

What Remains

By Juli Carson

...[T]here is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. This has nothing to do with the claim made by some people that art and politics should not be mixed. They intermix in any case; politics has its aesthetics and aesthetics its politics. But there is no formula for an appropriate correlation.

- Jacques Rancière¹

A question is being raised among cultural practitioners with increasing frequency: *What remains of the avant-garde in contemporary art?* This query is interesting because it implies that the avant-garde – to the chagrin of some – is not entirely dead. Not its legacy anyway. Rather, according to those following Rancière, the Marxist *formula* for correlating art and politics – one most famously associated with the Frankfurt School – is dead. And, along with it, goes the false dichotomy between formalism (*art-for-art's sake*) and social reality (*committed art*). As Rancière points out, so-called committed art is “an in-between notion that is vacuous as an aesthetic notion and also as a political notion... Commitment is not a category of art. [But] this does not mean that art is apolitical.”² Art and politics are always already bound up – there’s an aesthetics of politics and a politics of aesthetics. That said, Rancière’s assertion still accords with two fundamental axioms put forth by the Frankfurt School. One by Bertolt Brecht: *Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.*³ The other by Walter Benjamin: *A work that exhibits the correct [political] tendency must of necessity have every [aesthetic] quality.*⁴ Simply put, the reason there’s no one formula for correlating art and politics is because as reality changes so do the aesthetic means of representation, meaning that these categories – if they *are* categories – are never discrete. Change in one register affects change in the other.

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 62.

2 Ibid. p. 60.

3 Bertolt Brecht, “Popularity and Realism,” in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 82.

4 Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Reflections*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 221.

Indeed, Ranci ere’s interrogation of the art/politics dichotomy is apt for contemporary artists, but it is not new. In 1967, Oscar Masotta, the Argentine artist and Lacanian theorist, noted much the same thing in a very different context. A year after General Juan Carlos Ongan ia led a military coup d’etat in 1966, Masotta wrote “I Committed a Happening” to counter the condemnation – made by one Professor Klimovsky in the newspaper *La Raz on* – that those perpetrators of what Allan Kaprow called Happenings would better serve the Left by investing their creative “imagination in lessening this tremendous plague (of ‘hunger’).”⁵ For Masotta, the choice between *either* Happenings *or* Left politics was a false dialectic. Since Happenings reclassified the materialist basis of Art with a capital “A” (its most noble form being bronze or marble) and site (traditionally confined to the museum), Happenings had the potential of demystifying the hegemonic value system of conventional art production/consumption. And, since art and politics define themselves in a shared culture of *mass media*, to publically interrogate art this way *was* to interrogate politics. Or, at least the Happening held the contingent *potentiality* of doing so. In the end, the Masotta case attests to the existence of a global neo-avant-garde – one influenced by the European avant-garde – that existed within (and responded to) specific regional and cultural issues. Hence the tendency of artists, both neo-avant-garde and contemporary, to throw away mandated avant-garde formulas, while still retaining contingent avant-garde tactics of cultural critique.

Enter UCI’s graduate class of 2011. A tight-knit group of art practitioners, these artists are *not* defined by a single aesthetic formula, but, rather, a cultural *perspective*, upon which the aforementioned discourse sheds some light. What is this perspective, specific to *this region, this culture*? The tenacious belief that reality can be addressed in aesthetic, phenomenological terms and that this endeavor *matters* because any artwork that manages to break open a formal/cultural system is inherently political. Moreover, their *collective* cultural identity and *disparate* aesthetic means attest to this post-dialectical perspective. From this vantage, they take up the remains of the avant-garde’s discarded parts – reusing and recycling them – to open up new potentialities apart from nostalgia or pastiche. Among their individual projects, we thus see a non-contradictory alliance of aesthetic strategies that were once pitted against one another. What follows is a non-schematic breakdown of how this class redirects these strategies, which I’ll read through what *remains* of the Frankfurt School – now that we are no longer forced to choose between its practitioners for the *right* formula.

Sophie Lee, Amir Nikravan and Marcus Perez’s respective projects recall Theodor Adorno’s claim that a *negative knowledge* of the world can be gained through the artwork’s *aesthetic distance* from known reality. As such, each project celebrates the critical power of abstraction.

5 Oscar Masotta, “I Committed a Happening,” (1967), in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), p. 191.

In *Construction Site*, Lee displaces painting's conventional stage – canvas and stretcher – to the support system, or frame alone. These “structures” are marked with painted gestures, collapsing the dialectic of center and margin and, by extension, sculpture and architecture. As Lee observes: “The marks on the structures are formed with a continuous ground, yet the removal of that plane requires the viewer to complete the image in their mind's eye while simultaneously negotiating the background and foreground of the room. The ‘painting’ cannot be experienced as separate from its environment, and that environment constantly shifts.” Consequently, when the distinction between painting and environment disintegrates, so do the cultural connotations associated with them.

Nikravan's *Internal* encompasses two aesthetically different bodies of work linked through the process of indexical image generation. As with the one-to-one relationship between the photographic image and the event it depicts, each component of *Internal* re-performs this “photographic process” – replacing the generative light component with a procedure of direct physical contact. By spraying paint onto, and through, sculpted and folded materials, Nikravan produces an indexical image of the object's former three-dimensional state in two-dimensional form when the object is subsequently unfolded. The image thus becomes a picture of the material itself, expressed through the latent mark that subsides within it.

