

Studies in Decay



fig. 1



fig. 2

Laura Piasta

Raymond Boisjoly, Jordy Hamilton, Laura Piasta: Studies in Decay

"Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill."¹

This exhibition represents an effort to reconcile two ways of thinking about what it might mean to make politically engaged works of art. The first issues from the writing of Walter Benjamin, who held that decay is an inherent aspect of our being in the world, and that this process has been complicated and accelerated by the advent of modernity. The artists in this exhibition have strived, like Benjamin, to find new ways to affirm the transformative potential immanent in modern experience while calling attention to its frequently disastrous outcomes.

The second is indebted to Nicolas Bourriaud, a theorist who has sought to account for the tendency in contemporary art towards more dispersed forms—a phenomenon that he sees as encompassing not only the spatially scattered installations of artists such as Jason Rhoades, but the temporally fleeting actions of Rirkrit Tiravanija.² Recently, Bourriaud has ascribed these qualities to a realist impulse, but a realism less concerned with particular stylistic effects (as in the realist novel) or naturalistic depiction (as in Courbet), than with formally conveying the increasingly fragmented nature of experience in modernity.³

It is in relation to a broader sense of decay, then, that I propose to consider the works in this exhibition. While each piece manifests the look of decay, figured either as ghoulish dripping, a cataclysmic expulsion of destructive energy, or an organic process, they also call up a more metaphysical sense of the process in question. In light of Benjamin's conception of decay as an inherent aspect of reality (that is, our experience of being in the world), and following the spirit if not the letter of Bourriaud's argument, I would here like to propose that the attention paid to decay in works such as these might usefully expand our understanding of the possibilities for realism in visual art.

§

Similar to Benjamin's dialectical image—a technology for organizing experience that can seize upon the tensions between the past and the future and display them for our contemplation in the present—the realist approach of the works in this exhibition is to pose questions that reveal the contradictions inherent in modern experience while refusing to artificially resolve them.⁴

Raymond Boisjoly is a Vancouver-based artist whose recent series of work, collectively titled *The Writing Lesson* (2011), highlights an historical asymmetry in power relations. Devised in response to the spate of overtly racist reactions to the suggested renaming of Vancouver's Stanley Park to *Ḷwáýxway* (after the Squamish village that once occupied that site), Boisjoly's project folds political critique into a rigorous formal exploration by way of an analogy to black metal music. Black metal, a subgenre of heavy metal that originated in Norway, became notorious in the early

An anecdote about naming and language

In the summer of 2010, an idea was circulated in the press that concerned the suggested renaming of Stanley Park in recognition of the Squamish village once located within the present boundaries of the popular tourist destination. With the heightened awareness of Canada's Aboriginal peoples visualized by the spectacle of that winter's Olympic games, the suggestion seemed appropriate and long overdue—long overdue as *Ḷwáýxway* was settled an estimated 3000 years ago while Lord Stanley, then Governor General of Canada, dedicated the park in 1889. Acknowledging Lord Stanley's status as the Governor General seems particularly important as it allows the process of naming to appear strange, absurd, an historical contingency since Lord Lansdowne was the Governor General of Canada until 1888—the year Stanley Park was officially opened and a year before Lord Stanley would arrive to dedicate the park. Another example, perhaps clearer for its strangeness: the colonial-era name of the archipelago now known as Haida Gwaii was the Queen Charlotte Islands which was named after a ship named after a queen.

The reaction from the public to the suggested renaming of the park and to the name *Ḷwáýxway* itself was mixed though mostly negative. The comments contained many reflections on language, naming, and Aboriginal cultures (and it should be noted that comments rarely concerned the Squamish people and their culture instead opting for a generalized, and apparently popular, image of an abstracted and singular Aboriginal culture lacking any internal differentiation). Common topics included the apparently Scottish name of the hereditary Squamish chief associated with the suggestion: Chief Ian Campbell, the discussion of the absence of the written word among Canada's Aboriginal peoples to frame the name as a political fiction (as if naming a civic park in honor of the nation's current Governor General was a politically innocent gesture), and

aesthetic judgments concerning the sound of the name *Ḷwáýxway* and of Aboriginal languages generally. The name *Ḷwáýxway*, along with the name of Spuzzum, an unincorporated settlement beyond Hope, was deemed offensive to ears accustomed to the English language while Haida Gwaii and the Salish Sea (a recently named entity encompassing the Strait of Georgia, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Puget Sound), were found to be pleasant and acceptable. One remark that is difficult to forget sums up the situation all too well. berk1952 writes, "The name being proposed by native groups is ridiculous and impossible for most people to remember or pronounce." This comment is revealing as it questions the ability of most people to comprehend, or even say, the word *Ḷwáýxway* while ignoring the important fact that there are currently only 15 people that are highly proficient speakers of the Squamish language. It is not a matter of "remembering" the word, it is a matter of learning it and speaking it so that it may be relearned and written for those who come after.

