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art
beyond
ART



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K.A. LETTS draws on the insights of Marshall McLuhan to make sense of new media art in Detroit.

ANN SINFIELD reviews exhibitions commemorating the fifty-year anniversary of "OBJECTS: USA"

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New Art Examiner

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WANTED: WRITERS

The ***New Art Examiner*** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

EDITORIAL POLICY

As the *New Art Examiner* has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The *New Art Examiner* does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary is welcome. The *New Art Examiner* has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the *New Art Examiner* is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

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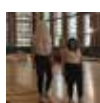
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Introduction

How do specific media and practitioners ascend to the status of Fine Art and Fine Artists? In short, how does art become capital-A Art?

Our theme, “art beyond ART,” was inspired by our discovery that the Art Institute of Chicago’s serious institutional recognition of photography does not date back very far. In fact, one of its photography collection’s early champions, David Travis, is still an active photographer here in Chicago. We wanted to examine how photography, performance art, intuitive/outsider art, new media art, and other innovative forms have gained (or are gaining) recognition by universities, museums, and other powerful institutions.

We begin with a conversation between photographer David Travis and Rebecca Memoli. Travis talks about how the Art Institute’s photography department took shape as well as his own recent output. Art historian Kelli Wood is next with a polemical essay about the evolution of video games and their presentation in museum settings. She argues that false, ideologically motivated dichotomies between art and technology have distorted our perception of video games as art objects with independent aesthetic value.

Complementary articles from Noa/h Fields and Phillip Barcio take on Chicago’s fertile performance art scene. Fields reflects on the condition of performance art in the city, noting a “backwards-glanced turn” toward past summits of achievement. Barcio introduces us to John Thomure, a young performance artist who discovered the work of the late Lawrence Steger while browsing the stacks at the

Logan Square Branch of the Chicago Public Library. Thomure uncovers the grassroots history of that form in Chicago while attempting to complete Steger’s unfinished ninth piece.

Photographer Lauren Whitney documents the House of Tomorrow in Beverly Shores, Indiana. Built for the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, this historic structure, which was the United States’ first glass house, has fallen into disrepair. Our editor-in-chief, Michel Ségard, reviews EXPO Chicago.

Our Detroit correspondent, K.A. Letts, analyzes street art and avant-garde digital work with the help of Marshall McLuhan’s media theories. In southeastern Wisconsin, Ann Sinfield reviews several shows at the Racine Art Museum that focus on the seminal 1969 “OBJECTS: USA” show, which helped put craft media on the map.

Emelia Lehmann, meanwhile, considers an exhibition honoring the legacy of outsider/intuitive visual artist and punk rocker Wesley Willis. She also speaks with T. Paul Young, the Illinois Institute of Technology architecture prof (and former cigar gofer to Mies van der Rohe) who mentored a young Willis. Finally, Evan Carter reviews Wrightwood 659’s show of Tetsuya Ishida’s surrealistic paintings. While he sees much to critique in Ishida’s approach, Ishida’s early death by suicide leaves him and us to wonder how the artist could have pushed past his own limits if he had stuck around a few more years.

New art must go beyond what went before. We hope this issue helps point the way for artists seeking to overcome any strictures they may currently face.

The Editors

A Conversation About Shadows: An Interview with David Travis

by Rebecca Memoli

As the former curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, David Travis has been at the forefront of each shift in photography since 1973. He retired in 2008 and began teaching at Columbia College. These days, if you wake up early enough, you can find Travis photographing joggers and swimmers along the lakeshore near Promontory Point in Hyde Park.

I met with Travis at Café Jumping Bean in Pilsen to talk about photography, museums, and shadows.

Rebecca Memoli: I would first like to talk about the work you are making now.

David Travis: I've always photographed. Although, when I was a curator, I only photographed incidentally. I wasn't trying to have shows and compete with the really great photographers. John Szarkowski [director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 1962-1991] photographed and published before his time at the museum began, but he didn't have shows [during his tenure at MoMA]. After he retired and had time to photograph, he had an exhibition and a catalogue. I was from a generation where the curators of photography had been photographers. So, it wasn't strange to me.

RM: Your current work strikes me as being about capturing shadow rather than light. What is it about the shadow areas that you are drawn to? How did you come to start the project?

Chicago Lakefront, Jogger and Irish Setter at Sunrise, August 28, 2015. Photo courtesy of David Travis.



DT: I would get up in the morning, and I said, "I'm going to get out, and the first thing I'm going to consider is luminosity." What is the source of light? In the morning it's the sky. But if you go early, the sun isn't up yet. I thought, okay, that's gonna be the main starting point.

Then I need an event. I use this old technique that André Kertész used: to stay in one place that had a good [view] and served as a stage for impending action. I found a place on the lakefront that if it rained, there was a little puddle, and it was framed with the trees on both sides.

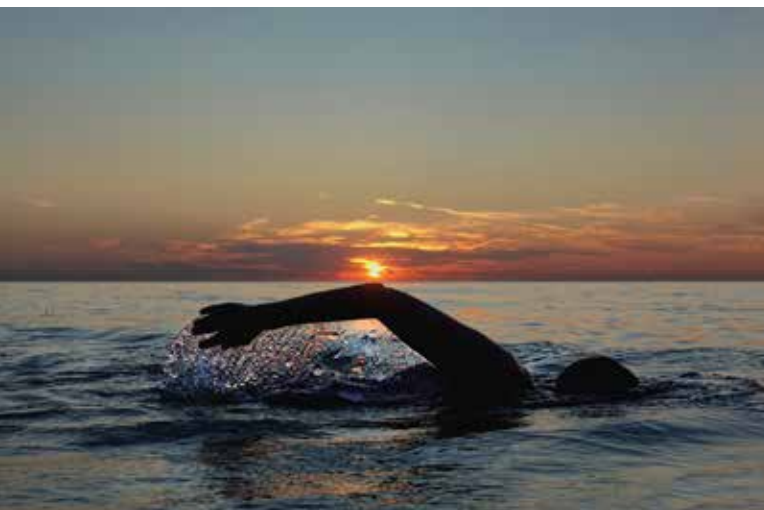
And so, I wait for people to come into frame. I would photograph them in the morning, when there isn't enough light to light them fully. They're all silhouettes. I said, this is better because the silhouettes are graphic shapes but still have a personality, and they don't reveal the identity of the people.

So, what if I just forget about the subject and see the light? What kind of picture will the light permit me to take? Then I realized—when I'm photographing that way, I get these silhouettes. I love the silhouettes. They're so good, because when they are really sharp and frozen in time, they are accurate in a way we are not used to seeing for ourselves.

The first thing I recognized was ponytails. I mean, when you watch joggers, you don't focus on their ponytails. They're just flagrant in the silhouette! Oh my god, this is fantastic! So, already I'm taking a picture that I didn't go out to take it. This is what I wanted to do. I wanted to find out, [based on] the conditions, what new pictures are possible to make. So, the camera is kind of speaking to me.

And then the best thing that happened, the real picture that I had never seen before, was when two figures overlapped, and you can't tell whose legs and whose arms are whose. So, you get people who look like they have four feet running. I mean, it's kind of comical.... My god! If I was sitting here watching them, I wouldn't see this picture at all.

RM: Is there something you long to see return to photography? A style, subject, artist, etc....?



Point Swimmers Chicago, Linda Swimming at Sunrise, October 4, 2017. Photo courtesy of David Travis.

DT: First, I've liked the idea that there's something in the photograph as a picture for my eyes to do, and second, that I can take my experience of looking at it and make something that's not only directed at the original idea of my being where I am. Like Lewis Hine has a very narrow idea of what [he] wanted the pictures for. But there's so much in his photographs as picture and as empathy. Still, [because] similar issues, like immigration, have come back, part of the original message didn't die out... Sometimes you have pictures that are made only for something specific. And you realize it did a job, and then later, there wasn't anything else in there... so they die out. But some of Jacob Riis's [photographs]—they're so bizarre. They weren't even [made] anticipating a composed picture. He wasn't touting anything about that. He was dealing with an actual subject as he encountered it.

I do look for how [the photograph] was made. And this makes me kind of old-fashioned. I realize I just have to let go of the critical attitude—let go of some overpowering idea to which the photographer is trying to force an equivalence. Maybe this is my front door entrance to a subject. For me, that's better.

In the last decades, a lot of political, racial, or gender-[related] issues that are good to talk about are hard to picture in original ways. If an issue becomes a photograph, I feel you also want something else in that work than the issue alone. Something for your eye to do, even something that perhaps leads you to twist the intended meaning, as dogmatic ideas get fairly rigid. If it's about one of the great liberal issues in life, all the discussion of the values of the picture and how it comes into being are squashed. Well, that's okay. We [are] going down the same path. We don't need to bash each other around.

RM: What role do you think museums play in the movement toward diversity?

DT: Oh, I think they've been told they have not played a great enough role... Dawoud [Bey] is a good example. He says part of his personal program is to have black people in pictures that might end up in museums or someplace that they are part of the whole society. They're not invisible... Some would say they were invisible—or they're just not featured—or they're just incidental. And so that was why he wanted to photograph black culture initially, not to show that it was a very separate thing, but it was just always here, and that it was not being addressed [in the U.S.].

We love his work. So that's not hard. But it is no secret that much of the art world was a closed and privileged sphere evaluating and admiring those who could afford to pursue the vocation of being an artist in America. For much of that period, photography was exclusive too.

Robert Frank was one of the first [widely recognized] photographers to show black people in their environments, and it wasn't a pretty picture. It wasn't quite a damning one, because he was not a journalistic muckraker. He was an individual observer of what he saw in plain sight as he looked around him.

You know, that's one of the things that people hated about the book [*The Americans*, 1958]. It wasn't about the America that Life magazine was promoting. I should mention that long before I got there, the Art Institute of Chicago was the first museum to mount an exhibition of Frank's photographs of *The Americans*.

There would be black photographers who were working in the industry or on their own, but it was rare. Gordon Parks, he got a foothold and even worked for Life magazine... There was also Roy DeCarava, but beyond those two, there wasn't an abundance to choose from. That would improve gradually.

The museum was very white. All the all the trustees were white. Mostly it was men but [there were] some influential women, however... James Wood was the first director to recognize the problem and began to make some changes in the 1990s.

Now, everybody's woke, a bit, and they're trying hard. Some museums are selling a Jasper Johns so they [can] get a lot of money for it, and they'll put all that into diversified acquisitions.

It's exciting now. Why don't we see more of, say, Jacob Lawrence in the collection? Well, because there's only a handful of collectors who had amassed contemporary art, mostly through the art market of galleries

and auctions. When I looked at the pattern of acquisitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art over the decades, I found they are heavily gifts from collectors. You can get great artists that way, but you don't get diverse artists...

RM: Do you think photography has a unique ability to move art and museums toward diversity?

DT: It may be true. Because photography—it's so easy to make while owning your own means of production. If you're a filmmaker, you gotta have a sound person. You gotta have actors, you gotta have all kinds of stuff. But [in] photography, you can actually own and manage all the stuff. You can even keep it at a cellphone level.

