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THE POETICS OF BAD HISTORY

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History, as a form of knowledge, has been recently catalyzed despite the prediction of its untimely closure. But, in order to construct an “end of history” (as Francis Fukuyama announced in his predictive text of 1989), history has to be conceived of as a series of progressions leading to wholeness. Today, the imagined endpoint of such a directional history is liberal democracy, “the final form of human government,” as Fukuyama calls it; history has arrived at a perfect form of capitalism through both economic determinism (which gives us global capital) and a drive for recognition (which evolved into liberal democracy).

This thesis of history is a dramatic symptom of the *temporal* thinking of our neoliberal moment: history is not a catastrophic piling up of wreckage caught in the backward gaze of the angel of history, but rather the timely development or “intelligent design” of the hand of the market, freed by philosophy from the necessity of human actors or collective interventions. With the end of history, the appearance of the future (or what Ernst Bloch called “the utopian horizon to come”) is blocked by the construction of a continuous present or absolute present.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, this linear model of history, while laying claim to the present, has served to make the past a contested terrain. Even the President of the United States now feels the press of the past and has taken to reading historical biographies to pick a figure that can be used to help *recognize* him in his present predicament. The obvious analogy is with Nixon (Vietnam, low polls, Cheney), but George W. Bush favours Churchill (war on fascism, statesman, war leader).<sup>2</sup>

But this historical turn is part of a larger project that is constructive of both the past and the present, and not simply an intensification of pulling the past into a renewed relationship with the present. History as a form of knowledge is being refigured and contested. In fact, the poetics of history as a form of knowledge — which “attempts to define

the mode of truth to which such knowledge is devoted” (Rancière 8) — has fallen into two paradigms that are not in contradiction, but which can be toggled on and off, both serving the inevitability of the present. One tendency is a narrativization of a linear history that leads to the absolute present; the other is a similar model, but which has events and figures that are narrativized moments of stasis (events and people caught in time) that can be brought forward as eternal fixed ideas.<sup>3</sup> Both of these models lose the push and pull of history, or, in another language, lose the dialectical aspect of history because they deny the bad side of history.

Marx deploys the concept of the bad side of history in *The Poverty of Philosophy* to complicate Proudhon’s concept that the good side of history, which moves to advance the ideal of equality, evolves until economic contradictions end (118). For Marx, however, “It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle” (121). As Étienne Balibar describes it, “history advances by the bad side, the side the theory had not foreseen, the side which challenges its representation of necessity and, ultimately, challenges the certainty...that history does indeed *advance*...” (97). Without this bad side of history — the events, people, and coalitions that were unforeseen by the theory of history — there is no movement and a stasis or “the end of history” is built. Does this not parallel the form of stasis we find ourselves in, politically, today? The bad side of history (even in the form of economic contradictions) is routinely denied — the good side of history is continually held up as the engine of the eventual outcome, the equality to come. Timeless and delusional ideals such as “We will be greeted as liberators!”, “The global economic playing field will level poverty”, and “Liberal democracy is our universal desire!” all push aside the bad side of history and its unpredictable outcomes. The bad side of history does not *lead* to a bad outcome — “for it precisely has the function of showing...that the rational

end of historical development...is sufficiently powerful to *come about through its opposite*" (Balibar 98) — and we know that the present has not been formed by the good side of history advancing equality.

The denial of this bad side of history opens up a space within cultural engagements of history as a form of knowledge. For decades, artists, poets, and critics, have been reentering the historical archive, but today this refiguring is different than the recovery of suppressed histories, and instead seeks to create new or unexpected combinations of history that include the bad side, that ignite a more dialectical view of history. This tendency is striated through many of Sam Durant's projects. By linking, via its location, Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* to the murder of protesting students by National Guardsman on the Kent State campus (a narrativized moment of bad history that was instrumental in organizing opposition to the state's policies on the Vietnam War), the bad side of history is brought into a horizontal axis of associations that leads, via Neil Young, to Kurt Cobain's futile death (another moment, but one which advances a myth of the individual).<sup>4</sup> In *Inversion, Proposal for the Five Dollar Bill* (Huey Newton, *Founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense*), a drawing of Huey is above an inverted drawing of Abe Lincoln: a linking of the president who "ended slavery" and the radical figure who pointed to slavery's continued legacy. This a monetary monument in some aspects, proposed for the US five-dollar bill, but it is also an *insertion* of Huey and the history of the Black Panthers into official US history as the classic bad history whose goal was not an idealist equality but a material equality. Likewise, Durant's *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.* conceptually and spatially brings the bad side of history and official history together in order to represent "the role of violence in the formation of the United States and to raise questions about the function of monuments

and memorials in that equation" (Durant). In this case, the formation of the nation is troubled by history as a form of knowledge that must narrativize a founding history of the nation based on equality while simultaneously burying the real destruction and inequality in its founding, a founding more properly based on creative destruction.

