

MONIKA SZEWCZYK

# OPEN LETTER, DECEMBER 2007

Dear all,

I wish I could write this letter from the future, given that an "imminence" brings us together with the expectation that the times ahead will be expanded somehow and maybe better even, though they remain uncertain for the time being and in need of consideration. Instead, I write from Brussels. From this distant vantage point, where I have found myself after so many formative years in Vancouver, aspects of work being made in Terminal City (or for it, as some of you are also away) may have come into clearer focus. Consider these notes and questions as an attempt to get close to the things in your work that I think will matter when we all look back in years to come.

*To begin with, the question of faith...*

I have often spoken with a friend (who, amongst other things, writes art criticism in Vancouver) about making an exhibition to address the *zeitgeist*, which we would call *A Show of Faith*. Related exhibitions seemed to mushroom mid-decade, particularly in Europe, beginning with *Emotion Eins* (Emotion First) (curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen at Frankfurter Kunstverein in 2004) and *Reason/Emotion* (curated by Isabel Carlos for the Biennale of Sydney in 2004) and followed by *Emotion Pictures* (curated by Dieter Roelstraete at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp in 2005) and *Stage of Life—Rhetorics of Emotion* (organized by the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in 2006). To this list one might add the touring exhibitions *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era* (organized by Tate Liverpool in 2005) and *Romantic Conceptualism* (curated by Jorg Heiser in 2007 and theorized by Heiser, Jan Verwoert, and others in the accompanying catalogue) as well as the touring presentation of Polish amateur films in 2005 and 2006 by Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, which was pointedly titled *Enthusiasm*.<sup>1</sup>

In various ways, all of these projects presented art as an attempt to express the forces that move us, but cannot be rationalized, or (as one exhibition brief dictates) to encapsulate experiences "of love and isolation, of mourning, melancholy, and happiness, of age and youth, longing and fulfillment, illusion, confusion, and despair."<sup>2</sup> One could also add to this shift into emotive concerns in art and exhibition making the touring show and reader *Populism* (co-curated by Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, and Schafhausen in 2005), which delved into art that addressed the (perhaps related) developments in politics reflected in an intensifying communalism and more oblique manipulations of emotional bonding within political rhetoric. And currently, a year-long investigation titled *Concerning the Post-Secular* (organized by Maria Hlavajova at Basis voor Actuele Kunst in collaboration with the University of Utrecht) has begun to delve into the renewed role of religion in contemporary politics and aesthetics. But none of these exhibitions have combined or brought out the tensions between the current investment in the "emotional" and a re-evaluation of religious feelings as *A Show of Faith* would.<sup>3</sup>

Two of our protagonists would have to be Althea Thauberger and Kevin Schmidt—Althea, because you not only delve into cringe-inducing coming-of-age *emotions* (particularly in *Songstress* of 2004), but also because you tackle the unsolved questions of contemporary religious yearning, drawing it out of the communal culture of tree planters in the film *Northern* (2005), or from new, aspiring, immigrant communities in *The Decarie Devotional Choir* (2005), not to mention the teenage girls mourning the death of a dog in *A Memory Lasts Forever* (2004), where God is spoken to through song. We've started speaking about the

opportunities to tackle this question of a nebulous but potent (or potent *because* nebulous) notion of the “post-secular” in your work. In your (emphatically) collaborative projects, I also see space to consider whether the act of orchestrating the displays of heightened communion, ecstasy, and such strong spiritual emotions should also be read as an attempt by the artist to play God—to position herself at the centre of a social experiment and see how the participants and various audiences, including the jaded art audience, handle the sincerity on display. Judy Radul has written about two sides of experimentalism: on the one hand, the freedom of working through certain difficult-to-swallow behaviours and, on the other hand, the cold-observant voyeurism (the “let’s see how they’ll behave” side of experimentalism that is often found on reality TV).<sup>4</sup> And I know this is often the question around your work, though not only yours.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is the sincerity—the absence of knowing winks or any other escape latch for the mounting passions—that makes your work so difficult to consume.