Perez's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* enacts the artist's continued – though productive – ambivalence about contemporary abstract painting. Ambivalence affords the simultaneity of contradictory attitudes, and as such, for Perez it circumvents partisanship. His paintings thus simultaneously evoke (and celebrate) the non-objective *and* narrative, the popular *and* esoteric. As Perez comments: “Sometimes unassuming, my paintings are the site of fragmentary half-happening, relationships between grays and grays, a more yellow brown and a more orange brown, green, black, yellow, blue line stopping before a wrinkle; sometimes the back of relations, the doubling of them; sometimes the continuation of half-finished relations elsewhere.”

Works by **Samira Yamin** and **Noritaka Minami** evoke Georg Lukács' axiom that if style *is* content – because style is culturally determined – and content determines form, then form is *always* political. The artist's role is to unpack this latent content in its most ubiquitous form.

Yamin's *Geometries* maps one knowledge system – Islamic sacred geometries – onto another – *TIME Magazine* articles about wars in the Middle East. Meticulously cut into the magazine image, the geometries let us read one page through another, exposing the ubiquitous war image's material base. Yamin explains: “Once the system is exposed, the focus shifts from the magazine's content to its inner mechanics. This revealing eventually points back to the magazine's content, but now it questions the images' status as visual facts of

war.” These aesthetic cuts thus function as “windows” that shift our attention from the manifest content of the Middle East to the latent content of Western journalism itself.

Minami’s 1972 photographically captures the anachronistic Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, designed by Kisho Kurokawa, a member of the 1960s Metabolism movement. The aim of Metabolism was to formulate flexible designs that facilitate continual growth and renewal. Because the Tower is the last of its kind, having never undergone its intended renewal, it exists at the pivot between a past that has ended and a future that never arrived. As both documentation and abstraction, Minami’s photographs reiterate the Tower’s ambiguous status. In Minami’s hands, if the Tower is thus a “ruin,” his photographs document the remains of Metabolism’s aspirations in its most real *and* mythological forms.

Maura Brewer, Adrian de la Peña and **Josh Cho** all conjure up Freud’s notion of the uncanny – that disorienting subjective state that fascinated the surrealists. It’s also a tactic Walter Benjamin stubbornly defended against the Frankfurt School’s continual disavowals.

As source material, Brewer appropriates content from outmoded documentaries, museum displays and science fiction to examine how popular media consolidates *and* destabilizes the subject through a web of identifications. Her video installation, *The Donner Party*, inspired by a 1992 PBS documentary of the same name, re-envision the original story – the failed attempt to cross the Oregon Pass that resulted in cannibalism – as a family drama played out in a contemporary California home. Mother and Daughter mine a pseudo-survivalist narrative, inter-woven with diagrammatic animations. As the subject of Brewer’s video shifts, the work meditates upon the boundaries of self – both physical and psychological – on the verge of collapse.

In *Project Blue Beam* we are confronted with enigmatic images and objects, reflecting the artist’s fascination with a world in which things are held in unresolved suspension. As de la Peña explains, this “absence of certainty allows for things like worldmaking, fiction, speculation, faith and beliefs, conspiracy and fantasy.” Influenced by Nelson Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking*, de la Peña creates fictional worlds from the native material surrounding us. In so doing he makes use of established art forms and worldviews to construct a unique physical and conceptual space in line with fiction-making or story-telling. However, there is a self-reflexivity to the work, as the structures of this worldmaking are exposed along the way.

Cho’s *Portrait* series presents photographs of gym patrons, who, while working out, are visible from the public sidewalk. Captured using an antiquated large format film camera on a tripod, the duration of Cho’s photographic process allows the subject to walk away. Should the individual stay, an implicit “contract” is established between the photographer and the photographed

subject at the very interstice of public space (the gym/street) and private space (psychic interaction). This diaphanous interstice is literally, and figuratively, *pictured* by the reflective paned glass that separates interior and exterior, subject and object. For, upon this glass exists a palimpsest of images: the photographer and his subject.

Brecht maintained that the *reality* conveyed by a critical artwork is one ordinarily censored in life. In **Alexis Disselkoen** and **C. Ree's** respective installations, reality – passively consumed in the world – shifts to the gallery. Here the viewer is poised to interact with the world's terms in a more complex way.

In Disselkoen's *Installation for two*, the entry door requires two people to enter into a room. The second door only allows one person out of the space at a time. The resolution of the event – to let the person inside the room, out – requires the participants to collectively act. Using the language associated with nation-building, personal identity, and sites of sanctuary and belonging, the installation works with constructions of power that inform art production and viewership by creating an encounter that's participatory *and* self-directed. Simple devices and material become the atmosphere and space that viewers must negotiate in order to experience the work, while creating meaning through a collective process: participation.

Ree's *Aimless Bullet v1* is a two-part installation. It begins with a suspended multi-layer ceiling, twisted between flight and fall, and ends with its aftermath strewn on the gallery floor. In between, the work's sabotage – the clipping of over 100 suspension wires holding the piece in place – is performed beyond public view. In either state, *Aimless Bullet* sets a stage for the viewer's encounter, inversion and perversion of the world around him/her, wherein misrecognition and near misses imbricate the seen and unseen. These moments not only collapse spatial location, but also activate the artist's interest in blindness and visibility, the cinematic, the paranormal, the parasite and the para-site.

In sum, these young artists – poised to enter the field – demonstrate what potentialities remain of the historical avant-garde's tactics in contemporary art. Even though our conditions are very different now, these debates *insist* on our consciousness. Indeed, if a contemporary "neo-avant-garde" exists, it would seem to be characterized by our heterogeneous *debate* over the avant-garde's relevancy today. Just as we see this tendency in Rancière's current writings, we see it in the work of these young artists.

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