RM: Who should we be looking at right now in terms of contemporary artists?

DT: Well, I'm not a good person to ask, because I've kind of kept myself out of it since retirement eleven years ago. I've become a photographer and been looking at what I've been doing myself. I do see photographic masters getting recognition, finally. Dawoud Bey is the prime example. He is contemporary, but not “emerging” if that is what one means by contemporary. But I find all those parts [of the photograph]—the subject, how it came into being, and the idea—are beautifully balanced in his work. It doesn't mean that other great artists don't have that or that they have to be balanced at all. But he is one of those people. The David Hockney [exhibit at Richard Gray Gallery] was a good experience for me, but then that's an older, established artist.

When I was at Columbia, there were quite a few people I knew, came to know, or found out about. But I was teaching the history of photography up to 1940. Still, I acquired photographs for myself from Anahid Ghorbani, Clarissa Bonet, and others, including some undergraduates. On the faculty I acquired work by

Point Swimmers Chicago, Nial in a Ninja Dive, August 30, 2017.
Photo courtesy of David Travis.



Dawoud Bey, Paul D'Amato, [and] Jay Wolke, and [I] wrote for Melissa Pinney.

I get excited about lots of pictures. And, you know, they're all over the map. I like these pictures that people out in Nebraska and Kansas are taking of thunderstorms. They're storm chasers. They're all nutcases, the people, they drive into tornadoes. I know they have to do a lot of Photoshop massaging to get these really dark pictures more luminous. Well, that's part of the game here. I can only enhance something that's already there. If you saw this with sunglasses and high contrast, you would see a picture not unlike what they're doing when they get worked up. So, it's there. It would make an interesting show. They wouldn't sell for \$40,000.

RM: That's kind of a distinguishing factor. But not everything in the Art Institute would sell for \$40,000.

DT: Oh no, not at all. My god.

RM: Do you think everything that's in the Art Institute has some sort of inherent artistic value?

DT: At the time the first photography curators were acquiring photographs, we were explaining what it was to the trustees. Early in my career, the odd explanation was that the photograph was highly photographic. Szarkowski wrote beautifully and more deeply about that idea. He thought it could be any kind of thing, but it had to participate in the medium. So, that's a very Modernistic idea. If you didn't show something about the medium, you weren't being modern.

I think the photographic field has gotten to be almost too big. When I first started, we would see anybody. Then we got to be overburdened quickly because there were too many graduate students, even in Chicago: IIT, SAIC, Columbia. Well, you're making too many people looking for careers in art photography. They're all excited, they have to come and see me. There's no room for all of that... and then there's New York. Now the AIC will not review portfolios.

RM: What artists from the past make you think of the present?

DT: That's a more interesting question. Well, I don't have a prepared answer. It's not Walker Evans anymore—as much as I like him.

And it's not Robert Frank or anything like that, because I've gotten so used to everybody never coming up to his excellent standard.

Continued on page 14.

Display Mode: Exhibiting Video Games as Art, History

by Kelli Wood

“Are video games art?” The frequency with which that question has been posed over the past decade belies the wholly unsatisfactory nature of the responses. Although the classification of what we mean by video games has not remained categorically uncomplicated, the crux of the debate has largely lain, instead, with fairly banal epistemologies of art.

At the extremes, art critics have derided video games as lacking the sophistication, depth, or even “soul” of works by such strawmen as Picasso and Van Gogh. Game designers and industry professionals, in turn, have accused such critics of being uninformed outsiders and Luddites unable to appreciate the ways technology has revolutionized art’s expressive potential on a popular level.¹ Historians of art are, of course, never to be consulted, as history is positioned as manifestly irrelevant at both nadir and zenith. An art historian might eagerly delight in discussing Plato and old master printmaking jointly in conversation with games. She might point to the fundamentally mimetic quality of games and to the well-worn ground of claims for the revolutionary nature of replicative technology. But such pedantry will be avoided here.

Rather, the tangible answer to two core questions—“What is art, and are video games it?”—is one that has remained the same for nearly a century when it comes to the canonical absorption of new media: when art and design museums display video games, those games unequivocally attain such status. Yet even though the institutional answer to this is question is patently unsatisfying, the conditions and rhetorics of the display of video games in exhibitions and museums have something important to tell us about ingrained understandings of art, science, culture, and industry, as well as those categories’ shifting hierarchies. In short, though exhibitions can only tell us that games are art in the least-interesting ways possible, they can tell us rather a lot about *how* they are art when encountered in “display mode.”

The 1939 New York World’s Fair displayed the first video game in a major exhibition.



Figure 1: *The Nimatron at the New York World's Fair*, photograph, 1940, © Westinghouse Electric Corporation.

Edward Condon, then associate director of research for the Westinghouse Electric Corporation (and later nuclear physicist for the Manhattan Project), designed the Nimatron computer game to entertain the public at the company’s pavilion (Figure 1).² The Nimatron digital computer competed against a human player at nim, a sorting game wherein player and computer took turns removing virtual tokens from shared piles, which were signified by rows of lightbulbs, with the goal of being the player to remove the final piece. The game joined other installations that emphasized the wonders of Westinghouse’s innovations, which included new, store-ready products, such as their electric dishwasher, along with publicity stunts like Elektro, a life-sized robot. The inventive design of this pavilion created the perfect environment to display commercial products as technological achievements advancing human life.

Promotional materials for the pavilion—including a comedic (but moralizing) hour-long film—depicted the imaginary “Middletons,” the exhibition’s ideal family visitors (Figure 2).³ The plot centers on the romantic exploits of the Middleton daughter, Babs. To the chagrin of the Middletons, she brings along her out-of-touch paramour Nicholas Makaroff, a European-styled, bowtie-wearing, Marxist art professor. In the nick of time, the family’s handsome young friend Jim Treadway, an all-American hero who works for Westinghouse, defeats his foil’s snobbish critiques of the exhibition as a “temple of capitalism” by pointing out how the innovations of Westinghouse’s products will benefit the working man. In the end, the earnest Treadway rescues Bab’s from her misguided and worrisome dalliance in focus from “science to art,” and the film closes with the couple arm-in-arm, admiring the marvels of modern industry and imagining a happy domestic life made possible by Westinghouse.

Art was not just irrelevant—it was, in fact, situated as patently antithetical to the values espoused by the first exhibition that included a video game. The abstract painting Makaroff shows Babs during the film was, in 1939, indexical for anti-capitalist Bolshevism, contributing to a discourse that would pervade subsequent early exhibitions of video games—one that emphasized science and technology’s value for industry.

Figure 2: Stills from *The Middleton Family* at the New York World’s Fair directed by Robert Snody, 1939, film, Library of Congress.



Figure 3: Nimrod on display at the Festival of Britain, photograph, 1951, © Computer History Museum.

The Canadian National Exhibition of 1950 featured “Bertie the Brain,” a tic-tac-toe computer game built by Josef Kates to demonstrate a new tube display technology. Across the pond, on the centennial of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Festival of Britain attracted huge crowds eager to experience the progress promised by post-war recovery and national unity. The associated Exhibition of Science in South Kensington invited visitors to “seem to shrink like Alice in Wonderland” as they navigated a path through the atomic structure of matter, slowly enlarging as they returned to the familiar structures of life.⁴

The path of the Exhibition of Science prepared visitors to confront a final section focused on the latest advances in research “in a more leisurely way.”⁵ This included the opportunity to play a game on Nimrod, an “electronic brain” built for the show by Ferranti, who began offering the world’s earliest commercially available computers that very year (Figure 3). Unlike Westinghouse’s earlier Nimatron, which Condon devised specifically for the purpose of entertainment, a pamphlet emphasized the scientific and practical importance of the Nimatron rather than its use for the game:

“It may appear that, in trying to make machines play games, we are wasting our time. This is not true as the theory of games is extremely complex and a machine that can play a complex game can also be programmed to carry out very complex practical problems.”⁶



Figure 4: Installation view, "Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade," 1989, © Museum of the Moving Image.

It was precisely the supposed value of this new computer technology for the complex problems of scientific research—and, in particular, research supported by the US's postwar military-industrial complex—that would foster innovation and dissemination of video games on a popular level.

In 1961, the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) donated a PDP-1 computer to MIT, and that same year, Dan Edwards, Martin Graetz, and Steve Russell used the new technology to create a video game. *SPACEWAR* simulated galactic combat for players by employing a subroutine enabling the cathode ray tube (CRT) monitor to display pixelated spaceships and stars. By the summer of 1962, *SPACEWAR* went viral, showing up across the country on any research computer with a CRT—a precursor to the way that video games would dominate the electronics market during the '70s and '80s. Fierce competition among companies like Apple, Atari, Intellivision, ColecoVision, Commodore, Nintendo, and Sega fast-tracked the development of processors and graphics in the 8- to 64-bit era.

In 1988, the rapidly growing popularity and increasing visual sophistication of video games caught the eye of Rochelle Slovin, director of the then newly opened American Museum of the Moving Image, and in 1989,

she co-curated the first exhibition dedicated entirely to video games, "Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade" (Figure 4). Writing twenty years later, Slovin would describe how a fundamental connection between form and content, circuits and graphic style, inspired the exhibition:

"[T]echnology became both the enabling force and the content of the games. This was a useful orientation for the Museum, because we meant, as I saw it, to show how technology affected the content and technique of the entertainment industry."⁷

In his essay for the opening of "Hot Circuits," poet Charles Bernstein employed a time-tested conception of Art as divorced from utility in favor of pure aesthetics to describe these games: "Liberated from the restricted economy of purpose or function, they express the inner, nonverbal world of the computer."⁸ Rather than exemplifying a rupture between science and art, video games in "Hot Circuits" supposedly pointed to the artistic value of technology itself.

For Slovin, interactivity was a key quality that earned games a place as an emerging medium within the worlds of art and design. That very interactivity, however, posed a problem. Video games relied upon rapidly changing technology and were subject to the wear and tear, neglect, and abandonment faced by all such hardware. Upon the exhibition's opening, *The New York Times* published, "An Archeological Hunt for 'Old' Video Games," which described the difficulty of finding and maintaining defunct cabinets and consoles. Many video games were already "near extinction," antiquated consumer goods that found themselves "discarded, abandoned, scrapped, or recycled."⁹

In response, many of today's museums dedicated to video games take a directly archival and historical approach, falling well within one traditional function of museum as a cultural repository and curators as caretakers (coming from the Latin *cūrō, cūrāre*). Such institutions include Berlin's Computerspielemuseum, which opened in 1997, the International Center for the History of Electronic Games®, which opened within the Strong National Museum of Play in 2009, and Rome's VIGAMUS, which opened in 2012. Even "Game On," the now world-touring exhibition of video games originally installed at the Barbican Art Gallery in 2002, orients the visitor's itinerary around the history of technology and cultures of gaming with only passing nods to aesthetics. However, the institutional decision to preserve video games as technology may, strangely enough, be

a driving factor in their eventual full inclusion within the rarified realm of art. Recent methodical turns toward material and popular culture within art history and museum studies suggest that, with a bit of historical distance, a *Pitfall* cartridge manufactured for the Atari 2600 may well find itself installed alongside the Lewis chessmen.

