it serves both the tourist industry and the world of sports. There is a firm and refreshing critical edge to his work, as well as an astute precision and honest craft, that avoid the puerile playfulness often categorized as postmodernism. What, then, is this critical edge?

Jungen takes us to the heart of some of the most profound metaphysical questions of our times: who are our gods? Have the athletic stars of media spectacles become the shamans of contemporary culture? What will remain of "our" civilization? Will our remnants, when compared to those of the dinosaurs, amount to enormous deposits of synthetic materials left over from the ecological disaster they helped produce? In raising these questions, Jungen takes us into deep history: the history of eons and ages rather than the microscopic time of human existence. He turns "our" culture into an assemblage of comfortingly strange artifacts seen from afar, as if an anthropologist had unearthed them in the year 4026 and raised the questions: who are these people? What were their values? How did they treat their fellow human beings?

His critical edge consists in raising fundamental questions concerning the bare bones of "our" culture: how have we survived in the past (and at what expense)? How will we survive in the future? Will we survive in the future? What are the metaphysical underpinnings of the world we have created? And, perhaps most importantly: what will remain of us once we are gone?

- Theodore Tucker

absolutely necessary to save the firms that were "too big to fail." Moreover, this complex crisis required a reaction that was as swift as it was extreme, beginning with the 350 billion dollars distributed by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Goldman Sachs (Time magazine named Paulson a runner-up for its Person of the year 2008).

We should note that this crisis discourse of an extreme situation and the need for swift action recalls all of the exceptional measures that were put in place or intensified after September 11, 2001: the USA PATRIOT Act, the Military Commissions Act, illegal wire taps, extraordinary rendition (an extraordinary euphemism for illegal international kidnapping), a secret prison network, the redefinition of torture by the Office of Legal Council, etc. It is not by chance that this crisis broke on the scene as a complex, uncontrollable natural phenomenon whose severity was largely unforeseen. By naturalizing the economy and making it into an autonomous instance, independent of decision makers, the historical logic of the economic crisis promoted passive reactivity (we can only react to forces more powerful than ourselves), the removal of responsibility (no one is responsible for natural phenomena like economic hurricanes) and historical myopia (the situation is so critical that it is necessary to react immediately without debating over distant causes: we are pressed for time!).

In short, we were told again and again that *there was no alternative*! No alternative to what? To *state intervention* in the economy. There is, of course, a term that is widely used to describe the *only alternative*: socialism. Strictly speaking, the staunch defenders of the free market should have simply embraced the results of a competitive market involving unguaranteed risks that may pay great dividends. However, the consensual opinion was the opposite. On both the left and the right, "everyone" seemed to agree that *there was no alternative* to state intervention to save capitalism. Although this appears to be blatantly contradictory, a broader historical perspective allows us to make sense of it.

In his classic work on the history of capitalism, *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi brilliantly attacks the historical credo of economic liberals: the idea that laissez-faire was a natural development and that the resistance to it was the result of deliberate action on the part of the adversaries of economic liberalism. By breaking with this near-sighted orthodoxy, Polanyi shows the extent to which the establishment and preservation of the free market necessitates state intervention. In a passage on the market system that should make us reflect on the contemporary situation, he writes: "as long as that system is not established, economic liberals must and will unhesitatingly call for the intervention of the state in order to establish it, and once established, in order to maintain it." This is not the place to marshal all of the historical evidence that Polanyi mobilizes to justify his claims. But his central conclusion should shed light on the widespread appeals to state intervention to save the "free" market.

119 West Montgomery Avenue, Philadelphia PA

"Here it is, this is the only place for me!" This group was known to some as "the family"; my own name for it was "the tribe." Things went on like that for just a little while, not long at all-but such moments are precious in life, and distinctly rare.
-Jean Michel Mension, The Tribe: Contributions to the History of the Situationist International and Its Time. Vol. 1

We all know that it's a bitch to survive in this town. This being the case, there are ways to get around the unstable employment dilemma and still be able to live in a thriving art scene. Real estate on the edges of the city is cheap and artists have been working in these areas in converted factories and warehouses for decades. The affordable architectural landscape seems to have been internalized into the sinews and bones of many of the artists that live and work in the area.