In *Scenes From the Pilgrim Story, Natural History*, Durant takes a moment of historical stasis as the material to recirculate. Durant was able to obtain figures from the Plymouth National Wax Museum as it was being closed: the figures formed a natural history display of the establishment of Pilgrim settlements. The particular figures in Durant's exhibition are from the Merry Mount exhibition, a display in the museum that portrayed the free community headed by Thomas Morton, a community that was to live in concord with the Algonquins who had given them the land for their colony. This utopian project came down at the hands of the Puritans (or "those precise seperatists, that lived at new Plimmouth." as Morton describes them in the poem and narrative from his *New English Canaan* (1637) that commemorates and corrects the history of the May Day celebration of 1628 that ultimately turned the Puritans on Merry Mount). The canonical American author Nathaniel Hawthorne has also produced a work that commemorates this radical social project: Hawthorne's short text, "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" sets up a utopian image of nature and light conquered by the dystopian grimness of the Puritan's unpleasurable toil and shadow-laden darkness. Durant's project, on the other hand, disassembles the frozen historical moment of the wax museum and reorganizes the pieces into sculptural platforms and photographic tableaus that inscribe a different semiotics into the poetics of history than the one built up by the national myth-building project of the Plymouth National Wax Museum. And the clunky and battered wax figures and the historical reconstruction of the official Pilgrim time are the

perfect figures of a narrative moment frozen as historical stasis. And despite stepping outside of the chronological framework of the majority of Durant's projects, this recent work aligns with Durant's sculptural aesthetics: as he commented in an interview, "Formally my sculptures tend to be somewhere between models, props, and sculptures...." But models and props (including the infrastructure of the original display with reel to reel tapes and speaker boxes) turn a light to how the good side of history is narrated, which is also to turn a light toward the moment that we are living through, a use of history that denies both the materiality of history and the dialectical aspect of history: "We're making progress...Stay the course," all wartime denials of the *bad side* of history.

Durant's Merry Mount project breaks the narrative instantiation of the history of Plymouth Rock and the pilgrims and launches these graspable national moments back into a historical dialectic. In order to break the stasis of the foundational historical narrative, Durant treats each figure — now compellingly incomplete, missing their museum context, props, or legs, feet, and body — as a sign freed of its referent. This allows new comical, pathetic, or provocative assemblages of the partial figures: a pilgrim with a yoke carrying two wooden buckets, but with his red stockings ending in feet that are anything but "anatomically correct"; a "male colonist" also with curiously hoof-like endings to his legs and no head, just the fixture which would have fixed the wax head; an Indian figure on his knees, perhaps working but missing the tools from the original display so he appears to be prostrating himself before some invisible force; a colonist, in a striped shirt, menacingly holding a piece of milled wood; a colonist head, lying carefully on its side beside a parallel barrel and an upright barrel; a colonist head, a pilgrim shoe, and a museum speaker box floating in a curious museological conundrum; and the torso and head of a Indian woman,

her head turned plaintively, but missing one forearm and the wax-skin covering of her upper arms, with her 1970s-style fantasy breasts exposed to link "the Indian" with an earthier bodily connection, the perfect completion of the fully covered and alienated pilgrims.

These figures are historically charged merely through their representation of a foundational narrative of the nation, but they become even more so devoid of their context and restaged as broken objects that hover in our current time. As Durant's *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.* asserts, the history of whites and Indians is still part of the undone business of the nation and, on a larger scale, the tragic recurring business of capital: the dispossession that begins America is replayed across the globe in various scales today. These floating figures are both the frozen moment of a particular history — and its use — and the reminder of how the bad side of history is still one engine of the present.

Yet to make such a link between the past and the present is to at least partially accept that history *naturally* creates such a linkage, but as I have been pointing out, this linkage is always, at best, partial and is always ideological, for history as a form of knowledge can not move through time as easily as these figures appear to, landing in our present battered but recognizable. *Scenes From the Pilgrim Story*, Natural History disassembles the poetics of history, not just by showing it to be a construction (materially and metaphorically played out by the figures and props in their careful arrangements) but also by making a movement from an artistic practice with an archival impulse to an artistic practice that enters into the poetics of history.<sup>5</sup> Here we have less of a return of the repressed and more of an investigation into the missing future — a future displaced by the continuous present, the end of history, and a static history that is having trouble upholding its myths.

## NOTES

1. I'm referring to two powerful formations of the present here. One from Gertrude Stein, whose "continuous present" sought to overcome the temporality of reading and move to an avant-garde plane of temporally unlocked signifiers in a field. And secondly Lenin's "absolute present" that has become itself a field of interpretation in the various recuperations/reuses of Lenin. For a good overview on the Lenin debate, see Michael Marder, "On Lenin's Usability" in *Rethinking Marxism* 19/1 (January 2007).

2. The biography of Churchill that Bush read is *Troublesome Young Men: The Rebels Who Brought Churchill to Power and Helped Save England* by Lynne Olson. Yet even Olson has written in an op-ed that a comparison of Bush and Churchill is historically improbable. In Churchill's place she proposes Neville Chamberlain — in terms of his lack of experience of international diplomacy and tendency to unilateralism — as Bush's parallel. See "Why Winston Wouldn't Stand for W," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2007.

3. In this second tendency, I'm merging Marx's critique of Proudhon's confusion of contradiction for the dialectic and Gayatri Spivak's critique of Marx's model of history in relation to India and the "Asiatic Mode of Production" where, she charges, he "runs the risk of restoration of the same hierarchy — philosophy (science) on top, being 'applied' to history (matter or hyle) — dialectical as well as historical materialism" (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, 90). But, on a more everyday level, I do think this is part of how the present feels strange beyond contradiction, beyond classic formations of alienation.

4. For the structuralists in the house, see Mary Leclère's application of Jakobson's vertical and horizontal axis to Durant's associational work in "Speaking of Others," *Afterall* 10.

5. For an elaboration on the current archival impulse in visual practices, see Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22.

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