In 2012, the Smithsonian's provocatively named "The Art of Video Games" seemed poised to finally take a definitive stance on video games' status as Art. The exhibition used crowdsourcing to select 80 games; computer expert and console collector Chris Melissinos then organized those games around progressive technological developments. Deferring to public judgement, Melissinos wrote, "[V]iewers will be left to determine whether the materials on display are indeed worthy of the title 'art.'" ¹⁰

Dashing art critical hopes, the meaning of "art" in Melissinos' title proved to be something less than a polemical declaration. Rather than straightforwardly elevating games to the canonical status of contemporary genius reserved for the likes of Kehinde Wiley or Cecily Brown, "The Art of Video Games" articulated a traditional and safer conception of 'arte' as a conspicuous and skillful manipulation of a medium or technology, itself a holdover from Renaissance art theory.

Unlike the Smithsonian's strategy of crowdsourcing a large number of games, Paola Antonelli initially incorporated 14 carefully selected titles into the Museum of Modern Art's collection in her role as curator of architecture and design. For Antonelli, video games were clearly art. Yet even still, it was their expressive

Figure 5: Installation view, "Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt," Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019, photograph by Kelli Wood.



Figure 6: Installation view, *The Video Game Art Gallery* at Galerie F, Chicago, 2014, © VGA Gallery.

qualities as design products that most fully situated them within MoMa. "Our criteria," Antonelli wrote, "emphasize not only the visual quality and aesthetic experience of each game, but also the many other aspects—from the elegance of the code to the design of the player's behavior—that pertain to interaction design." ¹¹

Design similarly took center stage at the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2018-19 exhibition "Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt" (Figure 5). The opening section treated eight video games as products of individual workshops and artists, juxtaposing finished games with their process of creation using preparatory drawings and notebooks—a conventional and effective curatorial maneuver similarly employed in recent exhibitions of Michelangelo and Andrea Mantegna. Moreover, by displaying René Magritte's surrealist *Le Blanc Seing* (1965) alongside the game scenography it inspired in *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer, 2013), "Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt" not only connected video games with their influences from traditional media, but implicitly asserted their parity with capital-A Art.

These major national and international exhibitions were in many ways both a response to and an apotheosis of connected local gamer cultures. Over the past 5 years, Chicago's vibrant indie gaming scene has fostered exhibitions of games as untidy and fertile assemblages of Art, design, technology, and performance. In 2014, The Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery, now a brick-and-mortar space in Wicker Park, held its first exhibition at Galerie F, featuring playable game stations alongside commissioned fine art prints of video games, a move that fashioned indie games as Art hanging on the white walls of gallery space (Figure 6). The same year saw the inaugural iteration

of Bit Bash, Chicago's indie game festival, which continues to introduce the public to the work of lesser known game studios. Recent events by Bit Bash have not only served as a node of connection between art and industry but have also interrogated how video games are increasingly comfortable (or perhaps equally uncomfortable) being exhibited at The Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Science and Industry alike.

Their very institutional situation at the intersections of technology and aesthetics and of industry and design places video games at the fulcrum of art's ongoing and living history, unimpeded by reductive and outmoded definitions of art employed in conservative criticism. Industry responses that defensively deride the analog history of art as irrelevant to the values that video games bring to a digital future are, then, a telling reminder of the way that both camps have inadvertently fallen victim to the same false dichotomies of art and technology and of culture and industry—dichotomies purposely evoked by the all-American corporate champion Jim Treadway and European Marxist art professor Nicholas Makaroff. The 80-year record of video game exhibitions not only gestures toward the problematic and polemical roots of this divide but also charts the course of curatorial struggles to reconcile this false and motivated binary.

Recognizing the ways in which art and science have been pitted against each other in the very question "Are video games art?" can potentially create space for new, collaborative curatorial strategies as video games continue to find themselves on display mode in exhibitions and museums.

Dr. Kelli Wood is an Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Tennessee and an alumna of the University of Chicago. Her research and teaching situates video games within the history of games and museum studies. Currently she is guest curating a permanent wing of the Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, A Global History of Sport, forthcoming in anticipation of the 2022 World Cup.

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A Question for Performance Art: What Can One Do with A Past?

by Noa/h Fields

The state of performance art in Chicago? It's happening, it's happenings: plural, and never still. Performance art is a fluid form, so it's no surprise that it resists containment.

I won't bore you with an exhaustive catalog *à la Emergency INDEX*, Ugly Duckling Presse's former annual snapshot of international performance art. Instead, let me give you a few glimpses into our city's vibrant scene.

Performance art, as instantiated in the gallery context, is closer to visual art, a sort of live sculpting in time that works with the body, site, and duration. Of course, genre borders are porous, and in DIY spaces like No Nation or Oh!klahomo, the offerings can be adjacent to poetry, dance, punk, conceptual and video art, and nightlife. This is to say, performance art is far from a singular "state," even within city borders.

Nevertheless, I am noticing a trend. A backwards-glanced turn, as several of Chicago's major institutions of performance art, including Goat Island Performance Group, Links Hall, and DFBRL8R Performance Art Gallery, celebrate landmarks. It is as though Chicago's performance world has collectively turned into Orpheus. Except this look back won't banish our love to the Underworld...

Chicago writer T Fleischmann's gorgeous and riveting new book *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*, a queer blend of memoir and art criticism, asks a question I find reverberant with this particular moment in Chicago's performance spheres: "What can one do with a past? / What I mean is, what can we do with our bodies?" With its renewed attention on the body as well as on lasting legacies of bodies of work, contemporary performance art shows us new ways to animate and reactivate Chicago's pasts.

We Have Discovered the Performance by Making It

The Chicago-based Goat Island Performance Group made an international splash on performance art during its stint from 1986–2009 with its emphasis on collaboration, language play, and creative response.



Hancock & Kelly, *An Extraordinary Rendition*, 2019. "goat island archive—we have discovered the performance by making it," Chicago Cultural Center, 2019. Photo: Nicholas Lowe.

The Chicago Cultural Center honored its lasting legacy with a retrospective for which the city of Chicago commissioned nine new performance works in creative response to each of Goat Island's major works. These were all performed in the spring and early summer at the Cultural Center's exhibition, which reconstructed Goat Island's performance gymnasium.

A retrospective featuring new work is characteristic of Goat Island's *modus operandi*, with its sustained drive to build on performance archives through "response" in all of its conjugations (pedagogic, creative, and critical). Through dialogic response, past extends into the future. As founding member Mark Jeffery commented to me in a personal interview, "It's not about re-enactment but response: it's about keeping the work alive not only through seeing an artifact but to have new, now contemporary artists from different media respond to the work." The commissioned artists were selected by the ten former members of the collective: each member nominated ten artists who they felt were influenced by the groups, and then a vote whittled these nominations down in consideration of diversity of medium, age, and nationality.

Prior to their world premieres, each of these new works were previewed as works-in-progress at nine satellite venues all around the city as part of Mark Jeffery's biannual IN>TIME performance festival. As a title, "IN>TIME" captures performance art's rigorous preoccupation with time as both form and material—something that can be choreographed and heightened. But also, to play in time is to play in sync, and in this spirit, the festival orchestrated a harmonic coming together as multiple artists and sites around in the city played in time with each other. From museums to basements, from the established to the emerging, most of the usual suspects showed up on this map of Chicago's performance art circuit: Links Hall, Hyde Park Art Center, Comfort Station, DFBRL8R Performance Art Gallery, Gallery 400, Red Rover Reading Series, Oh!klahomo, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago, with the commissioned international artists programmed alongside local performing artists. In this way, the ghosts of Goat Island circuited throughout the city, imprinting various sites with its cultural memory. The festival brought together geographically dispersed strands of performance art's scene, closing the gesture by "coming home" to the reconstructed gymnasium installed at the Cultural Center.

Links Hall at Forty

Links Hall's 40th season gave occasion to reflect on its legacy as the closest thing the Midwest has to Judson Church. Yes, our very own long-running space for intrepid, experimental movement research, from contact improvisation to post-Butoh to puppetry, Links Hall has been a reliable place for curators and performers looking for an empty white room to incubate new work. Throughout its "Pay-the-40th-Forward Season," Links Hall donated its space for artists to perform in rent-free—a generous gift to nurture the city's emerging talents.

The 40th anniversary celebration LinkSircus in March featured a full line-up of back-to-back performances in its two theatres, from the likes of Bob Eisen (founder of Links Hall) and Jessica Cornish, Asimina Chremos, Honey Pot Performance, J'Sun Howard and Jennifer Karmin, Kristina Isabelle, Rika Lin and Tom Lee, Same Planet Performance Project, The Seldoms, and Zephyr Dance. Due to the simultaneous nature of the event, my experience as an attendee could only include a sampling of the offerings. Needless to say,

however, the lineup was deep, as were the linkages it outlined.

Look back, look forward: singing, poetry, contact improv, Butoh, and more linked up for the night in a showcase that potently brought together of artists with diverse practices throughout the city.

What Remains

In anticipation of its tenth anniversary next year, DFBRL8R is turning back to its archive of performance objects, or "relics," as founder and director Joseph Ravens calls them. DFBRL8R invited Dutch artist Ieke Trinks to guest curate an exhibition of these objects in February. Given the ephemeral nature of performance (which, unless it is photographed or video-recorded, might live only as long its audience is present), an object exhibition is a unique intervention to the problem of building a performative / performance archive.

Moreover, in conjunction with the exhibition, DFBRL8R has announced a global **open call** for new artist works to activate these artifacts through live re-performance. The call invites artists to experiment with "the significance of material leftover from performance," asking, "What affects an object's status? What value does it have when it is not specifically an artwork itself, or not intended to be an art object that stands on its own? These materials are relics that once had a functional or symbolic purpose." Rather than being put to pasture, the relics are put back in free-play, giving them a second life.

Artists can choose to craft proposals with or without knowledge of the object's contextual history in

Robert Walton, *Exhuming Johnny*, 2019. "goat island archive—we have discovered the performance by making it," Chicago Cultural Center, 2019. Photo: Nicholas Lowe.