The gallery Little Berlin is housed in a large renovated warehouse at 119 W. Montgomery Avenue. This building has been the home of many notable artists working in Philadelphia. The footprint of the place is massive, and it has made it possible for the artists who've resided there to produce large ambitious works and make a lot of noise. In the 90's this building provided a safe haven and vital environment for Bardo Pond.

Bardo Pond has a legacy of being the city's 'premier lurching noisemakers' and has been beating the Gamelan-like central drum for this assemblage of creative individuals in many ways. Its strain of American psychedelic rock is loud and durational. Through extended songs that rely on high volume repetition, one is lulled (or beaten) into a state of passive acceptance until Isobel Sollenberger vocally sucker punches the audience out from its sleepy-ness and into a state of temporary ecstasis. It is a palpable and visceral experience. Many of the artists that are associated with this scene have generated works that provide similar effects in the visual field.

Much of the work in Little Berlin's 'Heaven and Earth' exhibition has been wrought by the aforementioned coalition of friends and colleagues. This is a genuine arts community that has drawn from one another for more than ten years. Communities have the ability to buffer the influence of the ubiquitous and hegemonic international art crowd that can be found sprouting up around the planet in biennials and art fairs. A narrow margin of blue chip artists are over-represented on the pages of full color glossy art magazines, and their ripple effects can be found in the derivative gestures of art students and career minded social climbers. In contrast to this state of affairs, some of the work in this show is incredibly strong and gives form to themes that are unique to this city.

What themes and articulations in the realm of the sensible are unique to Philly?

In 2003, Sid Sachs, the director and curator of the Rosenwald Wolff gallery assembled a historicizing exhibition titled 'The Other Tradition' that tried to outline what sets Philadelphia artists apart from the dominant trends of the New York-centric artworld. A handful of the artists from 119 W. Montgomery Ave. were in the show. In trying to pin down an intergenerational thread that stretches from Robert Crumb to Joy Feasly, Sachs states that 'Philadelphia has an underground figurative tradition based on comics, graffiti, Duchamp, and a true raw sense of the absurd' and that 'there is also a dark, almost abject sensibility going back to Charles Bukowski, Paul Thek, and David Lynch.'

Artists respond to their environments, and this tenor of the absurd, the dark and the occult is inscribed into the architecture of the city. It can be found in the country's largest Freemason lodge on Broad street, the hanging cast concrete pagan creatures in the alcoves of city hall, the Theosophical society on Walnut street and the Academy of the Fine Arts building that was designed by the maverick American architect Frank Furness. Philadelphia has a slower architectural turnover than New York, and many of the older anomalous buildings, facades and signs of long extant business adventures are hanging on like ghosts in the shadows of urban redevelopment. These buildings have populated the psycho-geographic imaginary for the cultural producers who've resided within the city limits. If one cares to look for it, a sort of dark magic can still be found in the city's alleys and neglected streets or even in the dusty bookstall at the Reading Terminal.

Paul Swenbeck, *Blood Drawing*, 2009

Richard Harrod has been producing art and exhibiting within the city for the last 15 years. Harrod's works have at times set up situations for encounters with the unheimlich that are disorienting and funny. In the Little Berlin exhibition, with a work titled 'The Managers' Harrod provides a trompe loeil image of a life sized rectangular hole in the floor of the space (on the actual floor) with a fearsome set of steps leading to a basement for unaware gallery goers to stumble down and meet their untimely demise. The work consists of large format laser jet prints that have been glued together and highlighted with off white paint. At the bottom of the steps is a short log with scissors impaled into its cross section. The illusion is not convincing, but one still feels a little wary walking around it. To reinforce the sense of vertical depth, Harrod has run a string from the floor to the ceiling thus literalizing the name of the exhibition.

The title of Harrod's floor work could have been taken directly from Kafka or Maurice Blanchot. In Blanchot's most Kafkaesque novel Aminadab, the antagonist Thomas wanders into a house that has infinite rooms with an ever-changing set of rules and hierarchically distributed roles for the servants and managers. There is no comfort to be found in the bedrooms, and the mood of the house constantly oscillates between safety and danger. The novel is dream-like. Blanchot intimates how the impressions left on us by interiors are perpetually in a state of flux with strange atemporal admixtures of memories of rooms that overlap and interpenetrate one another. Harrod's stairway performs similar procedures by compositing multiple points of view and contaminating the domestic scene with absurd and spooky details.