In Kevin’s case, a Biblical scene from the Old Testament pushes similar buttons, albeit instead of communalism we encounter a communion with unreified nature. The recent high-definition video, *Burning Bush* (2006), is a weirdly homely (due to the use of miniature silk torches to effect endless fire), yet hypnotic reconstruction of the Biblical myth in British Columbia’s arid outback. A little bush stands burning for hours, long enough to exhaust the “knowing detachment” that the revelation of the artifice of the burning effect might imbue in a viewer. Indeed, the video lasts longer than the opening hours of the average gallery and therefore cannot be seen in its entirety. *Nec tamen consumebatur* (yet it was not

consumed): this is a motto for the Church of Scotland, which is accompanied by an emblem of the burning bush. But could this not also serve as a motto, an ideal even, for the contemporary artwork? What would it mean in today’s hyper art market to stick to such a motto? It seems that for you, Kevin, the key task is to confront the question as a cultural symptom within a culture understood to have a contradictory relationship to the idea of Nature as at once the unattainable (and therefore an almost biblically revered antithesis of contemporary life) but also (and increasingly with the elimination of viable counter-ideologies) omnipresent, uncontrollable, and the undeniable “force” behind the globalized market.<sup>6</sup>

Once again aiming to actualize these contradictions, you are on a quest cinematographically to represent the Northern Lights in White Horse alongside a “rock concert style light show.” The messianic sounding early name for the project, *Angel of Light*, recalls a Christian rock song that is to be played to the winter winds and that you used to listen to as a teenager. But here the Angel of Light is Satan, at once the object of criticism and of certain devotion (the entire song is about him).<sup>7</sup> In an e-mail to me, you explained the song as “a denouncement of all the temptations of the city and materialism as things that look appealing but in the end are not. like satan, the angel of light. all but mentioned is rock and roll—the very vehicle of the song.”<sup>8</sup> I cannot help but recognize in this condition of *immersion* the fundamental problem for our generation. The song you selected is a symptom of this position wherein the object and the vehicle of critique are one and the same thing. I don’t suppose you see this condition as restricted to teenage evangelism.

Corin Sworn, Switzerland 1972,  
2005, graphite on paper. Courtesy of  
ZieherSmith Gallery, New York

*Measures of distance...*<sup>9</sup>

A broader question arises here. Are notions of criticism as ironic distancing giving way to positions that are consciously implicated, immersed, or otherwise imbedded in the object of said critique? Whether we invoke capitalism, globalization, or, more abstractly, Jacques Derrida's sense of there being "nothing outside the text," an inevitable sense of *immersion* in a single system is being fostered. And this has been in effect since at least 1989, when the official opposition (in the form of Soviet-sponsored International Communism) collapsed (and Communist China began to emerge as the most capitalist state of them all).<sup>10</sup> But as one of its side effects, the fall of Communism seems to have produced a rich rethinking of critical tools, particularly in the guise of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) is a revelation in this respect. She considers another angel: *The Angel of History*, as painted by Paul Klee and then described by Walter Benjamin,<sup>11</sup> who is poised between past and future, showing the way to historical rethinking that does not privilege a teleology of progress, but a "dialectic at a standstill." Within this stasis, aberrant modernities, or what Boym calls "a hybrid tradition of impure modernity" can brew.<sup>12</sup> As her somewhat paradoxical title implies, at the heart of this concept of nostalgia—a yearning for the past thought in relation to the future—is a transformation of the traditional term, which is rooted in the Greek *nostos* (return, homecoming) and *algia* (pain). Moving beyond this impossible pain, a reconsideration of the flow of time may be perceived, which defies both the inevitability of progress and the inevitability of certain ideological closures (the waning of the search for utopia[s] for instance).



Reading Boym put me in mind of your work, Corin, which always makes me nostalgic, but in a way that also divulges the critical potential of seemingly impossible returns. Because your research revolves around children—the non-subjects of any society, though increasingly the most consumed, fetishized, and otherwise projected upon members of western culture—it is perhaps doubly timely to consider them alongside nostalgia. Is childhood not *the* horizon for nostalgics? But you also test the (im)possibility of return in a broader historical sense, as in your partial (re)construction of an adventure playground at the Or Gallery in 2006—itself a dual echo of *The Model for a Qualitative Society*, a project organized by Palle Nielsen in 1968 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and the experimental Summerhill School established by A. S. Neill in 1921 in Hellerau, a suburb of Dresden. The rather chaotic results of your experiment made the phrase "a hybrid tradition of impure modernity" sound polite. But as you always stressed, what may have seemed like a fantastic mess—an anarchic ideal—was in fact full of rules. Freedom and control: another dialectic at a standstill.

