



PHOTO BY ANDREW BALFOUR

Alexandra Oliver was a force in and for the arts in Pittsburgh, bursting with ideas and enthusiasms. When she began her own blog, with the humble title of “a Pittsburgh art blog,” she wrote: “Ultimately, my hope for this blog is that it provide a record, however imperfect, however partial, that someone made some art and that it mattered. Most artists working today will not enter the canon, but they all deserve a fighting chance. Without the visibility and feedback that art criticism provides, along with a committed cadre of collectors, galleries, archivists and curators, careers will be injured.” Our selections from her writing, in academia and across social media platforms prove that she followed her own advice, in the process adding to the record of art in Pittsburgh.

## ALEXANDRA OLIVER SELECTED WRITINGS

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ALEXANDRA OLIVER: SELECTED WRITINGS

SELECTED BY VICKY A. CLARK AND CASEY DROEGE  
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS FROM CINDY LISICA AND BARBARA MCCLOSKEY

PITTSBURGH, PA  
2021





CLD: Alex emailed me out of the blue in 2013 asking if she could attend SIX x ATE, an art lecture and dinner series I ran where 6 artists spoke about their work briefly and a chef made a delicious meal. She wrote that she was “stubbornly, resolutely, interminably uncreative” but wanted to attend as a “sympathetic observer.” I’m forever grateful that she did reach out because it was the beginning of an impactful friendship. I wrote to her the day after the event, thanking her for being so engaged during the dinner and asking her for any feedback she might have. Her response was the first of many insightful and productive critiques of my work. Over the following years, I grew to treasure her insights to the point of asking her to join the advisory board the first year of starting my arts business.

VAC: That’s so Alex. She could rapidly shift from the academic in a dissertation with nuances and distinctions that help us to rethink terms and categories to policy statements that rethink her community in Wilkinsburg. She went beyond the usual publication sites, preferring to use social media, and she understood that the arts could be used in so many ways to change our world. She, for example, asked me to help her organize a Wikipedia edit-a-thon, a one-day event to add information about women, sadly lacking on that platform, in concert with a nationwide effort. She made sure that we galvanized forces from our worlds of academia and art museums to include libraries and community groups, advocating for women of all colors and ages. She raised money, provided snacks, and even organized child care to enable women to attend. Our effort was so successful that the Carnegie Museum of Art took over the event the next year.

CLD: That was an incredible event, I remember starting several pages for Pittsburgh women in the arts and have loved seeing them grow over the years. She also saw the value of documenting our arts ecosystem and tried building an archive. She found a front end developer and UX designer and put together the foundation of a system to help track and archive independent projects, exhibitions, artists, and events happening all around Pittsburgh. It’s the kind of project that would have not only preserved the story of what was happening, but also would create a wiki of ideas for people to check out. It could have given us the chance to look at the big picture of our system and see what was missing or how we could strengthen things overall. I was so disappointed that she wasn’t able to find the funding to push that project forward. It was a brilliant idea.

VAC: I would call her the queen of networking as she was always connecting people and resources. She combined her art history knowledge with keen organizational and business skills, working at the Forbes Fund, maximizing the efforts of Radiant Hall, and serving as part of a curatorial team at Carrie Furnace.

She wanted to know about everything, and when she was asked to jury a show for the first time, we talked about the process so that she would be prepared. She was just so smart and so engaged. She had so much to contribute.

CLD: She was also an incredible writer, which of course is why we’ve attempted this project. She was really one of the few people actually writing reviews and real art criticism. I remember having a writer at one of the large papers in town try to do a story on an exhibition I was organizing. He contacted me through email alone and was not only condescending, but straight up rude. Then the “review” he put out was almost entirely cut and pasted from the press release I wrote. Alex, in contrast, would attend something in person, talk with the artist and/or curator, then proceed to write something informed and thoughtful. She walked the line of writing actual criticism in a small city and doing so in such a well-crafted way that people could take it in, discuss it, and potentially grow from it. Alex left a hole in an already weakened state of criticism with very few people left to write about art in our city and even fewer who could write about it in a meaningful way.

VAC: As an independent critic myself, I know how difficult it can be to review the variety of shows, interventions, and individual works. Yet Alex covered that variety of events, and she had a strong voice and never softened her criticisms. In discussing the contested Associated Artists of Pittsburgh annual at the Carnegie Museum of Art, she dared to question the importance of the organization; she discussed a theater piece featuring people with disabilities at the New Hazlett Theater. She addressed the totality of artistic endeavors in the city, going far beyond the major venues, introducing readers to different modes and venues in order to give broader arts coverage. With her ability to think critically, add context, and write quickly, she added the criticism component needed here, expanding the range of interest, placing our local endeavors within a broader international context. Her shorter blog posts kept us informed, her longer reviews and interviews were deeper dives.

CLD: She kept writing, kept networking, and starting her own projects after she finished school and while sorting out her visa to stay in the country. At one point, she told me that for fun she would watch shows like “Website Throwdown” to learn more about marketing and design tips, so that she could share that info with her friends. She was so good at soaking up knowledge and then redistributing it to everyone around her!

VAC: A good example is Versatile PhD, a national effort to get graduate students to think outside the box in terms of careers. Alex, who was excelling in her PhD program at the University of Pittsburgh, had serious doubts about a career in academia, and so she established a local chapter to discuss possibilities.

It was her commitment to the arts with an open mind that led her to explore new ways of belonging and participation. Never satisfied with the status quo, she kept searching for new jobs that could engage aficionados and the curious. As a critic, she became part of the younger crowd in town, giving artists, curators, and administrators more feedback and visibility than the major publications could.

CLD: Like funding and media coverage, much of the art writing in the city focused on the large institutions. Her attention to smaller venues, independent projects, and younger artists was invaluable. It provided some critical publicity and resume additions for many people. I loved the review she did of Brett Yasko's exhibit around John Riegert, which incorporated 252 artists. She wrote about the context of why the show was organized, wrote critically around selected pieces and brought up great questions about what this project could mean to the city. This was a show that was largely ignored by other writers until Riegert passed away a few years later. Then a few writers and media outlets acknowledged the importance and impact of the exhibit.

VAC: Yes, Alex had the wonderful quality of understanding complex discourses, but she used her wealth of knowledge in an accessible way, leaving the multisyllabic artspeak behind. Her dissertation (Critical Realism and Contemporary Art, University of Pittsburgh, 2014) brought the work of three contemporary photographers together, for the first time, in a discussion about a renewed interest in realism near the end of the last century. She placed Alan Sekula, Ian Wallace, and Jeff Wall in a context she called critical realism. Her goal was "less to carve out a new definition of realism by specifying its formal or thematic features, and more to explain the meaning of our continued desire to grasp reality in images, even when postmodern theories of signification have taught us that we ought to know better." (pg 2) Her definition of realism moved from "conceiving of realism as 'fit' or identity between representation and reality" to ... "an articulation of difference, otherness and non-identity." (pg iv) Small but significant changes.

CLD: She was not the typical academic. She saw how much of the art world exists beyond academia and large institutions and that a large portion of the work to serve the art community needed to happen outside of those structures. We bonded over thinking through the holes in our arts ecosystem. While my concern was more focused on providing economic opportunities for artists and arts workers, she focused on supporting them by writing about, documenting, and archiving their works. It's the kind of work that is hard to sustain but hugely important. And sadly, maybe even ironically, it's the kind of work that should be applied to her legacy. Her writing is hard to find now with many of the publication sites she wrote for having closed their doors and her own erasure of her personal blog. It's impossible to gather all of her writing, but we've tried to pull together a wide range of her work to represent the many interests she wrote about and the many angles she covered.

VAC and CLD: We still can't believe that Alex is gone, and we will never be able to

understand why she took her life. She left many of us bewildered and at a loss. She had so much to add to the arts in Pittsburgh, especially in the way we think about art. We imagine she would have had a national or even international reach with her ideas for innovative archiving tools, her writing, and efforts to connect with artists and arts workers. Her time here was short but she had a big impact, and we honor her by putting together this selection of her writings to ensure a lasting legacy. Her contributions are definitely a part of the history of art in Pittsburgh.

Vicky A. Clark, PhD  
*Independent Curator, Critic, and College Professor*

Casey Droege  
*Owner and Executive Director of Casey Droege Cultural Productions*

CHAPTER ONE  
CRITICISM & REVIEWS

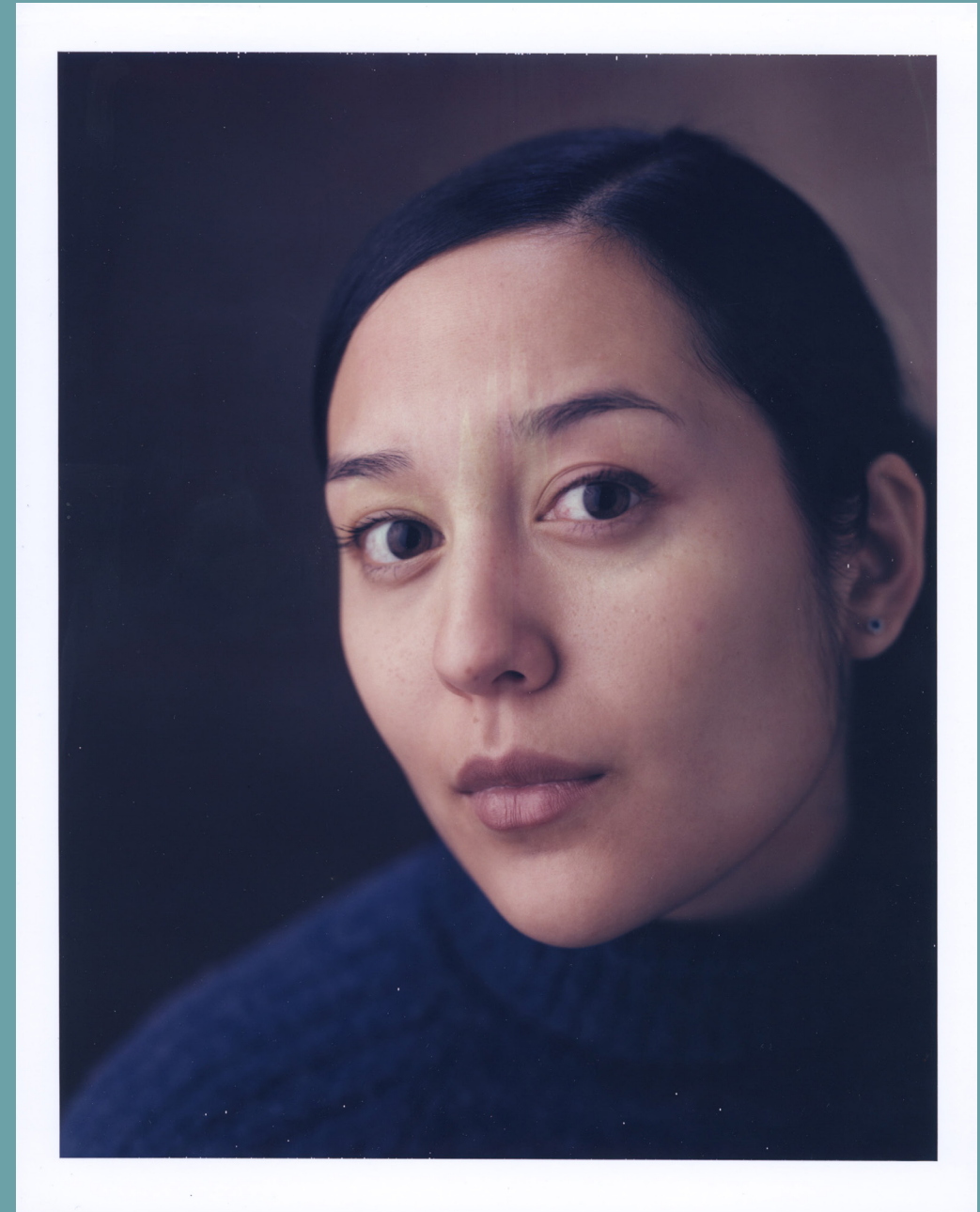


PHOTO BY ANDREW BALFOUR



## 1.1 Formalism Dominates at the 105<sup>th</sup> Associated Artists of Pittsburgh Annual

May 27, 2016 for *The Glassblock*



Gallery View [Left To Right]: Carolyn Frischling, *Appstraction*; Mia Tarducci, *Floor*; Leah Patgorski, *Yellow Somewhere*; Laurie Barne, *Domestics of Ritual: Vignette 3*; Andrew W. Allison, *Pool*; Atticus Adams, *Portal-Mossy*. Photography By David Bernabo.

*The correct name is Laurie Barnes.*

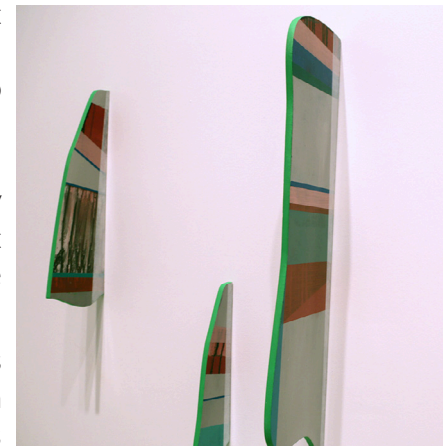
If the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh didn't exist, as the saying goes, it would have to be invented. For over a century, the AAP has organized annual exhibitions, providing an important venue for Pittsburgh-area artists to exhibit and sell their work. This year the 105<sup>th</sup> Annual returns to its traditional home at the Carnegie Museum of Art. It's a crisply installed show, beautiful and rich, but also deeply conservative, which is striking in the context of a city experiencing rapid and sometimes uncomfortable social change. This is not to say that there aren't some wonderful moments in this show—and some outstanding individual works.

Facing the entrance is Laurie Trok's clever suite of wall pieces, thin fins of wood projecting straight out, creating the illusion that their neon green edges are mere lines applied directly to the wall. Its neighbor, Katie Murken's *Continua*, uses phone books dyed with rich, bright colors and stacked high into columns. Seen at a distance, they appear minimalist in conception; up close they reveal velvety, rainbow surfaces. To me they suggest core samples taken from sedimented layers of historical information, rendered archaeological by the emergence of digital media.

Bright, saturated colors continue to punctuate the show, appearing in abstract paintings by Mark E. Weleski and Mia Tarducci, and in sculptures by Michael Walsh and Daniel Roth. Roth's large floor piece is serious in intent and humorous in execution, resembling a finely-crafted piece of space junk. Its surfaces are painted cool colors but its edges are trimmed in fake fur, which animates and anthropomorphizes the work. Roth described imagining the black tufts as an alien life form, a mold or parasitic moss, finding this hulking, broken object and calling it home.

There are many other strong works, including satisfying paintings by David Stanger and Todd Keyser. But it is precisely the power and variety of these formal achievements that bring out most forcefully the overall conservatism of the AAP selection. Among sixty-three artworks, not one deploys new media. There is no film, video, VR helmets, or screens of any kind. There's no hint whatsoever that the internet exists. As my editor put it, "There's nothing plugged in."

To anyone familiar with the Annuals, this will come as no surprise. Curator of the 2005 Annual Terry Smith—the éminence grise of contemporary art—observed that while AAP members produced quality work in traditional mediums, they offered little or no installation, process work, performance, or



Laurie Trok, *God is in the Forest Counting Trees* (Detail)



Katie Murken, *Continua*



Lenka Clayton, *Hand-Typed Check Shirt*



Lenka Clayton, *Detail*



Andrew W. Allison, *Pool*

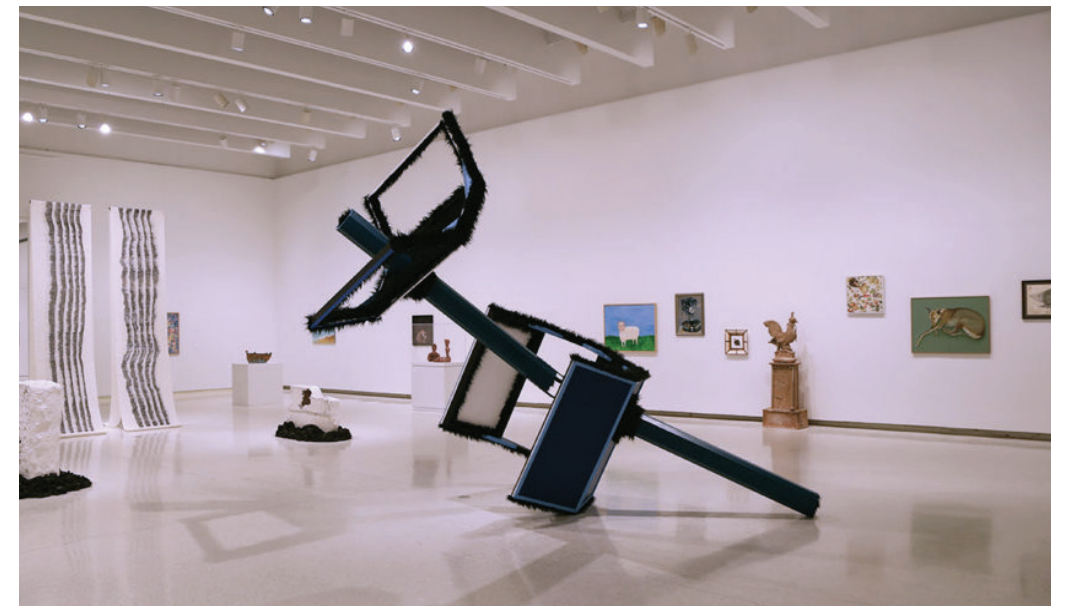
digital media. “Much more of it should be encouraged in the AAP competition if the exhibit is to maintain its contemporaneity,” he counseled. Earlier still, in 2001, David Carrier juried and made virtually the same assessment: “Relatively few videos and installations were submitted, and there was very little openly political art. Oddly little of the art submitted was rooted in this place or its history. On the whole,” he concluded, “the Pittsburgh art community is conservative.”

Obviously, it would be risky to generalize from one AAP Annual to “Pittsburgh art” at large; still, it’s worth pausing on Carrier’s point. We might assume that in a Pittsburgh context, “conservative” art would imply “regional” art, realistic representations of identifiable local landmarks or activities. But in the current Annual, the art has been scrubbed of regional identity, leaving formal qualities—form, color, scale, texture—to dominate. And it is precisely this absence of rootedness in place and history that, paradoxically, makes this Annual feel so conservative: The exhibition celebrates formalism and abstraction at a time when global contemporary art in general is moving in the opposite direction, towards realism, embodied experience, and historical and geographic specificity. This shift began in the 1990s, crystalized around documenta 11 (2002) and has intensified since, driving some of the most important work of the past decades, including Rachel Whiteread’s *House* (1993), the photo-journeys of Emily Jacir in Palestine (2002-03), and Jeff Wall’s quasi-documents of Vancouver’s exemplary banality. We live in a globalized age, but as Arjun Appadurai and others have shown, globality produces locality. Understanding how our localities intersect and complicate each other is urgent cultural work, and it’s an area where artists excel.

Attending to the specificity of place is important not only to connect local art more thoughtfully with art around the country and the world, but also to connect it with Pittsburgh itself. Our city is undergoing major changes—not all good, and some much worse for certain people. In this context, high formalism, however elegant, risks calcifying into indifference, or at minimum, of being received that way. All this isn’t to say that I am advocating for an Annual dominated by the likes of explicitly political artists such as Jonathan Horowitz. I’d settle for the gentler social critiques of David Hammons.

Otherwise, a little contextualizing information would go a long way in guiding visitors through this vast and eclectic exhibition. Apart from a prefatory statement from juror Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, no didactic panels are provided—with the notable exception of one for Lenka Clayton’s *Hand-Typed Check Shirt*. The wall card explains that the artist disassembled the child-sized shirt, passed it through a typewriter to create a checkered pattern with over 30,000 strokes of the “=” key, and sewed it back together. That minimal information grounded and enlarged my viewing experience, evoking repetition and ritual, the invisibility of labor in garment manufacturing, and the work of mothering.

During the opening reception I caught up with Danny Bracken, an accomplished North Side artist who has used projectors and iPads to create intimate, multi-sensory installations and sculptures. He is not an AAP member. To him the organization always just seemed like an old club for Pittsburgh painters. But the high quality of the current exhibition impressed him sufficiently to make him consider joining. “I’ll try anything once,” he said. Of course, by the time the next Annual arrives, the iPad may be obsolete. But, as the saying goes, if at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again.



Daniel Roth, *Search*



## 1.2 103<sup>rd</sup> Associated Artists Annual at The Westmoreland

August 29, 2014 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*

Last month, the Post-Gazette ran a review of the 103<sup>rd</sup> AAP exhibition at the Westmoreland under the headline “a respectable reflection of regional art.” And indeed it is. The predominance of pleasing abstract painting with textured surfaces and lush palettes offer a safe, and yes, thoroughly regional display of recent Pittsburgh creativity. It is miles and decades away from the other biennials (Venice, Whitney, documenta – whoops, that’s not a biennial, but you know what I mean). The dominance of painting and sculpture distinguishes the AAP from the current trends in contemporary global art, which tend towards new media, mixed media, video, performance and installation. And whatever Thomas Hirschorn does. But for a few exceptions.

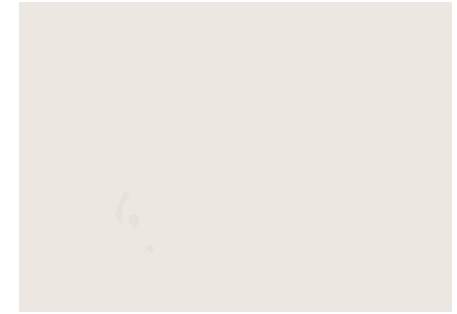
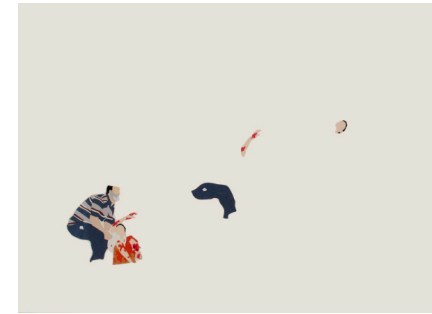
Thus, if you’re not a painter or some other kind of abstractionist you have a good chance of standing out, as do Karin Kaighen’s pair of moody, achromatic photographs. These two landscapes bear fleeting traces of bodies that once were, or might-have-been, or used-to-be. The panoramas are saturated with nostalgia but escape the trap of sentimentality with their fundamentally mysterious narrative scenarios. (Their titles, *Slag Heap* also hint at darker origins.) Figures blur and blend tonally into the landscape like ghosts escaping historical time. This suggests the figures are mortal guests, both on the ancient land and in the memories of others: vital, alive, but ultimately just passing through.



Karen Kaighin, *Slag Heap 2* (left) and *Slag Heap 1* (2013), inkjet print, each 24 x 52"

I was also astonished by Blaine Siegel’s contribution, hung to the left of Kaighen’s photographs, which tells a story of sorts using paper cut-outs across three panels. In the first frame a diminutive figure bends over another, who is splattered with blood-red marks; to their right are other objects – a bloodied arm, a head, hanging against the naked surface of the paper, without even a hint of an environment or depth of any kind. The figures occupy only a fraction of the frame and the surrounding blankness is vast and enigmatic. It is also a strikingly bold compositional decision, and stands out against the density of the painted surfaces of its neighbors.

Indeed the white void might be the principle subject. In this undifferentiated and perhaps indifferent field, brutal physical violence manifests without any whisper of a context – much as it does in a dream. In the second panel – yet another blank field – my eye searched around hoping for elaboration – but



Blaine Siegel, “0016360.JPG/IRAQ 0016360.JPG/LIBYA 0016360.JPG/BOSTON (Triptych)” (detail), undated, paper, 34 x 26"

the it is more unforgiving than the first. Figures appear in cut-out paper that is almost indistinguishable from the background. It is as if the figures are slipping away, their marble tone unable to cut away from the white paper ground. In the lower right corner a small bloody mass of flesh (I am grasping here) is isolated against the background, apparently unconnected with anything around it. And yet the last panel is the most agonizing – and intriguing – of all the paper fragments of arm, head and hand seem to struggle against drowning in the clean white field that surrounds them. Barely above the threshold of vision the raised arm calls for our attention but gives us too little to hang onto.