Another exhibition with artists from the same community is the 'None More Black' show at Vox Populi. A standout from the show was Paul Swenbeck's suite of blood drawings. Swenbeck had a nurse withdraw a cup of blood from his body. This blood was used in a manner similar to ink that was transferred to paper with brushes and pens. Swenbeck borrows images from the book of Solomon to create talismans that hopefully will not work. Admittedly, the artist loves to work with blood. This fascination began with a sanguine fluid drawing made from a high school biology blood test that the artist has carried in his wallet for more than 20 years for good luck. These drawings are generous and frightening. In an altruistic gesture, Swenbeck donated the blood that could provide nutrients and oxygen to his muscles and brain for the production of drawings that are to be consumed by others. Still, the occult symbols with their Faustian connotations are troublesome with their lack of intelligibility or supplementary wall texts, leaving one to guess who the intended recipient of the talismans may be.

Drawing with blood, and the use of the body's humors has a long history in pagan, alchemical and satanic rituals. The images bear a striking resemblance to Joseph Beuy's iodine paintings on paper. Beuy's was interested in Alchemy and the re-sacralization of life. This lineage can be traced through the work of Joan Jonas in the artist's attempts to neutralize the effects of technology and instrumental reason by evoking the sirens of the sublimated counter histories of secret societies and initiatory rites of passage. Swenbeck's drawings reflect the darker side of this art historical trajectory, as well as embodying Sach's description of a local ethos that is both dark and abject.

There is no apparent investment in critical theory in any of these works, nor do they bear the mark of a voguish miming of current art world trends. Most of the artists in this informal community came into there own in the early to mid 90's, a moment when French theory was being crammed down throats of resentful art students throughout the country. It appears that their work is part of a generational rejection of the era's theoretical trends. These artists work with the tropes of the uncanny, inside jokes, and a renewed interest in the occult, without resorting to the intellectual crutches of philosophy, psychoanalysis or semiotics.

A problem with projects that have an anti-theoretical attitude is that the artists do not provide the public with a form of self-diagnoses through their statements or public talks, and therefore leave the ideas behind their work unintelligible and opaque for the uninitiated. The burden is placed on the viewer to decipher and decode their offerings. Due to the swaying indeterminacy of the artists' intent, one is cautious of over-reading their drawings and installations. This caution short circuits extensive readings and cuts off a wider and more meaningful discourse.

Genuine alternative artworlds are vulnerable and precious. They provide a very thin crust of resistance from the banalizing effects of living in the belly of an advanced capitalist state. Fragile worlds are always on the verge of dissipating and fading into invisibility. Where there are gatherings of friends who share an aesthetic project no matter how articulate or inchoate, there potentially stands an indefatigable community that can withstand the ebbs and flows of the art market as well as the assaults of younger generations who attempt to sideline their predecessors to stake out their own territories.

-Holly Martins

“We’re not even sure of carrots (whether they’re what we think they are, how poisonous they are, who grew them and under what circumstances).”

John Cage, A year from Monday, p. 9

It is hard to write anymore about representation. The essay form itself, with its unending self-consciousness, seems to drive me to want to talk about myself from the start. Perhaps also it is another form of self-consciousness, which is to say, a nervousness, when the topic of representation is broached. Wasn’t it that we were supposed to stop representing *them* a long time ago. Wasn’t this the age of the *differend*, when my job was to make space for other voices, make visible new languages in order to efface myself?

Or did it turn out that that was the not-so-subtle modernist/postmodernist project all along? Didn’t Schelling want to lose himself in the ecstasies of India? Wasn’t that Cage’s Zen? Or that great poem with which Tim Clark began his chapter on Pollock: “I shall make a poem out of nothing at all / it will not speak of me or others…” penned by William IX of Aquitane?

If representation was then to be a more active project, one which Gayatri Spivak has recently considered (implicitly) as “learning to learn from the subaltern,” then the question of representation and others remains paramount for contemporary art. The very fact of this foregrounding was the most essential aspect of Slought Foundation’s *The Return of Horse: Painting in the Ambivalent Present*, which opened on Nov. 14.