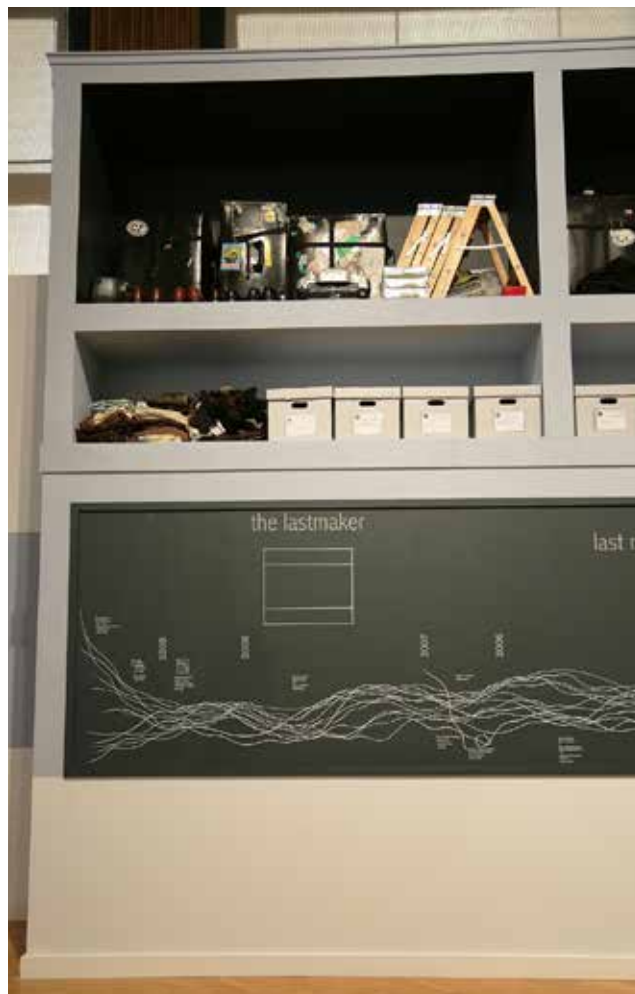


their original performances, creating opportunities for resignification of the objects in a new circulation with new hands, methods, and forms. For audience members with intimate histories with these relics (bound to happen, since the last decade is still recent memory), all of the performances could have a palimpsest quality, with overlapping layers of the past and present peeking through the object as it is activated in performance.

Today, Chicago's performance art spaces are creating exciting new work that revisits what remains of the past. But what's next for Chicago's performance art world remains to be seen.

Noa/h Fields is a nonbinary poet and teaching artist living in Chicago. Their chapbook *WITH* is out from Ghost City Press, and they are writing a book on the poetics of queer nightlife.

Detail, open storage display, "goat island archive—we have discovered the performance by making it," Chicago Cultural Center. Photo: Nicholas Lowe.



David Travis.

Continued from page 5.

Strange to say, and this would never make it in the current art world, I am eager to write an essay on Eliot Porter, because I think I have ideas about him that no one's expressed. And about every third month, I see an article about William Eggleston being the first great color photographer. Yeah, in the mode that Walker Evans left to us. But what if you're a landscape photographer? There's nobody as great as Eliot Porter. He invented the Sierra Club style.

And people say, "Well, these are just nice pictures." Okay, you give me somebody, a photographer, who's had more influence on the ecology and conservation, one of the biggest issues of our time, than Eliot Porter and Ansel Adams. Both went beyond all those calendars and photographs and served on the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club. But while Adams is completely known, Eliot Porter has one page on Wikipedia.

When Rebecca Solnit writes about Porter, she doesn't so much get into the photography part. But she writes about him as this guardian of the environment. And I thought, okay, there's a bigger idea that we're all stuck with now. He has much to teach us about our stewardship of nature but just as much about how photographs come to be pictures. He understood optics like few others have, because color is a totally optical phenomenon. And that nobody talks about it is just amazing.

Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows. Her latest curatorial project is "The Feeling is Mutual".

Untitled Ninth Piece: An Elegy to Lawrence Steger

by Phillip Barcio

John Thomure never met Lawrence Steger face to face. Thomure's relationship with the legendary Chicago performance artist began in the autumn of 2017, in the stacks of the Logan Square branch of the Chicago Public Library, where Steger reached out to Thomure from beyond the grave.

"I stumbled across this book entitled *Performance and Place*," says Thomure. "It had a chapter by a former teacher of mine, Matthew Goulish [co-founder of the collaborative performance group Goat Island], called 'The Ordering of the Fantastic: Architecture and Place in the Work of Lawrence Steger.'"

Only two years old in 1999 when Steger died from complications associated with AIDS, Thomure was an aspiring performance artist himself. This book chapter, encountered by happenstance, made him feel connected to Steger through time. Most fascinating, he says, was that "the chapter included an excerpt from Lawrence's notebooks detailing the aspects of an unfinished performance."

Steger called the performance simply "Untitled Ninth Piece." Its description made little sense to Thomure at first. It was a study of two seemingly diametrically opposed personalities: architect Mies van der Rohe (creator of the famed International Style, which, among other things, helped define the modern look of downtown Chicago) and Mitchell Szewczyk, a folk artist who created the House of Crosses (a no longer extant two-story house at 1544 W. Chestnut in Chicago's Noble Square neighborhood, covered entirely in handmade crucifixes, shields, cryptic messages and tributes to celebrities).

To better understanding the Mies—Szewczyk connection, Thomure began a deep dive into Steger's life and work.

"The more I researched, the more I realized what connects Steger, Mies and Szewczyk is that they are entirely self-taught in regard to their art," Thomure says. "Steger's work was examining what it means to be an autodidact."

Van der Rohe taught himself architectural design while working at an architectural firm. Szewczyk taught



Lawrence Steger performing in the 1994 P-Form Circus, "Psycho Circus: a performance art marathon and faux psychic fair," (Source: Event calendar—September/October 1994).

himself woodworking, then covered first his bedroom walls, and eventually his entire house, with crosses, in part to discourage gang activity in his neighborhood. Steger topped them both, convincing Antioch College in Ohio to let him create a performance art curriculum from scratch, of which he became the first graduate.

Even today, the performance art medium is ill-defined, perhaps on purpose. Too anarchic to be considered Fine Art, and too capricious to fit in the Performing Arts, it occupies its own idiosyncratic, hallowed, sweaty, irreverent, smart, honest, raunchy, beautiful ground where most members of polite society fear to tread. The only contact many members of

today's Fine Art world have with performance artists is at international art fairs like Frieze, Art Basel, or EXPO Chicago, where rogue representatives of the form periodically wander about, wearing masks, perhaps, or dragging chains, and making this or that amorphous commentary about the charade they are passing through, judging, and yet love to be a part of.

Yet surely performance remains at least as crucial to contemporary art as it is to life. As the malcontent Jaques stated more than four centuries ago in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts..."

Lawrence Steger made his first entrance in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1961. After graduating from Antioch in 1984, he moved to Chicago, earning his MFA in performance from the School of the Art Institute in 1986. Over the next 13 years, he played many parts, writing and performing works about violence, death, delinquency, sexuality and other such topics related to everyday life. Eschewing convention, he staged his pieces not only in formal art spaces but also in venues such as bars and local cabarets, where he performed alongside musicians and comedians.

"Steger's art was inseparable from his art making," Thomure says. "He showed that you don't need a gallery funding and supporting your work and that the work can happen anywhere."

On the occasion of Steger's final exit, *Chicago Tribune* staff writer Achy Obejas memorialized his contribution thusly: "An elegant, seductive presence on stage, Lawrence Steger was one of the most important, and most influential, performance artists in Chicago during the late 1980s and '90s. Besides producing his own provocative work, Mr. Steger often brought diverse artists together to explore complex and frequently dark subjects, especially obsession and desire. At the time of his death, he was surrounded by a group of friends, mostly members of his artistic community."

Thanks to Steger and his artistic community, Chicago now has one of the healthiest performance art scenes in the world.

"Steger laid out a model for artists to remain independent," says Thomure. "His involvement in organizing performance events at Randolph Street Gallery helped introduce performance to the Chicago community. Even more important was his championing of Queer art. But he was not just a performance artist—he was a writer, curator, and community organizer. What sets Chicago apart is how many artists are involved in hosting shows, writing critical essays, and helping their communities. I believe this directly grows out of Lawrence's efforts."

Thomure cites the variety of Chicago spaces that currently host performance work, "from apartments and DIY spaces such as No Nation Lab in Wicker Park, to established performance galleries like Defibrillator [DFBRL8R] in Bridgeport, to large galleries to museums."

"From my vantage point," he says, "all of the daring and experimental work is happening in the Midwest. The art world isn't as ossified here."

Thanks to this experimental ecosystem, Thomure says he is witnessing, and participating in, a "new wave of transdisciplinary artists in Chicago, alongside Tandy Solutions, Sarah Pramuk, and Maryam Faridani, to name a few, who utilize humor, satire, [and] critical theory, and embrace the banal and the everyday."

His own latest contribution to the new wave evolved directly from his research into Lawrence Steger.

At the premier of "An Anthology of American Folk," John Thomure's completed version of Lawrence Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece," at Oh!klahomo. Left to right: Mark Jeffery, Layla Gallagher, John Thomure (standing), Sarah Dhobhany, and Chia En Chen. Photo by Carlos Salazar-Lermont.



Through a mixture of empathy, inventiveness and transmogrified immersion into Steger's persona, Thomure completed Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece."

"In my eyes, the project became a collaboration over time, as if Steger had left small fragments and clues behind," Thomure explains. "The performance is presented as a reading of an unfinished documentary script, which is a tongue-in-cheek way of bringing the process of researching to the audience's attention. I am inviting the audience to see the frustrating and embarrassing side of creating a work of art. The work begins with a fairly dumb slapstick joke from The Three Stooges—I trip over my own feet and collapse into my own set piece, totally destroying the performance in the process. The challenge then is to build the semblance of a performance with the broken remains. It's a twist on the old Mies van der Rohe moniker of 'Less is More,' embracing an attitude of 'Do More With Less.'"

Fittingly, Thomure debuted his experimental completion of Steger's final work (which he titled "An Anthology of American Folk") at Oh!klahomo, a residential performance space in Chicago's Ukrainian Village, as part of the 2019 Terrain Biennial—an event which, according to organizers, "takes place on lawns, in front yards, on porches, beneath awnings, and in windows." Founded in the front yard of a home in Oak Park in 2013 by Sabina Ott—who passed away in 2018, an elder of Steger by six years—this year's Biennial includes satellite events in 30 cities around the world.

"Terrain subverts the typical biennial structure by hosting events solely in small, DIY spaces," Thomure says. "It pays tribute to Chicago's longstanding underground DIY scene"—a scene that likely would not exist were it not for Lawrence Steger.

Reflecting on the experience of finishing Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece," Thomure says he feels inspired.

"Steger defined his own form of success in the art world. He allowed himself the time and independence to create work that was dark, grotesque, and visceral. Alongside Ron Athey, he pioneered extreme endurance art in spite of audience walkouts and being panned by conservative critics. He inspired me to become more like him as an artist, to carve out my own space in the art world instead of waiting around for someone to 'discover me' or validate my work. Making art is a way of



At the premiere of "An Anthology of American Folk," John Thomure's completed version of Lawrence Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece," at Oh!klahomo (left to right) Mark Jeffery, Sarah Dhobhany. Photo by Carlos Salazar-Lermont.

learning to live life, not just create products to be sold. Making art is its own validation and reward."

Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has

appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.

Links:

Goat Island:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goat_Island_\(performance_group\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goat_Island_(performance_group))

House of Crosses:

<https://www.wurlington-bros.com/Marvelous/castlecross.html>

Lawrence Steger Obituary:

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-02-09-9902090128-story.html>

Terrain Biennial:

<https://terrainexhibitions.org>

Sabina Ott:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabina_Ott

Ron Athey

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Athey

Yesterday's House of Tomorrow

The House of Tomorrow, Built 1933 by George Fred Keck

by Lauren Whitney

The House of Tomorrow is one of a kind. A creation of George Fred Keck—a true American Modernist—this innovative glass house helped pioneer American Modernism. It was built to give hope, and yet it now sits empty, completely dilapidated and in desperate need of attention. The next investor in the House of Tomorrow will need deep pockets, boundless passion, and unwavering determination.

