

BRUCE GRENVILLE

ENTANGLED FORM: RON TERADA'S JACK PAINTINGS

RON TERADA

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When I first arrived at CalArts, John [Baldessari] said I had to drop my “fuck you” attitude. I knew what he meant by that. In different ways, I’ve had a lot of dealers and collectors tell me the same thing. They would tell me to hobnob more, show up at openings, to be more social. I was told that it would hurt me if I didn’t sharpen my social skills, so I tried to rise to the occasion but it was never enough; I couldn’t satisfy them. I’m a loner and that has allowed me to maneuver more easily, to cross over into different groups, but also to become isolated.

— Jack Goldstein

I visited Ron Terada in his studio shortly before the first group of Jack paintings was to be shipped off for exhibition in Britain. It was a surprise, not only to see him painting again, but also to see that his paintings were based on text excerpted from the recently published book *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia*. It was an uncanny moment, in part because there in the studio, without the apparatus of the gallery to neutralize them, those words seemed to come directly from Terada himself. It was a voice filled with bitterness and resentment, but tinged with a certain resignation and melancholic air that comes with hindsight. It was marvellously confusing and disconcerting to encounter this voice again, but now in Vancouver, in Ron Terada’s studio, written on a painting leaning against a wall.

I'd heard about the plans for the publication of the Goldstein book a few years earlier; Brian Butler at 1301PE in Los Angeles had mentioned it because we both shared an interest in Goldstein's art and had worked with him at different points in his life. I'd known Jack Goldstein in the late 1980s and early 90s when he had shown in Toronto at S.L. Simpson Gallery and a couple of years later when I organized the first survey exhibition of his work. Although it was an outstanding exhibition, it had been a very sad period of Goldstein's life and I wasn't really interested in returning to that time and had purposefully avoided acquiring a copy of the book.

To read these words within the context of Terada's paintings was surprisingly unsettling. At the time I wondered about the propinquity of Terada's appropriation, was it too personal, too close to home? Certainly Terada had consciously rejected an affinity with the dominant, photo-conceptual discourse in the Vancouver community, but did he really believe, like Goldstein, that he'd suffered because of that rejection? Or was this another of his carefully crafted jokes, a self-deprecating gesture to ward off the critics and cognoscenti who might question his return to painting? More than anything I sensed an uncalculated vulnerability in his decision to work with Goldstein's text and wondered how it would be received here in Vancouver, and elsewhere.

The next time I saw some of the *Jack* paintings was at Catriona Jeffries. These were different from the ones I had seen in Terada's studio; they utilized texts drawn from other chapters of the Goldstein book, but all with the same persistent voice. They too present a white text against a black ground (though technically they have a white ground with a black overcoat, the white text is revealed when the vinyl stencils are peeled away). The paintings were hung in small groupings, each group a complete

chapter from the book: Chapter One: '*Chouinard and the Los Angeles Art Scene in the Late Sixties*' and Chapter Four: '*Early Days at CalArts*'.

These are comparatively sanguine texts describing Goldstein's arrival at the Chouinard Art Institute in the late 1960s, his interaction with fellow students such as Bas Jan Ader, Bill Leavitt or Allen Ruppersberg, and his subsequent entry into graduate studies in the year that Chouinard closed its doors and reopened as the newly formed CalArts. Among the most telling quotes is Goldstein's understated note: "Between 1966 and 1970, I was introduced at Chouinard to the complexities of the artworld and to the artists who would become my friends and competitors." Those 'complexities' would become the greatest point of contention for Goldstein as he struggled to find a way to balance his ambition and his ethics in the New York art world of the 1970s and 80s.

While Terada's career may bear some passing resemblance to that of Goldstein's, it would be unfortunate to suggest that Terada is imitating or emulating him, or engaged in some sort of appropriation of Goldstein's personality and art. Terada's *Jack* series isn't a critical representation of Goldstein and his practice, but it does raise interesting questions about his identification with Goldstein and the parallels between their perception of the art world, their practices and their shared conception of art.

Much has been written on Terada's appropriation of existing forms and materials, his adaptation of signage, various media and genres. He effortlessly adapts complex forms and inhabits them seamlessly. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Jack* paintings. Here Terada offers a simple narrative: a chapter — whole and unedited — from a book written by an artist who describes the trajectory of

his career. The paintings are reduced to their most basic form, a figure and ground that allows for an unimpeded apprehension of the text. The typeface is *Souvenir*; the scale is large enough to read at a comfortable standing distance. Compare this, for example, to Allen Ruppersberg's 1974 transcription of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and one is immediately aware of the struggle to apprehend Ruppersberg's dense, cursive script, while Terada withdraws his hand leaving only a clear and poignant voice. Many first time viewers, I imagine, would easily attribute the authorship of the text to Terada himself.

While such a strategy is common to the methodology of appropriation, it nonetheless seems to lack a compatible intent. Appropriation is traditionally an aggressive act, a counter-narrative intent on destroying the credibility of the original. It is most often a theft, a confusion and a belittling gesture. Similarly it would be difficult to argue that Terada's strategy is a form of inhabitation, a kind of parasitic, guest/host relationship, which is also a form of appropriation but slightly more benign and more ironic than aggressive. Instead I am inclined to argue that Terada's strategy, here and in many of his other works, is one of entanglement.