—Raymond Boisjoly

This text was first published on digitalnatives.co by Other Sights for Artists' Projects as part of the Digital Natives project

1990s for its anti-Christian lyrics and the implication of some of its adherents in a series of church burnings. Using the familiar visual conventions of dripping, thorny embellishments and what he calls "forced symmetry" from black metal band wordmarks, Boisjoly has created a series of logos for indigenous place names such as Chilliwack, Masset and Nanaimo. The variation of this project in the present exhibition features a vinyl cut-out of Boisjoly's logo for Spuzzum, an unincorporated settlement north of Hope, BC, applied to a 9x12' tarp.

Like the wordmarks to which they refer, Boisjoly's decrepit tangles of letters often border on illegibility. Paradoxically, it is at this point of precariousness that the work's disparate trajectories of signification converge. For this is where the work most strongly evokes a sense of processes held in suspension; of translation, of naming, of colonization, and ultimately of representation.

Vancouver-based artist Jordy Hamilton's *Freedom Machine* (2011) is a collection of appropriated images comprised of a large-scale video projection and a series of 4x6" inch photographic prints. It is tempting to read this work as a parable of moral enervation, especially in light of the reactions, both in the media and from the public at large, to the bubbling-over of violent excess expressed by Vancouver's recent hockey riot.⁵ Hamilton's images record several instances of an event held at the artist's family home near Niagara, Ontario, in conjunction with the Welland County Motorcycle Club barbecue and skeet shooting competition in the early 1990s. Each year, following the contest, the assembled picnickers would take aim at a beat up old motorcycle, propped in a field with its motor running, and, when the engine failed, shoot it until it burst into flames.

The photographs are fading colour prints that sequentially depict a motorcycle catching fire; the video is a digital transfer from cassette of the same process that reveals the degraded image quality of the Video8 original. Transplanted into the pristine whiteness of the gallery, a gesture that often carries the potential for condensation, even the work's run-down appearance might be seen to reflect the excesses of its subject matter. But such readings are complicated by the artist's own implicit role in the activities he represents—it is his family's event after all. That he did not take the pictures himself suggests a range of other possible positions, including a more deeply embedded participation than that of the disinterested ethnographer. The destructive impulses that Hamilton represents are, in this sense, posited as an open question, and invite viewers to consider them for their beauty as much as for their frightening intensity.

Laura Piasta is a Vancouver-born artist currently based in Umeå, Sweden. Her sculpture, *Crystallized Lee Jean Jacket* (2011), consists of a vintage denim jacket, hardened from having been soaked in saltwater and left to dry, a process that covers the fabric with a delicate crystalline patterning.⁶ The jean jacket's signifying power has been diluted considerably in recent years; the subversive connotations it once held for the mid-twentieth century counterculture are now a vestige of the past. Similarly, although the sculpture's slumping shape takes on a pathetic anthropomorphism, the body it might clothe remains elusive.

Indeed, given the conspicuous absence of the narrative agent par excellence, the human figure, Piasta's work resists being interpreted in terms of narrative. Impressions of monumentality or atemporality, however, are similarly belied in that the jacket itself has been overrun by the cycle of organic growth and decay. That this work's very shape might be understood as a refutation of selectively spatial or temporal modes of interpretation underscores the realist artwork's determination to manifest an adequately complex understanding of the intersections between experience and history.



fig. 3

This poster commemorates the exhibition *Raymond Boisjoly, Jordy Hamilton, Laura Piasta: Studies in Decay* at Or Gallery, Vancouver, from October 29 – December 10, 2011.

Jonah Gray extends his thanks to the artists, Or Gallery, Scott Watson, Sacha Hurley, Diane Evans, Chris Gaudet, Helga Pakasaar, Bronwen Wilson, John O'Brian, Gareth James, Annette Wood, Naomi Sawada, his fellow students at the UBC AHVA department, and special thanks to Fabiola Carranza, Francis Carranza-Gray, and Janet and Steve Gray.

This exhibition was made possible through support from the Killy Foundation and the Audain Endowment for Curatorial Studies through the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory in collaboration with the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at The University of British Columbia.



fig. 4

fig. 1: Annika Rixen and Laura Piasta, *The Invisible College: Hat Box with Mirrors and Crystallized Lee's Jean Jacket*, 2010. Detail.

fig. 2: Raymond Boisjoly, *The Writing Lesson: Spuzzum*, 2011, courtesy of the artist and Republic Gallery.

fig. 3 & verso: Jordy Hamilton, *Freedom Machine*, 2011. Details.

fig. 4: Logo of black metal band Mayhem.

OCTOBER 29 to
DECEMBER 10, 2011

Jordy Hamilton

Raymond Boisjoly