And then there are your ongoing drawings, involving meticulous renditions and sometime isolations of existing photographic sources showing children at play in the 1960s and 1970s. There is also newer sculptural tinkering with Tinkertoys, which have been around since 1914 and constitute a kind of second life of abstraction, even before the Constructivists gained force. Both of these forms tend to look impossibly innocent, which is part of the appeal of the work. It triggers the desire for a simpler time. But, considering how the drawings and the sculpture are made, I always associated them with a process of sitting and thinking (and of rendering images more tactile in this fast digitalizing world). However, I have to consider it differently, having read your e-mail:

Interesting that you mention drawing as a type of thinking. I think of it also as a form of not thinking. Freud mentioned negative hallucinations once—where you don't see something that is there. Drawing can be a bit like this as one is so close to the laying down of marks that the overall disappears... A disappearing into rather than a view from above.<sup>13</sup>

Here again is a kind of search for a stance that allows for more than the sober eye can see and that is in close proximity to—even immersed in—the object of scrutiny ("A disappearing into rather than a view from above") that eschews critical *distance* in order to find something unthought or inconceivable. Are artists exploring nostalgia, romance, and enthusiasm because they have deemed distancing hypocritical? Or, have they simply decided that, after so many years of deconstruction, some reconstruction is in order?

Partly hoping to find some answers to this perceived shift in critical attitudes, I began reading Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). And, while he does not exactly advocate the romantic turn, Sloterdijk does express the shortcomings of the cynics, ironists, and misanthropes of his day (at the dawn of an earlier Republican age):

Modern mass cynics lose their individual sting and refrain from the risk of letting themselves be put on display. They have long since ceased to expose themselves as eccentrics to the attention and mockery of others. The person with the clear, "evil gaze" has disappeared into the crowd; anonymity now becomes the domain for cynical deviation. Modern cynics are integrated, asocial characters who, on the score of subliminal illusionlessness, are a match for any hippie. They do not see their clear, evil gaze as a personal defect or an amoral quirk that needs to be privately justified. Instinctively, they no longer understand their way of existing as something that has to do with being evil, but as participation in a collective, realistically attuned way of seeing things.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of this sociable, integrated, and therefore neutralized cynicism—the dullness of which may have also given deconstruction and negative dialectics a bad name—Sloterdijk sets up a search for a better cynicism, one based on a "radical nakedness." This search for naked truth feels somewhat dated, but the attitude—and perhaps *because of* its anachronism—retains some force. On the one hand, we have artwork as fan-culture (with its esoteric knowledge and palpable enthusiasms) and the renewed interest in romantic, psychedelic, or downright mystical positions, wherein



Isabelle Pauwels, *Unfurnished Apartment for Rent*, 2003, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Milutin Gubash

a common ground may be perceived—that of evading the cold shower of irony. On the other hand, cynicism, irony, and other forms of distancing—if not always from the market, then from its seemingly neutralized antecedents—remain perceptible in artistic practice.

Now, I imagine that when reading of reconstruction, many Vancouverites will think of real estate. I can almost hear Isabelle Pauwels cracking a joke about this. The epic reconstructive efforts around the old Woodward's building, for instance, have prompted you to pen a script (titled *The Embellishers*) that seems to cut against the grain of the type of "faith-full" positions that I have described above. Instead, it is full of tough

talk, acerbic wit, Brechtian *Verfremdung* effects, moments of high sarcasm—the latter, particularly, surrounding the naming of the new Woodward's development as "An Intellectual Property"—and, yes, a kind of raw, uncomfortable, naked truth. We could call it bringing the "real" out of real estate. This new video work (in progress as I write) follows in the footsteps of what, to me, was the most economical stroke of irony in your practice, namely, *Unfurnished Apartment for Rent* (2003), the book/script in several acts wherein various poor people cannibalize the walls of their rental apartments to construct the furniture they cannot afford. Of course, the truly ironic twist came with the fact that the scripts were presented on tables that were themselves made out of the cannibalized walls of the Contemporary Art Gallery, not un-coincidentally I am sure, a cultural site made possible by the condominium development upstairs.

I also recall another publication project, this one made jointly by Tim Lee and Mark Soo, which consists of a thick book with many empty pages. There is something about such thick books that makes me pay attention, as if I were in the presence of a manifesto (a rare thing these days). And your joint imperative was rather terse: *THINK FAST HIPPIES*. The text only appears when one flips through the book to check if it is indeed one big blank. It is spread across two middle pages in a crisp modern sans-serif font, slanted for extra speed. Titled with too much pomp, *Modern Optical Experiments in Topography: Univers Ultra Light Oblique* (1968) (2006) may be considered as a one-off gag, an exercise of high irony in an all too sincere world. But it also speaks (I think) of a genuine conversation between artists and friends about the question of *how to think*. Should one reject hippie romanticism as slow-minded and behind