No: the house is not dead. Though my images may show how broken it is, there is still a heartbeat. This very faint heartbeat seemingly persists as if the building is waiting for the perfect someone—a hero—to come in and wake it up.

The House of Tomorrow was a part of the Homes of Tomorrow Exhibition for the Century of Progress International Exposition. Held in Chicago from May 27 through November 12 of 1933, it was back up again from May 26 through October 31 of 1934 because of how successful the original run was. The original goal of the Exposition was to commemorate Chicago's past, but with the backdrop of the Great Depression, the fair evolved into an event with a deeper purpose: inspiring optimism in the face of an uncertain future.

The fair's theme was technological innovation. The Exposition included and encouraged corporate participation along with scientific participation to educate the public on how science and technology are essential. By advertising new inventions and encouraging

the public to adopt them, the Exposition helped cement Americans' faith in the promise and power of science, particularly electricity-based solutions for everyday life.

The House of Tomorrow included a structural steel building material, air conditioning, and a dishwasher. At the time, these items were groundbreaking for everyday homes. All are now commonplace. More exotic amenities included an airplane hangar next to the one-car garage on the ground floor. With the House of Tomorrow, Keck realized his own unique vision of how cooperation across the government, business, and science might enable future families to live.

This past June, I was blessed with the wonderful opportunity to photograph the House of Tomorrow. I already knew the exterior as a result of many drives past the house; this was my first trip inside the home, and it was a fantastic and moving experience. Overwhelmed with emotion, I found it very hard not to scream in excitement with each new room I visited. Documenting this home was much more than checking it off my bucket list as a photographer; it was the fulfillment of a dream.

The three-story dodecagon house is approximately 2800 square feet, resembling a three-tiered wedding cake. A staircase spirals around the supporting steel tube at the center of the building. Steel beams extend throughout the structure, allowing for floor-to-ceiling glass walls on the upper two floors. Keck did not intentionally design the House of Tomorrow to be solar, but that is exactly what he achieved with the enclosing glass. This glass house construction predated Philip Johnson's Glass House and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House by more than a decade.

The house's experimental design prioritized function over form in order to solve anticipated needs for the future. That approach did result in some notable issues with thermal regulation. The primitive A/C could not keep up with the temperature swings caused by the floor-to-ceiling windows, creating dramatic and inconsistent temperatures inside the house.

The biggest surprise during my visit was all of the color I observed. Specifically, paint had fallen away

House of Tomorrow Exterior. Photo by Lauren Whitney.



from the steel beams, revealing the original colors from 1933. Beautiful green and red paint, now dull and dirty, was still very much there. I can only imagine how Keck intended the house to look.

Bold and striking hues remained throughout the house, including on the air ducts, steel beams, floors,



Top: House of Tomorrow 2nd floor living room.

Bottom: House of Tomorrow looking south.

Photos by Lauren Whitney.

and ceilings. To date, I have not found any images of what the house looked like with these original colors. However, Robert Boyce's book on Keck's architectural achievements (*Keck and Keck*, published in 1993 by Princeton Architectural Press) detailed vibrant colors throughout the home: an orange floor in the workshop; red curtains with a blue ceiling in the recreation room; turquoise walls with a green rubber floor in the children's room. These bright tones were ultimately unpopular with the sponsors, and the decision was made to paint the house in pastels, grays, and beiges.

Once the Exposition was over, Robert Bartlett purchased five Century of Progress homes, including the House of Tomorrow. Robert was a developer from Indiana who had purchased Beverly Shores, Indiana from his older brother, Frederick Bartlett. He sought to create greater awareness of Beverly Shores, which was intended to be a resort-like community. Four of the homes were shipped by barge across Lake Michigan, while the Cypress House was disassembled and then reassembled next door to the House of Tomorrow.

Whether the house appealed to people at the time of the exhibit or more than eight decades later, seeing it was a memorable experience, and its trailblazing features remain an impressive tribute to American ingenuity. As the country's first glass house, it is very surprising that this building does not receive more credit and recognition. Keck was ahead of his time, and he mentored or influenced many other notable architects and designers, including Robert Bruce Tague, Bertrand Goldberg, and Marianne Willisch. Given this impact, you would expect demand for him to build another House of Tomorrow. Keck knew what he was doing; with more than 800 homes throughout Chicagoland credited to him, I am sure he could have created another House of Tomorrow. Yet I believe he knew there could be only one House of Tomorrow.

Built to inspire Americans by offering a glimpse of their technologically advanced future, this iconic structure is now vacant and in need of hope and vision. It is not lost. It is still adored by many people—I among them.

Indiana Landmarks, Indiana Dunes National Park, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation are partnering in efforts to restore the House of Tomorrow. They plan to sublease the properties to anyone who can restore the house in exchange for a 50-year lease.

I do believe in this house. I also believe in perfect timing. Much as this house's construction and the Exposition's timing were perfect, this house has persevered, and the timing will again be perfect when it finds someone to extend the legacy of the House of Tomorrow.

A Chicagoland native, Lauren Whitney has been a freelance architectural photographer since 2009. Photographing architecture is not just her passion, but also her purpose and responsibility.
www.laurenwhitneyphotography.com

EXPO Chicago 2019 Review

by Michel Ségard

This year's EXPO Chicago had some notable differences from recent years, both in content and in quality.

First, there was a discernible improvement in the overall quality of the art shown. There were fewer “decorator art” pieces and a greater emphasis on finished craftsmanship. However, that meant that the sketchier artistic styles that are at least partially influenced by street art, for example, were missing. A similar trend was observed at the Whitney Biennial, with only two artists, Jennifer Packer and Marlon Mullen, who would easily fall into that category. Or is this style just going out of fashion in the commercial market? After all, this kind of painting is alive and well in Chicago galleries, especially the smaller alternative spaces. But EXPO is about selling art to collectors, not setting or exploring aesthetic directions.

The next “trend” that was observed was the increased presence of large scale portraiture. Most notable were the works of Danny Ferrell (Marinero Gallery), Devan Shimoyama (De Buck Gallery), and Kehinde Wiley (Galerie Templon). These three artists also shared an LGBTQ subject matter connection. All three deal with gay and/or transgender sitters, but their works emphasize the emotional sensitivity of the subjects, not just their sexuality—a dramatic change from LGBTQ art of past decades. It is a bit of a surprise to see this change manifest itself in such a commercial space. Was it EXPO's way of commemorating the Stonewall anniversary?

Third, there was an extraordinary amount of small-scale sculpture—sculpture suitable for interior spaces. In recent years, small-scale sculpture played a minor role in Expo's offerings. This year, there were dozens of pieces from which to choose.

There were a couple of Louise Nevelson wall pieces, a Picasso bronze shown by Richard Gray, a hanging piece by Diane Simpson at the Corbett vs. Dempsey booth, and some Claire Zeisler pieces in Rhona Hoffman Gallery's booth, to name some superstars. There were also a large number of hanging pieces,

mostly made of wire. Galeria Nara Roesler had a booth full of work by Artur Lescher.

There was a wide variety of styles and materials in this sculpture category. Philip Martin Gallery presented Nathan Mabry's *Nostalgia of the Infinite (Le Portrait)*, a rather large (105 inches tall) stainless steel, bronze, and aluminum piece was noteworthy for its humor. A hawk is perched on this “Calderesque” work all painted in a deep orangey red, reminding Chicagoans of the pigeons on Calder's *Flamingo*. A complex wall piece at the Galerie Templon booth by Iván Navarro was particularly colorful, with yellow, orange, green, pink, beige and white neon animating a form in the shape of a hand. On a more intimate scale, James Cohan showed charming, small ceramic pieces that were not quite bowls by Kathy Butterly. Similarly, Monique Meloche Gallery showed a wall piece by Sanford Biggers made from an antique quilt and birch plywood and meant to be hung in a corner.

On a larger scale, David Gill Gallery had an installation by Barnaby Barford call “The Apple Tree.” Taking up nearly the entire booth, 80 apples made of painted bone china were hung on a large brightly painted steel tree. Its cartoon-like presence made one smile while at the same time caused one to reflect on the symbolisms associated with apples, like the garden of Eden and pioneer folklore.

With that much inventory on display, there were bound to be a couple of areas that were less than ideal.

Dan Gunn, *Bad Scenery*, 2019. Acrylic, stain, furniture finish on birch plywood with nylon rope. 57 x 110 inches. Photo courtesy of moniquemeloche.





Kathy Butterly, *Crossed Arms*, 2019. Clay, glaze, 6 ¼ x 6 ¼ x 6 ¼ inches. Shown by James Cohan Gallery, NYC. Photo by Michel Ségard.



Sanford Biggers, *Untitled*, 2019. Antique quilt, birch plywood, 30 x 30 x 18 inches. Shown by moniquemeloche. Photo by Michel Ségard.



Leonardo Benzant, *Black Joy Takes Courage*, 2019. Upholstery fabric, string, monofilament, leather, gel-medium, acrylic, pony beads, semi-precious stones and seed beads, 48 x 98 x 5 inches. Image courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery.

First there were far too many John Chamberlain pieces available. His works made of colorful, crunched auto body parts lost their luster many years ago. It seemed that there was a deaccessioning campaign afoot. The other “glut” was the presence of highly polished stainless steel pieces (some may have been chromed). They were available in all shapes and sizes, and in the context of this fair, became an instant cliché.

Overall, this year’s EXPO felt more civilized and the art more sincere (less hucksterism). And word is that it was also financially successful and that many galleries are anxious to be back next year. That is good news for an event that, in one form or another, has been going on for 38 years.

Examiner.

Michel Ségard is the editor in chief of the New Art

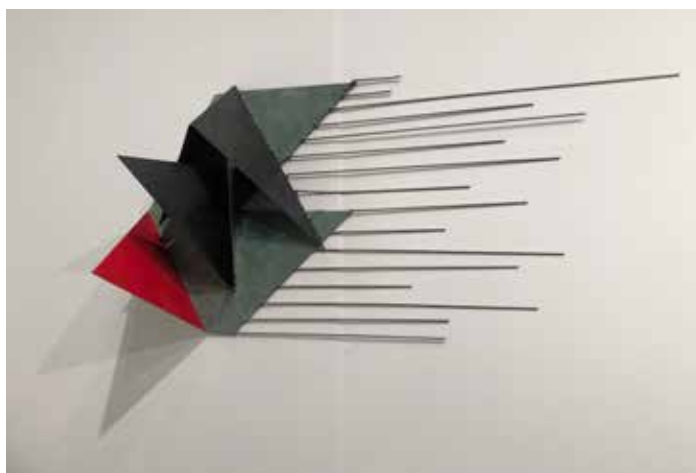
Left: Danny Ferrell, *Pansies*, 2019. Oil on canvas stretched over panel, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York.