The curatorial essay accompanying the exhibit (indeed hanging at the gallery entrance and tactically framing the art) begins with an interesting parallel: the outmoded means of transportation that is the horse and the outmoded means of representation that is painting. Moreover, by placing the horse as the go between of Philadelphia and New York (between which one could not travel without a horse, or two, not so long ago), it brought to the fore questions of the traffic of objects and people in the art world as we, just south of the center, have come to understand it.

But here some concerns arise. When in the statement curator Osvaldo Romberg writes, for instance, “What is the difference between a Brazilian novella and Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*? It is the viewer’s experience, affected by their relative receptivity to the explicit or implicit meanings of a work,” I begin to worry that he is not sufficiently foregrounding the task of learning to learn from the other - in other words, he moves away from the fact that representation in art today is first and foremost about a reconfiguration and not a validation of that experience. (This is not, of course, to rule out validation or empathy as a tool of representation, but it is to argue against a leveling of the field of representation to the terms of validating what is given in experience.)

When it comes to the art itself, these questions remain. One of the show’s pieces, by Natalie Frank, is a combination of video testimony about the Rwandan genocide and a few accompanying painted portraits. The work is part of *Voices of Rwanda*, and seeks to bring testimony about the 1994 genocide to the world stage in order to “inspire a global sense of responsibility to prevent human rights atrocities.” This is no doubt a noble goal, but it is not one that I am sure lives up to the contemporary demands of representation.

The *Voices of Rwanda*-type message is something that one might take from any number of standard discourses on representation, but it does not live up to the trenchant argument advanced, for example, in Mahmood Mamdani’s *When Victims Become Killers*, where he reverses the standard interpretation of events in Rwanda and shows precisely how a misintervention by Western powers was what precipitated and reinforced the genocide in the first place. For him, the question of representing Rwanda is then not to call on a banal response couched in human rights discourse, but rather one which sought to learn from the histories of colonialism and its machinery of inventing and representing Africans (the very Hutu/Tutsi distinction itself) in order to call into question one’s own voice in this process. In other words, representation is neither the letting speak nor the making speak, it is the difficult (infinite?) conversation which is the condition of speech itself. Such a conversation is unfortunately absent in Frank’s work.

So much of the discourse on representation in modern art has been haunted by the infamous statement of Theodor Adorno, “To write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” But it is not frequently enough noted the revision Adorno gave this statement in *Negative Dialectics*, where he writes: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.” Indeed, this is crucial for a critic like myself to keep in mind, and to recall that although there is a limiting condition to Frank’s work, it does form an important part in the archives of genocide. But Adorno does not let us off the hook here. He continues, “But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living…”

It is tempting to psychologize away this statement, as Adorno himself does, as a matter of the trauma of survivor’s guilt. But the question is, I think, much more powerful and necessary as we think through the questions of representation, for they move the domain from the register of the art to the practice - indeed the very possibility - of everyday life itself. How do we live in the face of a world which has abandoned all its values? What forms of representation might help us answer this question?

There was only one horse at the Slought show, and it did not appear in any of the three artists’ work. Rather, it was in a simple cartoon on the bathroom wall, where a man playing polo has just rammed the head of his horse through a museum wall. The patron there exclaims, “You’re lucky that painting was of a horse!”

The horse in Romberg’s curatorial vision seems to raises a few questions. One, what happens to outmoded media - do they just become sports, or romanticized images of a time long gone? (Or) two, do they, like the repressed, ever return, to disrupt the sedimented view of culture that we have collected? The horse’s head through the painting in the cartoon does just that by relying on a certain trope: the painting represents a real horse’s head. The decidedly anti-Magritte stance of the patron is what gives the joke its humor: of course, the real horse’s head is no more a painting than a painting of a pipe is a pipe.

But the humor here is also the subversion. The horse in fact is no longer represented - it is now called upon to represent itself. But like Coco Fusco & Guillermo Gomez-Pena, it is forced into this representation, literally imprisoned. To transcend this situation, the cartoon relies on its implied temporality: the horse will leave the painting and a conversation will ensue about what just happened: the irony of it all, the circulation of damages, the question of the body, the archaic and deprived role of the modern horse (or, dare I say, painting).