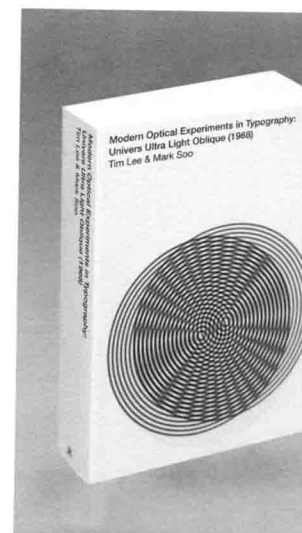
the times? An interesting aspect to your oppositional stance is that you point negatively to a set of values that seem to be motivating artists anew, including perhaps Althea and Kevin's work. I wonder what you think of each other's positions.

Before I leave the optical experiment behind, it should be noted that the choice of font emphatically asserts not only an anti-hippie stance, but also the position of artists as historians. It harkens back to the year—1968—a moment both of climax and utter dissolution within (also hippie) oppositional politics and the year after the Summer of Love. It may be said that if the protracted exercises of deconstruction from the 1970s onwards undid many historical canons, they also opened up a space for artists to become historians. And since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there is a stronger sense that at least half of the history of the twentieth century (in reunified Europe) remains untold or forgotten. The notion of making art as a form of historical research and as a positioning of the artist-as-historian is not, perhaps, a generational anomaly, but it does seem to have taken on a more varied and prevalent role in recent practice.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Regarding the hippies...*

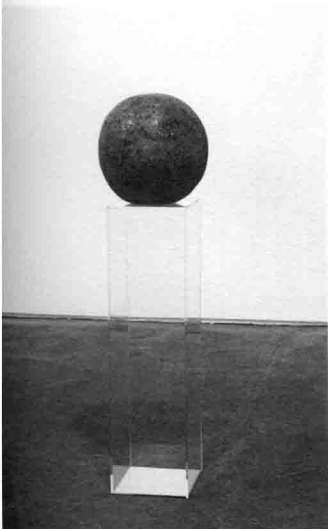
In the history of rebellion, hippies continue to be a divisive figment. One of the most interesting strands of what may be termed a "pro-hippie stance" appears close to home (but is not featured in the current exhibition). It is positioned resolutely towards a rethinking of material culture (which also develops the earlier question of consumption) and inflects the notion of the artist as historian with archeology. Here I would include the work of Gareth Moore (the

sculptor/self-styled pilgrim or hippie journeyman, who attends to and cultivates rustic objects of use and narrative depth), Kara Uzelman (whose archeology of her own backyard aligns with an entire paradigm of art making that worries about the disposability of commodities), Kerri Reid (who reconfigures mass-produced, forgotten, one-in-a-million objects),<sup>16</sup> and Arabella Campbell (because painting emerges less as picture-making than as the meticulous crafting of *things* and the marking of site in her practice). One could also mention the work of a slightly older generation that includes artists such as Brian Jungen, Geoffrey Farmer, and Damian Moppett in Vancouver, as well as Carol Bove, Mark Dion, Simon Startling, and Gabriel Kuri. (Even though the hippie factor within this earlier generation is less perceptible, Dion is an important early advocate of the archeological enterprise in art.) There are also exhibitions, such as the upcoming fifth edition of the Berlin Biennial, which sets up humanism, use-value, and "the thing" as leitmotifs, and *Unmonumental: The Object in the Twentieth-First Century*, the inaugural exhibition at the new site of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. But it is perhaps more important to consider the exhibition closer to home, *Thrown: Influences and Intentions of West Coast Ceramics* (curated by Lee Plested and Scott Watson with Charmian Johnson in 2004 at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery), which displayed some seven hundred wares of a crucial subset of the West Coast counter-culture. The exhibition brought to the fore materialism, holistic values, the dialogue of Eastern and Western morals and aesthetics, and transcended most of the clichés that might be leveled at hippie culture.