Center: Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of Tahiatua Maraetefau II*, 2019, Tahiti Series. Oil on linen, 68 ⅞ x 57 ⅞ inches. Photo courtesy of Galerie Templon.

Right: Devan Shimoyama, *After the Black Ecstatic*, 2019. Oil, colored pencil, rug, sequins, collage, glitter, jewelry and Flashe on canvas stretched over panel, 84 x 72 inches. Photo courtesy of De Buck Gallery.



Works that Caught Our Eye at EXPO Chicago 2019



Parvin Peivandi, *Portrait of a Nomad Woman, Frame #3*, 2019. American steel, old Kurdish rug woven by Iranian Kurdish women, Chicago sourced encaustic, 19 x 38 x 11 inches. SAIC booth. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Carlos Garaicoa, *De la series Puzzles: Carro y Farola*, 2019. Jigsaw puzzle over photograph. GALLERIA CONTINUA. Photo by Michel Ségard.



Above: Peter Linde Busk, *The Generous Gambler*, 2019. Fired and glazed ceramics, treated paper, treated wood, wood stain, shellack, cardboard, card, foam, on board 80.7 x 59 x 4.7 inches. Photo courtesy of Josh Lilley.

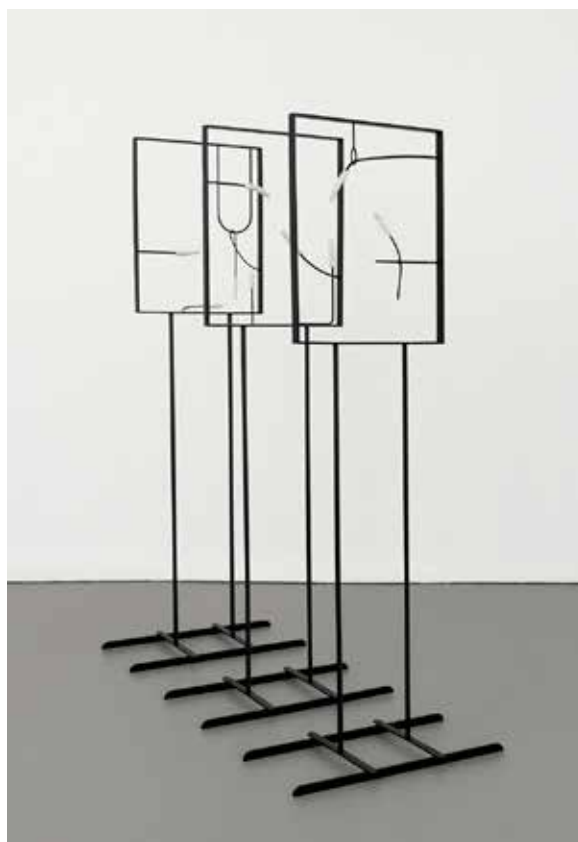
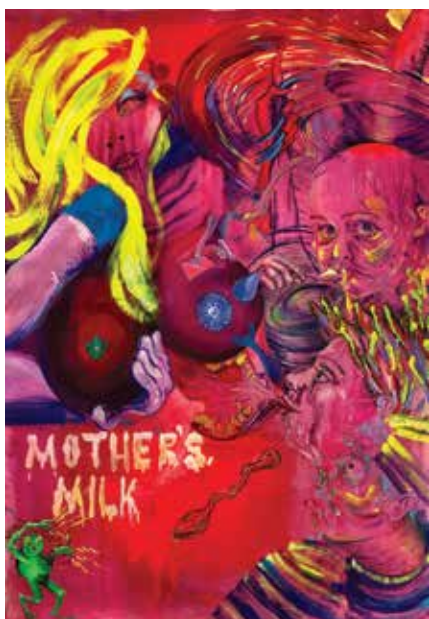
Left: Maskull Lasserre, *Anvil Study #3 (Lyre's Paradox)*, 2018. Steel, Wood, Violin components, velvet, sand, potential sound, 25 x 9 x 34 inches. Galerie Division. Photo by Michel Ségard.

Right: Nathan Mabry, *Nostalgia of the Infinite (Le Portrait)*, 2019. Aluminum, bronze, stainless steel, paint, 91 x 39 x 105 inches. Photo courtesy of Philip Martin Gallery.

Below: Barnaby Barford, *The Apple Tree*, 2019. 80 Apples: oil paint on bone china. Tree: painted mild steel, PU pipe. 18 x 118 x 118 inches. Photo courtesy of David Gill Gallery.



Works that Caught Our Eye at Chicago Invitational Presented by NADA



Above Left: Stevie Hanley, *Mother's Milk*, 2019. Watercolor pencil, gouache, and acrylic on paper, 53.5 x 42 inches. Photo courtesy of M. LeBlanc gallery.

Above Right: Alex Chitty, installation view of *Linnet I, Linnet II, Linnet III* (2019). Powder coated steel, cast aluminum, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON. Photo by Aron Gent.

Left: Blair Whiteford, *Untitled (Annunciation)*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 94 x 76 inches. Jack Barrett Gallery. Photo by Michel Ségard.

Bottom: Amir Khojasteh, *Untitled (Leaders #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6)*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 53 x 40 inches each. Images courtesy of Carbon 12, UAE. © Copyright by the Artist.



DETROIT VIEWS

The Medium and The Message: New Media and the Democratization of Fine Art in Detroit

by K.A. Letts

Visual artists have historically been enthusiastic experimenters and explorers of new ways to see and make, but now things have gotten crazy. Technologies like video, 3D printing, digital printing and live-streaming are speeding ahead of our ability to digest their significance and formal possibilities. Cultural institutions are likewise disoriented by the speed at which new media must be adapted and adopted within the walls of institutions conceived in the 19th century to house static objects.

Marshall McLuhan's still-valuable insights on media can be productively applied to our current state of confusion. In his view, our cultural environment is a product of its historical context. That environment allows or requires the development of new technologies. These new technologies, in turn, change the cultural environment... and so on. It's a dialog—or, perhaps, dialectic.

Which brings me to the humble spray paint can as an example of a simple invention that has spawned an entirely new—and still evolving—art form. A technological advance as rudimentary as a new way of applying paint enabled the birth of graffiti art in the 1970s and '80s, which in turn changed our perception of who is entitled to personal expression in the public space and what that might look like.

Spray Paint and Street Art

Though mass-produced spray paint was invented in 1949 (by Bonnie and Edward Seymour in Sycamore, IL, in case you're interested), things didn't really get going until the early 1970s, when it occurred to creative young kids in the Bronx that they could take advantage of New York's economic disarray and a lack of adult supervision to create a new kind of ethnically inclusive expressionism. The speed with which they could illegally tag subways and blank walls—thanks to those spray cans!—allowed them to develop a visual language that privileged the expressive potential of previously marginalized artists. Predictably, howls of



Murals in the Market, Eastern Market Detroit. Mural by Oizi (Louise Chen Jones) and Michelle Tanguay. Photo by K.A. Letts.

outrage from authorities ensued, but all the while, the idea that personal expression could belong in a public space took root.

It was interesting to watch the evolution of unauthorized painting on public walls from my vantage point in Detroit as artists here began to create street art on the many empty and derelict buildings of the troubled (but not yet bankrupt) city. This was a kind of “second-wave” street art, often sanctioned by building owners and ignored by the city authorities who had much, much bigger problems.

Given the relatively high level of public acceptance for street art in Detroit, more and different individuals and groups have produced murals and 3-dimensional artworks throughout the sprawling city over time. Large-scale urban art installations like *Heidelberg Project*, *Dabls Mbad Bead Museum*, *Hamtramck Disneyland* and the *Lincoln Street Art Park* all developed organically from grassroots beginnings.

Murals in the Market, one of the best known of a new global genre of street art festivals, has also contributed

to the inclusiveness of street art. Women artists like Ouizi (Louise Chen Jones), Shaina Kasztelan and Ellen Rutt, to name a few, have produced murals for the festival, and artists of color like Tiff Massey, Olayami Dabls and Ivan Montoya are well-represented as well. Dan and Jennifer Gilbert's financial support for The Z, the Belt and *Library Street Collective* has also contributed to the legitimization and democratization of street art, now Detroit's "official" art form.

Art on the street has slowly lost its outlaw image. Even an established arts institution such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, sensing the public's growing appetite for visual art in public spaces—and an opportunity to reach a new audience—has gone outside the walls of the museum with its program "Inside|Out," which brings high-quality reproductions of masterpieces from the museum's collections to outdoor venues throughout metro Detroit. There could hardly be a better illustration of street art's official acceptance than the recently announced *Detroit Blight Abatement Artist Residency Program* (BAARP), which commissions murals by formerly unsanctioned artists.

Not a bad legacy for a can of spray paint.

SaveArtSpace.org

That's not to say that street art has reached its endpoint as an art movement. Street art's provisional, often temporary existence and competition for space with commercial advertisers inspired artists Travis Rix and Justin Aversano to take the next step in 2015. They founded SaveArtSpace.org, a non-profit online organization that juries work by emerging artists from a wide range of backgrounds, ethnicities, ages and conditions for on-street exhibits of art on billboards.

SaveArtSpace got started as a counter-measure when the two noticed that commercial advertisers in

SaveArtSpace billboard from their show, "The Future is Female." Art by Elise Peterson. Photo by K.A. Letts.



Murals in the Market, Eastern Market Detroit. Mural by Brandan Odums and Rick Williams. Photo by K.A. Letts.

their Brooklyn neighborhood were papering over artists' murals with ads. Neither had a background in advertising, but they decided to buy ad space on billboards and put up reproductions of work by artists from all walks of life. Their first project, in Bushwick, Brooklyn, included 11 billboards and 12 artists. It showcased work from a 12-year old-autistic boy and a 94-year-old woman and pretty much everything in between.

Since then, Rix (who has now moved to Detroit) and Aversano have organized over a dozen (and counting) exhibits centered on a variety of themes in locations nationwide. When I spoke to Rix, he was especially proud of their recent and largest event, "The Future is Female," which featured the work of 10 female artists and 20 spaces, juried by 5 female-identifying curators.

In addition to being thoughtfully inclusive of artists from marginalized groups, Rix and Aversano are sensitive to issues specific to the areas where they install work. The effect of public art in accelerating gentrification is of particular concern to the pair, and they often get community input on artworks by enlisting the help of on-site jurors.

"We try to [find a partner] in each town," Rix says. "Over time we've found it's better to have a local person's vision."

SaveArtSpace plans to expand from billboards into video in 2020 with an innovative exhibit on cable television of 30-second videos by artists.

"9 Hours: a live stream from Detroit"

In contrast to SaveArtSpace, which represents a late-state locus in the dialectic between technological invention and societal response to street art, the Detroit-based art event "9 hours: a live stream from Detroit" was a 2-day new media happening. This self-described "experimental platform" was intended to enable artists as they explored emerging online technologies. Featuring a range of artists working across mediums and disciplines with varied content and intent, "9 hours" was live-streamed from Detroit to Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago during this year's EXPO Chicago.