I have to give Siegel credit here; when almost every exhibition everywhere is stocked full of objects *that look like contemporary art*, Siegel has produced something formally distinctive, departing from the established cut-paper vocabulary of Kara Walker and Swoon. He is probably closer to filmmakers like Alain Renais and Michael Haneke here, who show us violence by mostly not showing it. Violence remains in the void, the silence.

Siegel was inspired by a 2007 digital image which a fellow artist had printed and posted in the studio space they shared. “I had to pass this image every day on my way to my work area,” he said in an email. “It affected me a great deal the first time that I saw it...but less so every day there after.” The experience of his studio mate’s source material became source material for his own invention: “I became interested in how we are fed violent images and how we process this information...if it affected me as strongly as it did at first look I wouldn’t be able to function through the day. My way of coping was to break the image down into more formal aspects... analogous to what we collectively do in our minds to cope with violence.” This effect is aesthetically rigorous, and haunting in the best way.

Finally, I should draw attention to the one video work in the show, which is technically simple but thematically rich. Kyle Milne’s *I’ve Gone Too Far to Go Back* is a single-channel video mounted on a plain monitor showing the artist walking against a stark Colorado landscape. By flipping a coin out ahead of him and striding forward to pick it up, Milne’s everyman makes slow progress up Flag Mountain. The camera waits patiently for him to enter and exit the frame, every one a stunning vista, which he never stops to take in, instead driving himself relentlessly forward at regular intervals.

Milne's procedure hints at Vito Acconci's obsessive repetitions, but Milne is an existentialist not a neurotic, and his self-driven meandering seems driven less by mimicry of bureaucratic processes than a genuine attempt to give performative expression to something we've all encountered: the agony of continuing on a path which, however, has become so familiar it is impossible to abandon. This issue, while universal, becomes pressing as we invest more in basic human activities like getting an education and saving for retirement, only to discover that we haven't come as far, as fast, as we'd hoped. Even worse are the moments of discovery when the pattern of dubious investment becomes clear (the argument we can't win, the exploitation of the planet's natural resources) while clarity about the solution remains obscure, in the distance. I won't give away the ending to this seven-minute pedestrian anti-adventure, but let's just say that the ending isn't what Hollywood dreams of, but it isn't a total downer either.

The show closes August 31. Some of this newer work may not be back for a while. And Siegel's work, in particular, resists reproduction. See it now before it's gone!



Kyle Milne, *I've Gone Too Far To Go Back* (2013) video, 7 minutes.

### 1.3 John Riegert, John Riegert, and 252 Artists of Pittsburgh

July 27, 2016 for *The Glassblock*

It began as an experiment. "I wanted to see what would happen if a large number of different artists—well known and little known—each painted the same subject," designer Brett Yasko said. That subject was John Riegert, a Pittsburgh artist and Yasko's longtime friend. Over the course of two years, Yasko organized portrait sessions of Riegert with 110 local artists; many others worked from a photograph of him in a bright red sweater.

Now, all 252 portraits are on view at SPACE in what the gallery's press materials claim is "one of the largest group exhibitions to be displayed downtown in Pittsburgh's history." In addition, Yasko has included some works by Riegert himself: His drawings wallpaper the gallery's storefront, and videos of his early performances play on a small monitor, a nice complement to the uncanny suite of portraits, which, when taken together, suggest a cult of celebrity in the making.

But who is John Riegert? In the weeks before the exhibition's opening, speculation abounded—he was a big-time artist in the '70s who had since faded from memory, some speculated, or, perhaps, he had already passed away. As I began talking to participating artists about their work on this project, it seemed like everyone knew John, but none could tell me much about him. As it turns out, the question of his identity is part of what makes Yasko's project so interesting—but instead of answering, it prompts other lines of inquiry that go beyond the individual man and touch on community, identity, and the nature of portraiture itself.

Like a nineteenth-century salon or a contemporary flea market, the vast downtown gallery is packed, works hung low and high on the walls, from the ceiling, spread across floors, and tucked into corners. They represent an astonishing variety of artistic approaches. Some paintings are tightly rendered; others are loose and impressionistic. Some picture Riegert as serious, while in others, he cracks a smile. In a touching trio of Polaroids, contributing artist Elizabeth Raymer Griffin dons the red sweater, making a portrait of herself as Riegert. Her body becomes fainter in each frame, almost disappearing entirely. Photographer Matthew Conboy slyly captures Riegert as he holds up a smartphone in front of his face, concealing his features from our view. Inevitably, at least one artist asked him to pose nude.

Several portraits stand out for their unusually innovative conception, particularly an interactive 3-D rendering of Riegert's body by Caroline Record and Ricardo Iamuuri Robinson. Hovering cross-legged amid a blank white





Exhibition photography by Tom Little

field, Riegert appears calm, a Buddha-like figure basking in enlightenment. Using a mouse, gallery visitors can trace the surface of his body, an experience which feels surprisingly tangible despite the crisp digital environment. Each video journey is accompanied by a soundtrack of Riegert speaking and making expressive sounds. “You do heal and come out fine,” he says in one recording. “You can do it. It’s possible. I’ve tried to be good my whole life. Sometimes I haven’t been. It’s ok.”

In this and other works, Riegert comes through as sincere, vulnerable but dignified, an equal and active participant in the project. After touring the entire gallery, I felt I had experienced him on his good days and bad, alone and among company, at home and about. Yet, curiously, this experience did not produce a clearer, more comprehensive sense of the subject—quite the opposite. Somehow, despite the variety of works, John Riegert does not take us deeper into the subject but rather obscures him from view.

It may seem counterintuitive, if not perverse, to claim that a show titled John Riegert, featuring nothing but portraits of John Riegert, isn’t really about him after all. But it’s a direct consequence of the show’s presentation, placing as it does remarkably different representations of the same subject side by side for our review. After studying a few portraits we become acquainted with Riegert’s most distinctive features, notably his bushy, reddish hair and beard and blue eyes. But soon the shared subject falls to the margins of our attention, leaving the artist’s choices front and center. For instance, when I came across a punchy black and white photo of Riegert taken in a studio

under a broad, soft light, I didn’t notice his character, but instead the way the photographer had transformed him into a polished but typical studio portrait that wouldn’t feel out of place in Vanity Fair.

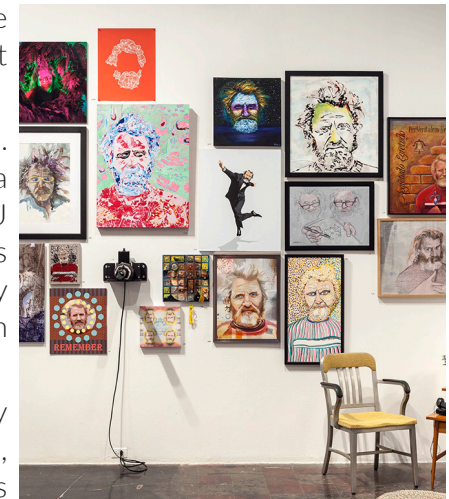
Moreover, the exhibition does little to fill us in on biographical essentials. It’s not obvious from the selection itself that Riegert is Yasko’s friend and a fellow artist, that he is now 48 years old, that he attended art school at CMU in the 1980s, that he lived in Lawrenceville for much of his life, that he was twice married and divorced and has a daughter, or that he has periodically been hindered by mental illness (he suffers from Bipolar II). But then again, on some level, the details don’t matter.

The artists’ general indifference to biography was sharply reinforced by the inclusion of several completely abstract works by Seth Clark, Dee Briggs, Michael Lotenero, among others. Since portraiture by definition requires figuration, or at least some relation of resemblance, abstract art cannot be a portrait in the usual sense; if Briggs insists that this hanging steel I-beam encrusted in concrete is a “portrait” of John Riegert, we must take her word for it.

This isn’t to argue that Briggs’s I-beam is not a portrait of John Riegert but rather that the question of whether or not it is one is a source of tension in the work, and one that pervades the show generally. Some may find this familiar, citing Robert Rauschenberg’s famous and unconventional Portrait of Iris Clert (1961). When invited to participate in a group show of portraits of the Parisian gallerist, Rauschenberg instead sent a telegram which simply read, “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.” In this gesture Rauschenberg followed the earlier example of Marcel Duchamp, who shifted the source of artistic value away from the formal features of the work and onto his own authority as an artist. We have Duchamp to thank (or blame) that art today need not look a certain way. It just has to be accepted as art.

Personally, I’m less interested in whether abstract qualifies as portraiture than I am in why such an accumulation of portraits tell us so little about the sitter. If this show is not about John Riegert, what is it about? In the press release, Dan Byers, senior curator at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art, suggests it is “a portrait of Pittsburgh, its artists and what it means to be a creative individual within a small community.” Fair enough. But what does that mean?

This question isn’t easy to answer. We might observe, as Riegert himself has in interviews, that Pittsburgh artists are a really warm and welcoming bunch. We might also draw attention to the very smallness of the “small community,” noting the vanishing presence of artists of color in the show; though probably less a conscious choice and more a symptom of the ways our representational practices depend upon curators’ organic social networks, it doesn’t make it less problematic. We could also discuss how much the community is growing, both luring newcomers from cities like New York and San Francisco and



Exhibition photography by Tom Little



retaining younger artists after graduation, a change from Riegert's own time, when most of his peers sought better career opportunities elsewhere. Or we could talk about the range of people who fall under the umbrella of "artist"—from prominent, credentialed professionals to those on the margins of our cultural institutions, whether by choice or force, making their living by other means.

In any case, if Dan Byers is right that John Riegert is a portrait of the Pittsburgh art community, I hope it will be read not only as a celebration, much less as flattery, but mainly as a provocation. The exhibition raises lots of questions that, though maybe impossible to answer, are very much worth thinking about—and which make John Riegert well worth the visit.

## 1.4 Cataloguing Pattern at SPACE Gallery

July 24, 2014 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*

More than 50 artworks by nine artists on the theme of "pattern" could have been mesmerizing— or headache-inducing. It's a fine line. But Kristen Letts Kovak has kept headaches at bay by generously padding each of the artists' works with an ample volume of space, enough for visitors to clear their heads between encounters but not so much as to sever objects from each others' presence.

I don't normally pay much attention to gallery audiences, but at the opening it was hard to miss the flock around Salinda Deery's abstract paintings. *Three Against Five* was particularly magnetic. Viewers got up close at distances that make museum guards nervous and then walked its length back and forth and back again, as if their gaze were locked on a track. It is painted from end to end with small, short brushstrokes in a tight pattern akin to woven wicker.

At a distance it is powerfully illusionistic, the layered dabs of black, blue and purple fooled my pathetic eyes into telling my brain that I was looking at layers of lace-cut wood. Cut wood! It's ridiculous and magical. Moving closer does not reveal the sleight of hand: you're left with flat pattern. But that's what makes this work so contemporary.

This work isn't grappling with Greenbergian problems of flatness or Friedian claims about shape. It's rather a quantum approach to painting, you can have the parts and view the whole too. Just step back five feet. This is painting that engages the whole body, and in that sense, Deery's work exemplifies the major strength of this show. It doesn't leave pattern and perception to eyesight alone. These are patterns you move into.

Letts Kovak's own contribution is also impressive: an oversized scroll painted with tendrils, arabesques and fantastical creatures in luscious gem tones. One scroller is mounted on high on the wall, close to the ceiling, so the paper unrolls down onto a low supporting dias. The presentation and size are strange: scrolls are meant to be handled with ease for reading (excepting ceremonial Torahs and the like). By contrast, *Permutations* has the monumental verticality of *Voice of Fire* combined with a pop tendency towards inflated scale. Here, the largeness and vertical presentation lend a magisterial quality to the thing, perhaps alluding to the Bayeux Tapestry which pops up (that, or something quite like it) in a small section among the flora and fauna. It's a beautiful object, a scroll wanting to be a tapestry. But at the end of the day, big macarons are just macarons made big, and big balloon dogs are just Jeff Koons messing with skittish investors. It's unclear what size contributes, besides itself.



Aaron Henderson with Ted Coffey, screenshot from *Afghanistan Fire Fight* (2014), video projection, digital sound, size variable.



Salinda Deery, *Yellow Stomp* (2006), oil on canvas, 30" x 60". Installation photo taken by the author.



Salinda Deery, *Three Against Five* detail (2008), oil on linen, 36" x 216". Image taken by author.



(left) Cataloguing Pattern installation with Kovak's *Permutations* in foreground. Image taken by author. (right) Kristen Letts Kovak, *Permutations* detail (2014), watercolor and gouache on paper and wood, 23" x 5". Image courtesy of Kristen Letts Kovak.

On the next wall were an utterly different suite of watercolors hung in an irregular grouping of frames. Rebecca Zilinski's small dots of color in quiet tones fall variously into disciplined grids or escape into dynamic clusters and clouds.

Several "grid" pieces mimic typical technical experiments with pigments such as Payne's grey or ochre in columns from most to least dense. The proximity to actual technical exercises reveals a conceptual willingness to flirt with non-art, and in a way that is much more visually interesting than Gerhard Richter's similarly conceptual color grids. It's a nice reminder of the ongoing importance of technical skills in an age of conceptual art, which did as much as Mondrian or Martin or Eisenman to canonize the grid-form. And I admit I was charmed by the smallness some of these works. After big balloon dogs and big photography and Richter it's refreshing to see painting that is not held back from smallness by fears of minoriness.

On the other side of the gallery Aaron Henderson's two video collaborations with sound designer Ted Coffey immobilized me on a hard bench for rather longer than my butt agreed to. Both videos run in short loops, but they are extremely visually dense.

Henderson finds footage on YouTube and cuts them into symmetrical quadrants, forming a perplexing kaleidoscopic whole. The effect resembles some of the fractal art that's been circulating on hip design blogs recently, but with content from the real world, so it can mean something to someone other than math dorks. And Henderson's subjects are terrifyingly real: Black Friday Riot shows people and products colliding and fusing into one another in a frenzy of consumption.

In Afghanistan Fire Fight we see fragmented, helmeted bodies moving through a desert city. These, too, fold into each other, like a huge body swallowing and vomiting itself in a convulsive teaseract. Henderson and Coffey's pieces are labeled "reflection" but this feels all wrong. There's nothing reflective about the mirroring here. They videos are pulsing, panicked, restless.

Letts Kovak has classified the various works into categories like reflection,

rhythm and permutation, but this cataloguing does little to frame the work. In my experience there were just two classes: strong and struggling. The weaker pieces were interesting and might have done better among different companions, but here they fell back. Todd Keyser's larger mixed-media works used photographs with a "digital" look that I found distracting; the smaller pieces were clever schematic interventions into photographic illusion, territory already explored by Jan Dibbets in the 1960s and more recently by the brilliant Sean Alward.

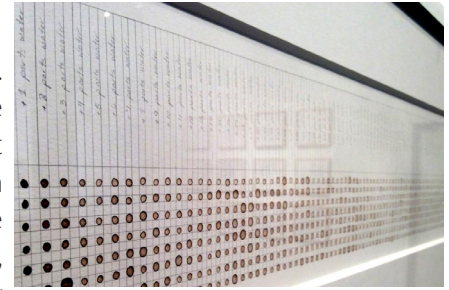
Brooke Sturtevant-Sealover's contribution had multiple components that neither cohered as one installation nor stood apart from each other autonomously (nine individual works are listed in the catalogue).

And generations of art students have hardened me against the poetry of reclaimed windows. Maria Mangano's pieces literalized pattern in mandalas of cut-out birds (put a bird on it!) in a way that collapsed into an illustration of the theme, rather than an exploration of it.

By contrast, Kristin Kest's invented Fables pushed the theme to philosophical extremes, but had little to say to the other works.

The notion that patterns depend on expectation, and expectations are crafted through narratives is suggestive but too tenuous to hold up against, say, Henderson's savage symmetry.

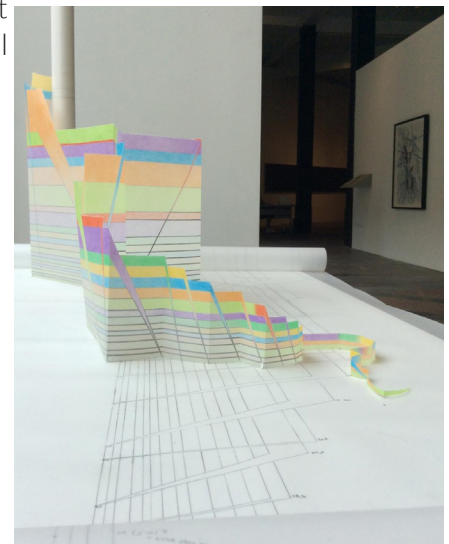
This is Letts Kovak's first curatorial exercise, apart from a freshman effort at Future Tenant. That she took two years to allow the works to evolve in some dialogue with each other is no small feat. And although the fundamental notion that art and knowledge require order is not new (hey, Kant), the best works here feel fresh. They move beyond mere optical effects or intellectual ideas to reveal "pattern" as a richer, fully somatic phenomenon.



Rebecca Zilinski, detail from *Sepia* (2014), ink and graphite on paper, 6" x 54". Image taken by author.



Todd Keyser, *Golden Thread* (2014), acrylic on ink-jet print, 8.5"x 11". Image courtesy of the artist.



Brooke Sturtevant-Sealover, *The Notation of the Allocation of Consumption and Progress, Portulaca* (2011-present), colored pencil and graphite on vellum, size variable. Image taken by the author.



## 1.5 Fieldwork: CSA PGH Show

May, 2014 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*



2014 art shares. CSA PGH. 2014.

It is hard to imagine a more compact affirmation of the pluralism that rules contemporary art than the CSA PGH Show, currently at Fieldwork. This exhibition features 12 artists selected for this year's art CSA. Like a farm share ("CSA" normally stands for "community-supported agriculture"), CSA PGH offers "shares" of original art, available by subscription. In this way artists, like farmers, can sell directly to their customers, a sensible strategy in areas like Pittsburgh that have underdeveloped markets for contemporary art.

Curated by Casey Droege, Kilolo Lockett, Blaine Siegel and Corey Escoto, the CSA PGH exhibition is offered as a teaser for the shares. It also provides an additional context for them, since these particular works of art are not multiples, and so are not included the shares themselves.

The revelation of this show is its diversity, and this is also its greatest difficulty. On the west wall hang three works on paper by Jim Rugg, small monuments of astonishing figurative skill. Older critics would have called this "comic book art" and Blaine Siegel, the co-curator of this exhibition, and a collector of original work in this style, still does. Recently the style has since climbed the ranks of critical esteem from entertainment to literature to contemporary art. ("I don't see comic book art as low art or high art," Siegel said at the opening.) The largest of the three pieces, a "splash page" in black ink (2013), is a compact universe of brawny activity punctuated by many a ZING and a BANG! Bodies, words, speech bubbles, explosions and numerals collide in space and also in scale, mingling in chaotic simultaneity unconstrained by the panels that would shape a linear narrative.

Next to Rugg's drawings are four wood poles that lean against the wall. All are painted blue with red wedges mounted on their sides: two pairs of child's stilts. One pair is old and worn; the other, pristine. Artist Cara Erskin made the new pair based on the originals, which were crafted by her grandfather as a child. *Antecedents* (2012) is one of those enigmas whose conceptual content lies adjacent to its formal presentation and threatens to leave it behind, but doesn't quite. Viewers with a taste for the conceptual will find much to chew on in this piece, including associations with twinning, traditional craft, genetic continuity and aging.

Several artists are represented by photography. Bookending the exhibition on either side of the door, two large color photographs by Jennifer Myers depict small sculptural assemblages which here, several times enlarged, have a second life as photographic icons. Alexis Gideon, a relentlessly multi-



*Splash Page*. Jim Rugg. 2013. Pencil and ink. Photo by the author.



*Antecedents*. Cara Erskin. 2012. Wood and paint. Photo by the author.



*thoughts/writings*. Blaine Siegel.  
2013. Guache and gesso on wood.  
Photo by the author.

disciplinary artist, has contributed photographic stills from his celebrated stop-animation musical cycles. The photographs are richly printed on metallic paper and their considerable scale and detail lay bare the crafted artificiality of the figures and sets, but knowing their source just made me long for their filmic ancestors (Video Musics III: Floating Oceans, 2012). (Incidentally, Lucia Nhamo's uncut prints of Zimbabwean paper money had the same effect on me. Designed as "frames" in a flip-book style animation, they are interesting enough, but watching a money counter actually create a flip-book before your eyes is utterly hypnotizing.) Barbara Weissberger's large digital pigment print exploits reflections for painterly effect, confounding reality and illusion while Escoto's own piece, a rigorous, cool geometric design in Fuji instant film explores minimalist gestalt in two dimensions.

But although themes of perception, geometry, and the crossing of media struggle to emerge, they remain parts of the whole. Another faint theme is the use of language. David Montano and Alisha Wormsley both paint on found objects; book covers and a salvaged window frame, respectively. They are joined by Droege's intelligent and colorful diagrammatic print, a sly jab at the dominance of data and our collective obsession with infographics, unexpectedly reaches for the poetic. Siegel's stand-out abstract painting on wood, answering the challenge of the shaped canvas, has little to say to these neighbors; even less do they resonate with Edith Abeyta's installation, a bolt of fabric suspended like a hammock, accompanied by wine on a plinth (elements of a performance).

This diversity may feel jarring. But however this particular display fails to cohere, the curators should be congratulated for identifying and including these artists whose very divergences will together make a rich ensemble for the CSA. There is no Pittsburgh "style" or "school"; there is zero orthodoxy and total freedom. That we have arrived at this utopian state in a one-room gallery on a rough strip of Penn Avenue is reason enough to celebrate. And hopefully, a new generation of local collectors will join in.

## 1.6 Review: David Bernabo's The Reduction

August 31, 2015 for New Hazlett Theater

Whatever else *The Reduction* is, or might be, or might be about, it is not reductive. Quite the opposite. Although the performance begins quietly enough with the artist alone on stage, the first few minutes are a feint, a few breaths of calm before a long stretch of uninhibited, celebratory maximalism. This piece has everything: dance, video projection, live and recorded music, poetry (in the form of a voiceover), crafted objects, found objects, machines, audience participation, and three photographers who do not stand by discreetly but roam about the stage, following their moving subjects in pursuit of the right shot. Time and space become so densely packed it's hard to know where to look.

All of which is typical of David Bernabo, who created *The Reduction* for New Hazlett Theater's 2015 CSA series. A talented musician, visual artist, choreography, dancer and filmmaker, Bernabo has long pursued "thick" multimedia experiences. This is no accident: Bernabo has expressed his admiration for Merce Cunningham and John Cage, both notorious anti-purists, and has referenced the Judson Dance Theatre in his sculptural work and interviews. In his first solo show, at Pittsburgh's Modern Formations in August 2007, Bernabo decorated the walls with paintings and nails joined by lines of string. Calling this a "score," he and the violinist Ben Harris "played" it for a live audience. With *The Reduction*, Bernabo continues his engagement with this avant-garde legacy, which is actually less a dialogue and more a form of friendly banter.

*The Reduction* is divided into three acts. As I noted, it begins quietly. In Act I, as the audience enters the theatre and settles into their seats, Bernabo is already standing on stage, supporting a long wood plank on his shoulder. He has 20 minutes to wait in this posture until the theater's Executive Director launches into a welcome speech. The lights dim. Then, slowly and gingerly, Bernabo begins to walk about the stage, carrying the plank. As he walks his body parts appear to expand and contract, each moving independently of the others, until his hips and torso threaten to detach and go their separate ways. In this bit and later, when performing a sequence of gestures that mime practical tasks, Bernabo is equally mechanical and graceful—a mesmerizing mix.

In the second act Bernabo is joined by three dancers (JoAnna Dehler, Ru Emmons-Apt and Lauryn Petrick) and shortly after by three photographers (Heather Mull, Mario Ashkar, and Stephanie Tsong). They are all outstanding;

Emmons-Apt danced with a leg brace, which impacted her performance not at all. In one of the most terrifying segments their bodies became rigid and began vibrating, as if possessed or violently ill. The Reduction is not without a curious darkness, which was enhanced by a hollow shrieking sound, periodically produced by an apparatus of brass mouthpieces and tubes that musician Darin Gray amplified through his upright bass.