Tim Lee and Mark Soo, *Modern Optical Experiments in Typography: Univers Ultra Light Oblique* (1968), 2006. Published by ECI Press and JRP Ringier





Mark Soo and Elizabeth Zvonar, *Perfect Sphere/Negative Thoughts*, 2007, concrete, Plexiglass, mirror. Courtesy of Cohan and Leslie, New York

Even as I write of Tim and Mark's counter-hippie taunt, I think of another, much more elaborate, collaboration by Mark and Elizabeth Zvonar: *Yo Yo Yo Ga Ga Ga* (2007). Titled with maximum exponential vibes, this project struck a thoroughly ambivalent chord with regards to this ultimate hippie pastime. The sculptural objects and photographic work forged within the framework of your collaboration could be understood both as artistic *asanas* and a protracted test of negative dialectics. Consider *Perfect Sphere/Negative Thoughts* (2007), which is indeed a perfect stone sphere, positioned at head-height on a transparent plinth, with negative space in the shape of a head removed from its bottom. An ambivalence attends this work with regards to the potential of art to create conditions for losing one's head. Are all the hippie teachings and Eastern wisdoms able to deliver us to new consciousness? Or, do they constitute a total brainwashing? The work manages not to answer these questions or stake a clear position. I suspected there was some discord between your attitudes, which you confirmed.

There are similarly two minds in operation in Mark's continual return to drugs as a catalyst for his art making: from getting high to construct an airplane, through building an installation with a photograph of a sublime sunset lit (and thereby de-saturated) by street lights used to prevent addicts from seeing their veins when they shoot up, to the most recent time-lapse video of a rotating growing pot-plant, which will be shown on a television monitor flipped on its side and rotating in reverse for ultimate delirium. While your work gestures towards an embrace of the psychedelic, it also contains a sober hermeticism within. You (and Tim) seem to cultivate the sense of the artwork as a rigorously thought through and

full-proof rational system. And this is perhaps what ultimately repels the hippie vibes, in favour of a split and accelerated intellect.

Another ambivalence about the hippies pervades Alex Morrison's work, especially *Is Freedom Academic?* (2007). Your recent exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery had a satirical emblem of 1960s revolt at its centre—*Proposal for a New Monument at Freedom Square* (2007)—in the form of a fired-up, turtle necked, and bearded hippie with cartoonish proportions out of unfired clay. There is a lot to be skeptical about in the iconography of hippie rebellion; its potency often seems greatest in the corporate realm. The branding of the broader object of your scrutiny—Simon Fraser University's fortieth anniversary—under the slogan "Radical by design" resonates most clearly with the Woodward's boosterism of "An Intellectual Property." Unlike the placard-wielding hippie, the logic of corporations is not oppositional. Rather, they elevate to conquer: radicality can be tamed by design and intellect can be bought. In the same way, the Hollywood film *Battle in Seattle* (2007) turns a stand-off against globalization into a Hollywood blockbuster; its most radical claim might be the outsourcing of Hollywood production to Vancouver, which the Gubernator has sought to squash.

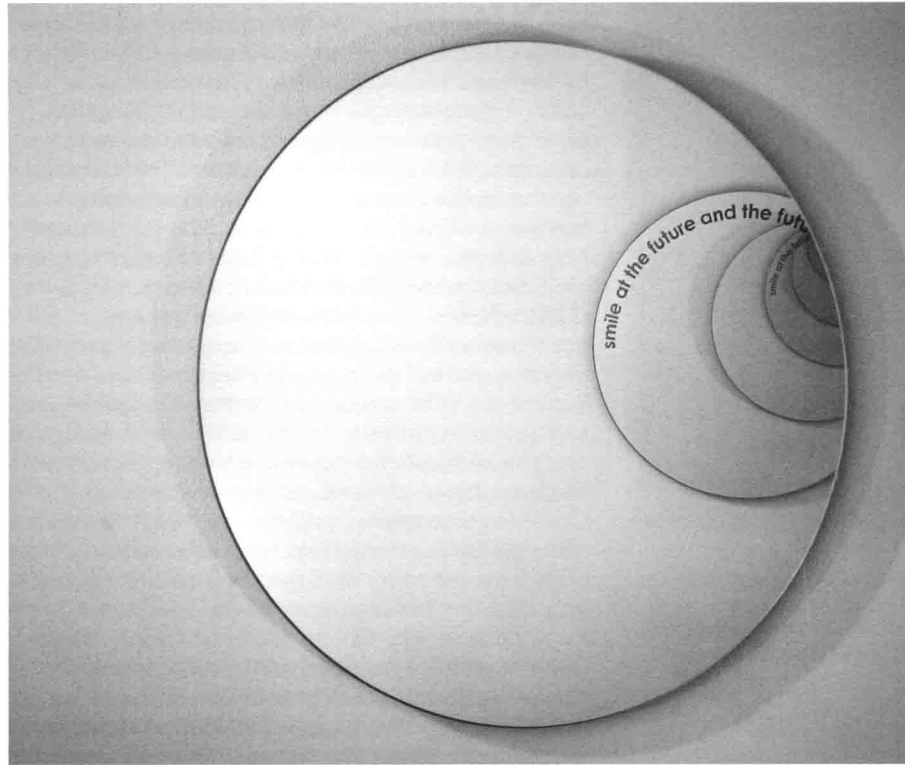
I remember having a latte at the bottom of Homer Street in Gastown in the early spring of 2006, seeing the stand-off between wool-clad hippies and gas-squirting cops rehearsed ad nauseam a few blocks above, feeling myself squirm with unease about my own position in all of this, but also enjoying the spectacle of the passionate masses shrouded in a romantic mist. Only later did I find out that you were