Entanglement is a delightful and multivalent word; it carries with it a sense of unexpected encounter and outcome. A line of meaning and intent may be drawn between the Goldstein text and Terada's painting but any attempt to trace its path becomes twisted and messy. Other lines of narrative may be drawn through the work (including our own), but these too become entangled. Like a parasite we are cast into a symbiotic, interdependent guest/host relationship, but now the nominal identification of guest and host is blurred or perhaps even irrelevant. Entanglement involves delays, it slows down comprehension and causes instability. It creates ambiguity and confuses

the singularity of authorship. An entangled subject slips and shifts, its source or point of origin quickly disappears and its endpoint is equally obscured. While often the successful outcome of strategic appropriation involves a reversal of the dominant position, entanglement would seem to offer no such option. Indeed, there is no reversal of positions within entanglement.

Terada has employed this entangled subject in much of his earlier work. His *Catalogue* exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2003 is an exemplary instance of entanglement. The exhibition offered an ethical conundrum that can only be represented within the model of entanglement. Artist, gallery, sponsor, writer, publisher, viewer: all are entangled in a complex network of interaction and engagement. In a gesture worthy of Hans Haacke or Mark Lombardi, Terada laid bare the apparatus of the art community, but unlike Lombardi or Haacke, Terada places himself squarely at the centre of this entangled mess. He doesn't claim a position of critical distance from his subject, but rather provides us with an opportunity to consider the complexity of his and our investment within the world of art and the mutual constitution or entanglement that is necessary to bring that world into existence. Artistic autonomy and criticality are revealed, like the dream of universal humanism and autonomous subjects, as absurd ideals.

Likewise Terada's *Entering City of Vancouver* (2002) is a fine example of entangled form. When shown in Vancouver it is a delightful anomaly, a misplaced sign, a conundrum; but when shown elsewhere it also speaks to a sense of locatedness that is shifting and subjective. It references a perceived community of artists and begs the question of Terada's belonging and not belonging to that community. It displaces the viewer and invites them to consider their own belonging and not belonging to

their own community.

This entangled form is carried forward once again in Terada's *Voight Kampff* exhibition in 2008 where questions of origins, authenticity, idealism, and immutability are cast aside and an entangled subject is offered up for consideration. The exhibition's title and the images of the Caucasian geisha, in video and photographs, purposefully reference the film *Blade Runner* and specifically a series of questions posed by the interrogator who intends to identify the replicant. Like Ridley Scott and Philip K. Dick, Terada invites us to consider the human/not-human conundrum and the artifice of this distinction, but now in the context of his own Japanese identity and ambivalence toward the limitations of the critical discourse surrounding cultural difference. Here mutuality replaces individuality and entanglement replaces stable identity.

The design of Terada's catalogue for his recent exhibition 'Who I Think I Am', offers the most persistent image of the entangled form. This extraordinary publication provides a formidable extension of the narrative of the *Jack* paintings, connecting them to an even broader network of artists, museums, designers, writers and publishers. Each of Terada's catalogue pages has been skillfully lifted from an existing catalogue or book produced for one of the many artists or publishers — On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Venturi and Brown, Dan Graham, etc. — consistently referenced in Terada's work. The original catalogue pages have been photographed or scanned, the text and image excised and replaced with Terada's text and image. The result is a wildly disorienting narrative, at once comprehensible and linear, but constantly subject to unexpected moments of slippage when an asynchronous reference to another artist or exhibition is recognized. I had my own uncanny moment in recognizing the idiosyncratic design of the Mendel Art Gallery catalogue

Jack Goldstein that I produced in 1992, now recast as the opening page of Tom McDonough's essay on Terada's Jack paintings.

Admittedly entanglement is a term most likely to be found in a discussion of quantum physics and may therefore seem to be an odd way to describe the relationship between Ron Terada and Jack Goldstein as manifest in Terada's Jack paintings. But it is a superb concept that was, in its early usage, intended to describe a fundamental problem within contemporary physics, the problem that Alfred Einstein derisively described as "spooky action at a distance," a kind of connectedness between separated particles that shouldn't exist, but does. And more recently it has been reconfigured by Bruno Latour in his thinking about the actor-network and the relationship between humans, things and concepts. In the context of Terada's work entanglement allows for the description of a set of relations that encompass a whole system that is not limited to human-to-human interaction, but also allowing for interaction between humans, animals and things, and humans, systems and concepts across space and time, in ways that are unexpected and unanticipated and even

unknown, until they are brought forward for consideration.

For Terada the *Jack* paintings offer an exemplary instance of entanglement, one which ‘explains’ the linkage between Terada and Goldstein in ways that avoid the reductive models of appropriation and inhabitation and opens the work up to a broader range of connections. Within this entangled form we aren’t obliged to believe or disbelieve Goldstein’s narrative of the emergence of the Pictures Generation and his ambiguous position within that community. Nor are we constrained by Terada’s sense of belonging or not belonging to the Vancouver community. We can, it is true, trace a line between the two artists, but any attempt to follow that line is subject to delays, slippages and shifts that defer resolution and instead offer unanticipated connections and complexity. We’re witness to a multitude of things and concepts at work — individuals, institutions, businesses, collectors, dealers, artists, teachers, lovers, friends and dogs. Within this context Terada’s *Jack* paintings become a eulogy, an homage, a cautionary tale, a retrospective gesture, a self-critical analysis, a critique and a rejection: a densely entangled form contained within the work called ‘Jack’.