Each of the acts is intercut with another formal welcome speech, variations on the one given by the Executive Director before the show. In the final act the dancers build a barrier of props at the front of the stage, and Bernabo addressed the audience directly, explaining that we had just been reorganized into a new society with a new social hierarchy based on our seating location—which of course, was as arbitrary as the social circumstances of our birth. The audience chuckled, suggesting that if Bernabo had intended this as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, it had missed its target, sailing over the audience's heads.

In a printed artist statement Bernabo indicated that these self-conscious conceits were designed to explore the relationship between reality and simulation. In an email to me, he elaborated:

What I'm hoping to achieve would be the audience's awareness of the different ways reality can be perceived. When the audience enters the theater, I will be on stage. Is my presence onstage part of the performance's environment or is part of the theater's day-to-day operation? ... I'm hoping that the piece can use some of the tools of a theater and performance to question what systems are real, what are simulations.

In framing his work this way Bernabo situates it in a larger artistic field occupied by artists as diverse as Hito Steyerl, Cindy Sherman, Omar Fast, Duane Hanson and the people behind the Museum of Jurassic Technology. In that past 15 or so years, this growing field has largely been theorized as a response to the advent of mediation in our (affluent, Western, urban lives), as typified by virtual currency, Second Life, reality TV, drones and Twitter bots crashing the Dow Jones. How can anyone tell what's real anymore? One answer, by far the most radical, was proposed by French post-structural philosopher Jean Baudrillard. On his view, there is no reality, only a simulacrum. "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truths—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true."

To understand *The Reduction* in these terms seems plausible enough. For example, consider the photographers. Are they actors, or photographers, or both? Clearly they are acting as photographers but also, in some non-trivial sense, are also acting as performers. They follow the dancers with their cameras, matching their location and pace, becoming photographers as "virtual" performers—the shadow of the reality they hope to capture. In the process of "performing" their role, they also create photographs, a second version of the performance, which is "virtual" in a different sense, since it is a trace of a past event that has yet to be experienced as a trace. In recounting how

he became involved in this production, Ashkar, an experienced photographer, joked, "To play a cameraman as a cameraman was a great opportunity. I've been practicing a long time for this." Photographer Heather Mull added, "Really, I have no idea what just happened."

I would add to this, though, a distinction between how this idea is expressed at the level of content and the technique. Where Bernabo focuses overly on the content, the technique seems less successful: in one segment Bernabo grasps a shrouded object, and holds it out in front of him, gradually pulling back the white cloth dramatically to reveal a mask of his own face. Better are moments of raw technical experimentation. One of my favorite moments came in Act I, where Bernabo is throwing a ball against the wall; as it bounces back he catches it and repeats. Finally he misses one catch but just then, another ball comes flying towards him in the same direction, thrown by someone off stage. The sudden appearance of the second ball was totally unexpected; it had a hint of slapstick, an echo of countless gags in which normally inert objects suddenly display an unexpected agency. In the context of the overall work, this feels so fresh because it both catches us off guard and still fits tightly into the rhythm of the scene. I was less concerned about whether the gesture of bouncing a ball on stage exists as a real gesture (it does) or a simulation (it also does), than in the artful way a second ball jolted my expectations and pull me—if only momentarily—into a new register of attention. Indeed, I would argue that this is what characterizes Bernabo's work at its best.

Consider, once more, the photographers. Following the dancers' movements and are isolated from the surrounding reality of the performance by their viewfinders, the photographers become intensely absorbed in what they see. On one level this dramatizes spectacle of the dance, since it intensifies our awareness that the dancers' bodies are on display. At the same time, it also intensifies the spectacle of the photographers themselves, who by virtue of their narrow fields of attention are unaware of the audience's gaze—and that much more vulnerable to it. Much of the intensity of the piece derives from the amplification of visuality achieved through the photographers' presence, and long stretches of improvised dance would probably be much diminished without them.

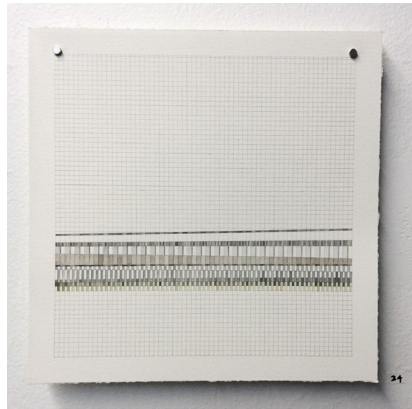
In a way, Bernabo's interest in the relationship between reality and simulation, however, sincere, may be less important to the final work than a good intuition about audience attention. When it comes to changing how we see and how we feel when we see, there is no possible simulation.

*The correct name and pronouns of David Bernabo's collaborator are Ru Emmons (they/them).*

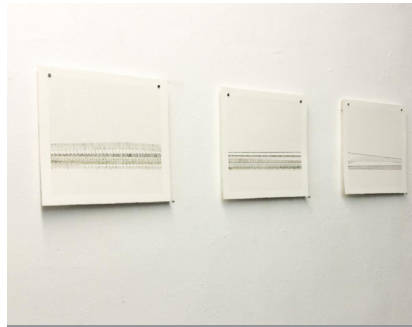


## 1.7 Kara Skylling Stacked; Patterns and Piles at Assemble

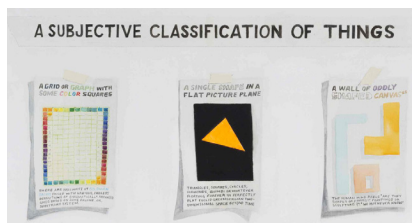
May, 2014 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*



*Pile II* (undated), graphite and watercolor on paper, 14" x 14". Installation view at Assemble, 2014.



Installation view at Assemble showing *Pile I*, *Pile II* and *Pile III* (undated), graphite and watercolor on paper, 14" x 17".



William Powhida, detail from "A Subjective Classification of Things," (2013). Image via (<http://hyperallergic.com/84620/is-all-the-stuff-at-art-fairs-the-same-ish>)

The title of Kara Skylling's solo exhibition led me to expect some stacked or piled things, perhaps with patterns, on a scale somewhere between the sublime hoard of Christian Boltanski and the diminishing accumulations of Gonzalez-Torres. But the presentation is conventional: works on paper hung on the walls in a single ribbon around the room. If anything is stacked or piled in this show, it is not the objects themselves.

Skylling's paintings are composed of grids, which are delicately indicated in graphite, their cells filled with sombre colors that, at a distance suggest landscapes, roads, housing tracts or sine waves. The compositions are both horizontal and vertical. Hung without protective frames or glass, the work appears vulnerable, naked, and this contributes to their quiet minimalism. Some of the larger pieces are so minimal as to appear diffuse; they were also injured by under-lighting (I glanced at the ceiling and a couple of lights were out). The better works, like *Pile I-III*, and especially *Pile II*, are smaller and more compact, their tiles of color more dense.

This work is of a generic contemporary type, "a grid or graph with some colored squares", travestied by William Powhida in *A Subjective Classification of Things*. Obviously, the type is about pattern, or its absence. But only in a Pittsburgh context could Skylling's grids be read explicitly, and unproblematically, as "piles" or "stacks." There is a tension between the notion of the pile, which is implicitly voluminous, and the flatness of the gridded surface, and investigating that tension is the basic organizing idea of the series. The notion of stacks, piles, hills, or perhaps mounds of building materials, new or discarded, and the visual shapes these produce, haunt the whole show. But so does flatness, in particular, the surfaces of siding, corrugated tin, boarded up windows, cinder-block walls, picket fences and the slatted rolling sliding doors of loading docks. These subjects manifest in small collection of quasi-abstract black and white 120-format photographs, also on view. Both volume and flatness are explicitly architectural, and just in case anyone was in doubt, here's an extract from Assemble's web copy: "Kara Skylling's [sic] is influenced by pattern found in urban landscapes and architecture."

Skylling is not alone in her occupation with the material stuff of the built environment. Indeed, it is practically a rustbelt obsession, appearing variously in work by John Humphries, Meghan Herwig and Seth Clark, who has made series called *Pile* and *Mass*. Ron Copeland's recent exhibition, *STRUCTURE* at Modern Formations provided a concise summary of this cluster of concerns,

and the theme could probably have accommodated twice the number of regional artists. (Dane Horvath was notably absent, for example.) More recently, SPACE's Cataloguing Pattern group show flirted with some adjacent concerns. (Skylling's minimalism is apiece with Rebecca Zilinski's gridded color exercises.) In the mean time, Meghan Olson and Megan Shalonis have found novel ways of interrogating the ontology of finished lumber.

Pittsburgh is a city wracked by architectural anxiety. Leaving the gallery, I walked around temporary fences and heavy machinery. Several blocks of Garfield are torn up, under construction, and behind the temporary fences new facades look fresh out of the box. Good brick stock continues to degrade as property owners wait for higher prices. New townhouses are built. Architect's renderings fantasize about an Old Navy in East Liberty. Rents rise. Artists live with a hyper-consciousness about their role in the coming flood (or drought?).

Over forty years ago Dan Graham rediscovered the minimalism of Donald Judd's *Stack* in the regularized tract housing of America's suburbs. Today, *Homes for America* remains a monument of architectural critique, its mix of formal observation and conceptual rigor as urgent today as in 1967 - maybe more so. It is unclear where Skylling and her young and emerging cohort stand with regard to this history, but it is imperative they continue to investigate the conditions and consequences of Pittsburgh's renaissance. When it comes to pattern, stacks and piles there is a rich history of art behind us but the future of our city remains uncertain.

## 1.8 Why you need to watch #Blackmendream now

January 14, 2015 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*



#Blackmendream (2014), film still, single-channel digital video.

So I hate to be that pain in the ass who's all, "You have to check out this new podcast/book/film/juice cleanse!" But seriously, you have to check out #Blackmendream. It's a short film, just 45-minutes long, by Philadelphia-born artist Shikeith. The premise is absolutely simple: it's black men talking. That's all. And that's a whole lot.

The subjects are interviewed separately, each isolated in his own room, facing away from the camera. We hear a questions asked, off-camera, that are both personal but open-ended (what makes you sad? What makes you angry?) and lightly sociological (when did you become a black man?). Otherwise, the film is entirely dedicated to the answers. Except for the occasional atmospheric buzz or the tap-a-tap of rain on the window, all we hear is black men talking.

The men open up about the trauma of growing up, of gradually identifying a circle of friends, of wanting to find love, of professional success. They dream. Their answers weave together a tantalizing mix of utterly personal and universally-human experience—and really, is there a difference? One man tells the interviewer that he cries all the time, whereas another says he wants to cry but never quite manages. But this isn't just a Disney-dimensional celebration of black humanity ("Black men, they're just like us! They have a full range of psychological states!") but rather a slow layering of experiences, some familiar, some foreign, and no narrative structure to tell you in advance which is which. (One of the most seductive features of this film is precisely that the presentation of the material is so bare. It feels as if the director had put his full faith in his viewers, neither presuming to know who they are, nor needing to know.) After laying down the "universal" foundations of human experience, we are plunged deeper, into experiences that are neither individual nor universal, but in-between: black and male.

And that's where things get interesting. To answer the question, "When did you become a black man?" one interviewee describes a searingly clear moment, when, at the age of 5, he discovered himself an object of curiosity in an all-white environment. For another, it was more gradual, "when I realized the weight that comes along with it, especially here lately, all the racial tension in the news..." He continues: "I've always tried to fit in and be normal and

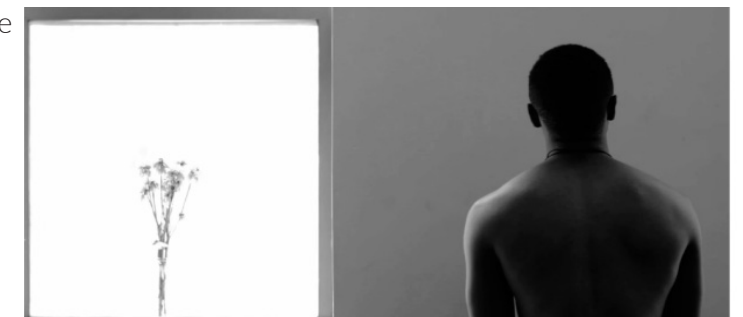
kinda downplay different parts of me, my blackness, without even realizing... This year I became a black man, more aware of my place and more importantly, my purpose."

The answers are extremely nuanced, revealing the sensitivity and thoughtfulness of the individual speakers. The answers are right because the question is right. One is not born, but becomes, a black man. It's an obvious point, but still radical, because it exposes the relational dimensions of race: whereas many people believe that race is something that people are, the experiences conveyed in #Blackmendream is rather one of becoming. We see how black masculinity is something that is thrust on individuals by interactions with white people, institutions, the media, local communities and family members. So, while this film conveys the full humanity of its subjects, it doesn't stop there. It also reveals history in the writing.

I don't want to give away too much; discovery is part of the pleasure. As the interviews go on, they sometimes blend together in one continuous narrative; at other times, they peel away from each other, pulled by the force of contradiction. This dream-like flow is due in large part to the magic of editing. In one particularly slick cut, we're treated to the verbal equivalent of an eyeline match: one man asks a question and a different man in the next shot immediately answers. This reinforces the sense of contradiction: formally, the cut drives towards continuity and shared experiences, but the different content of the shots pushes in the opposite direction.

We never learn the identities of the speakers. They face away from the camera, a simple strategy that both preserves their anonymity and frees up the viewer's attention to focus on the words being spoken. Nevertheless, there is a lot to look at in these rich, black and white compositions which have the crisp formalism of Robert Mapplethorpe or Horst. It's the perfect vehicle for Shikeith's message and no doubt strategically chosen—when it's doing its job, restrained classicism never got in the way of a good story. And the story is really the most important part. This is the film we need right now. In this period of terror and tragedy, a ravenous 24-hour news cycle and sanctimonious social media, one of the most powerful things we can do is just stop and listen. Black men are talking.

I'm going to say this one more time. You have to see this film. You have to see it to hear it.



#Blackmendream (2014), film still, single-channel digital video.

## 1.9 A (Micro) History of World Economics, Danced at New Hazlett Theater

June 6, 2015 – for *Pittsburgh Articulate*

In the days leading up to Friday night, various friends asked me what plans I had for Friday night. “I’m going to the theatre,” I said, then hedged. “Well, maybe it’s dance. At the New Hazlett. By City of Asylum,” Invariably I received a puzzled look. Of course, I myself didn’t know what I was in for. I had read the press release three times and didn’t grasp it. The performance was entitled *A (Micro) History of World Economics, Danced*, and if that wasn’t enough to trip you up, it has a director (Pascal Rambert), the artistic director of Theatre de Gennevilliers, plus a producer (City of Asylum), 17 local non-actors with disabilities and 28 of their family members, friends, and caregivers, eight singers from the Bach Choir, three professional actors, and an artist-activist.

The performance was divided roughly into three sections, each addressing a stage in the evolution of political economy: the emergence of commodity production, the shift to consumption, and finally the ultimate stage of capitalism, the production of the commodified self. The first section opened quietly, with a poetic prelude read by the actress Clémentine Baert, who was soon joined by the full cast. Let me pause here to acknowledge how radical this is. Usually people with disabilities are marginalized in visual culture; in television, for example, actors with disabilities often play characters with disabilities. By contrast, in this performance all cast members participate equally in all parts of the performance: speaking, dancing, singing, writing. Consequently, we see a performance of diversity, not a performance of disability as such. Moreover the radicality of all this is given visual articulation by the costume design, which is absent. Everyone wears street clothes, which, in the context of the austere black box, highlights the diversity of color, cut and fabric.

As the cast entered the space and distributed themselves throughout, they began silently performing everyday activities such as cleaning, cooking or reading a book. These form a background for a the first of several dramatic set pieces. Baert with fellow actresses Chelsea Fryer and Alessandra Calabi take on the roles of eighteenth-century shipping stockholders, debating the relative health of markets in England and France. It’s an exaggerated comic performance, like period caricatures come alive. This set piece is echoed later with a different trio of characters: nineteenth-century avant-garde French poets, who debate the nature of beauty and ultimately reveal themselves as deeply embedded in economic affairs as the businessmen.

In between, segments of dance and music occur, and these are punctuated



*A (Micro) History of World Economics, Danced*. Image via City of Asylum.

in turn with short lectures on economics addressed directly to the audience by the activist John Malpede. Tall and handsome with longish grey hair, Malpede cuts a romantic figure. His delivery was improvised, situated ambiguously between a lecture, which is performative by nature, and a performance of a lecture, and as he spoke about political economy from Adam Smith to the 2008 subprime crisis, I felt myself transported back to an undergraduate seminar at a liberal arts college, basking in the warm discovery of my first professor crush. “Crisis is not a problem for the capitalist economy, but a system of renewal.” Indeed!

If all this sounds crazy—even anarchic—it is, and that may be the performance’s greatest strength—and weakness. At times the various parts (poetry, dramatic vignettes, song, monologue) aligned in a way that felt coherent, but fragile, and refreshingly open, at others, totally disorientating. The breakdowns mainly occurred in the transitions between segments, for example, between a choreographed and an improvised one.

But the openness produced some wonderful moments, particularly readings of personal statements written during the course of the performance itself. Rambert has said that he never tells the participants what to write, just that he wants to hear about their experiences, not generic platitudes. In this way the cast addressed the audience directly with sensible insights about disability: “Do not be ‘inspired’ by this—be convicted!” and “The elephant in the room is disability, which I’d rather call ‘differences.’ They describe, but do not define.”

Unfortunately, the performance concluded weakly, with the group singing “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door”, which struck me as trite and unworthy of the seriousness of the preceding material. It’s exactly the kind of song that’s calculated to be “inspiring” and so inevitably crumples into a cliché. It’s also aspirational in exactly that way that Karl Marx—whose name is finally uttered in the closing scene—would have despised. The title suggests an appeal to the divine, whereas Marx advocated organized struggle and ultimately, revolution. The two are not compatible.

In the talkback after the show I asked about the relationship between disability and economics—two central themes that inhabit the show but never fully connect. Josie Badger, one of the cast, who holds a PhD in Healthcare Ethics from Duquesne University, responded that these two spheres intersect in multiple ways: (dis)ability impacts individuals’ employment opportunities, thus, their financial security, for example. Then there’s the issue of accessing support: insurance is often insufficient to cover the cost of care so family members leave their jobs and become caretakers. This is all true, but it didn’t come through for me in the performance itself. (There are no parables about the evils of insurance companies, as we would expect from Berthold Brecht.



*A (Micro) History of World Economics, Danced*. Image via City of Asylum.



And the jump from Michel de Montaigne to insurance is too great.) But one of Badger's points was helpful in framing the specifically artistic achievement of Rambert's work. Whatever the technical barriers to access and participation for variously-abled people whether in economic or cultural life, fear remains the overriding social barrier. And it seems to me that fear is one thing that performance art is uniquely adapted to addressing. As Aristotle observed, theater helps us to hear and see things that would otherwise frighten us, by constraining them within the familiar rituals of drama. The fact that the cast presents itself as largely non-fictional (they present themselves as themselves) strikes a balance between fiction and reality, and encourages us to extract new experiences and insights from the black box, for application on the street.



A (Micro) History of World Economics,  
Danced. Image via City of Asylum.

## CHAPTER TWO

# BLOGPOSTS & INTERVIEWS

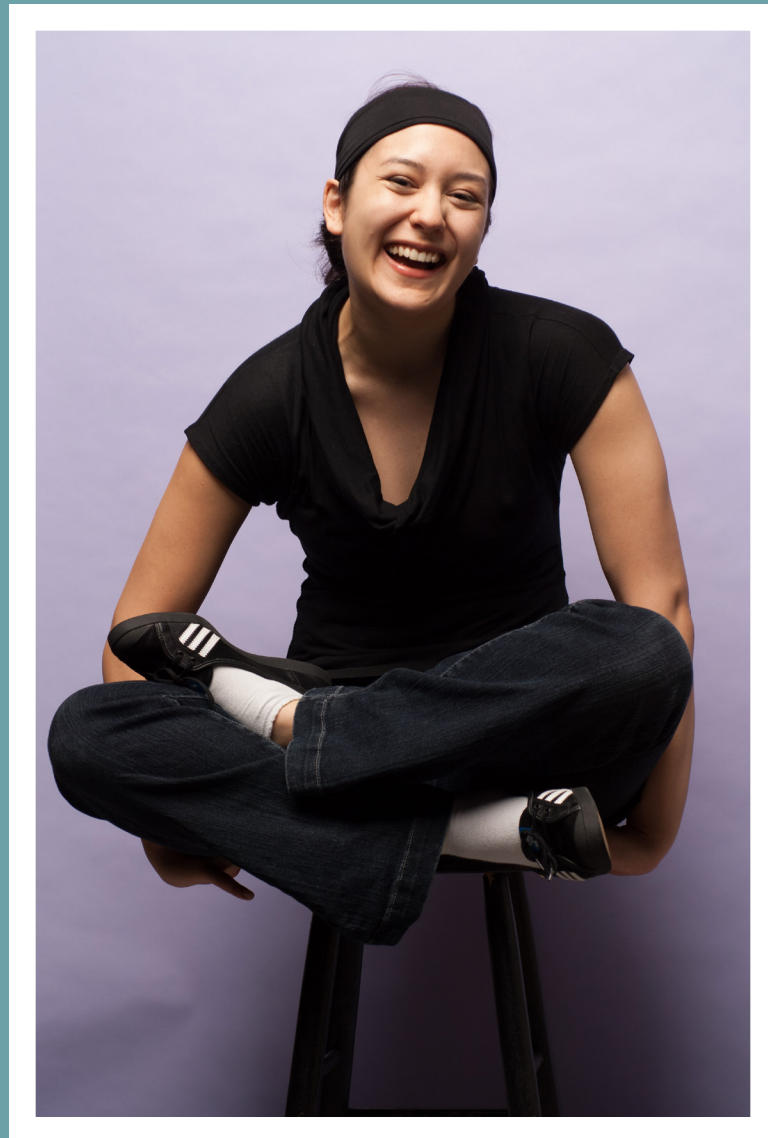


PHOTO BY ANDREW BALFOUR

On rare occasions in life, we meet someone who makes an impact: someone who sparks an instant connection, warmth and shared knowledge. Alex appeared in Pittsburgh around the same time that I made an appearance of my own. Mine was more of a reappearance after nearly a decade away, and Alex instantly became one of the reasons that I fell in love with the place I had once left to seek something else... There are several people I knew who had already been in the city for a long time, forging and supporting the vibrant and ever-changing art scene (most of whom are now contributors to this book). Alex was a new implant to Pittsburgh, and she was extremely creative and brimming with scholarly ideas and intuition. She had ambition, and she had energy.

We both saw the magic that was budding, and we discussed it immediately. We didn't simply discuss it; we felt it. And we went to work on it. On the night of the first opening reception at my first gallery, Revision Space, in Lawrenceville, there was Alex, full of energy and enthusiasm, and many questions. An art lover, an academic and a writer, she was on a mission.

Like many of us probably realize now in hindsight, I was not fully aware of the unresolved missions in her mind and her heart. She certainly was a sort of dynamo, and it seemed that she easily met people and made conversations happen. She was not afraid to be critical, to break tradition, and to question conformity. She was considerate and caring, while also professional. I loved when she came in the door of the gallery at the openings, and so did the artists.

Alexandra Oliver wrote about what was happening in Pittsburgh art in a way that every city needs, and very few cities outside of New York or Los Angeles have. She knew how to research, investigate, interview and create a thoughtful vision through her writing. It meant a great deal to me, as a new contemporary art gallerist in Pittsburgh, to have someone like Alex, who not only "got" what I was trying to do, but also made sincere and vigorous efforts to recognize and contribute to it. She brought her passion and her knowledge to the table, and my gratitude to her will never wane.