This was new technology in search of an art form, and clearly in its infancy. The performances toggled between the unhinged and the desultory and seemed to be an exercise in range-finding, with emphasis on proof-of-concept and brainstorming. Works were provisional and experimental. While the actual performances were somewhat underwhelming, I had a



Detroit Institute of Art, Inside|Out program, Detroit Metro Airport. *Noah's Ark: Genesis* by Charles McGee.

number of conversations with participants that point toward more fruitful future projects that make use of this very new technology. Leslie Rogers, one of the participating artists, told me she was thinking hard about the implications of police body cams, facial recognition technology and the surveillance state, with the future shape of her art practice to be determined. Video artist and printmaker Ryan Standfest explored the live-TV aspect of live streaming by presenting an Ernie Kovacs-style spiel from a slimy traveling salesman who peddles real estate scams to the unwary (I should say this is a very topical subject in Detroit right now.)

Overall, I was impressed the artists' serious intent, even though some of the proceedings were manifestly silly. Standfest, a keen observer and archivist of vintage media, put 9Hours into a historic context for me:

"What interested me about this [live-streaming event] was that there was a fixed camera, a set I had no control over, a finite amount of time and the camera doesn't turn off, so there are boundaries that translate into rules. Whenever I've had to deal with any kind of new media, it's about trying to find out the rules inherent in that medium."

Standfest pointed out that some of the issues impacting new media are familiar: "The pitfalls of social media are the same as when radio was introduced... But it's so highly accelerated [now] that it's creating its own problems. We need to find a rigor. Like in early television, we find out what we're getting into when we get into it. I think it's good to be pushed out of that comfort zone. When I teach, I'm learning that the shelf life of themes in popular culture is so short (that's what we're experiencing on Twitter right now) and that scares the hell out of me. But what do you do? Do you bury your head in the sand?"

Ending on a hopeful note, Standfest pointed out that, technology aside, humans experience the world as they always have, their concerns remain the same and their perceptions are not so different from what they've always been: "I think a good way of thinking of new media is as a refinement of all these other places we've already been, the speeding up of it, the refinement of it. Delivery [becomes] more precise. But a lot of the issues we grapple with [now], we grappled with then too."

It's unlikely that technological advances will slow down in the future; if anything, they may speed up. As cyborgs and artificial intelligence appear on the horizon, it's up to artists to respond thoughtfully and humanely to new challenges in human perception and art production.

That should be quite a challenge.

K.A. Letts is a working artist (kalettsart.com) and art blogger (rustbeltarts.com). She has shown her paintings and drawings in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.

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REVIEWS

Object Redux: 50 Years of Craft Legacy

Racine Art Museum

It is difficult to imagine a time when “craft” was considered to be separate from “fine art.” For many years now, art schools, galleries, and museums that focus on craft have been readily accessible. There are professional associations for specific media, awards, and collectors, and there have now been generations of makers, teachers, and students. Artists have been utilizing what have been considered craft media for thousands of years. But the art world has not always been so welcoming. Makers’ work has not always been pursued by collectors, and the communities that supported craft artists were not always so well known.

In 1969, a gallerist, a corporate president, and a museum director decided to change the relationship between craft and the art world. The timing was fortuitous: artists were exploring new media through a number of opportunities; universities were expanding studio art programs; and collectors were starting to take notice.

Lee Nordness, who ran a commercial gallery in New York City, convinced S.C. Johnson & Son Inc.’s CEO, Samuel C. Johnson, to support an ambitious project. Nordness brought in Paul J. Smith to help curate what turned into a landmark exhibition of over 300 works that traveled to over 30 venues across the US and

Europe. It included a substantial print publication, an hour-long film, and a sales catalogue featuring works by artists in the exhibition. The S.C. Johnson company not only purchased and gifted the works at the close of the tour to museums across the country, they also provided the muscle of corporate PR to increase visibility of the project throughout its intercontinental tour.

Fifty years later, the Racine Art Museum (RAM) has partnered with the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft to celebrate the impact of the 1969 exhibition, which was entitled “OBJECTS: USA.” Both institutions have organized exhibitions that are on view concurrently, and they have collaborated on a thoughtful gallery guide that provides important context and reflects on the lasting importance of that visionary project.

The celebration in Racine takes the form of four related exhibitions. The first, “OBJECTS REDUX: 50 Years After OBJECTS: USA Defined American Craft,” features works from the museum and area collections that were either included in the 1969 exhibition or purchased from the accompanying sales catalogue. The display also incorporates some archival material—original exhibition brochures, contemporary articles, the catalogue, the film, and photographs of artists and the installation at the initial venue, then known as the Smithsonian National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). The three other exhibitions are drawn primarily from the museum’s collection. Each has a different focus. One showcases studio craft made between 1960 and 1985, and two additional exhibitions explore the greater art context of studio craft production and consider primarily functional work that was produced in the decades leading up to the “OBJECTS: USA” project.

Taken all together, the overlapping exhibitions are an ambitious effort. The accompanying materials provide a wealth of information, including clearly written curatorial overviews and a significant interview with Paul J. Smith, the co-curator of the original exhibition. The artists represented are a heady mix of both established and less familiar names: Peter Voulkos, Robert

Wendell Castle. *Desk (Silver Leaf Desk)*, 1967. Mahogany, cherry, plywood, gesso, and silver leaf, 40 x 89 1/2 x 66 inches. Racine Art Museum. Photography by Jon Bolton, Racine.





Marvin Lipofsky and Gianni Toso. *Venini Series 1972 #3*, 1972. Glass, 12 3/4 x 12 x 13 1/2 inches. Racine Art Museum.

Arneson, Harvey Littleton, Marvin Lipofsky, Toshiko Takaezu, Don Reitz, Ruth Duckworth, Art Smith, Wendell Castle, Toots Zynsky, Michael Glancy, Val Cushing, John Takehara, and Linda Threadgill, among others. The objects are sensational, from the unusual hanging form of Littleton's 1969 steel and glass *Reflections* to Castle's luscious and non-utilitarian *Desk (Silver Leaf Desk)* from 1967 to Arneson's whimsical 1972 *Sinking Cup-a-Coffee*.

One of the intentions of the original project was to bring studio craft works into the resource-rich environment of art museums. Supported by big donors, backed up with deep documentation, protected by preservation missions, and highlighted in beautiful, potentially long-term installations, the art museum setting conveys prestige and authority to objects and artists. There are no other venues where works of art are so carefully presented with the intention of being experienced by thousands of people.

The wide assortment of objects in the exhibitions at RAM—including furniture, wall-hangings, small metalwork, glass, and ceramics—poses particular problems for display. These items' fragile surfaces and easily transportable sizes require casework and careful pedestal placement to protect the materials. Lighting can also be tricky, as some objects have potential for drama and spectacle, while others require subtlety due to complex surfaces or conservation needs.

The museum's generous donor community is evident in the loans and gifts that are on display, and the research that went into "OBJECTS REDUX" was clearly extensive. Unfortunately, however, the installation for these important pieces feels flat. The fantastic objects are simply overwhelmed by the sparseness of the space. With even lighting utilized throughout the galleries, there is no emphasis or drama to the exquisite forms and surfaces. The desk by Castle receives the

same lighting treatment as small jewelry or glass work displayed in cases. The casework is likewise sadly limiting. An example is the placement of Peter Voulkos's *Platters* from the *Circular Variations* series. Displayed flat in large cases rather than vertically on a wall, the objects' detailed surfaces are difficult to see in the distance necessitated by the vitrines. The visual power of the series is diminished when the repeated shapes and delicate markings are barely accessible.

This is a basic conundrum of the museum operation: with so many resources available, how to create an engaging experience around fascinating objects and rich background material? How to make the story of the objects visually engaging? It is why museums remain important places to experience artwork. In bringing together the history and the objects, museums enable personal interaction with physical things, which—hopefully—generates enthusiasm. Providing the opportunity to experience the art works that were part of—or are heirs to—the 1969 "OBJECTS: USA" project is an important contribution, not only to current studio craft production, but to the art world as a whole. I just wish this installation design made it easier for visitors to experience just how wonderful the artworks are.

Ann Sinfield

Ann Sinfield is an independent curator and writer. She is also Exhibits Manager at the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"OBJECTS REDUX: 50 Years After OBJECTS: USA Defined America Craft" is on view at the Racine Art Museum through January 5, 2020.

"OBJECTS REDUX: Clay, Glass, and Metal, 1960-1985" is on view through January 26, 2020.

"OBJECTS REDUX: Small-Scale Studio Craft of the 1950s and 1960s" and "OBJECTS REDUX: Studio Craft in Context, 1960-1985" are both on view through February 2, 2020.

Peter Voulkos. *Platter* from the *Circular Variations* series, ca. 1975. Glazed stoneware, 16 inches diameter. Racine Art Museum.



A Dreamer in a City of Many Dreams

"I've loved his music for a long time, so when I heard there was an exhibition of his art, I was shocked! I had to come check out this show," an excited passer-by exclaimed to me as I walked through the Matthew Rachman Gallery. The visitor, who introduced herself as a "huge fan of his punk rock," explained that Willis has had a major impact on mental health awareness in the underground music scene. "He had schizophrenia, but he never gave up on his dreams," she said, adding, "I didn't know he was an Artist!" She stared awestruck at the drawings in front of her.

"Wesley Willis: A City of Many Dreams" explores art and architecture through the eyes of a young man who dreamed of a Chicago with even more buildings. Exhibited at the Matthew Rachman Gallery in West Town, it is a celebration of a Chicago outsider artist and punk rock musician who spent his life documenting the city he called home. Never without his garbage bag full of work and supplies, plus a folding chair so he could set up and draw wherever he pleased, Wesley Willis hardly sounds like a Chicago cultural icon. But his work reveals a way of looking at the world in which architecture and art, imagination and theory, come together to produce a City of Many Dreams.

Most know Willis through his music—he has had various punk rock hits like "Rock & Roll McDonalds" and "Cut the Mullet." However, he is also a celebrated artist, particularly popular overseas for his vibrant American cityscapes. Showcasing never-before-seen works from the private collection of architect T. Paul Young, this exhibition highlights Willis's early work, which was drawn between 1981 and 1991.

Young, a long-time friend and collector of the artist who got his own start in Mies van der Rohe's studio, has spent years trying to share Willis's artistic talent with the world.

"I was in Chinatown in the early 1980s, and I saw a young man sitting and drawing. I immediately recognized in him a talent for architecture," said Young. Young was then a professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology's (IIT's) College of Architecture, and he

invited Willis to spend time at IIT's Crown Hall with his students.

"Being around the activity of Crown Hall gave him a new sense of self," Young remarked. He gave Willis books to study and encouraged him to use ball-point pen and colored pencils to make his drawings last longer. He also helped Willis sell his drawings to students and faculty at IIT, introducing him to the idea that one could earn a living as an artist. "I wanted to share his talent with the students and convince him that his drawings were worth putting his name on."