also around, making the act of observing all this into an artwork. And I wonder about your sneaking behind the set to film the production. Is the punk gesture of this, or of wrecking a house,<sup>17</sup> a paradoxical construction of distance (from the faith in such actions) *via immersion* (in their spectacularization)? This feel for the “inside job” is also evident in your e-mail about *Picture for a Glass Tower (New Dawn Rising)* (2007), which is a large triangular canvas gesturing towards a Lawren Harris-like transcendental abstraction and the Devil:

the painting is meant to look more like a relic... something that you would un-earth, dusty and worn from some institutional collection. you often find these sorts of paintings in out of the way halls of universities...framed in plexiglas cases, etc., usually seriously neglected and forgotten. i imagined this painting as something for the lobby of a new condo in vancouver. abstractionist, transcendentalist. empty, oppressive.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to consider how contemporary art is often made to look like a relic, something that is out of step with its own time.

I was also curious about *Picture for a Glass Tower (New Dawn Rising)*, in part because of its surface proximity to some of Elizabeth’s work. But I detect another kind of question—perhaps more sympathetic to the power of positive vibes—in her evocations of transcendence through the iconography of mirrors and rainbows. When I first saw them, Elizabeth, I didn’t know what to do with your pair of round mirrors, positioned as they were to face each other and thus create the effect of infinite regress, with the über-corny phrase etched in one mirror backwards so that it could be read in



the other: *smile at the future and the future smiles back*. I wasn’t sure which was more problematic, the futurism or the smiles. If the critical enterprise in art has often been associated with history-writing—be this a deconstruction of grand narratives, a reassessment of pop lore(s), or a recuperation of the lost and esoteric chronicles of various counter-cultures—concerns for the future in art making have seemed retrograde, if not non-existent, until very recently. In your case, especially

Elizabeth Zvonar, *Surrender to Perfection*, 2005, sandblasted mirror.  
Collection of Marlee Ross & Joost





Alex Morrison, *Proposal for a New Monument at Freedom Square, 2007*, modelling clay and wood. Courtesy of Patricia Jeffries Gallery

with *Surrender to Peace* (2005) and *Pelly's Mission 2982* (2006), there is still the sense that a former future is at stake, so it is perhaps not a question of a zero sum game (between future and past), but (as with the question of nostalgia) another realignment of *chronos*.

And it is your monumental sculpture of an oversized stone hand, which makes for the most complicated time warp. Will the two fingers of the behemoth you are having carved be broken off as in the maquette you showed me? With two fingers broken off, the attempt at gesturing is also aborted, recalling Giorgio Agamben's insight that "by the end of the nineteenth century the Western bourgeoisie had already lost its gestures once and for all."<sup>19</sup> Come to think of it, even with fingers on, the gesture will remain unclear—the intent could be to form a hippie peace sign or to "stick two fingers up at" something or someone (maybe *chronos* itself). Anachronisms abound in this work: sculpted out of stone—a substance out of step with human time that will outlast us all—yours is a sculpture that resuscitates the pre-World War II faith in figuration that we seem to have outlasted. In hearing you describe the project, I thought of George Taylor (played by Charlton Heston) at the very end of *Planet of the Apes* (a film released in that fateful year of 1968). When he comes upon the Statue of Liberty, blown up and buried in sand, Taylor realizes that what he thought was another planet is really Earth in an apocalyptic future. Never has the Statue of Liberty looked more like an artwork. But it is not exactly your work, because I see more than the apocalypse here.<sup>20</sup>