Cindy Lisica, PhD

*Professor of Art History, Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD)*

*Curator and Critic*

## 2.1 Burning Questions: an interview with the founders of Alloy Pittsburgh

September 11, 2013 for *Second Steel*

Second Steel curator and Pittsburgh art blogger Alexandra Oliver interviewed Alloy Pittsburgh co-founders Chris McGuinness and Sean Derry about the work they've been doing in the Carrie Furnaces. Their project resonates in interesting ways with Second Steel—in its focus on site and renewal and possibilities of space, its belief in art's ability to help us reimagine our spaces, its small admin team out to do big things mentality, and its desire to be part of an international as well as a local dialogue—and we're thankful they took the time to talk to us. Find details on their opening reception (Sept. 28 from 2pm-6pm) at the bottom of the interview!



The Carrie Furnaces. Photo by Heather Tabacci.

Alexandra Oliver: How did you first get interested in the Carrie Furnaces?

Chris McGuinness: Like many people, I think my first interest in the CF came from simply seeing it while crossing the Rankin Bridge and wondering, "Wow, what is that place? I want to go there!"

I remember enjoying the fact that I could see the past and present of industry in the Monongahela Valley by either looking downstream at the CF or upstream to the Edgar Thomas Works. So for better or worse, I sneaked into the CF site one morning at about dawn to take photos and just explore.

That was before I knew that the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Homestead offers "Hard Hat Tours." I eventually went back to the site on one of these tours, which better satisfied my interest in the history of the site.

Sean Derry: I had the opportunity to visit the Carrie Furnaces on one of the first Hard Hat Tours and the place has stuck in my head ever since. As a relatively recent transplant to Pittsburgh, visiting the furnaces provided an experience that helped me orient myself in the city.

A: Where does the name "Carrie Furnaces" come from? Is this an official designation or of local coinage?

C: As far as I know, the name Carrie was given in honor of a female relative of the original owners or builders. This evidently was a common practice at the time. I always suggest that anyone interested in a more complete understanding of the history and function of the mill,

visit <http://www.riversofsteel.com> or take a guided tour of the site. Their Director of Museum Collections, Ron Baraff, is our project partner for Alloy Pittsburgh and a great resource for more information.

A: OK, so what have you guys been up to?

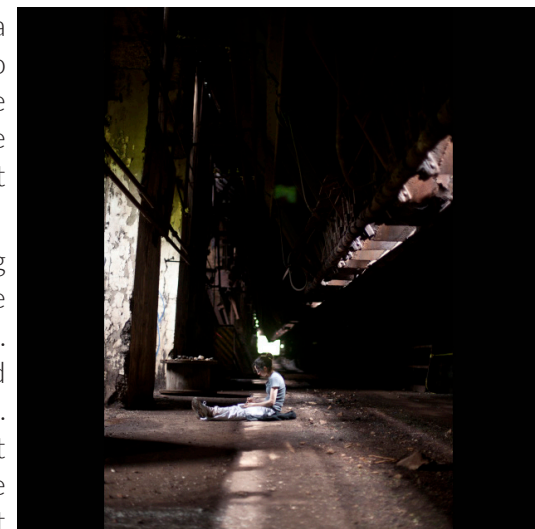
S: Our overarching goals of the program are to establish a forum where artists and communities come together to collectively reimagine their surroundings. We are particularly interested in fostering new community partnerships and celebrating novel ways of reimagining a post-industrial site. We both feel strongly about advancing the careers of emerging artists from the region and have structured Alloy Pittsburgh to maximize the exposure of regional artists. To address these goals, we structured the program in two phases. First was a weeklong research residency that occurred in early June. We combined site-based programming at the mill with free public lectures in the evenings. Presenters included internationally recognized installation artist Ann Hamilton, Philadelphia based author, photographer and landscape design consultant Rick Darke, local historian and spoken-word artist Chuck Lanigan, and sculptor and Industrial Arts Cooperative President Tim Kaulen. The lecture series complemented research activities occurring on-site at the Carrie Furnaces. Since the research residency, we have been periodically meeting with the artists on-site and finalizing plans for installation of their projects.

C: Sean and I felt that extended time to research the site was particularly important for participating artists to get beyond a superficial experience with the mill. The Rivers of Steel opened up their archives to participating artists, which was a big help for at least a few of the artists. We did incorporate some structured programming at the mill, but for the most part we wanted artists to have time. Time to get lost, get bored and perhaps notice things they passed over initially. One afternoon we had two former workers from the CF tour the site with the artists. Their personal insight proved to be incredibly influential to everyone in the program.

A: Your press pack frames the project's aims temporally: to contend with the site's history, to consider current state and to imagine possible futures. How have particular artists accomplished this?

C: The artists have engaged the site from a range of perspectives. Some have responded to how light intensity affects particular parts of the mill in subtle ways. Others have considered the role of play and interpreted the site as a giant game.

S: I think this is a particularly interesting moment to be developing a program for the Carrie Furnaces National Historic Landmark. There is a groundswell of interest in the site and physical changes are occurring on a daily basis. Chris and I were interested in facilitating a project that would allow artists to contribute to the discourse surrounding the site. It was important that participants in the project had some understanding of the past, but we don't want the



An artist engages with the site. Photo by Heather Tabacci.

work to become monuments. I hope the physical interventions the artists are planning become a collective experiment that attempts to identify the latent potential of the site.

A: What challenges did you encounter, in getting this project off the ground, bringing together various stakeholders and/or defining the project concept?

S: At the beginning I don't think either of us fully understood the scope of what we set out to accomplish. Balancing the administrative tasks and seeking funding from half a dozen institutions has been daunting at times. Working as a collaborative team, Chris and I have been able to divide the workload and remain on track. It has been relatively easy to get people excited about the project and it has been humbling to have so many people step up and make the program what it is.

C: I would agree with all of what Sean said. It has been humbling to see how many people kicked in their time. It has also been difficult at times to coordinate schedules and maneuver the administrative end of things.

A: There are intense debates about the value of "creative labor" and the "knowledge economy." How did site inflect current issues about labor, class, workers' identity or notions of economic productivity? Can these sites be used to ask critical questions, rather than just giving in to ineluctable charisma of gorgeously rusting factories, indulging in a postindustrial romance where The Factory stands in for Ozymandias?

S: We think so. The projects constituting Alloy Pittsburgh emphasize our belief in the necessity for participation, dialogue and action within the post-industrial landscape. I hope that by enabling artists to work at the site we are creating a space of possibility at a site once defined by the singular pursuit of iron.

A: I'm sold. It's clear why this is important for our region and our history. But what is its significance to the broader, international enterprise of contemporary art generally?

C: Well, there is certainly international precedent for projects like Alloy Pittsburgh that approach former sites of production from an artistic perspective. The Landschaftspark in Germany's Ruhr Valley and Sloss Furnaces in Alabama are a couple of examples of similar projects. I feel that one of the most exciting things happening in contemporary art is a re-thinking of the typical museum/gallery paradigm. In my own experience creating and producing exhibitions, there seems to be a push for a more experiential visual art encounter. One that more effectively bridges the gap between the general public and the arts. I think part of the attraction to projects like Alloy is that they engage the public in a less intimidating environment such as a mill, the street corner or a parking lot. Rather than museums and galleries, which are ultimately less approachable due to their history as cultural learning environments. This is not to suggest that art museums and galleries are going anywhere or even that they should. Both play a role in what I feel is becoming a generally more approachable art world.

Your opening is Sept. 28 at 2pm. How do I get there and...where exactly is it again?

Alloy Pittsburgh artists will reveal their completed site-based artworks in a public reception on September 28th, 2013 from 2-6pm. All artwork will remain on display through October 26, 2013. Alloy Pittsburgh is a ticketed event with proceeds benefiting the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area and Alloy Pittsburgh. Tickets are \$20 and available through the Alloy Pittsburgh blog, The Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area website, and can also be purchased from

participating artists. Youth under 18 years of age will receive free admission to the project.

The reception will take place at the Carrie Furnaces National Landmark along the Monongahela River, downstream from Braddock, PA. Attendees of Alloy Pittsburgh will ride a free shuttle into the mill complex. The shuttle will pick up from a secure parking lot off of Braddock Ave in Braddock, PA. Please visit [www.alloypittsburgh.blogspot.com](http://www.alloypittsburgh.blogspot.com) for a map to the parking lot. The shuttle will also make regular stops at the Swissvale Station of the East Busway for any travelers coming by Port Authority bus.



## 2.2 What is the real moral of the Outlines Gallery story?

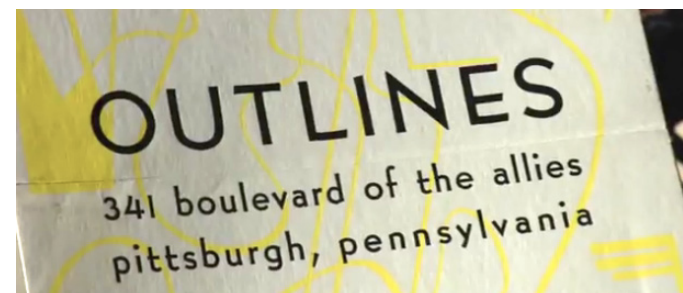
June 9, 2015 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*

Every year the Three Rivers Arts fest includes a lineup of art-related films. On the marquee this year is *Tracing Outlines* (2013), a documentary about the remarkable titular gallery opened by Elizabeth Rockwell Raphael in 1941. For six years the gallery exhibited the most radical avant-garde artists of the day, including Picasso, Klee, Cornell, Breuer, Gropius, Deren and countless others—often before they were established in New York. Superficially this seems like another point of pride of our city’s endless “first in” and “best of” lists, but this interpretation largely assumes that Outlines can be counted a success. In my view the whole story represents something more complicated, and when seen from a certain angle, disturbing.

No question, Rockwell’s roster was impressive. Soon it would settle into the modernist canon. One of the most elegant and moving sequences in the film is a long chronology told through the animated designs of Outlines exhibition brochures: month after month, year after year, the names of Western artistic luminaries dance, scroll and fade with dynamic colors and shapes like a stunning piece of advertising fresh from a past that was always ahead of its own time. Predictably this shocked and angered the press and public, but despite all that Rockwell’s gallery persisted for six years.

So what does all this add up to, six decades on? In some ways, the story is truly remarkable: it’s a heroic tale of Rockwell overcoming sexism, provincialism and corrosive cultural politics. Yet measured against the achievement of the canonical artists and gallerists that we call art history, Rockwell’s achievements were modest, and given that Outlines was immediately and long forgotten, it wouldn’t be far off to call Outlines insignificant. Unfortunately, in art history, only results matter. There are no entries in the Oxford-Grove for good effort. Based on the evidence at hand, Outlines was not significant. The trailer tagline says it all: “a story about a girl and an art gallery that you’ve probably never heard of.” Exactly.

Harsh? Perhaps. Recently art historians have criticized the standard art-historical perspective, arguing that peripheral, marginal (often female, indigenous, and minority) histories ought to be incorporated into the dominant narrative. But being a minority still isn’t a free pass. Lots of things are marginal because they are minor, not because they’ve been



Outlines Gallery exhibition flyer. Film Still. (Image via tracingoutlines.com)

unjustly suppressed. For this reason, art historians arguing for a revised canon tend to advance muscular theses. And here’s the core problem: this film provides no such thesis for the importance of Outlines despite its obviously marginal profile. A few speculative noises from Blake Gopnik—that Andy Warhol may

have been inspired by the art he saw at Outlines—are blatantly insufficient. Even worse, the film is so flushed with the satisfaction of being on the right side of history that its conclusion feels foregone, the triumph, finally empty. It flags about halfway through, as a tedious rotation of talking heads eulogize Rockwell as a “visionary” and “ahead of her time” (Gopnick again, plus Eric Shiner, Dan Byers, Robert Manley, and a few of the surviving participating artists). Glaringly absent are any of Outlines’ patrons. Who were they, who helped the space survive six years? Where did their collections end up? As the story drags on these irritating absences become gaping holes. Also absent is Rockwell herself. We never learn how she assessed her own achievements or even what she wanted. We learn she had several successful post-gallery careers, including in education, travel and as a mother. But who was she?



Scrapbooks from Outlines Gallery help reconstruct the gallery’s history. Film Still. (Image via <http://www.tracingoutlines.com>).

So, while it’s a fun piece of local lore, this story doesn’t need a full-length documentary; it could have been told better in a tight 12-minute Vimeo video. Which is just to say that what it actually needs, first and foremost, is better, more scholarly, research. Who knows what an art historian could dig up? Also, I don’t want to suggest the Outlines story isn’t interesting; in fact I think it is very interesting but not for the reasons the filmmakers suggest. It is not a straightforward story of triumph but a messy one, rent by contradiction. For if Rockwell was such a terrific success, why did Outlines close and fall into obscurity? Why didn’t Pittsburgh carry the torch of avant-gardism through into the 60s, 70s or 80s? There is no historical evidence that I can discern, from the film or otherwise, that Pittsburgh became a culturally progressive, a lasting, supportive environment for the newest, most challenging art. Therefore, even if we believe Rockwell was successful on her own, local terms, she was so *despite, not because of*, Pittsburgh. We can have a successful Rockwell, or a Pittsburgh Rockwell, but not both.

And that makes Outlines interesting, even disturbing, for Pittsburgh’s culture-makers today. Either we art people identify with Rockwell against the Pittsburgh that let Outlines die or we claim Rockwell as one of Pittsburgh’s own and admit the awful truth that even with taste and grit and Picasso, we’ll never be significant to anyone but ourselves. It’s a depressing thought for someone like me who has high ambitions for my work and that of my creative collaborators. Maybe in six years the Mine Factory will close, and in another ten no one will remember it ever existed.

On the other hand, why should this depress me? Just because something is minor on the stage of global art history doesn’t mean it has no bearing on locals today. I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that limited scope, but even still, in that case, we have our work cut out for us. There is some evidence that Pittsburgh today is more interested in avant-garde art than earlier times, but local conditions remain poor: ongoing lack of patronage, combined with the

rapidly rising rents, bode ill for our ambitions.

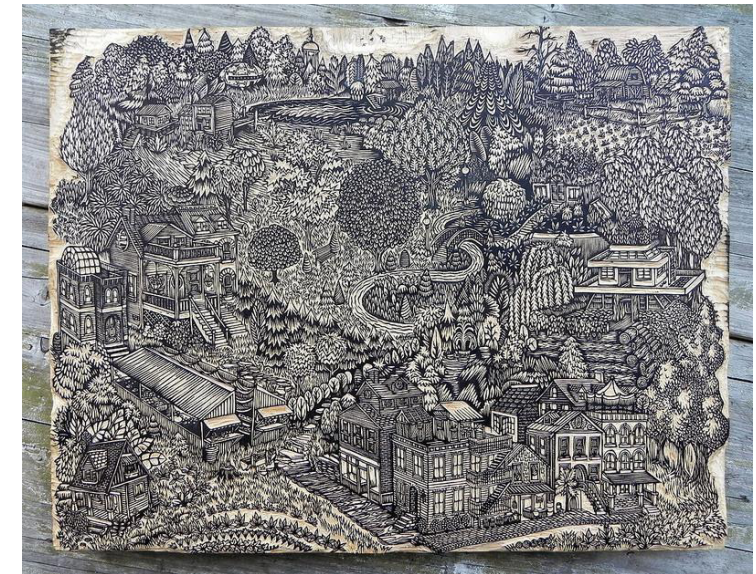
Perhaps the real lesson to be gleaned from this intriguing, deeply unsatisfying film is an existential one. The existentialist philosophers taught that “existence precedes essence.” In other words, we make our own realities through our actions and these are necessarily contingent, unpredictable and characterized by constant struggle. Pittsburgh is no exception. Despite the stories we tell ourselves, Pittsburgh is not straightforwardly supportive or toxic; it nourishes us and constrains us; on some days it inspires us with hope and on others, douses us in despair. Pittsburgh supported *Outlines* but was not fundamentally changed by it. On this view it’s less important that the Mine Factory is here in 60 years, than that it is here today. Honestly, I’m still not completely satisfied with this angle either, but getting deep into the contradictions, messy as they are, is way more interesting than being handed down the story of a “visionary” in outlines.

Tracing *Outlines* (directed by Cayce Mell, 82 min.) at the Harris Theater tomorrow, June 10, at 6:30 pm. More details online at Three Rivers Arts Festival. Watch the trailer at [TracingOutlines.com](http://TracingOutlines.com).

## 2.3 Pittsburgh Art and Community

I.

On a mild Friday evening last September, 100,000 Pittsburghers went to a party on the Roberto Clemente Bridge as guests of the Cultural Trust. The bridge had been stocked with vendors, food stalls, two stages for DJs and one very special guest: a giant inflatable rubber duck. “Crowd the bridge,” the Trust’s website admonished, and people did. At one point circulation stopped completely: police yelled at young people climbing the tresses, two mothers with children and strollers squeezed



*Community*. Valerie Lueth and Paul Roden, 2014. Photo courtesy of the artists and Tugboat Printshop

back tears of panic, and those who managed to survive while crossing the bridge were disappointed to discover that all the food was sold out. Visitors checked in on social media and bought the merchandise. The party’s organizers received a proclamation from City Council, declaring October 29th, 2013 to be Pittsburgh Cultural Trust Day and encouraging “all citizens to support and attend the Cultural Trust’s diverse events and programs.” The gesture was redundant, or at least belated, but welcome in any case.

Rubber Duck is an invention of Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman. It had made stops all over the world, generating buzz, derision, and Instagram posts, but its first American stop was Pittsburgh. It was a perfect fit. Many cities have civic pride; Pittsburgh has something closer to civic adoration, which is expressed most intensely in its famous sports fandom, but also in the circulation of feel-good lists, as citizens relish the satisfaction of someone who’s known all along what others are just now discovering: “Best All-American Vacations”, “15 cities for Creative 20-somethings that Aren’t New York or Los Angeles.” BuzzFeed’s attention is particularly telling as a sign of Pittsburgh’s growing cultural cachet among a younger, hipper crowd. But what does this mean for the arts? What is left after the rubber duck has swum on? What can, or ought, Pittsburgh ask of its artists, and what do those artists need in return?

While the city is home to a handful of established cultural organizations that offer exhibitions, events, education, and often, jobs, to creative individuals, a diverse group of small but ambitious culture-makers has taken root here, too. These entrepreneurs serve populations and purposes



that the big institutions can't or don't, while doing what they do best: creating in ways that defy easy description, mixing knitting with Pittsburgh's bridges, performance with community dinners, and occupying vacant structures in endlessly original and challenging ways.

## II.

Much of Pittsburgh's allure comes from something that no one, not even the Cultural Trust, can take credit for: low cost of living. Rents are famously cheap and this attracts artists, entrepreneurs and young people, three classes that have something in common: failure, according to Evan Mirapaul, an art dealer who specializes in fine art photography. "That sounds like a negative philosophy, but it's not intended that way." He explained: "The cost of failure is low, and cities where that's true spark a lot of creativity."

In 2012 Mirapaul founded the PGH Photo Fair, which brings outside galleries to Pittsburgh to sell fine art photography. But Mirapaul's role in Pittsburgh extends beyond art dealer. Rather, he hews to the classical model of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, an early twentieth-century art dealer who was among the first champions of Cubism. In addition to cultivating collectors Mirapaul has also spearheaded challenging projects like La Hütte Royal, a house installation by the German artist Thorsten Brinkmann. The house, located in Troy Hill where Mirapaul is also a resident, is now an internal maze of rich, unsettling sensuous experiences, carefully crafted through the use of found objects, video, photographs, and sound. Navigating the space is like spelunking your way into a Jean-Pierre Jeunet film. It is disturbing enough that it's hard to recommend unequivocally to all your friends, which is altogether a good sign. A writer for *Art in America* called the installation a "grotesque palace."

According to that source, Mirapaul purchased the house for \$9,000, an unthinkable sum for an artist in New York or even Berlin. But affordable space alone cannot support a vibrant arts scene and in the absence of a class of committed patrons; artists must become entrepreneurs. Flight School, a crash-course in business for artists offered by Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, fills a gap in college arts education, which tends to focus on technical and conceptual aspects of art-making. Without such programs, young artists are often on their own when it comes to figuring out how to make a living. Nicole Capozzi, who owns Boxheart Gallery with her husband Josh Hogan told me she sometimes struggles to convey to artists that exhibiting at her gallery means entering for-profit, retail context. Both majored in arts education, having been told repeatedly that being an artist itself was not a viable career choice. But although they decided to open a gallery rather than teach in schools, they quickly discovered that a major part of their role involved teaching artists about the business of art.

Supporting emerging artists in this way isn't unique, but what distinguishes Capozzi's and Hogan's enterprise from New York or London peers is a collaborative attitude towards commerce. "Artists need growth, collaboration and dialogue," Capozzi told me. She is realistic about the notion that artists will outgrow her gallery and even welcomes the idea. "It may not always be this way; however, for now they will have to leave us. And that would be awesome."

Capozzi for her part is beginning to explore art fairs, which would provide access to a bigger market. In the meantime, artists such as William Kofmehl and Dee Briggs have managed to make careers for themselves while living in Pittsburgh but selling elsewhere. Others, like Cy Gavin, as well as the performance collective Yinzerspielen, have chosen to decamp for New York but continue to exhibit work in Pittsburgh. For less established artists like April Fridges,

who arrived in Pittsburgh last year to take a tenure-track teaching position at Point Park University, this is a precarious path. "It's a give and take," she told me recently, when we met at an opening in Lawrenceville. "You have this great position but there are no galleries here. You live here but show elsewhere—that's the rule." Her worries reveal an ongoing tension between two sets of expectations and activities involved in teaching art professionally.

## III

In the gap between artists' material needs and a robust system of patronage, which lies somewhere in the future, the universities provide a stable base for artists who want to take risks: if your primary source of income is not sales, you have more freedom to make unsalable work. Ayanah Moor moved to Pittsburgh from Philadelphia 14 years ago, initially as a visiting artist at the College of Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon University, and found that her new role carried some advantages. "You're presented to the art scene with a certain level of status, being art artist who's an academic," she explained. "That gives you an interesting lens to look at the art scene because you figure out, how might I fit in the arts scene here, and what are the benefits or limitations in having my work known, here and beyond?"

Moor emphasized that her teaching position has also allowed her to pursue collaborations, such as a sound piece with Herman Pearl. *All My Girlfriends* (2011) consists of a recording of Moor reading the text of *JET* magazine's "Beauty of the Week" centerfolds in a clear, bright voice. The piece was funded by the Studio of Creative Inquiry, which is a "laboratory" housed at CMU, and exhibited in the Pittsburgh Biennial at the Andy Warhol Museum, specifically, in the museum's elevator. In a video on the Studio of Creative Inquiry's website, Moor thanks the organization for its support and says, "I hope people enjoy it." It's a thoughtful and intriguing work (according to Moor, people stayed in the elevator for long periods, riding up and down), but conceptual work is a difficult sell, and the fact that it deals explicitly with race and sexuality makes it doubly so.

While Moor has benefitted from institutional support, she remains somewhat critical of the dominance of Pittsburgh's foundations, if not their funding model per se. Not only do they support art, they shape it, and overlook practices that commercial galleries, residencies or artist-run centers might support. The result is a kind of "corporate" system that favors good grant-writers, not good artists. In her opinion, "The institutions support activity, not criticality, beyond a certain point. You lack a certain kind of rigor." Instead, Moor advocates a diversity of models and institutions.

In addition, Moor offered a different perspective on arts and community, one that has—on the surface of it—nothing to do with art: "Pittsburgh suffers from having a poor public transit system. So when you ask about community you have to ask, how can people move around and see things? The city's still very segregated in some ways. I think it makes all the difference. It's about movement and making sure that the make-up of audiences is diverse. You have to have access points." This is a difficult subject, especially for well-meaning, white artists who are often themselves poor, dependent on public transit, and in debt. As they move into depressed or historically black neighborhoods, development often follows. "East Liberty has really transformed rapidly in the past five years, which has lead to accolades like 'most livable city' and highly visible, booming development, but it also has the highest rate of poverty among African-Americans." (I looked this up: Moor was close. Pittsburgh came in third in a

ranking of major metropolitan regions, as of 2013, according to Harold D. Miller, a professor of public policy and management at CMU.) Moor went on, “You have this dynamic of visible progress and this erasure of different aspects. This contest says a lot about the dialogue that happens and the difference between gentrification and development.”