Tongue-in-cheek though this may be, the point stands that the important thing about representation today is to raise the question of representation itself. While I have advanced an ethical-aesthetic paradigm that breaks with Romberg’s, it does invalidate the fact that the Slought show is able to put on the table a critical series of questions about the possibilities for representation in the modern world. Learning to learn from these questions is itself a primary task of criticism today.

-Avi Alpert

Over a year later, we are told of the successes of state intervention in the economy. President Obama, while recognizing the lack of job growth, has recently declared that “the economy is now growing again for the first time in more than a year and faster than at any time in the past two years.” Indeed, it is true that Wall Street is on pace to have its most profitable year to date, breaking the record set three years ago (before the “crisis”). The profits of Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley and JPMorgan Chase—the four largest firms—grew to $22.5 billion dollars in the period from January to September. During the same period, the top six banks set aside $112 billion for salaries and bonuses.

On the tenth anniversary of the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, a crucial deregulatory move celebrated by Lawrence Summers (who is now the director of the White House National Economic Council), Special Inspector General Neil Barofsky, the top oversight official for the $700 billion Wall Street bailout, stated that the program will almost certainly result in a loss for taxpayers. Moreover, he claimed that he has opened sixty-five investigations into possible fraud by bailout recipients. At the same time, the overall delinquency rate for home mortgages has reached a new high: over six percent were sixty or more days past due during the third quarter (TARP funds are largely the privilege of those at the top). Finally, unemployment is skyrocketing, and this does not include all of those who have become so disheartened by the job search that they have stopped looking.

David Harvey has convincingly argued, following the work of Karl Polanyi, that the management of crises is part of the neoliberal project. One of the primary objectives of crisis management—through the use of fear tactics, misinformation campaigns, the promotion of historical amnesia, etc.—is to consolidate class power. In this light, the economic bailout has been wildly successful: it has—via state intervention in the economy—redistributed wealth from the taxpayer to the wealthiest portions of the population.

The Shah’s Nuclear Weapons

Iran’s supposed “nuclear threat” is in the forefront of the Western media. Israel’s nuclear capabilities or India’s nuclear arms program appear to be of little or no concern (indeed, they are more or less overtly supported by the United States). The underlying message seems to be that allies have the right to nuclear arms but enemies do not.

However, it is important to remind ourselves that the United States is the only country in the history of the world to have used nuclear bombs. The death of approximately 165,000-275,000 Japanese citizens should, in principle, diminish their credibility as the international moral authority on the nuclear issue. Secondly, as every Iranian surely knows, Iran and the United States have not always been enemies. In 1953, the CIA organized Operation Ajax in Iran to remove the democratically elected leader, Mohammed Mossadegh, who had become

enormously popular for nationalizing Iran's oil reserves. The autocratic Shah took his place and served as a close American ally and business partner until the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79. Would the Shah have had the right to nuclear weapons?

There is an additional reason why we should be skeptical of the demonization of Iran (while also avoiding the blind embrace of the Iranian regime). The belligerent and repetitive vilification of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the mainstream Western media is an excellent example of the extreme shortcomings of political monocausality: a president elected by universal suffrage for a 4-year term who has no direct control over the armed forces, military intelligence, security operations or foreign policy (these are all the prerogative of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), has been transformed into an evil "dictator" anxious to use nuclear weapons to wage war (even though the Iranian president does not even have the right to declare war). It is clear that such political monocausality is directly linked to the drumbeat for more war in the Middle East and is part of the perfect exit strategy for the debacle in Iraq: it "explains" the failure of the American military in Iraq (it's Iran's fault); it is capable of distracting public opinion from Iraq, which is old news, in the same way that Iraq once served as a veil to mask Afghanistan; it provides for a clearly identified diabolic enemy to fill the shoes of Saddam Hussein; it perpetuates a faulty image of Iran as unjustifiably hostile to the United States and contributes to American amnesia concerning the CIA-orchestrated coup d'état against Iran's nascent democracy. Furthermore, the Western discourse on the "Iranian threat" can ultimately serve the purposes of the fundamentalists in Iran by revealing the hypocrisy of the American position and helping them fan nationalist fires to resist—once again—the imperialist endeavors of the invaders and occupiers of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959

The Power of History

The spectacular presentist images of "the Iranian threat" or "the economic crisis" mask deep historical developments. They favor political amnesia and the passivity of political spectators who are supposed to simply be bewildered by the latest "shocking news." The role of historical critique is, in part, to break through the aesthetics of the present in order to situate the contemporary world in the temporal trajectories that give it meaning. History has the power to shatter the thin veneer of the political, social and economic world that is presented to us.