*Signs of the times...*

Futurism, which seemed much maligned within postmodernist discourse (largely because it was

associated with the even more-maligned progressive, utopian, and teleological mindsets of modernism), seems to be invigorating literary, critical, artistic, and curatorial circles anew.<sup>21</sup> In part, *Exponential Future* marks this shift. Apart from Elizabeth, we can also note Tim projecting more emphatically beyond tomorrow with *The Pink Panther* suite of works that similarly make use of facing mirrors for the effect of infinite regress. The usual historical dating in your work, Tim, shifts forward in *Untitled I* and *Untitled II*, as they are both subtitled (*Pink Panther, 2092*) (2007). In *Untitled (The Pink Panther, 2049)*<sup>22</sup> you present yourself in three absurdly grainy photographs, taking self-portraits with a whacky lens contraption that, as I've noted previously,<sup>23</sup> speaks of your broader aim at an altered vision (seeing through several contradictory lenses at once and so maybe also exponentially). I had not thought about it, but the photographic blur is also a trope in Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée*, which used blurry photographic stills to evoke a blurry sense of chronology. In the case of your work, however, the lyricism is replaced with an incitement to laugh (and to squint). It should not, though, be mistaken for anything like a smile at the future.

If "[the] late twentieth century [rode] on a wave of negative futurism," as Sloterdijk observed, I now begin to wonder if this tide is about to be reversed or if it is going to turn into a whirlpool.<sup>24</sup> In the end, this is the horizon of Elizabeth's mirror work, which perhaps seemed strange because I was fully imbibed with that late twentieth century spirit. Yet, having fully entered the early twenty-first century, we may begin to sense and forge another futurism. It would have to be as far from being positive as it is from being negative. In this dialectic at a standstill, there is something at

stake that cannot be named, though saying this does not preclude conversation. (This is, after all, what the dialect is about.) Rushing to name it produces platitudes, like the sound bites of “change” in the US presidential primaries.<sup>25</sup> Failing to consider it further turns the dialectic into paralysis. So how can this conversation be sustained? Scott, Juan: perhaps this is also your driving question in the exhibition...

Until we speak again,  
Monika

#### Notes

1. In an introductory conversation between the artists and Anthony Spira, Cummings and Lewandowska reflect on the shift in title from an earlier presentation of the archive titled *Entuzjasci/Enthusiasts* at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw (26 June to 29 August 2004): “As we re-think and re-present the films, the phenomenon of enthusiasm has become an important concept. Enthusiasm is the motivating force that enables all kinds of exchanges. We are using the films to trace a trajectory of enthusiasm, which seems to have been drained from the spaces of art, culture, free time, sport, and self-organization to become thoroughly instrumentalized; enthusiasm has replaced labour as a resource for contemporary capital.” See Neil Cummings, Marysia Lewandowska, and Anthony Spira, “From Enthusiasm to Creative Commons,” in *Enthusiasm: Films of Love, Longing, and Labour* (London/Berlin/Barcelona: Whitechapel Art Gallery/KW Institute for Contemporary Art/Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2005), 23.

2. Quoted description from the exhibition brief found on the German Pavilion 2007 website, [http://www.deutscher-pavillon.org/english/schaffhausen\\_exhibition006.htm](http://www.deutscher-pavillon.org/english/schaffhausen_exhibition006.htm) (accessed 28 December 2007).

3. The show might also address how the rhetoric of faith in the Bush Administration has capitalized on a broader critique of irony and cynicism. But we should try to be careful not to equate this rhetoric with George W. Bush, since many non-right wing positions that encompass non-rational forces—from psychedelia to the aforementioned enthusiasm—exhibit elements of faith, in that they strive to demarcate unquantifiable forces that move us. I, too, tried to inch towards this dialogue in the 2004 exhibition *I love you, I love you, I love you*, *I love you* with Hadley Howes and Maxwell Stephens at 69

Pender in Vancouver and the exhibition catalogue *Paint: A Psychedelic Primer*, which accompanied *PAINT* (curated by Neil Campbell at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2006). Campbell and I had a fascinating conversation about energy fields and other “unmentionables” of the rational stance when I tried to contend with his light work, *BASE/MACHINE*, installed on the Georgia Street façade of the Vancouver Art Gallery in the fall of 2005.

4. See Judy Radul, “Just Try It: Thoughts on Art and Science Experiments,” *Public*, no. 25 (2002): 92-105. This was a special issue on experimentalism edited by Susan Lord and Gary Kibbins.

5. Polish artist Artur Zmijewski’s *Oni* (They) garnered similar questions. The work was created for last year’s documenta 12 and involved an experiment with four opposing social groups brought together to make painted banners and to comment on each other’s creations (in ways that finally deteriorated into destruction and some violence).