To their credit, many artists and arts administrators are aware that creeping housing prices will inevitably make it harder for artists to find living and studio space, and are trying to manage the growth in their own small way. Janera Solomon, Executive Director of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater, recently purchased a slice of space on Penn Avenue in Garfield. Ayanah Moor was featured in their inaugural show. More recently they hosted the PGH CSA (“community-supported art”), which uses direct subscription to fund artists’ multiples. During the exhibition opening in May Janera said she and her husband, Jeremy, who is a partner in the project, wanted the space to develop organically. “Penn Ave is changing quickly and I think it’s important to preserve room on the avenue for a diversity of new ideas and emerging artists.”

#### IV

Blindness and visual art are not an obvious pair by any means. But, as I discovered on an afternoon workshop at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts last January, what is obvious or not is largely a question of perception anyway.

The workshop was organized by Creative Citizen Studios, a project of Kirsten Ervin, who holds an MA in Special Education and Tirzah DeCaria, who completed her MA in Arts Management at CMU. CCS also consults with cultural organizations that want to improve accessibility to their collections and programs. This afternoon they presented Touch Art, a project of workshops and training for people who are blind or visually impaired. During the presentation, several of the participants spoke about their experiences of exclusion, and how art teachers—even well-meaning ones—assumed they were incapable or uninterested in visual art. Ann Lapidus, who was born sighted but has now been navigating the world as a blind person and artist for six years, made a remarkable statement: “Just because I’m blind doesn’t mean that I don’t see. I am creating the world in my mind.”

Indeed, the adaptations necessary to include people with disabilities may be less radical than one might assume. Ervin and DeCaria do not aim to develop new art classes for the blind, but rather to include the blind in existing art classes by providing these accommodations. As one participant asks bluntly in a documentation video posted on the Touch Art website, “If sighted people are doing it, why shouldn’t we?”

With their complimentary professional backgrounds Ervin and DeCaria represent an imbrication of two communities, which has permitted them to do more together than they could have alone, or as Ervin puts it, within the framework of “human services.” “So, how refreshing,” Ervin continued. “We teamed up with our different strengths, and also are embraced and welcomed by larger art institutions.” They have since worked on projects with the Carnegie Museum of Art and the Warhol Museum.

The dynamic and mutually-beneficial encounter between the arts and disability communities has attracted supporters on both sides, and, importantly, some who already straddle a middle ground: committed, interested artists with disabilities who lack access to formal training, such as a BFA or MFA would provide. CCS also holds classes at the Union Project featuring guest

artists who share their work and run critiques. Ervin told me over the phone that, “Pittsburgh artists are community-minded—not everyone, but there is strong tradition here. They see arts as a way that community can be engaged.” Her current challenge is to find more funding, to increase access, and to convince funders of the importance of adult programs. “Typically when you talk about art education for folks from disenfranchised communities the focus is on kids, and I think that’s great, but people with disabilities grow up and the majority of their life is spent in adulthood. There’s a real need for adults and people can be enriched no matter what age.”

#### V

Ervin recommended I talk to Amanda Gross. Gross, a local fibre artist who also works as a program director for a faith-based nonprofit, recently directed an outstanding community-driven artwork. Knit the Bridge, which is often compared to the Rubber Duck’s scale and enthusiastic public reception, engaged community volunteers to cover the Seventh Street Bridge (also called the Andy Warhol Bridge). It was “yarn-bombing” on a large scale, a type of street art that uses yarn to cover public objects or spaces. Eye-catching and colorful, these guerilla decorations are eminently photogenic and often have a humorous aspect.

Gross envisioned her project literally and metaphorically. The tagline on her WordPress page reads: “Knitting Pittsburgh Communities Together, One Bridge at a Time.” Impressively, her list of community partners includes 128 names, from the Pittsburgh Tote Bag Project, which collects new and gently used tote bags for distribution to the region’s food pantries to Star Chevrolet Nissan and Volvo. The Pittsburgh Foundation was also a supporter.

Gross dismisses the comparison to Rubber Duck. “My goal has always been [to work] at this intersection between arts and peace-building,” she told me recently, when we met for coffee in Oakland, near her office. “Depending on where you’re coming from there’s different language for that: community art, socially engaged art, arts and activism.” Gross’ background is Mennonite, which is one of the historic peace churches (the others are Church of the Brethren and the Religious Society of Friends). Rubber Duck was the creation of a single author, she notes, by contrast an astonishing 2,000 participants supported Knit the Bridge.

I asked whether Knit the Bridge had had any lasting impact on any of the participating communities. Gross’ response is unequivocal. “That definitely happened in a number of different ways,” she said. Defunct knitting groups were reenergized and newcomers to Pittsburgh made their first community connections through the project. The media had difficulty telling this complex story, and preferred to focus on Gross, a charismatic white woman with a calm poise and a quick smile. By focusing on her as a personality, Gross said the story missed the project’s “horizontal leadership” and wide range of community experiences. NPR was a notable exception. It focused on three teenage boys from the North Side, with 16-year-old Diondre Harris leading the story.

But while the media have trouble recognizing such distributed authorship, academics and art critics have praised it. Many view projects like Knit the Bridge as socially progressive because they reposition the artist as one maker among many and engage communities in dialogue with an emphasis on social inclusion. Claire Bishop, a British critic and professor of art history at the CUNY Graduate Center, put it this way, in her book *Artificial Hells*: “the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and



producer of situations...” for example, social events, publications, workshops or performances. Likewise, the “work” of art, formerly an object, is now conceived as a project, and the viewers as participants.

Bishop is concerned that such “projects” are too quick to discard older avant-garde values of shock and dissensus. She also argues that governments and funding agencies have instrumentalized such projects for cultural policies that celebrate innovation and creativity, while concealing structural social inequality. On this view, innovative, creative individuals—like entrepreneurs, who are the new heroes of business schools around the country—assume risk willingly and happily sacrifice wages for the opportunity to “do what they love.” Such policies also presume a world of equal opportunity, where passion, not education, health or safety, is the most critical resource. In Bishop’s words, “the emergence of a creative and mobile sector serves two purposes: it minimizes reliance on the welfare state while also relieving corporations of the burden of responsibilities of a permanent workforce.”

Most of Bishop’s case studies are drawn from a European context. In Pittsburgh, designer and blogger Dane Horvath, who maintains the enormously popular Steeltown Anthem blog, apports some of the blame to local critics who would rather celebrate than critique. She cited as an example the reaction to Dee Briggs’ House of Gold, which has so far received cordial praise. Horvath thinks we can do better and ask tougher questions about the fate of Braddock’s housing, which is still crumbling under the radar of most policy-makers. “I get that bringing attention is important but I want folks to actually fix the problem, not just create art projects around it,” she told me, via email. “I do praise interesting installations such as these but I also like when there is a back and forth discussion. I get so tired of just reading kiss-up reviews, it’s not bad to be a little critical and just ask ‘why?’ That’s how we learn, right?”

In any case, Gross’ and Briggs’ community-oriented projects fit well within Bishop’s “participatory” framework, connecting them more tightly to a group of artists and collectives globally than to the majority of their Pittsburgh peers, who continue making paintings and sculptures. Similarly, the efforts of Vanessa German’s ARThouse in Homewood and Transformazium’s “deconstruction” of a house in Braddock, resonate with the Dorchester Projects, initiated by the artist Theaster Gates in Chicago’s South Side. Such projects activate abandoned urban spaces to support community well-being and they exist uneasily within established critical frameworks. In an interview with Jim Rugg on Tell Me Something I Don’t Know German said, “I’d never describe anything I do as a project or program,” citing negative associations with post-war housing projects, and, “I don’t talk about my life as work.”

For the purposes of community-building, space is clearly a critical tool. Ryan Lammie, an artist and entrepreneur who runs Radiant Hall, has transformed a half-occupied office building into a dynamic and supportive environment for almost two dozen artists. In a casual, friendly arts scene, Lammie has achieved a creeping celebrity reputation for operating a sustainable, artist-oriented business. (Full disclosure: Radiant Hall will be providing space for a project I am directing.) At an arts community meeting held recently at Startuptown, Lammie introduced himself to a roomful of Pittsburgh VIPs including established artists Bob Qualters and James Simon as, “that guy everyone keeps mentioning.” He said this modestly, with a shy smile, but it was true: three people had mentioned him as an inspiration or important connection. His ambitions are less modest: he plans to open accessible Radiant Hall-supported spaces in other

neighborhoods, to respect geographic specificity while building a network of professional contacts and shared resources. In a symbiotic gesture, arts organizations and foundations have been courting Radiant Hall in hopes to replicating its success in target areas.

Just as useful are food and drink. Casey Droege, an arts community-builder whose projects elude easy definition, organizes a regular arts dinner series called SIXxATE, featuring six artists who give short presentations on a pre-selected theme. The dinners are advertised but most invitations are extended through word of mouth, and the community has grown organically. In another instance of support being extended from a large institution to a small one, Tina Kukielski, one of the Carnegie International curators, helped Droege identify the first round of artists. The Carnegie Museum also donated their Lawrenceville Satellite Apartment for the dinner in June 2012, as a part of a popular series of over 30 events. The events are casual and welcoming, but have a spark of intensity as people network, explore ideas and meet new artists. Droege admitted as much, during a talk at CMU last year: “No one really understands it ‘til they go and they see what it’s like.”

Such entrepreneurial approaches are necessary if smaller organizations and individuals are to survive and build careers in the city. Forty-two percent of the region’s cultural organizations are running deficits and the same number are breaking even. I asked Ayanah Moor whether she was optimistic about the future of Pittsburgh art. Although she is leaving to take a position at a prestigious school in a larger, more glamorous city (Chicago), she was upbeat. “Because of Pittsburgh’s size it’s possible to connect with people making great work. Despite some of my criticisms, there are some really awesome artists here. As long as artist are producing I’ll be hopeful.”

## 2.4 Art criticism, huh! Yeah! What is it good for?

August 19, 2014 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*

James Elkins, a super-professor at School of the Art Institute of Chicago wrote a book called *What Happened to Art Criticism?*. His assessment: "It's dying, but it's everywhere . . . massively produced, and massively ignored." Elkins was considering criticism from the elevated perspective of an American super-professor at a top-tier art school in a first-world metropolis. But seen from this Shadyside coffee shop, the situation looks quite different. Art criticism is not massively produced in Pittsburgh. Long lists of artists in an exhibition: not criticism. Recycled press releases: not criticism. Facebook updates that begin, "We're so excited about...": not criticism. So what does serious art criticism look like? As we launch a new blog here on Articulate, here are a few ideas to get started:

1. The first role of the critic is to understand. It's true! The first role of the critic is not to tear artists' hopes and dreams off the wall (or plinth) and shred 'em up along with their fragile self-esteem. Criticism isn't made better by being harsh; it's better when it's delving deep into the artwork's issues and feeling around until it grasps something solid and important. Michael Fried wasn't a good critic of Minimalism because he hated it but because he really understood something about it. His polemic crystallized something about sixties art that helped everyone see it more clearly. That's also why the best critics are are both acquainted with the history of art and up to date with the latest and greatest. From the vast, ancient oceans of cultural achievement, art rides a wave and crashes on the shores of the present. The critic patiently examines the fragile evidence and stands firm between the artist and those who'd rather pave over the beach. That said...

2. I will judge. I will say what I find good and not so good. I have to. First, judgment is a solemn duty. By working hard and exhibiting the results, artists are implicitly asking for honest, equally thoughtful feedback about what's working; to merely pat them on the back and give an A for effort would be insulting. Art is improved by constructive criticism; in this is it not different from business, science, sports or pulling a great espresso. In fact, one artist wrote me recently, "I find it very hard to grow or evolve without serious criticism..." Cheap studio space can get you started but it won't push you when it counts. That's why art needs criticism and why critics need editors.

Second, judgment is also a privilege. By rendering judgment, a critic honors the seriousness of an artist's efforts: if it's not serious, why bother judging at all?

3. Critics are often wrong in their judgments and I will also be wrong. Given the frequency and intensity of disagreement, we can't all be right all the time. No matter how widely we read or how much art we see, we are all provincials in the end, especially in the great geography of historical time, which ultimately judges everyone, even the judges.

4. I will check my facts and correct them promptly and happily when required.

5. I also regard it as a part of writing criticism in Pittsburgh to educate the public, including collectors. While writing this blog I was contacted by a NEXT Pittsburgh writer about art blogs.

Seems we're way behind the local beer community in making recommendations, listing events, reviewing new products, etc. It is easier to discover Pittsburgh beer than Pittsburgh art! For shame. On us. The public can only be expected to meet us halfway.

6. And educate artists. Among the things I have explained to local artists are: Hyperallergic, Charles Saatchi, Michael Fried, Ed Ruscha's word paintings. Seriously, people. Now before you hit "send" on that hate mail, let me clarify: I don't expect artists to be art historians; hell, only art historians are art historians. But I do expect artists to be curious their competition, which includes their forerunners - for better or worse. If you are making word art you are following a tradition that includes Ruscha, Christopher Wool, Lorna Simpson, Lawrence Weiner, Richard Prince and many others. They are the masters and mistresses. If you aspire to be more than a good, regional artist, take a look. Collectors and museums certainly do.

7. Ultimately, my hope for this blog is that it provide a record, however imperfect, however partial, that someone made some art and that it mattered. Most artists working today will not enter the canon, but they all deserve a fighting chance. Without the visibility and feedback that art criticism provides, along with a committed cadre of collectors, galleries, archivists and curators, careers will be injured. As Amanda Palmer sings, "Pictures, or it didn't happen!"

Happily, we're not alone in this - in the mess or the attempt to clean it up. Burnaway, ArtHopper and Chicago Artist Writers cover similar territory. (They're just a wee bit head of us.) So send us your press releases, and let's start on the first rough draft of art history.

## 2.5 What happens in Pittsburgh stays in Pittsburgh

August 4, 2015 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*



Cy Gavin, *Untitled*, 2015 acrylic, oil, ink, blood, diamonds, chalk and mica on brushed linen 54 x 90 inches. Image via [www.sargentsdaughters.com](http://www.sargentsdaughters.com)

A few days ago Huffington Post published a review of a current New York exhibition by a Pittsburgh artist. Awesome, right? The artist, Cy Gavin, has been living in Brooklyn since 2011 but he's still one of ours. So when HuffPost says, "His debut solo show at Sargent's Daughters is definitely worth a visit" we should be damn proud!

Except for one thing. That statement is false. Cy Gavin's "debut solo show" is not happening right now in New York. It already took place last year—in Pittsburgh. I wrote about that show, which was held at Revision Space in Lawrenceville. It was a big deal because it also the gallery's inaugural exhibition. Remember? Of course you do. It was even picked up by Blake Gopnik on Blouin. So why is this HuffPost writer getting it wrong?

As it turns out, he was just following the press release. The document, available on Sargent's Daughters' website, calls Gavin's New York show a "debut exhibition."

Why would Sargent's Daughters make a claim that is so clearly false? Could it be an honest mistake? Unlikely. For an older, better-known artist these types of "firsts" tend to slide into obscurity, but for a young artist like Gavin with a short exhibition history, a glance at his CV should have revealed the truth.

Maybe the artist himself hoped to re-write his CV to have his debut sparkle with the light of New York City. If so, that would be dishonest and rude. But either way, writing press releases is not the artist's job. Gallery press officers are responsible for doing the research and getting it right.

This latest episode with Cy Gavin seems to reaffirm the sad fact that what happens in Pittsburgh, however awesome, stays in Pittsburgh. Revision Space is just too small and too far

to see from New York City.

Recently I wrote about Outlines, a gallery that had everything going for it—including amazing artists who later became canonical figures—and still disappeared into obscurity. The notion that our current efforts could suffer the same fate saddens me. But seen from another perspective, in being passed over by the official record, we have good company. Julia Halperin recently revealed that "almost one third of solo shows in US museums go to artists represented by just five galleries." This means that Revision Space isn't the only one having its credit stolen; even a mid-sized gallery in New York, or a gallery showing less than totally commercially viable work, will be eclipsed by Pace et al.

Why does it matter who gets the credit for discovering and nurturing young artists as long as they're successful in the long run? It matters because credit is a major currency in the art world. It's a key component to the gallery's reputation. And it is this currency, not hard cash that it accrues as it discovers and supports young exciting artists. A gallery is a weird beast, caught between the behavior of an investor and a merchant. Like an investor, galleries gamble on the success of untested products. But unlike an investor, a gallery can't buy low and sell high, because it has to sell. It's also a merchant. In other words, smaller and regional galleries take all the risks of an investor without any mechanism to reap the rewards.

This just one part of a huge, dysfunctional, outmoded system that is also almost completely run by power and money. For better or worse we are all in it together.

## 2.6 Some thoughts on the first negative review of any art in Pittsburgh by renowned art history minor

May 24, 2015 for *Words & TC*

Yesterday late in the afternoon, Ryan Lammie posted a screenshot of a Facebook post with three photos. The writer's name was blurred out but the pictures were clear enough: several showed Louise Nevelson's assembled frontal sculptures, and one included the artist herself, looking tragic in a heavy fur coat. The writer accused Lammie of "ripping off Louise Nevelson." S/he continued, angrily, "Can anyone offer a perspective that can make it okay that a popular, 'successful' artist gets by with this? Has no one said anything? How can this art be viewed as original, controversial, ground-breaking, unique, wonderful, delightful? Or are artists in Pittsburgh making Art [sic] without any historical context?"

As it happens, I can offer a perspective. Keep in mind this is a perspective. But I have a PhD in art history and am a Pittsburgh resident, so hopefully it'll be a useful one. (Full disclosure: Ryan is a creative collaborator of mine, and for this reason I have never reviewed his work. Although I stand by my decision to be friends with the artists I write about in general, even I have limits.)

First, let's get clear on one thing. This post is negative but it doesn't constitute a review. It's more like a rant. A review doesn't just render judgement, it also provides detailed observations that support the broader claim. Here, such observations are absent.

Next: I'm not sure how to judge Lammie's popularity and success, in part because these are such relative terms. What would count? Clearly he has had some success: he is currently in a two-person show at a new but ambitious white cube gallery in posh Sewickly; he was recently invited to show in New York as a part of the curated 412 Made group show; he's been included in some local curated shows. But he doesn't have representation in a major city like London or New York and he doesn't make a living as a full-time artist. He is, however, prolific, so his visibility might be due to this plus his canny use of social media. But success is so relative and every artist's goals are different. As it happens Lammie isn't a full-time artist anyway. For better or worse he's a gifted administrator and entrepreneur who founded and directs an artist studio complex. Would he be more "successful" as a full-time artist? Is that even his goal? Would he be successful if he reached a 5- or 6-figure price point? Would that success be recognized in New York?

Who knows. Let's move on. The Facebook writer is mainly angry that Lammie's success exceeds the quality of his work, which s/he finds derivative. Hence the Louise Nevelson thing. So is it derivative? Does it matter?

Lammie, in his own Facebook response, defended his work as a creative adaptation: "artists have always smudged, cropped, and borrowed other ideas as a way to engage other or different ideas and expand them to untapped audiences." From the artist's point of view, his borrowing is justified, indeed, is characteristic of a certain art-making tradition. Clearly this wouldn't satisfy the Facebook writer, who would distinguish legitimately creative

borrowings from slavish copying - and clearly s/he thinks Lammie falls into the latter category. Here, the concern is legitimate: nothing is more tedious than mere repetition. It is axiomatic of modernism that the good is also new. Originality is problematic, but necessary, and for the moment, inescapable. (Apologies to Abigail Solomon-Godeau.)

Still, there are cases where very similar stylistic adaptations can still be very rich. Take any of the "neo's" for example. Clearly, Neo-Concretism evolved in relationship to, and against, Concretism. Does that mean that Hélio Oiticica is a lesser artist than Theo van Doesburg? That doesn't seem fair. Some might find Oiticica superior. Here, the defining feature is not the relative morphological similarity between a prior and later style, but quality, pure and simple. If the Facebook writer were to object that originality is essential to quality, his/her argument would fail. There's a lot that's both original and bad. Just remember, Adrian Rifkin, a pretty serious dude, called Jeff Wall a "minor artist." Granted, this is a tiny minority position, but still. Jeff Wall. People. Think about that.

We're certainly not the first to worry about originality. Prince was part of a generation of "Pictures" artists who were appropriating materials in a calculated move to make people mad (look, it still works!). Obviously Lammie isn't that kind of artist. Interestingly, this emerged in the late 1970s, shortly after Harold Bloom published his influential *Anxiety of Influence*. Major historians - particularly Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh have written scholarly treatments of the problem of "neo's" in contemporary art. For them, the issues aren't merely originality but the capacity of art to disrupt dominant structures of power in a revolutionary gesture. Nothing less than a better world is at stake.

It's funny that the Facebook writer singles out this one Pittsburgh artist. S/he writes, "If I am on the Internet too long, I find myself mostly getting angry about a Pittsburgh artist who's ripping off Louise Nevelson." Not YouTube comment threads of people calling each other Nazis, not ISIS videos, not Gamergate, not even Richard Prince's outrageous paintings of other people's Instagram photos - or the fact that they're going for \$90,000. Nope, a Pittsburgh artist. But I do take seriously the other target of his/her rage: the Pittsburgh scene in general. "[A]re artists in Pittsburgh making Art [sic] without any historical context?" s/he asks, and the answer is, sadly, probably, a lot of the time.

Now I'm not advocating we all become Ryan Trecartin or social practice devotees. I would never advocate for less diversity in the arts. But we deserve as many serious, globally engaged artists as we do amateur photographers permanently discovering urban decay and deciding the best response is "increase saturation." (Back away from that sepia Photoshop action!) As Lammie correctly argues in his Facebook response, we need serious critics who can reflect deeply on our artists - whether good or bad, derivative or original - and render informed, detailed judgement. Otherwise, you're just a part of the problem.



## 2.7 Classical music out and about in the city

October 2, 2015 for *Words &TC*



A photo of Alex's view of the quartet at BOOM Concepts.

So we're always talking about how traditional and elitist classical music is but then there's this.

One of these is the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which has been working with a Wilkinsburg community group to organize performances in the neighborhood. It's an annual event and they've been doing this for the past 12 years! Even better: all the proceeds from the show go to a neighborhood high school.

Related, I recently attended a performance of Tracksploitation with classical string quartet at BOOM Concepts in Garfield. This concept didn't totally work: first of all, it felt like a regular chamber music concert with a beat (not at all the effect the DJs were going for, I'd guess. At one point the strings go really loud and sort of angry, but the whole effect was disjointed and felt like a bit of a novelty, rather than a rigorously thought-through presentation). Even worse were the

trio of photographers who kept circling the small stage. Half the time I couldn't even see the musicians; the constant click of the shutter and the mini illuminated screens completely killed the vibe. I wanted to see concert, but all I could see was photographers working at a concert. (Unless I'm behind the times and the point of chamber music is to post it on Vine.) But whatever. Pittsburgh is trying.

PS, if you want a good example of this kind of mashup, Mason Bates with the PSO, doing Mercury Soul at STATIC. I wished the night would never end.

## 2.8 Art and the election (no the other election)

October 17, 2015 for *Words &TC*

If you're ever depressed about the state of the arts in Pittsburgh, you should visit my hometown: Ottawa. It's Canada's capital. It also has the tragic distinction of being the least cool capital anywhere (except maybe Canberra?). It has no baroque subway stations (or any subway), thriving underground fashion scene, national portrait gallery, or other things you'd expect of a decent capital. It also does nothing to bust the myth that Canada is basically boring.

But sometimes something cool happens. To draw attention to the track record of the Stephen Harper's current conservative government, artist Jake Morrison organized a Memorial March for Victims of Harperism. There were pall bearers and a coffin draped with the Canadian flag and hundreds of people dressed in black bearing signs and fake tombstones. They collectively staged a "die-in" on the lawn of Parliament Hill.

While Morrison was researching the "victims" he learned all the gory details about Harperism's track record. You can read the roll call (appropriately, in both official languages!), which includes the Kyoto Protocol, which was supposed to help reduce greenhouse emissions. Depressing stuff.