- Etienne Dolet

Machete Interviews Jacques Rancière

Second Installment

Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence

Machete: What is the role of the critic, the interpreter, the theorist in drawing out or highlighting the political elements in works of art or artistic endeavors? I know that you've been very critical of certain conceptions of committed art or politicized art that try to reduce the political dimension of art to the artist's intention. What, then, is the role at the opposite end of the spectrum, i.e. not with the producer of works of art but with their reception by the interpreter, the theorist, the active spectator if you will. Do they play a role in articulating the political power of works of art? Or is this power somehow inherent in works as they stand?

Jacques Rancière: No, I don't think that the power is inherent in the work as it stands because for me the problem is that there is no politics of art; there is a politics of aesthetics. This means that what is important is not the idea that the work can have this or that effect. In fact, the work is an implementation of an idea of the artist, which means that the work is an implementation of the relation of an artist to politics. But this does not mean at all that the artist can anticipate political effects of the work. Thus, the effect, the aesthetic effect, is not the effect of a work in the sense that a work should produce this energy for action or this particular form of deliberation about the situation. It's about creating forms of perception, forms of interpretation. The role of the critic—which is a controversial name for me—is to draw the outlines of the kind of common world that the work is producing or a kind of common world of which the work is a product. For me, the role of the critic is to say, "this is the world that this work proposes." It is to try to explain the forms—as well as the possible shifts in the forms—of perception, description and interpretation of a world that are inherent in the work.

Machete: Given what you've said about the relationship between artistic production and the critic, as well as your attempt to redefine aesthetics outside of the discourse of modernism, how can you account for artists themselves taking up in their work a false paradigm of modernism, which therefore informs the nature of their own practice? What happens when art embodies this kind of misunderstanding? What is the role of the critic in relationship to these false historical narratives?

Jacques Rancière: I would say that there is a kind of truthful negotiation. I mean by this that the work of an artist is more or less informed by a certain attitude. It would seem that an artist situates himself as an avant-garde artist, a modern artist or a committed artist. I think that he tries to define his art in this particular frame, and the framework in general is a kind of partial view of either modernity or politics, which means that the work may have a potential that exceeds the idea of the work's producer. Artists in the sixties, for instance, had a very strong adherence to this or that discourse, and sometimes that is very uninteresting. But what they do can nonetheless be interesting. This means that the task of the critic, if I think of myself as a critic, is also to try to create another kind of frame for this practice. With the example of Alfredo Jaar, which I brought up earlier, it's true that his work can be drawn in the direction of the unrepresentable, but I try to draw it in another direction. To take another example, I had to write on the Irish artist James Coleman who, in a sense, is a very strong modernist, more or less dependent on a certain form of modernism linked with the minimalism of the seventies. I try to extricate from his work something that defines another way of representing social issues. He makes very sophisticated works composed of both slides and voice. He made, for instance, a work entitled "Photograph" in a school in a poor neighborhood of Berlin, on the way in which kids present themselves in front of the camera. It can be viewed as an entirely formal work: how people present their image to a camera. At the same time, the sound was borrowed from a kind of kitsch 19th century poem. I did a lot of work on this project, both on the images and the sound, to reveal a certain way of dealing with questions of social identity and the way in which those who are on the other side present themselves, try to construct their image and to play for instance singers or dancers, etc. I focused on this relation of people who are supposed to be outside of art to the world of art. This is an example, but very often when I am asked to deal with the work of an artist, I try to introduce my own shift, to say that what's interesting in this artist may come from an idea of avant-gardism, formalism, modernism, committed art or the art of the unrepresentable, but it can nonetheless produce quite a different image for instance of the poor, quite a different image of the victim (not only an image but also a different feature, a certain form of aesthetic experience out of shared experience).

Alfredo Jaar, *Let There Be Light*, 1996

James Coleman, *Photograph*, 1998-99

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

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