6. The problem of distinguishing what the market deems to be “natural” has plagued theorists and economists, notably Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and David Ricardo.

7. I should also mention *Satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas* (curated by Reid Shier at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 2003), which featured works by Althea, Kevin, and Alex. Here, despite the Antichrist reference, the religious aspect of the work was not yet evident and the exhibition focused more on the influence of rock music and works “whose creative methods ‘show’ violence, implicate danger, or threaten retribution.” See the online press release, <http://www.contemporaryartgallery.ca/exh/exh.SatanOscillate.html> (accessed 28 December 2007). However, a screening of Dan Graham’s video, *Rock My Religion* (1982-84), definitely contributed to my thinking about *A Show of Faith*.

8. Kevin Schmidt, e-mail to author, 14 November 2007.

9. Here I will readily admit that the question of distance, not so much in terms of geographical distance, but rather in terms of the proximity I have towards most of you—as a friend as much as a “critic”—has transformed this task of writing into a kind of meta-exercise in/ reflection on critical distance. Thankfully, endnotes are a great tool for expressing this position, when I am “of two minds at once.”

10. This is not to discount the self-appointed counterforce of Al-Qaida, which presents itself as a religious/moral rather than an economic/social opposition. But as far as artists are concerned, Islamist militancy has hardly emerged as a viable oppositional stance. What this newly recognized oppositional force has thrown into relief, however, is the increased visibility of a religious (Judeo-Christian) inflection of certain existing economic systems.

11. “His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of

events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angel of History* is quoted in Svetlana Boym, "The Angel of History: Nostalgia and Modernity," in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 29.

12. Ibid.

13. Corin Sworn, e-mail to the author, 7 November 2007.

14. See Peter Sloterdijk, "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness," in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minnesota, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 4-5; originally published in German by Suhrkamp Verlag in 1983. Reading Sloterdijk feels necessary since my move to Brussels. Though he is barely mentioned in North America, here in Europe he is (along with Jürgen Habermas) heir to Theodor Adorno, who has been particularly important in Vancouver.

15. See Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 140-72. Another notable figure (closer to home) who acts as a historian would be Stan Douglas. His recent retrospective exhibition at the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart and the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in the fall of 2007 was titled with an eye to his role as unsettling historian: *Past Imperfect: Works, 1986-2007*.

16. *Working Back*, an exhibition organized by Jesse Birch in 2007 for the Belkin Satellite in Vancouver, pointed to this common concern between Uzelman, Moore, and Reid.

17. I am referring to *Housewrecker* (2002), a five-channel video installation at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver.

18. Alex Morrison, e-mail to the author, 26 November 2007.

19. See Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49.

20. The giant body fragment also evokes unspecified scenes of Victorian dandies posing by the monumental feet of antique Roman statues, unable to penetrate the "mind" of ancient civilizations, but enthralled by their proximity to the antiquity as a stance of time travel.

21. We can consider the futurist setting of otherwise "realist" contemporary novelists like Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2006) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), which bring to the fore the allegorical function of futurist settings. Fredric Jameson's recent book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) may also be seen as building the *zeitgeist*. The same could be said for recent curated projects, such as *Again for Tomorrow* (organized by the Royal College of Art Galleries in 2006), *Archaeologies of the Future* (curated by Peio Aguirre at the Sala Reklade in Bilbao in 2007), and *Die Planung/A Terv* (The Planning) (a

three-issue publication produced by Sandra Bartoli, Martin Conrads, Silvan Linden, Levente Polyák, and Katarina Ševi in 2007). The latter is billed as "a publication for the utilization of the future, now," with each issue carrying a different date from the future: 2011, 2036, and 2048. As I have hinted in the text, this futurist turn may be seen in part as an extension of the past decade's development of the artist as a historian and, in part, as a recognition that the wholesale rejection of futurism (with the postmodern turn) has curbed the political potential of art, or at least the dialectical sense of history it sustained within (certain branches of) modernism.

22. *Untitled (The Pink Panther, 2049)* is a related work from 2007, which is currently on exhibit at the Presentation House Gallery.

23. See my "Reflections on/Refractions from the Art of Tim Lee," in *Remakes, Variations (1741-2049), Tim Lee: Works (2001-08)* (Vancouver/Calgary: Presentation House Gallery/Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008), 9-31.

24. Sloterdijk, 2005, 12.

25. In my sometime visits to online news in Vancouver, I also find that some journalists have already rushed to sum up this show, which is weeks from opening.

This essay was written before some of the works in *Exponential Future* were completed, and refers to them in their earlier states.