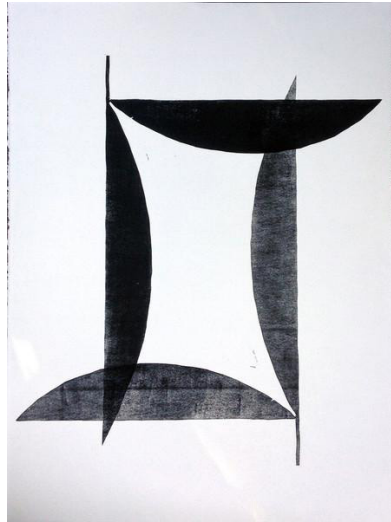
What's not depressing is how I found out about this: via email, from a woman who organizes exhibitions and salons in her own. Petra Halkes is of Dutch origin, but has been living in Ottawa for a long time, and keeps up with global contemporary art. She's a curator, writer and artist. And she gives me hope for my poor home town.

As for my country - that'll be up to the voters next Monday. If you're in the Ottawa area, hit me up for a private invitation to Halkes' celebration (or mourning, depending on the outcome of the election), on November 1.

Follow the Memorial March on Facebook. Read more about the Conservative and Liberal track records on the arts. And please fucking vote.

## 2.9 Artist I love: Guillermo Trejo

November 11, 2015 for *Words & TC*



I discovered Guillermo Trejo while visiting Ottawa two years ago. One of his letterpress prints was included in an exhibition at La petite mort gallery downtown. It was a simple phrase distributed across four lines: "Omar Khadr was 14." The name referred to a child soldier who had been captured in Afghanistan and imprisoned in Guantanamo. He was just a teen.

That's awful, right? Some evidence suggested the poor kid was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and after all, haven't we all made mistakes at that age? For years, as his case dragged on, the press continued to publish the same youthful photo over and over. It reminded me of my own teen brother: skinny, sort of bewildered, and very sincere.

After 10 years in prison without trial, Khadr pleaded guilty and was moved to a maximum security prison in Alberta. See,

he was a Canadian citizen. Throughout his time in prison, I and others felt the conservative government - which was proud of its tough on crime and anti-Muslim stance - wasn't doing enough to fight for Khadr's extradition, for his human rights. To me, Trejo's simple print captures full, dirty tragedy, the mistakes, the incomprehensible fact that we continue to tolerate injustice all around us.

Anyway, I bought the print (a measly edition of 2). I adore it the way I suspect some Christians adore images of saints: with genuine pleasure and a deep, insatiable guilt.

Trejo now has another show at Six Sixty Six in Ottawa, It is about Plants, Modernism and Other Things. This new work is utterly unlike the earlier print: it's monochrome, elegant, sensuous and organic. It's not obviously political. Check it out - and be sure to drop by if you're in Ottawa. Show closes November 22.



## 2.10 Cindy Lisica Interview

January 2, 2015 for *Pittsburgh Articulate*

In February 2014 Cindy Lisica opened Revision Space gallery in Lawrenceville. It was a breath of fresh air. Suddenly, art scenesters like me found themselves traveling past 45th Street. Since opening, Lisica has organized seven exhibitions, striking a perfect balance between local artists and those from New York and abroad. This is exactly what we needed. First, by privileging early-career artists whose work had a meaningful connection to what was going on locally, Revision Space's exhibitions helped contextualize local practices. This is something few, if any, other spaces are interested in doing. Second, Lisica forged links with larger communities: New York artists made appearances and I saw the curator of the University of Pittsburgh Art Gallery at a local opening for the first time ever. On some nights, it seemed everyone was at Revision Space. Last and certainly not least, Lisica is actually selling art.

Recently, Lisica left her job an archivist at the Warhol Museum and adjunct professor at Pitt to join The Antiquarium in Houston as Gallery Director. Revision Space will remain open in the foreseeable future, with exhibitions lined up through 2015.



Cindy Lisica with gallery visitors during the exhibition "Great Waves" this summer.  
Photo by Gianna Paniagua.

**Alexandra Oliver: So, I heard you're leaving us for Houston. What happened?**

Cindy Lisica: Decided to migrate south just in time for winter! Really though, so much has happened in the last year, a lot of big projects, great people, and learning experiences. Since my partner Alan Mur, who's a geophysicist, relocated to Houston for work in June, I've had to reconsider what the future looks like. There was no way I was going to leave Revision Space...

**Glad to hear it! How will you continue to run Revision Space from afar?**

The exhibitions schedule is planned in advance well into 2015, and I will definitely make sure that I return on occasion to work directly with the artists and the gallery. Now that we've done so many shows and learned what works and what we (and our audience) like, I feel comfortable working from a distance (although it's difficult not to be there or close to



the gallery all the time). But really, overall, it's not such a huge insurmountable change – I just won't actually be hanging out in the gallery on the weekends. But I still write the newsletters, catalogs, handle a lot of the social media activity, and of course we've got email and mobile technology to keep us all connected...

**Does this mean shifting roles for your staff?**

It does, yes, and thankfully I have a wonderful new addition to Revision Space, Karen Lue, who started as an intern in August and has worked with me on the last three shows, including installation and events. She's now the gallery's first manager, and I have full confidence in her abilities. She's very smart, responsible, ambitious, and, most importantly, she cares about art, the gallery and our mission.

**OK, I'm going to be honest. When we met and you told me you were opening a gallery, I was skeptical. People say they're going to do stuff in this town all the time. Yet here we are, with Revision Space coming up to a one-year anniversary. What was the original mission of Revision Space, when you opened last February?**

Yes, sure, I completely understand your initial skepticism. But I had a very clear vision. By that I mean, I knew what I wanted the gallery to do, and to be, and I was and still am extremely passionate about it all. In the last year, seven exhibitions were realized, and thirteen artists were exposed, including four solos, plus exhibition catalogs. I think the efforts have been rewarding for everyone involved.

**You're trained as an art historian and you have a PhD. Why open a commercial gallery?**

Contemporary art is inextricably connected to the art market, and artists who are serious about their professional careers as practicing artists need to have the opportunity to work with a commercial gallery. As someone who's worked in academic and museum institutions, as well as commercial galleries in various cities around the world, it's important to me that these areas are linked. One of the reasons I went to grad school for art history in places with active artists amongst the community was to always stay in touch with the art world at large. It's important to attend events, think about exhibitions, visit artists' studios, and keep an open dialogue. Never become pigeon-holed, as they say... Plus I've always been into curating shows.

**I've always been amazed and humbled at your ability to work across so many institutional contexts. I'd like to stay with this art market issue for a minute: the global art market has**

been criticized for its undue influence on what gets made, seen, and preserved. But in Pittsburgh, instead of complaining about how the spending habits of the "one percent" are injuring the arts, artists are advocating developing the market. In your view, should we aspire to big-city style art market conditions? Or is there a different, better approach?

That kind of market, as you've illuminated, is not necessarily there to support artists, but to make big sales and get the richest collectors to buy what you have. What the one percent is doing may be a form of entertainment for some, but it's not what's important to me, or us, or Pittsburgh. From my perspective, connecting art and artists to collectors, and for those collectors to trust and support what we're doing—that's important.

Of course sales are a major part of the goal, and are needed. And when I say "collectors," I'm not just referring to people who are known as such, or who even view themselves as such, but everyone who loves what's happening and maybe wants to live with the art that they love. Buying art is both a rewarding and giving form of consumption. The art market doesn't need to be intimidating or isolating for anyone, and I think I can proudly say that the clients and friends of Revision Space come from a wide range of backgrounds. And, the events are fun and enriching and diverse. The exhibitions are thoughtful, and we're always working hard and learning. And it's growing. As long as we don't lose touch with that, we'll thrive.

**What surprised you most, in the course of running the space so far?**

File under things that come with running your own gallery, or any small business: being deeply involved in all aspects, and being ready for surprises. I think every installation has come with some panic and late nights, but anticipation along with preparation is a good thing, and it's all part of the wonderful process.

But yeah, apart from that, I'm also overwhelmingly pleased and surprised by the participation and energy that people bring to the gallery. People are genuinely glad that we're here, and I am beyond appreciative of that. Neighbors have been helpful, the press has been attentive, and the artists are amped. Working on a show is mutually motivating, and there's an exchange of positive feedback. It gets everyone excited about their work, and that results in more production, new ideas and new work. Then that work gets attention. Some of the artists from group shows are now getting solos at Revision Space in 2015, and others are getting spotted for more shows in other cities and receiving awards and grants for their work.

**Awesome. It's working! You've said you're committed to keeping Revision Space open for the foreseeable future. What can we look forward to seeing in 2015?**

A string of solo exhibitions by Pittsburgh artists in the first half of the year. Miss Dingo, a painter and printmaker, was in our second show last year called "Art is Violent" with her popular and sort of sinister paintings on meat cleavers. Her oeuvre goes well beyond that though, and she's been working on etchings, woodcut prints and incredible large-scale paintings that are figurative and wild – they're delightful. Her energy is going to shine in February, and we can't wait.

After that, our first photography show will open with the one and only Caldwell Linker. It will include more than photography—she's also working on detailed beadwork and even an installation.

After that, Travis K. Schwab, who was in our Great Waves summer show, will be bringing his



talent to the entire gallery. He just keeps blowing us away and wins awards and gets recognized regularly in art magazines. I love his portraits from films and popular culture.

In the summer and early fall, there are a couple of guest-curated exhibitions that have been in the works for some time. Expect to see some national and international faces along with locals. And we'll keep working on hosting cool events. It's going to be great.

## 2.11 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher

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March 4, 2015 for *Words & TC*

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Certain facts about race have become increasingly visible to me recently, as I follow the news stories about police brutality. But racism isn't isolated to urban situations or particular neighborhoods. It affects every aspect of people's lives.

This new video by Ari Daniel illuminates this clearly. Drew Lanham, an ecologist at Clemson University, explains how even birdwatching is fraught with hidden rules and cautious measures for black people. How could something so nerdy and so benign evoke anger and fear in whites? This unusual angle on race makes this video absurd, witty, and true.





CHAPTER THREE

# DISSERTATION

EXCERPTS: *CRITICAL REALISM IN  
CONTEMPORARY ART*

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It is hard to think about Alex without remembering her infectious curiosity. She joined our graduate program in the Department of History of Art and Architecture to study the history of photography. Because I had the pleasure of serving on her dissertation committee, I came to know Alex best as a thinker and scholar. I always looked forward to our discussions about her work because I knew each time that I would be the one to do the learning. She had an exceedingly sharp intellect and was consistently several steps ahead of me in thinking through the critical challenges of her research. She could parse complex conceptual issues with considerable ease; more impressive still was her ability to connect her thinking to insightful and often transformative readings of visual works. In the end, Alex wrote perhaps the most poised and elegant dissertation I have had the privilege to read from our department. And given the very high caliber of students who come and go from our program each year and the wonderful dissertations they too produce, this is saying quite a lot.

Alex was invested in researching and teaching not simply as ends in themselves, but also as part of her deep commitment to social justice in the broadest sense. She insisted that students of all levels and capabilities should be given access to the excitement of discovery and she worked tirelessly to turn her classrooms into a site of engagement and encounter. She taught several courses with us while she was finishing up her degree work and quickly became a “rock star” instructor with a loyal and ever expanding following of students eager to take her offerings on photography and modern art. Regardless of how large or small, her classes became known for her innovative incorporation of collaborative work and group discussions. And the excitement she engendered in her students was more than palpable; in fact, we always knew when Alex’s classes were meeting, based on the considerable spike in the building’s decibel level. You couldn’t escape the laughter and boisterous conversation that routinely spilled out of her classroom and down the hallway!

Alex was also a pioneer in thinking about how advanced degrees could extend beyond tried and true disciplinary boundaries and expected outcomes in our field. Her thinking was in part motivated by the shrinking horizons of possibility for employment in academe that hit hard after the crash of 2008. But it was also clearly driven by her belief that humanistic learning should have a much greater reach and play a larger role in matters of social justice and inclusiveness. She insisted that we were shortchanging our students and ourselves by not recognizing and honoring alternative visions of what the study of art history might yield. She came to me with her thoughts on this subject right after I became department chair in 2013. She had solid plans, all of which we adopted, for how we could begin to incentivize various career avenues for the art history PhDs we were turning out each year. After she earned her degree in 2014, Alex walked the walk by using her training to solidify her commitments to the local arts community as a respected critic, as a catalytic force in the nonprofit sector, and as a tireless advocate for social justice. I credit her with leading the way for us on the more versatile thinking that has now become the norm in humanities programs; in this sense she has left a profound mark on our department and subsequent generations of students. Alex’s vision has helped change the way we think about what we do in our department and her example continues to challenge us in positive and progressive ways.

Barbara McCloskey, PhD  
*Professor of Art History*  
*University of Pittsburgh*

# CRITICAL REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART

by Alexandra Oliver  
University of Pittsburgh 2014

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study responds to the reappearance of realism as a viable, even urgent, critical term in contemporary art. Whereas during the height of postmodern semiotic critique, realism was taboo and documentary could only be deconstructed, today both are surprisingly vital. In this dissertation I will provide a new account of realism. I focus on the work of three contemporary artists who all draw on realist traditions: Ian Wallace (b. 1943, Shoreham, UK), (b. 1949, Vancouver, British Columbia), and Allan Sekula (b. 1951, Erie, Pennsylvania, d. 2013, Los Angeles). These artists share no "school" or style and have not been brought together before for analysis. My approach will allow us to see these artists' works differently and may be expanded to encompass a wider range of contemporary practices.

Of these artists, Allan Sekula is the most obvious candidate for a reconsideration of realism, since his practice has long been informed by the tradition of social documentary photography, which raises the problem of reality and reference. He has also chosen to focus on subject matter related to labor, which has an iconographic tradition going back to nineteenth-century realism. For example, in his monumental cycle *Fish Story* (1989-1995), he photographed the people and places that link various parts of the vast maritime economy: shipbuilding, containerization, scavenging, tourism, and militarism. However, his work displays interesting features that are not easily accounted for in traditional accounts of realism that emphasize authenticity and accuracy, such as working in diptychs or triptychs. For example, images number four and five in *Fish Story* both portray pipe fitters working in Campbell Shipyard in San Diego Harbor. They work in a tight interior space among a chaotic network of pipes in many colors and sizes. The two images were clearly made in close temporal proximity, possibly even captured in adjacent frames: the poses and lighting are almost the same in both. The working men are lit with a direct flash, which creates the sense of spontaneity and immediacy we expect from documentary photography. But why double the frames rather than simply pulling the "best", most complete image to tell the full story, like the Spanish Republican soldier at the decisive moment of mortal injury, struck from life but suspended before death? By contrast, Sekula's doubling is unnerving, suggesting the inherent incompleteness of the single shot. It draws out a tension inherent in the technics of the photographic frame, which must isolate in order to represent. Given Sekula's long-standing interest in the documentary tradition, particularly its historical connection to radical politics, how should we read this device? Is it a critique of documentary aspiration to capture the decisive moment within the single frame? Or does it move towards a more complete realism, precisely by laying bare the device, drawing attention to the inevitability of framing?

Clearly, realism is important to Sekula's work. There are moments in *Fish Story* when the raw material of life reasserts itself against the abstractions of information; at other times, most notably in his images of images (photographs, sculptures, and signs, including a meaningless script intended to evoke a South Asian written language at a military training site), the abstractions of value, signification and information become astonishingly concrete. Sekula's work raises issues of reference, in particular, the challenge of representing labor

under conditions of globalization, when “work” has become dispersed and casualized. Yet older approaches to realism that understand the concept as a “fit” between representation and reference fail to explain the use of the diptych in terms of the artist’s deep commitment to representing social reality and his skepticism towards traditions that claim to do so. What this dissertation attempts, through a qualified “critical” realism, is to offer a more suitably dialectical account, by treating the old problem of “fit” between representation and reference as a problem of identity and non-identity. The goal is less to carve out a new definition of realism by specifying its formal or thematic features, and more to explain the meaning of our continued desire to grasp reality in images, even when postmodern theories of signification have taught us that we ought to know better. In this context, Sekula’s art and writing becomes exceptionally rich, since he explicitly wanted to avoid reinforcing the notion that we live in a virtual world where work has been transformed into play and the signified into the signifier, as though the constraints of geography, materiality and class no longer have any consequence. Indeed, part of his project is precisely to remind us of their ongoing importance, which also suggests the ongoing importance of realism. Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace are less intuitive but equally rich cases. Wall famously stages his photographs to mirror the compositional strategies of tableau painting, but many of his motifs are based on actual events he witnessed.

In *Diatribes*, which I analyze below, we see two women walking; one is holding a child and opens her mouth to speak. Wall identifies the figures in an interview as working-class mothers, who he observed at “playgrounds, clinics, supermarkets, and laundries” (Wall 2007, 191). The clarity and detail of the image, like Sekula’s use of direct flash, assures us that nothing is hidden, that everything is on the surface. The everyday subject and setting appear plausible, even banal. It is clear what this picture is of (its subject matter) and at the same time we struggle to grasp what it is about (how we should read its deeper, symbolic meaning). And it is precisely here that the problem of realism emerges, as a dialectic between what is clearly visible and what remains obscure. It is, in short, a problem of identity and non-identity, which Wall addresses by offering a picture of working-class mothers that is completely pictorially lucid, but which we experience as incomplete, obscure, resistant to interpretation. Wall’s realism is not about creating a perfectly accurate or complete picture that we can identify with the thing it represents, but about emphasizing the reality of what escapes representation, living beyond the boundary that marks historically real, social difference. If anything, the desire to identify things with their images in an attempt to better understand them, is part of the problem. And yet, the desire persists. Wall’s usual pictures, which capture everyday objects, figures and settings, treating them as monumental and significant, express a continued desire to grasp things as they are, significant in themselves. Understanding Wall’s work as a critical realism, a realism of difference, allows us to see how knowing things is inextricably bundled up with granting those things their own autonomy, so that realism appears not just a problem of epistemological “fit” but of ethical relation.

Wallace shares many of these interests with his Vancouver colleague. Although he began as a painter, his mature work juxtaposes monochrome painting and photography. A good example



Figure 1 Ian Wallace, *My Heroes in the Street*, 1986, photolaminate, acrylic on canvas, installation view, Kunstverein, Düsseldorf, 2008. Left: Keith, 102 x 230 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Pinakothek der Modern, Siemens Arts Program, permanent loan of Siemens Aktiengesellschaft. Center and right, respectively: *Shelagh* and *Rodney*, 101 x 221 cm. Collection of Greta Meert, Brussels.

of this is his breakthrough hybrid work, *My Heroes in the Street* [fig. 1], which is composed of three large-scale panels. Each has two “wings,” which are painted an even white and sandwich a photographic print. The monochrome emphasizes the materiality of the painted surface, while the photograph, although existentially dependent on its subject, when set against the flat painted surface, appears illusionistic. By juxtaposing photography and monochrome painting, these bi-form works raise questions about differing conceptions of realism, while also alluding to the history of modernist abstraction. One of Wallace’s earliest influences was Piet Mondrian and he continues to describe himself and his work as modernist. Between the competing traditions of modernism (identified with abstraction) and realism (identified with figuration) it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to “locate” Wallace’s realism (is abstraction more or less real than figuration?). But this question only makes sense if we continue to treat realism as a “fit” between reality and representation. But contrast, I will argue that Wallace’s strategy does not identify with either tradition; rather, it is insistently relational, with each part pushing against the other, even as their edges meet and occasionally, provisionally settle into a dialogue about the possibility of unity. Wallace is less interested in overcoming the division between reality and representation than in understanding how different realities emerge socially, compete with each other in the form of politics, and how art can transmit this multiplicity by digging into its own aesthetic traditions. Wallace, like Wall and Sekula, but even more explicitly, relies



on anti-expressive sources for his art. But he does not believe, straightforwardly, that pulling the artist's interior Self back from the work allows external reality to appear in it. His practice suggests some adjacent, more thoroughly dialectical ideas. By drawing on existing forms, materials, or signs, whose contexts will always exceed his art, Wallace positions his works as a site where they can collide in new ways. This calls for a relational, dialectical, and critical approach to realism, which this dissertation seeks to develop.

Realism, however, remains a fraught category and there is little agreement about its definition or features. In particular, it is challenging to develop a plausible theory of realism after poststructuralism. Consequently, many contemporary commentators on art are skeptical towards categories of reality and realism, even as they acknowledge that contemporary art calls for an engagement with them. Most often, this skepticism leads commentators to collapse the difference between signifier and signified; for them, signs are the new reality. For example, British curator Mark Nash argued:

there is no longer any mileage to be gained from the opposition between fiction and reality. Decades of post-Structural philosophizing (for example, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum) have inured us to the argument that it no longer makes sense to try and distinguish between reality and its representation. At the same time documentary has become a means of attempting to re-establish a relationship to reality. The pertinent question, perhaps, is what kind of social, political or personal reality is being proposed. (2008, n. p.)

If reality and representation are one, then there is no way to ask the question about the relationship between contemporary art and reality, since reality itself no longer has any status. The most common solution to this problem is to abandon theories of realism in favour of theories of fiction, performativity and constructedness. This direction has become a major occupation for many commentators.<sup>1</sup> For example, in 2010 the Generali Foundation produced *Hinter der vierten Wand*, an exhibition subtitled "fictitious lives, lived fictions," which included work by Ian Wallace and Allan Sekula, as well as by Harun Farocki, Omer Fast, Mik Aernout and others. In the absence of reality, our ability to know it, or maybe both, Folie and Lafer propose to showcase the ways that artists instead "aim to show reality under construction, in all its complexity" (Lafer 2010, 130). Yet again, however, this is no solution since it falls into the same trap as Nash's approach, shifting the focus of analysis from reality to reality-under-construction. And yet, some contemporary art, like the work by the artists mentioned above, clearly demands to be understood in some way that engages seriously with history, social structure and materiality. Therefore, this model cannot accommodate their work.

I will depart from these approaches in the belief that reality remains ethically indispensable, and that if older realisms are no longer acceptable, then rather than simply discarding reality

<sup>1</sup> There are far too many to create an exhaustive list. However, some key theories developed according to this model include: documentarism (Steyerl 2005, 2003), aesthetic journalism (Cramerotti 2009), postmodern documentary (Williams 1993), performative documentary (Bruzzi 2006) and others (Henry 2006, Rhem 2004, Beausse 1999a, 1999b).

altogether, we should develop better models of realism. The approach I propose is "critical realism"—not a new category with a clearly-defined set of features (such as figuration, for example), but a way of approaching contemporary art that draws out artists' occupation with ethical as well as epistemological issues. To do this I will draw on foundational work by the curator Okwui Enwezor and German critical theory and in particular the work of Theodor Adorno, which provides a useful vocabulary and dialectical framework.

#### 1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

I have selected each of the artists and their particular projects for the way they engage with different aspects of realism. The first chapter concerns realism as materiality, which I examine through the use of the monochrome in the work of Ian Wallace. Wallace has developed a rigorous and instantly recognizable practice of juxtaposing emphatic, single-hued surfaces with photographic prints, generating a playful but optically disorienting encounter between two kinds of reality, one actual surface, the other illusionistic depth. I trace the development of this "bi-form" practice back to Wallace's early conceptual experiments, arguing that they represent the mature formal manifestation of an idea that has long been central to his practice, which he calls the "intersection." Drawing on the artist's writings, I suggest that the intersection has several uses for Wallace: as a metaphor, as thematic material and as structural device. It is also a "critical realist" strategy because it allows Wallace to explore how different realities encounter and shape each other, without assimilating one into the other or treating this plurality as mere relativism. While developing this work in the early 1980s, Wallace drew on related ideas from *Aesthetic Theory*, explicitly citing the notion of "truth content" as an influence on the development of the mature works. In the final section, I bring Wallace's work in line with Enwezor's concerns, examining a series of more recent conceptual works that use the language of human rights to comment on the colonial history of British Columbia. This last series, *Declarations*, emphasizes the importance of that history to the conflicting material, legal and political realities of indigenous and settler Canadian populations today. It also suggests that the much-maligned humanism and universality of the UN *Declaration of Human Rights* can be mobilized to critique inequality in situations where discourses of difference are used as tools of oppression—something that is not often considered by discourses that celebrate multiculturalism and heterogeneity.

Chapter 2 explores realism as representation of the social subject through the large-scale "tableaux" photographs of Jeff Wall. Examining social conditions such as marginalization and economic exploitation has long been a realist occupation, particularly associated with the nineteenth-century turn towards "low" subjects like industrial laborers, laundry maids and peasants. But unlike older realisms that could claim the social location of the subject or the proliferation of pictorial detail as proof of their authenticity, I argue that Wall's realism critiques the "adequacy" paradigm that has structured both older realisms and contemporary accounts. In this chapter, I demonstrate how such a critique can be read in works like *Diatribes* (1984) that are both highly descriptive and narratively opaque. First, I argue by recreating a history

of illegibility, whose features (failure of ekphrasis, heightened detail, and lack of narrative closure) can be read as realist tropes. Here I rely on previous research by Svetlana Alpers, who traced these tropes back to the same seventeenth-century models who influenced Wall, particularly Caravaggio and Velázquez, in a relay that passes through Edouard Manet. Second, I argue from intent, showing that Wall himself understands his work in terms of realism and difference, and that “cinematography,” a term Wall uses to describe his practice, is less about blurring the boundaries between film, photography, and cinema, and more about realizing the ideal of non-identity in aesthetic experience. Finally I return to *Diatrobe*, showing how its illegibility is a staged encounter between subject and object, where the object exceeds the subject’s grasp, and is preserved as an agent of autonomy and self-knowledge.

In Chapter 3 I draw on a model of “constellative” writing to tackle the problem of representing reality that has become complicated recently by the global flows of capital and information. The term comes from Adorno (by way of Benjamin) who believed that dissolving, rather than solving problems, could enact a passage from philosophy to praxis. I suggest that Allan Sekula’s monumental ensembles of images, texts, found objects, slides and audio, can be understood as a kind of critical-realist art that does this. Sekula’s work has long engaged with political subjects in a way that both enacts a critique of the documentary tradition while insisting on the material reality of his subjects—difficult propositions in the context of a mediatized, globalized world. Beginning with an account of *Aerospace Folktales* and moving to *Fish Story*, I argue that Sekula cultivates a complex relationality between subjects and objects, which emerge multiply entangled with and interdependent on each other, structured along lines of class, gender, geography and history. Using Sekula’s interest in the shipping containers as a starting point, I trace in the material and dialectical connections between the maritime economies that fascinated him and the emergence of mass communications technologies that convince us that we exist increasingly in a frictionless, post-industrial, “virtual” world, despite social and ecological warnings about the unsustainability of current arrangements.

In the conclusion I extend these observations to a set of broader arguments about realism, photography and the histories of modern art. If the desire for epistemological access to reality now appears in contemporary art as a desire for a more equitable social arrangement, this allows us to re-read older histories that tried to account for the attraction to realism—in particular, to photographic realism—in new ways. Not only does the literature on the art of the documentary turn appear differently but the concerns with anti-theatricality and photography developed by Michael Fried and the philosopher Stanley Cavell are given an injection of ethical substance. The fantasy of being present to a reality that, however, is not present to its viewer, can be read as implicitly utopian, and therefore, as a protest against an existing social formation. Finally, I explore how this fantasy appears in some recent film and video art, as well as in popular culture more broadly, expressed in dystopian visions of a world in which humanity has destroyed itself, tapping into increasingly pressing questions about ecological stewardship and our collective fate as we anxiously debate development and sustainability.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have tried to argue for an understanding of realism as something other than a philosophical position, a visual style or merely a second-order unmasking of the truth that there is none. Instead, I have tried to show that realism is an ethical proposition, which is achieved in art through structures that communicate the priority of the object. In my examples, I have shown how this can be achieved through motifs of the intersection, illegibility and constellation, and how these motifs are articulated through particular formal features (for example, Sekula’s use of diptychs and triptychs to assemble a subject over the course of several temporal intervals).

To do this I have also argued that the problem of realism can be productively framed as a problem of identity-thinking, thereby providing access to the language of dialectical criticism, and opening up a path between identities of difference and the negative philosophy of Adorno. As Bill Brown put it in “Thing Theory,” Adorno grasped the “alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (2001, 12). Or, in other words, distilled in the epigraph Brown selected from philosopher Michel Serres: “le sujet naît de l’objet.” Stopping short of arguing for a “realist” Adorno, I have tried to wrap his dialectical materialism around recent photo-based art, to show his hostility to figurative art (particularly to the art championed by Lukács) to be less a feature inherent in his philosophy than an artifact of the period in which it emerged.<sup>93</sup> His affections for abstraction in art and literature make little sense today when critical and political possibilities for figurative art are everywhere affirmed, especially in the context of a media-saturated environment dominated by screens. Today, the old modernist taboo on figuration appears particularly outdated as film, photography and video are recognized as legitimate media for serious contemporary art. And yet, as we have seen, the old iconoclasm hangs on in unexpected ways, recently reappearing as a taboo on reality itself, where figurative images are understood to refer only to other images. Against this view I have tried to argue that contemporary artists like Jeff Wall are powerful representatives of a distinctly contemporary practice that is realist because it is dialectically negative, or, critical. This does not mean there is no value left in representation critique. It does mean that critical realism is something other than naturalistic figuration. Indeed, recovering negativity within figuration can be understood, I think, as consistent with a politics of identity that critiques representation when realism is treated as a problem of ethics and not merely an outdated framework that ethics ought to replace.

Finally, I have suggested that reframing realism as a broader problem of intersubjectivity rather than a restricted epistemological one, offers the best explanation for realism’s continued attraction. What is striking about the recent realist and materialist literature, in art

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93 Fredric Jameson refers to it as “a new dialectical objectivity” (1990, 35). See also O’Connor on Adorno and “givenness” (2004) and Deborah Cook on his treatment of nature (Cook 2007). Cook and Hall have also focused on Adorno’s “critical materialism” in recent work (Cook 2006; Hall 2011). Espen Hammer takes a different angle, arguing for the centrality of metaphysics to Adorno’s thought (2006).

history as well as in social and political theory, is the persistence of a powerful desire for things as they are, rather than objects as we experience them from our individual points of view. As I noted in my introduction, considering its fraught history, realism should not be attractive at all. Everywhere around us reality seems to be ailing: online identities, drone warfare, virtual currency, digital photography, infotainment and so on, combined with postmodern or post-structural skepticism about the possibilities of objective knowledge, threaten the stability of cherished notions of reality and its cognate concepts (document, fact, objectivity, materiality, etc.) The German artist Hito Steyerl, who has become a prominent artist and theorist of the new documentary art, claims that we ought to understand reality as images—or maybe vice versa, since there is no difference between them: “Images do not represent reality, they create reality, they are second nature. Things among other things, image-objects, image-events, image-situations, image-bodies” (Steyerl and Rourke 2013, n. p.). If images have totally colonized reality, what good is realism? And yet, realism has become increasingly important in recent years, along with the document, the archive and the notion of witnessing. Indeed, one might plausibly argue that intensified interest in realism is being stimulated in large part by a sense that reality itself is disappearing. Certainly, some critics have interpreted the documentary turn in these terms, on which point, Steyerl writes elsewhere, this time with curator Maria Lind: “The double bind is strong: on the one hand documentary images are more powerful than ever. On the other hand, we have less and less faith in documentary representations” (Lind and Steyerl 2008, 11).

Obviously, there are pragmatic reasons for holding on to reality, especially if we are at all politically inclined. When Amnesty International reports that 2012 has been the most profitable year ever for arms dealers with over \$50 billion US in sales, we may doubt the figure’s accuracy and may doubt the possibility of accuracy in calculating this figure at all. But few of us are radical enough to doubt that arms sales occur or that American currency circulates. Or that the Gulf War took place. This is not to contest the notion that knowledge is produced through the movements of power. Amnesty International, like the United States Treasury and arms dealers, is an institution with its own political discourse. We are free to accept or contest the particular reality it produces. But reality as a concept is not politically selective in the same fashion. The idea of reality as such is indispensable to every position along the political spectrum, not unlike the concepts of freedom or justice. It is especially precious to liberal and progressive thinkers in the current political climate. Even Bruno Latour, himself a major advocate of social constructionism in science studies, has expressed doubts about the politics of anti-realist approaches:

...entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save lives. (Latour 2004, 227)

In addition to these pragmatic concerns, the pull of reality can be best explained, I think, when we see the desire for things-as-they-are as a desire for a reconfigured relationship to them. It strikes me that, as it stands, we cannot access thing-as-they-are, not because some Kantian cognitive categories are getting in the way, or because of ideology, or because the media is interfering, but for the simpler reason that our social arrangements generate a constant state of conflict, where things are coerced into being things they are not. One of the consequences of social contestation is that conditions of hybridity or liminality permeate contemporary cultural experience (to appropriate an older argument of Latour’s); nevertheless, these categories cannot adequately capture the structured particularity of things if they are treated as generalized conditions that equally describe all people of all classes, everywhere. For this reason, in narrowing the short-list of candidates to include for analysis in this dissertation, I particularly focused on artworks that incorporated difference into their structures, whether embodied in a duality (between painting and photography, for example) or mapped across a great geographic distance (the itinerary of a containership between sites of production and consumption). It is in these passages of heterogeneity that concrete alternatives to current social arrangements are most likely to emerge. Of course, to develop a substantial politics that would fully understand difference in its difference would require first reorganizing ourselves collectively in a non-coercive, non-objectifying, non-violent way, in a way that recognizes them as bearers of rights, not just despite their difference, but in their difference. In the case of other humans, this means human rights. I would transgress the scope of this dissertation to comment on the possibility of such a project; my rather more limited interest is clarifying how contemporary realist art derives its critical content in the riddle of difference.

What appeared as a problem of epistemology, then, reappears as a problem for ethics. This goes considerably further in explaining why our hunger for reality is not extinguished, but grows, as we register its gradual disappearance. And here I want to suggest that the loss of reality and the anxiety that follows was not new to the 1990s, but has a longer history embedded in the history of modernism itself. The desire for systematic and encyclopedic knowledge appeared with the Enlightenment, and soon thereafter the colonial ambitions that allowed scientific enquiry access to exotic lands and peoples. Seen dialectically, what the modern subject hungers for is not just complete knowledge of the world as it is, but a complete experience of itself. Because we are also a part of the world, an object in it among others and an other to others, an inability to know the world fully entails an inability to know the self. Indeed the very fact that I constitute a *self*, a something that observes itself, as it were, from only one location, means this blindness, this dark spot, this boundary can never be overcome. However sensitive I am to interpersonal dynamics, my experience of myself cannot include others’ experiences of me because their experiences are by definition theirs; I am bound to myself by the blunt fact of how I exist within myself as a particular body.

In its work to acquire knowledge and make a home of the world, the subject reaches for objects, only to discover that the very act of reaching itself, the outward extension of subjectivity, pushes objects beyond its reach. Knowledge is forever incomplete. And yet the



experiences others have of me—although different from mine and different, doubtless, from each other—are not less real therefore. They are not “merely” subjective, cannot be wished away or dismissed by those who have them. Each of the minute qualities that my friends, family and colleagues attach to me are true to those who experience them, untrue to those who do not, and totally outside my field of possible experience altogether. There is a part of me that is real but that remains unknowable to me.

So rather than despair and embrace relativism as a last, awful resort, we might consider the ways that the incompleteness of knowledge is structured, with the hope of discovering a less destructive way of relating to those who are our others. Framing the problem in this way, using Hegelian language, lends the entire problem a sickly, modern-Western color, and I recognize that in fact this is by far not the only way of thinking about global intersubjectivity. Even Adorno and his coauthor, Horkheimer, who together witnessed from exile the astonishing practical effects of bureaucratic efficiency on expansionist, nationalist ambitions, could hardly anticipate the ecological terrors that now regularly threaten from the seas and skies. Although we shudder at the ticking clock and spin apocalyptic fantasies enough to nourish several action movie sub-genres, imagining robust alternatives to the impending global catastrophe (whether economic, ecological or military) is difficult if not impossible, suggesting, tragically, that the only world safe from the destruction of instrumental reason would have to be a world without us in it. And this is an almost unbearably sad thought, an idea that we approach but cannot fully embrace, for it would mean accepting the absoluteness of the conflict between our existence and a peaceful world, which would be the end of all hope.

Hence the nervous fascination with books that explore human absence on a large scale, such as the speculative projections in *A World Without Us* (Weisman 2007). Perhaps the closest visual equivalent in photos of “the world’s most beautiful abandoned places” which have become a pop-culture phenomenon, spreading virally on the Internet.<sup>94</sup> The unavoidably seductive image of the object, thriving, independent of us, indeed, *free from us*, whether other ways of life or virgin wilderness, untouched, by the hand, by the eye—or even of the consciousness—of modern humans, sustains the illusion of a world of total and equal objectivity. This world of equal objectivity entails equal subjectivity as well and this is the world that realism promises to give us. Realism probes the wound even as it soothes. It cannot simply be given up.

As it turns out, photography is particularly powerful at achieving these effects. Although I do not feel that critical realism is dependent on any particular technical support or presentation format, I should say a few words about photography, since the artists in this study have engaged the medium and its history so deliberately. There are many accounts of what makes photography special; many of these point to the medium’s mechanical or “automatic” character. This is something that makes some intuitive sense only in the way a cliché does, at the end of

94 These appeared on the website BuzzFeed in late March and at time of writing had been shared 60,000 times on Facebook, 9000 times on twitter and 3000 times by email. The cheeky byline read: “Can’t wait until the world ends and EVERYTHING looks like this” (Ringerud and Stopera 2013). Polidori’s photographs have been published in the monograph *Zones of Exclusion* (Polidori and Culbert 2003).



Figure 24 Andrew Moore, National Time clock, former Cass Technical High School building, 2009, digital chromogenic print scanned from film negative, 86.3 x 68.5 cm. Collection of Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell, Cleveland, Ohio.

the road of verifiability. Instead of traveling that road yet again, I turn to Stanley Cavell, who as we shall see, and despite what one might initially think given his long meditations on the technical differences between a phonograph record and a photograph, has useful things to say about ethics and difference. Cavell does not argue that photography’s uniqueness derives from its “indexicality” although his claim does not contradict the possibility that something like “mechanical” transcription is at work.<sup>95</sup> What’s refreshing is that Cavell’s argument does not need indexicality, which after enduring decades of criticism<sup>96</sup> has recently been revived

95 Whatever that may be. For a concise and substantial summary of the “mechanical” arguments for photographic realism and related “foundational problems” see Costello and Phillips (2008).

96 I have in mind primarily Joel Snyder’s arguments. See his contribution to the roundtable on Photography Theory for

in tedious arguments that once again locate the artist's creativity and originality in its overcoming.<sup>97</sup> Rather, he says, photography's mysterious realism comes from its temporality, the way its perpetual pastness is experienced in the present: "The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past" (Cavell 1971, 23).

This perhaps explains the powerful, visceral attraction of recent images of urban or industrial decay (known colloquially as "ruin porn"<sup>98</sup>). Among photographers currently exploring this subgenre, Robert Polidori's pictures of nature's stubborn flourishing among the ruins of Chernobyl and Pripjat stand out; he has also made similar pictures of old Havana, which closely follow the tradition established by Victorian photographers such as Calvert Jones (1802-1877) and Benjamin Brecknell Turner (1815-1894) or the *Mission Héliographique*. For generations of photographers, there has been a unique challenge (or paradox?) in visualizing the battle between the world's greatest monuments and the inevitable ravages of time. In many ways, this genre imitates the still-older Neoclassical and Romantic paintings of

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a summary of this view (Elkins 2007, 369-400). His challenge has been ignored; for example, one of the contributors to Kelsey and Stimson's revisionist volume (Kelsey and Stimson 2005) single out Elkins, Martin Lefebvre, Rosalind Krauss, and Liz Wells but not Snyder as interlocutors; the other simply asserts that the index is a trace, a "this" that "points to a verifies an existence and a history" (Doane 2005, 12) as if the meaning of those terms were transparent—and this is exactly the problem that Snyder critiques.

97 The notion that photography is uniquely positioned as a candidate for "critical" realism because its native state is realism also implies that painting, which lacks this native state, is not a candidate for critical realism at all. Hilde Van Gelder's claim is typical in this regard: "The photo digs its critical potential out of this privileged relationship to reality; it really has something to say about it because it arises out of it" (quoted in Baetens and Van Gelder 2006, 9-10). For additional, similar examples, see Giuliani Paolini (quoted in Witkovsky 2012, 167), Davidts and Green (quoted in Baetens and Van Gelder 2006, 130 and 128 respectively), Linsley (1989, 31), Folland (1988) and Kuspit (1982, 54).

This just repeats Victorian (and later, Pictorialist, and later, Modernist) arguments that being an artist using photography means doing something other—something more (creative, valuable, critical)—than what photography does by itself, thereby implying that photography does something by itself. In *Pictorial Effects in Photography* (1869) H. P. Robinson writes, "we can add truth to bare facts" (Trachtenberg 1980, 92) and valorizes the "photographer's individual impression of the subject" (96). Similar beliefs were held by P. H. Emerson, who states aphoristically, in *Naturalistic Photography* (1889): "[i]t is not the apparatus that chooses the picture, but the man [sic] who wields it" (103, emphasis original) and, on attempting to negotiate that sticky balance between subjectivity and objectivity: "all poetry is in nature, but different individuals see different amounts of it" (Trachtenberg 1980, 104). No surprise, then, that Alfred Stieglitz endorsed this view, but so did Lewis Hine, for completely different reasons. According to the Proceedings of the June 1909 National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Hine justified his photographic reform efforts by claiming that the picture is a compact, unified "story" and is "often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated" (111). All these positions argue that the source of value in their enterprises lie in their human craft, skill, creativity and unique individual vision, against the implicit assumption that their absence would be artless, meaningless contact between reality and a machine—non-human object and non-human object, a state of raw nature untouched by Geist or awaiting passage into commodity-status by value-added human labor. Recent moves to established photography as a legitimate medium for contemporary art recapitulate the structure of this argument substituting "critique" for "creativity" so that critical realism is, above all, a critique of native photographic realism.

98 For example, "Detroit ruin porn" is a searchable tag used by the Huffington Post at [www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/detroit-ruin-porn](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/detroit-ruin-porn).

antiquity's faded grandeur, but photography's particular pastness combines with the pastness of the subject itself to unique effect, between documentary utility and sublime awe.

Andrew Moore (b. 1957) has become famous for his luscious scenes of Detroit, which is slowly disappearing as its man-made structures are digested by organic bodies. Without the feathered surfaces of peeling paint or the collapsed buildings, we would have no way of grasping the passage of time at all. An empty field is timeless but a field with the skeletal remains of a house has a different temporality that contrasts the bounded linearity of human life with the unending cycles of the seasons. A photograph of that same house registers both the tension between human time and natural timelessness, while stamping both with the time of its making, which is transcended in the photographic print. In *National Time clock, former Cass Technical High School building* (2009), this layering of times is illustrated in a particularly acute (some might say, heavy-handed) fashion, in a photograph of a clock whose plastic face has slid down, like sagging skin over a skull, pulling the numbers with it until they are distorted and compressed [fig. 23]. The effect is less surreal than one might expect given the unavoidable resemblance to its iconic painted cousin in Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931); instead, it is genealogically closer to the Romantic occupations of *Ozymandias*. Like a photograph, the inscription on the pedestal in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem points to the moment of its making. Which is fitting, if problematic, since Moore and the curators at the Akron Art Museum, who staged an exhibition of Moore's Detroit work, understand the fate of the American rustbelt exactly as did the early Romantics did the ruins of Egypt, Rome or the Mediterranean, without politics or scandal.<sup>99</sup>

To return to Cavell, we might say that photography's unique asynchrony is like a two-way mirror that permits ontological travel in one direction only, so the subject is absent in a reality to which it nevertheless has visual access. But that is not all. With the parenthetical "through no fault of my subjectivity" Cavell lightly insists that the subject has done nothing in particular to bring about this state of affairs. This implies a temporary loss of agency, which I think is no loss at all but a relief—of censure and perhaps, at a stretch, culpability. Photography's temporality has managed to secure not just my absence to the reality it represents but also a circumscription of my subjectivity. Once again, the goal is not to eliminate subjectivity, which in any case is impossible, but to experience it in a way that does not induce existential nausea at the prospect of nature's sublime indifference to human existence. Rather, photography reconnects us with reality through a presence or presentness of the world—or more properly, in dialectical terms, by presenting us with the illusion (Schein) that it does so. For this reason realism always contains an element of fantasy, myth, and utopian longing—which contributors to the current debate, such as Steyerl and Lind, Nash, Lafer and others, rightly recognize.

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99 In his artist statement published in the catalogue, Moore wrote, "Although poor leadership on many levels has beset the city, the true engineer behind its disassembly is Janus-faced nature, which renews as it ravages this shadowed metropolis" (Moore 2010, 119). Similarly, Barbara Tannenbaum, Director of Curatorial Affairs and Mitchell Kaham, director & CEO, write, in the "Afterword" that Moore "sees in the abandonment of large sections of Detroit a timeless theme: the human struggle to control nature by dominating the land. .... The scarce inhabitants of Piranesi's etchings of eighteenth-century Rome are the ancestors of more than a few modern-day Detroiters" (Moore 2010, 122). (Moore himself is from Old Greenwich, Connecticut.)

Like Adorno before him and Enwezor after, Cavell concludes that the achievement of full subjectivity requires the presence of the world, and so places this alterity at the core of what we value in aesthetic experience: “Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art,” Cavell writes. “Apart from this wish and its achievement, art is exhibition” (1971, 22) (by which I take him to mean something like Fried’s theatricality, an emptying of intersubjectivity).

The delicious satisfaction we derive from fantasies of our own absence—seeing without being seen, or more radically, of having the world present without being present to it—has been used to explain the pleasure produced by a great many images, including paintings. This idea will be familiar to readers of Michael Fried, who takes credit for having told the story of modernism by tracing the emergence of the presentness as its central problem (Fried 1980). But Fried is less interested in the explicitly ethical consequences of viewing than in intersubjectivity as a formal device, providing a model of intersubjectivity without a subject and beholding without a (sexed, raced, classed) beholder, which is either paradoxical or incomplete. Despite his indifference to social categories, Fried’s anti-theatrical model is not conceptually inconsistent with account of critical realism I have described in this dissertation. For Fried, the possibility of experiencing aesthetic pleasure is dependent upon the illusion of ontological independence created by the artwork; one such way of crafting this illusion pictorially is to represent a figure deeply absorbed in an activity, conveying the impression that they are immune to the distraction presented by whatever is happening on the viewer’s side of the picture plane. The illusion must be convincing if the work is to be deemed successful. In place of artistic quality, I have been concerned to elaborate a concept of critical realism, but what my model shares with Fried’s is an emphasis on a separation between subject and object that nevertheless achieves communication between them. With Fried’s anti-theatrical artwork, the beholder attends to an object according to convention, which, however, does not return the gesture, producing aesthetic pleasure (“conviction”). With critical realism, the beholder’s subjectivity is restrained, providing a “communication of what is differentiated” (Adorno 2005, 247)—a fuller view of otherness than is normally accessible to instrumental reason. Fried’s insights about the particular attraction of absorptive paintings is not invalidated by my observations, but enriched with social significance.

If mapping critical realism onto anti-theatricality exposes the social stakes of modern beholding, it also exposes the social stakes in Fried’s worries about objecthood. If the satisfaction we derive from anti-theatrical art is caused by the illusion of independence it creates, then perhaps the anxiety about objecthood can be attributed to its corresponding opposite: the image of subjugation of object to subject. More specifically, one might read the threat of objecthood as the threat of commodification as it penetrates the aesthetic field. For many Marxist critics, the latter is rather more distressing than artwork pandering to its beholder, because artistic production has long been thought, for various reasons, to be immune (or at least, resistant) to the logic of commercial exploitation. Although Fried is as indifferent to exploitation as he is to politics, his observations about objecthood might be

acute if radically incomplete observations about the vulnerability of reality.

We may recall how Marx characterizes the commodity. What is special about commodities, Marx thought, is that we are blinded by their exchange value; whether it is a luxurious or common thing, we think its value derives from the kind of thing it is, and believe, equally, that this is reflected in what we pay for it. But this is just an illusion. The value of commodities actually derives the labor that brought them into being. Commodities are actually “social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (Marx and Engels 1978, 320-21). Now it is hard to imagine a more powerful image of this phenomenon than minimal art, which I say despite the obvious commodity character of Pop. Essential to Pop are drama and storytelling, or at least the memory of dramatic pathos, etched into the consumer narratives crafted by PR firms to trigger desires and anxieties, which survive in the finished artwork. Yet sex, death, food and money—even when reduced to formulas—allowed artists such as Oldenburg and Warhol to retain their connections to human needs. Minimalism’s constricted, regular forms, by contrast, subsume the human within a compositional rigor produced by placing one thing after another, all manufactured to precisely the same specifications. This powerfully evokes industrial capacities, by banishing evidence of facture, figuration, and structuring negative space as if in anticipation of extending into it. Obviously I have in mind modular work like Donald Judd’s floor-to-ceiling stacks or Dan Flavin’s light “barriers,” but these observations also apply to singular sculptural pieces like Tony Smith’s *Die* (1962). The same industrial logic has also been applied effectively to cultural products, as Horkheimer and Adorno observed, and increasingly to service industries too.

The latent anthropomorphism that Fried talks about in “Art and Objecthood”—the feeling that, in the presence of a minimalist work or group of works, one senses the uncanny “silent presence of another *person*” or his observations about the human scale of *Die*—do not detract from, but rather reinforce my argument about commodification, precisely because it is in the nature of commodities to be vital, silent, and secretive about their humanness. We should not be surprised then, that Fried describes *Die* as marked by “the quality of having an *inside* ... as though the work in question has an inner, even secret life” (Fried 1998, 156-57), which echoes in a different context Marx’s famous passage on commodity fetishism: a commodity is a “mysterious” and “enigmatical” thing that conceals the secret of exploitative social relations within the product of labor (Marx 1976, 320). While Pop art resembles specific commodities, the resemblance is literally and deliberately superficial; by contrast, Minimal art mimics the commodity’s structure and subtle affective valences.

In this context it is interesting to revisit *Homes for America* (1966), a piece in which Minimalism and commodification are morphologically linked through photography. In this photo-text work, Dan Graham shows rows of identical tract houses, and the accompanying text explains how the color schemes and floor plans are configured to balance a desire on the part of homeowners for customized individuality without sacrificing the economies of scale required for efficient and profitable residential development. Graham uses the repetitious schemas to demonstrate how aesthetics has become functionalized in an attempt to provide the illusion of



freedom of choice to suburban consumers (Buchloh 1977). Perhaps not incidentally, Buchloh calls Graham's schemas "reality structures"—found forms that are able to dialectically reflect upon the conditions of artistic production (1977, 121). Graham himself resisted that reading.<sup>100</sup> Still, if the artist did not intend *Homes for America* to be read as a comment on minimalism per se, he was clearly occupied with the aestheticization of everyday life in postwar consumer society, as made evident by the text and the fact that it was destined for an ephemeral format: the magazine spread.<sup>101</sup>

If the threat of objecthood is the threat of reification in disguise then perhaps we are back on the old familiar battleground of avant-garde and kitsch. But there is more at stake than simply keeping art quarantined from consumer culture, a project that has come to seem hopeless or trivial or maybe both. There is no doubt that art is a species of commodity; the more important question is what kinds of social relationships do artworks conceal or reveal? As labor is outsourced to locations that are geographically remote and thus, practically invisible to consumers, the ethics of our relations with objects becomes murkier than ever. Not only do most of us not understand where our stuff comes from, as Sekula sought to demonstrate, we are also mostly ignorant of how it got here. More than ever do commodities have secret inner lives and their fetishistic power seems unassailable. Yet as long as things are being exchanged, our relationships to objects remain a part of a larger web of real social relationships, as Marx pointed out, whether their cultural status is elevated or low.

An interest in tracing these relationships drives much contemporary realist and documentary art. Sometimes this interest manifests as a systematic, rigorous research, which lends structure and material to the final work; sometimes it entails a looser form of storytelling. Often, the two are mixed. And this is where I think critical realism might find wider application, as photography's traditional technical means of support and forms of presentation are being overrun with installation, new media and screen-based forms.

Hito Steyerl's film and video work, for example, functions in this hybrid manner, and her videos are often structured around a quest for information. In *Lovely Andrea* (2007), for example, she documents her search for an old photograph of herself made for a fetish magazine while she was a student in Tokyo. Because this genre of photography is so rigid in its conventions and so voluminous, it is hard to distinguish Steyerl's picture from the countless other, similar ones. Steyerl's film wanders around the rich cluster of themes this subject produces. Video documentation of her research trip to Japan is intercut with clips from Spiderman cartoons, Shirley and Company singing "Shame" and photos of Guantanamo Bay prisoners among other sundries, crafting an allusive montage that sometimes produces its own brand of humor. (When a Japanese bondage model is asked what she wants to study in school, she answers, "Web design.") But the seriousness of the themes comes out in other segments, where a

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100 "Buchloh thinks it's a sociological critique of minimal art. In fact, it's a celebration of Italian-American petit bourgeois" (Graham 2011, 9).

101 It was Graham's goal to work in a disposable format. He intended to avoid the mistake that Lichtenstein had made (in his opinion) of elevating popular material to the level of high art (Graham 2011, 11-12).

photographer admits to exploiting the models until they get sick of the abuse and quit, leaving their wages behind. At the end of the journey (and I won't give away the ending), Steyerl is being interviewed. The interlocutor says, "I still don't know what your film is about." In this, it is very much like Allan Sekula's photo-narratives, which can move convincingly from US naval power to a Japanese fish market to Frank Gehry within the confines of a single project (Phillips 2002), producing an elusive or distributed subject that exists only across objects, places or points in time, like joints without a body, or, a constellation. This is often experienced as jarring,<sup>102</sup> because it is particular, and the particular is almost always obscure.

What is Steyerl's film about? Superficially, it is about the disappearance of the body behind the infinite regress of images, but there is a way of looking at it that brings it closer to the critical realism I have been exploring in this dissertation. What dominates this film is its unstructured structure, the way it moves forwards, then sideways, linking Japan and Germany along the axis of the filmmaker's personal history, which then crosses broader economies of photography, sex, pop culture, censorship and translation in a montage of free-association. Although its subject is elusive, the connections resonate. In the clip featuring Shirley and Company singing "Shame on you!" a pixelated blur crosses the stage, as if masking the identity of an invisible ghost. This musical track plays again as Steyerl enters the enormous library of bondage magazine back issues, and the staff member who receives her and her film crew ask to have his identity hidden. Steyerl obliges, and staff appear only as pixelated ghosts, once again affirming the stubborn power of photography to stick to its referent despite the consolidation of digital technology. Interestingly, it is by agreeing to hide the man's identity that Steyerl gets permission to bring her cameras in at all, in a fascinating and high-stakes exchange, where one identity is obscured (the video librarian) so another may be accessed (Steyerl's old photo). In other words the transaction is enabled through a mutual recognition of the rights of both parties: the man's right to control his own image, to protect himself from shame or censure of others, and Steyerl's right to access her own image and to collect the pieces of her past.

In his review of *Lovely Andrea*, Pablo Lafuente claimed that "it is irrelevant whether Steyerl ever posed for the bondage photograph, or whether the image she ends up finding is hers" (Lafuente 2008), implying that the premise could do its job equally well either way. He also noted that one of the interviewees in the film<sup>103</sup> refers to it as a "mystery novel" suggesting that the premise may as well be fiction. While I would agree that the "mystery" here is used as a device, this does not mean documentary is equivalent to fiction, or that the question about the photograph's truth is irrelevant. Structurally, for the film to work, the device must convince the audience to invest psychologically in the outcome of Steyerl's quest, whatever

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102 Sekula's critics have often mentioned the complexity of his work and how it requires slow looking. One commentator even suggests that what might superficially be taken for a commentary on the complexity of mediation can eventually be seen as something deeper, and more intimate: "we experience a quiet pleasure. Almost a recognition. Rather than looking at images, we begin to sense a web of meanings. This web has a familiar texture. It does not just remind one of mediatized reality, but also of the unequal, complex formation of lived actuality" (Westphalen 2003).

103 Matsumoto Yutaka, editor at Sanwa Erotica.

the filmic genre, and this depends on the idea that there is a truth, however fragile, waiting to be discovered in the course of watching. Otherwise, the artist's motivations would make no sense. We believe that her need to encounter the past inspires her to fly to Japan, to dig through mountains of photographs and find her younger self. Lafuente appears to have confused a device with a mere device; here the question about the discovery of the photograph is central because it drives the entire film. Steyerl is clearly interested in how images shape our memories, especially those accumulated through exposure to popular culture, but she is also concerned with the way that historical traumas come to disturb the present. If there was no crime, why bother going through the motions of solving it? Retracing the past is one very important way we do this and we will not be satisfied unless certain things fall into place.

That said, it's true that Steyerl never explains what, exactly she will use the photograph for, or what it means to her (although she does say posing for it made her ashamed.) While it's true that there is no way of ascertaining whether this photograph is important to the real-life individual Hito Steyerl, the same is true about the intentions of any artist and are just about as relevant to the finished work of art and anyway, this importance is not the type that is at issue in Lafuente's claim. I am more struck by the fact that the "smoking gun" at the center of *Lovely Andrea* is no gun at all, but a photograph. Although there are many photographs of girls who look like her, Steyerl is not looking a picture that looks like hers, she is looking for hers, and the mission will not be complete until she finds it. When a Japanese rope master offers to tie her up and make a new picture, she declines. The conditions are clear: it must be a picture of her and of her past.

The quest is complicated by the fact that "Andrea" is the name Steyerl borrowed from her childhood friend, Andrea Wolf, who starred in Steyerl's first film and later died a martyr for Kurdish independence. (She was shot as a terrorist by the Turkish army in 1998.) In *November* (2004), Steyerl tells Wolf's story, once again intercutting original footage with found material and interviews. It is hardly a straightforward biography, however, and Steyerl shows as much interest in Wolf's image as she does in her actions and character. In many ways, this is the kind of film that we have come to associate with theories of the free-floating signifier, and Steyerl herself has been a key contributor to theories of this kind [Steyerl 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009]). Certainly there is no denying the powerful role mediation plays, both in *November* and in Steyerl's work generally, nevertheless, there is no warrant to conclude that fact and fiction have become utterly entangled, even when it is clear that the "smoking gun" will never be found. If we approach this work with critical realism in mind, what becomes clear is that reality is complex, and we may argue about it from various perspectives and for different reasons, but it is not "merely" constructed, arbitrary or relative.

From the perspective of critical realism, *November* actually hews closer to history than poststructural semiotic approaches could discern. In the opening sequence Steyerl's voice-over informs us that Wolf was her best friend and was later shot as a terrorist by the Turkish army. Over the grainy Super-8 reels of a young Andrea fighting bad guys with her girl gang, Steyerl's voiceover states, "This is my first film. This is me. This is Andrea." It is true that the

demonstrative pronoun "this" here refers to mere images, not to objects themselves but there is nothing unsettling or unusual in this deferral of presence; we refer to images—particularly photographs—like this all the time ("This is me at age five," "This is my brother with our dog"). In fact, Steyerl's performance of the family photo album ritual is so familiar, so natural, that were the names or the images of Steyerl and Wolf reversed we would experience a full-blown falsehood, to which we could respond, with confidence: no, that is not Wolf; that is Steyerl. Despite the semiotic layering, the powerful pointing gesture of predication ("this is") is the same mechanism that will later allow Steyerl to condemn the Turkish and German governments' version of events as "official state fiction" (they claim that Wolf's whereabouts are unknown). Moreover, although Steyerl self-reflexively questions her own role as the "concerned documentary filmmaker" in all of this as we have seen, there is no doubt that Wolf—and not someone else—was registered on film in 1983, and that she disappeared in 1998. Even at its most dense, the weave of signs that refer to other signs bottom out in the brutal fact of Wolf's continued absence. Official or not, fiction is still fiction and reality is something else.

To fully appreciate how complex reality can be, *November* and *Lovely Andrea* must be accompanied for consideration by a third film, *Abstract* (2012), in which Steyerl travels yet again, this time to the site where she believes Andrea was killed. Here again, the "pointing" this, inventories the features of both the cinematic syntax used to create the film ("This is a shot", "This is a countershot") and the site ("This is a beltscarf..." and "This is where my friend Andrea Wolf was killed in 1998.") The desire to know, the inability to simply give up and live with the images history has bequeathed to her, drives Steyerl to (re)visit sites of loss or trauma, so although the truth of Andrea's fate may never become fully clear, the question or problem of truth, or as I have been referring to it, the desire for the other, persists as a substructure for her work.

At the other end of the contemporary video spectrum are artists like Yael Bartana (b. 1970) and Omer Fast (b. 1972) who make scripted or semi-scripted narratives using high-definition RED cameras to craft fully cinematic experiences utterly foreign to Steyerl's "poor" images. Like Jeff Wall, Omer Fast invests in high production values and often grounds his films in incidents he has witnessed or researched.<sup>104</sup> In *The Casting* (2007) and *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* (2011) he develops scenarios from real interviews, which are then performed by actors. Despite all this, and contrary to what one may expect based on his press releases,<sup>105</sup> Fast has stated that he is not interested in the fact-fiction pair, but rather different kinds of dynamic complexity, for example, the kind created by presenting a story and the response to that story simultaneously (Fast 2012). He is, however, interested in what happens when

104 At least one critic also noted the iconographical similarity between the aftermath of the battle in Fast's digital film *Continuity* (2012) and Wall's *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* (1986) (Fraser 2013).

105 Typically, press releases sound like this one from the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University on *5000 Feet is the Best*: "First shown at the 2011 Venice Biennale, the film melds fact and fiction together to explore the shifting divisions between reality and representation, and truth and memory" (Rose Art Museum 2013).

we take the structure of images and begin to dismantle them and rearrange their parts, a process highlighted by structural works like his single-channel video *CNN Concatenated* (2002) and the two-channel video installation *Glendive Foley* (2000). This careful retooling of particular documentary and narrative conventions interrupts expectations about how they work, which allows Fast to investigate difficult themes like war, mourning and trauma, or, more precisely, odd but powerful thematic clusters like war-history-entertainment or colonization-storytelling-retro-futurism.

In *5000 Feet is the Best*, Fast poses as a journalist interviewing a drone pilot, who is played by an unnamed actor (the film runs on a loop so there are no credits).<sup>106</sup> The interview scene repeats three times, with variations, each time followed by an interview with a real drone pilot, whose face and voice have been distorted to protect his identity (much like the sex archive staff worker in Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea*). The actor, rather than telling Fast's journalist about his work, spins three dramatic tales, each with their own plot and cast of characters. As he tells these stories they are dramatized for us on screen like very short movies, with his voice-over guiding us through the plot of each.

*5000 Feet is the Best* is a complex work, both in the strategies of storytelling (combining dramatic reenactments and an interview) and the thematic material (drone strikes, mistaken identities). Both combine to locate this film in an uneasy space between representation and reality. But Fast takes seriously not only the semiotic issues, but the ethical and historical questions raised by his material, and I think it would be wrong to read his work as an argument of a Baudrillardian kind, that drones strikes have turned war into a large-scale and very expensive video game. The path from violent video games to military simulations is about as direct as the path from those simulations to drone strikes, which is to say both apparently direct and not. In an interview with a drone pilot, Fast learned that although the pilots sit in offices in Las Vegas, far from the scenes of destruction they cause, operators seem to exhibit PTSD symptoms (nightmares, for example) and struggle with the ethical implications of their actions, much as ground force soldiers do (Anonymous 2012, 111). Although nightmares are not "real" in the sense of being grounded in external mind-independent phenomena, they are also involuntary and have concrete physical consequences. When Fast's journalist begins the interview, he asks the drone pilot (that is, the actor playing him), "What is the difference between you and someone who sits in an airplane?" And the reply is, "There's no difference between us. We do the same job." Fast's project is not exclusively devoted to the perspective of the drone pilot; in fact one of the most remarkable sequences comes through an attempt to unsettle the dominant (American) perspective of its military interventions in the Middle East through unusual juxtapositions of image and language. The sequence appears in one of the stories told by the drone pilot, in his voice-over. We see a family leave their sunny suburban home in their hatchback, which is loaded as if for a camping trip. "They stop at all the usual checkpoints..." the voice-over tells us, and we see this event enacted: the father leans out the window to show armed, visibly Asian military guards some documents. This is jarring, but we recover and

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106 The actor is Denis O'Hare, who is credited on the Internet Movie Database (Denis O'Hare 2014).

grasp the reversal Fast has contrived: America, or at least this well-maintained, middle-class neighborhood is being occupied, under circumstances that are not explained. Has Chinese technological superiority surpassed America's sufficiently to enable its government to protect its foreign interests abroad, as the Americans have been used to doing? The unsettling idea is extended in the next scene, where the father slows for a truck and several men digging a hole at the side of the road. The voice-over refers to "men wearing traditional headdress" and "clothes more typical to tribes from further south": the camera lingers on a man's baseball cap and plaid shirt. Watching this the first time, I stumbled on this reversal, as I had with the reference to "check-points." The concept itself is simple, but for a North American audience, it feels wrong, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. There is little time to meditate on this however, and suddenly we see this scene shot from above in black and white, with Chinese characters alongside superimposed on what appears to be a surveillance feed from the sky. An enormous blast cuts through the sky and instantly carves a huge crater in the earth, destroying the men and their truck, and the family too.

The way Fast writes a language of foreignness over images of "us" is crude, even kitschy, but even on repeated viewings, I could feel my mind being stretched. The language of "tradition" and "tribes" calls attention to the way American English constructs Middle Eastern cultures as different, as geopolitical problems to be solved rather than as autonomous societies deserving of respect. I felt a moment of psychological rebellion at the application of a primitivist vocabulary to contemporary American figures, but that's exactly the point. If a part of dominating others means giving them names, then how do we feel about having the names we coined for others applied to us? Language suddenly appears highly interested, one-sided and narrow. It calls attention to everything it excludes: to other temporalities, other names that people call themselves, and above all, our own inability to hear or understand them, which inevitably leads to further conflicts. In the presence of the unequal geopolitical power represented by the drones, there is no way for others to communicate their own difference in a meaningful way, and so we construct difference for them. Although no Iraqi, Yemeni or Afghani people or places are depicted in this story, they are made *palpably* absent somehow, like spirits in the bodies of Americans in their baseball caps and haunting a landscape that looks like Southern California. In other words, Fast has permitted us to see that the language we use to describe others is our language, and that we know much less than military experts we would like us to think.

Significantly, Fast does this not by replacing familiar, clichéd images with more "accurate" representations of foreign peoples, but by combining language and images that are both obviously ours in a way that renders them foreign. It is only in their juxtaposition that they shock. I think it is here that Fast arrives at object-priority, by showing how impoverished our language and images of Middle Eastern cultures are. We believe we understand foreign peoples but, as Edward Said observed long ago, too often remain trapped in an echo chamber of our own ideas about ourselves. What makes Fast's sequence so remarkable is that the shock seems calculated less to cause offence than to spark curiosity (admitting that audience



reactions, except for those of professional critics, remain undocumented). Even in the crudeness of the premise or in the use of some heavy Hollywood conventions, Fast's work is never deliberately scandalous. He trips us up and we forgive, then find ourselves thanking him.

These problems of cultural communication are intensified as war drags on, drone strikes intensify and economies continue to globalize. "This epitomizes globalization," Fast said, of drone warfare. And echoing Sekula, he stressed the interconnection of its various technical and human parts: "Because it's not just a plane—it's the transmission of data, it's the satellites, it's the remote stations that are located just outside of Las Vegas, it's the people who drive there to work" (Fast 2012). There is also a thematic connection to *Fish Story* here, which also contains an uncanny image of a moving automaton. In 1992 Sekula and Dercon collaborated on the catalogue for Jean-Francois Chevrier's exhibition *Walker Evans / Dan Graham at Witte de With*. It opened in August, providing Sekula with an opportunity photograph in Rotterdam, one of Europe's busiest ports.<sup>107</sup> He photographed the ECT<sup>108</sup>/Sea-Land Terminal at Maasvlakte, a harbor and industrial area near the city. Sekula, in his mildly philosophical, observational style, wrote in his notebook, on August 31, 1992: "At ECT terminal in Rotterdam, a new, fully-automated container loading system is being tested. Designed by an engineer who just retired, having maintained good relations w/ unions." In September he returned, hitching a ride with a former lorry driver. "Uncanny," he observed, noting the "sinister quality of unmanned vehicles" (like drones on wheels). A picture from this visit appears in the first chapter of *Fish Story*. From a depressed perspective we see a robot truck pull magisterially around into the background against an utterly desolate, unending plane of grey brick. Not a single figure is visible: it is a vision of the shipping industry without labor (Sekula 1992).

This photograph is placed in the sequence next to a portrait of a woman identified as "Pancake," who sits on the ground by a hulking metal frame, scavenging copper in Los Angeles. The caption reports that she is a "former shipyard sandblaster." The rusted metal box beside her is oriented such that its old and broken body echoes the form of the intact, painted Sea-Land container being driven without a driver, suggesting her job has been evaporated by automation. Thus the optimistic and slightly heroic vision of automation suggested by the robot trucks has its flip-side in human consequences. Taken together, the pictures do not argue that Pancake has lost her livelihood because of the automation of the ECT/Sea-Land terminal, since that would be nonsensical. Instead, we must fill in the story ourselves. We can only guess at her exact circumstances. Containerization permits automation, which means lower shipping costs, which has permitted industry to move about globally, taking jobs with it to new locations. But it is precisely the unpredictable directions of these flows that gives the unusual juxtaposition of the two unrelated pictures its sense of truth. However much a situation seems to be certain and business is booming, it may very well disappear next year,

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107 The Port of Rotterdam throughput places it fourth, behind Antwerp, Hamburg and Novorossiysk. In 2012 it handled about 450 million metric tonnes of cargo (Port of Rotterdam 2012a, 2012b).

108 Europe Container Terminals. This company operates several ports in Europe. Its majority shareholder is Hutchison Cooperatief U.A., a subsidiary of Hutchinson Port Holdings Group (HPH), which manages ports in 26 countries on every continent. HPH is a subsidiary of the multinational conglomerate Hutchison Whampoa Limited (HWL) (ECT, n. d.).

lured by some complex combination of factors that make up the supply chain. Like Sekula, who eventually did go on to make a film version of *Fish Story* (*The Forgotten Space*), Fast offers stories as pieces or clues, to be assembled by viewers. The facts, in their exact detail, may be uncertain, but the consequences are undeniably real.

*The rest of Oliver's dissertation, including sections 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 of the Introduction, is available through the University of Pittsburgh.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has taken longer than we thought. There was the frustrating search for material as many things weren't archived and Alex erased much of her own writing to our consternation. (Kudos to the way back machine.) Thankfully, many others helped us and contributed their own thoughts about Alex and her influence in Pittsburgh. We would like to acknowledge David Bernabo and Adam Shuck from *The Glassblock*, Inga Meier, and Meghan Stone from *Pittsburgh Articulate* because they forwarded material to us; Cindy Lisica and Barbara McCloskey for contributing short comments on how Alex affected their worlds, galleries and younger artists from Cindy and academia and teaching from Barbara. Andrew Balfour, who photographed Alex over several years, generously allowed us to reproduce several images that show her spirit and beauty. Leah Mackin who designed this book with care and respect. We could never have taken on this project without the support of her family and close friends. They appreciated our dedication without ever pressuring us to proceed more quickly because, we believe, they understood that our grief made it difficult to work faster and because we wanted this book to be a testament to our friend and colleague.

Finally, we are happy that we decided to step up to ensure that Alex has a legacy; it is something she deserves, and we hope that it extends into the future by adding provocative ideas about contemporary art and a sense of a specific period in our city's cultural history.

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