The show celebrates Young and Willis's friendship and highlights how Willis's exposure to architecture at IIT shaped his aesthetic and vision as an artist. While he never saw himself as an architect, Willis attempted to emulate the structure and look of architectural design. Many drawings feature black and blue pen on notebook paper, resembling blueprints. Many also take the form of a grid or blocks, featuring close-ups or different angles on buildings similar to those seen on maps or in architectural plans.

By far my favorite work of the show is *The Chicago Cityscapes*. A snapshot of various buildings and their inhabitants, this work speaks more than any other to Willis's understanding of design and his perception of

Wesley Willis, *The Chicago Cityscapes*, 1984. Ballpoint pen and felt tip pen on cardboard, 22 x 26 inches. © Wesley Willis. Images courtesy Matthew Rachman Gallery. Photo by Nathaniel Smith.





Wesley Willis, *City of Many Dreams*, 1991. Ballpoint pen and felt tip pen on cardboard, varnished and framed, 28 1/8 x 41 1/2 inches. © Wesley Willis. Images courtesy Matthew Rachman Gallery. Photo by Nathaniel Smith.

Chicago. Some blocks contain only scribbled windows, while others explore the sizes and shapes of different buildings as well as the relationship between buildings and the natural landscape. He also includes the vehicles and people that make up the city, illustrating how their movements and actions are dwarfed by the structures around them. (And we can't forget the nod to his second love, music, in the bandstand at the bottom left corner.) The overall result is an almost abstract, yet still recognizable, interpretation of the city that reveals how architecture dominates Chicago's landscape.

That said, there are certainly elements in his works that depart from architectural renderings and enter the realm of imagination. While depicting real city landscapes, Willis's drawings are often brightly colored and scribbled scenes that appear almost child-like. The centerpiece of the show, *City of Many Dreams*, is a brilliant cacophony of colors and sites. Big cotton candy clouds command an etched blue sky, as bright green grass fans out against spiraled bushes.

In his art, Willis imagined himself as an architect who could help Chicago grow. "He saw Chicago as a City of Dreams, and his dream was

to add more buildings to it. He even designed his own buildings in the Loop," Young noted. "They don't exist in real life, of course, but you can find them in some of his drawings." Willis's art was not only a way of documenting what he saw, but also a vehicle for exploring Chicago's architectural potential.

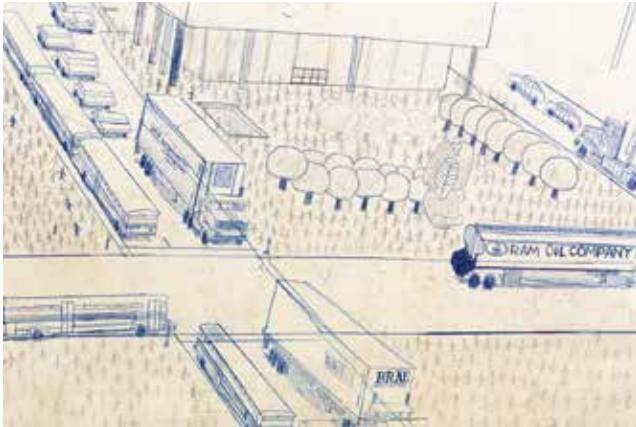
In addition to illustrating Willis's ideas for the city, his drawings offer a new perspective on Chicago's classic structures. Thought to be his earliest drawing, *Untitled* (November, 1981) is a highly accurate rendering of the Loop, drawn on found cardboard with torn and browned edges. But while this piece is made from very simple materials, it reveals a sophisticated technical understanding of both architectural design and Chicago's city planning. Reminiscent of blueprints, this work is a grid in a blue ink color scheme like those used by architects. Drawn

from life with unforgiving pen, not a single line is out of place. This work is a remarkable feat of patience and perception.

Despite the precision and accuracy of the building outlines, Willis has left the architecture completely blank. Instead, he focuses his attention on the cars and people in the street below. His trucks are incredibly intricate, and it is only upon very close study that one realizes the streets are filled with hundreds, even thousands, of carefully drawn people. This reversal of architectural focus is a fascinating twist, and one which is explored throughout his drawings. In fact,

Wesley Willis, *Untitled* (November, 1981). Ballpoint pen and pencil on cardboard, 28 1/8 x 43 1/8 inches. © Wesley Willis. Images courtesy Matthew Rachman Gallery. Photo by Nathaniel Smith.





Above: Wesley Willis, *Untitled* (November, 1981) – Detail

Below: Wesley Willis, *Untitled* (November, 1981) – Detail (including the Chicago Picasso sculpture in Daley Plaza). Both images courtesy Matthew Rachman Gallery. Photos by Nathaniel Smith.

while the buildings appear to be the central feature of these architectural drawings, it is often the vehicles and individuals in which Willis instills the most realism and movement.

“He loved the movement of the city, the activity of people and transportation,” noted Young.

Despite his love of architecture, vehicles seem to be the things that Willis focused on the most. Hung between his larger landscapes are various small studies of trucks and vehicles, drawn in ballpoint pen on lined sheets of ordinary notebook paper. Remarkably precise, these miniature works are a sharp contrast to the scribbled and sketched landscapes that dominate the gallery.

Wesley Willis’s fascination with transportation is shared by his brother Ricky Willis, an architectural historian and artist with Project Onward. Ricky has spent his life exploring Chicago’s architecture, just as his brother did. Shaping cars and water towers out of materials he finds around the city, Ricky creates sculptural models of the same structures and vehicles that fascinated his older brother. Situated amid Wesley’s drawings, Ricky’s sculptures provide a moving

counterpoint within this show, bringing Wesley’s drawings off the page and into a poignant 3D reality.

“I was never a teacher or a mentor to Wesley... I was just someone who could affirm that he was doing something worth doing,” Young explained. “But I can make sure his work is out there and not forgotten, because that’s been the whole point, from the beginning. To get him out there, in special places and special situations. He inspires people.”

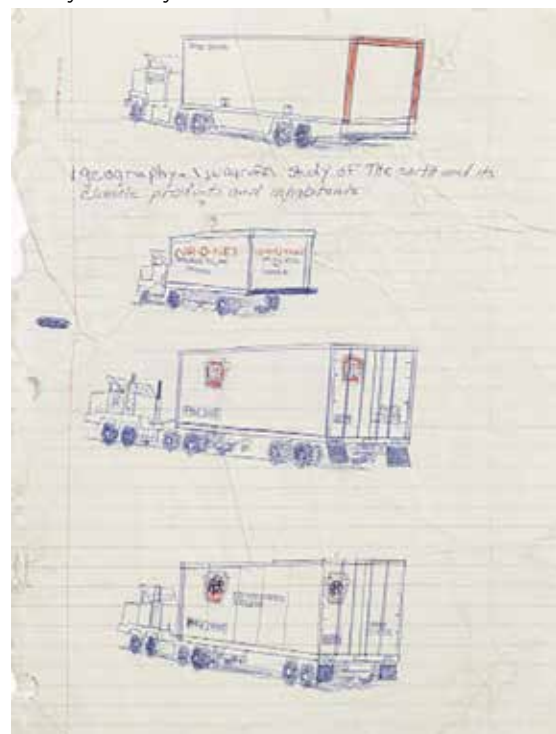
Through Young’s efforts, Willis’s artwork has been shown across the world, in Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and Africa, and is in many major museum collections. And now, Young believes, Chicago is ready for him: “There’s been a change in the last few years, and this country is starting to recognize the importance of outsider art. Wesley is an important figure in Chicago’s cultural history.”

A patchwork of different Chicago architectural features, Willis’s unique drawings reveal the vibrancy of the city through bright colors, sharp lines and scenes of everyday city life. And while he may never have intended to be an artist or expected that his work would one day adorn the walls of a gallery, Willis had an impulsive need to create. “He had a vision of the city,” said Young. “I think he just needed to get these ideas out of his system and onto paper.”

Emelia Lehmann

“Wesley Willis: City of Many Dreams” is on display at the Matthew Rachman Gallery until November 17, 2019.

Wesley Willis, *Untitled*, 1982-1983. Ballpoint pen on lined paper, 8 ½ x 13". © Wesley Willis. Images courtesy Matthew Rachman Gallery. Photo by Nathaniel Smith.



21st Century Surrealism: "Tetsuya Ishida: Self-Portrait of Other"

Every time I visit Wrightwood 659, it fulfills its goal of creating "contemplative experiences of art and architecture" in accordance with architect Tadao Ando's design aesthetic.

I realized how important this message is to the museum when, on my recent visit to "Tetsuya Ishida: Self-Portrait of Other," I saw they are still displaying the same "Tadao Ando: Architect" exhibition that was on view during "Dimensions of Citizenship: Architecture and Belonging from the Body to the Cosmos," which ran from February through April of this year.

Really, Wrightwood 659? Just slap on a new title and wall text and expect us not to notice? Do you have some contractual obligation to display this work every other time you have a show? Or, if this is just filler, why not show some solo or group exhibition of prominent or emerging local artists? It's not like there isn't anything interesting happening in Chicago's art community. Seriously though, I'd really like to know.

Anyway, after breezing through the Tadao Ando exhibit again, I moved on to the upper floors of the museum to experience a well-organized exhibition of some of the strange and engaging paintings of Tetsuya Ishida. As the accompanying text points out, although Ishida is not well known in the West, he is a cult figure in his native Japan. His work is both a reflection and a critique of pervasive cultural conditions in that country. Made during the turn of the new millennium after the economic recession that hit Japan in the nineties, his works speak to concerns of postindustrial anxiety that have had a lasting effect on Japanese cultural identity.

Ishida's paintings are filled with figures that almost all have the same face. Multiple figures in the same painting all appear as clones of one another, suggesting



Tetsuya Ishida, *Refuel Meal*, 1996, acrylic on board. Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

a complete dissolution of individual identity and submission to the monotony of life in a post-industrial capitalist society. *Refuel Meal*, for example, depicts suited diners in a restaurant being served by uniformed workers who plug a feeding mechanism into the diners' mouths. In *Prisoner*, a school building is not only surrounded by identical-looking boys, standing like alienated statues, but the building itself has the giant head and hands of that same boy.

According to the museum's wall text, Ishida explained that his clone-like figures represent a kind of "everyman" or "salaryman," as male professionals are known in Japan. To refer to them as self-portraits solidifies the on-the-nose implication that the self is lost in taking the path of the "salaryman" life. Scenes like the one in *Prisoner* or *Awakening*, a painting set in a primary school classroom filled with clones, some of whom have bodies hybridized with large microscopes, also feature the repeated figures not just as professionals but as the students they were early in life, speaking to the larger socioeconomic system that facilitates a destiny without free will.

It is not only repetition but conflation that is key to the narrative of Ishida's world. As in *Prisoner* and



Tetsuya Ishida, *Untitled*, 2001, oil on canvas. Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

Awakening, in many other pieces, the human body is merged with objects or mechanisms. The first painting we see outside the main gallery, *Untitled*, depicts a man who has melted into his combination bed and desk set and all of the possessions that are piled on top of it.

Heavy-handed as it may be, it is the wide scope of quotidian subject matter that gives Ishida's oeuvre its conceptual weight. Whether it is shopping, exercising, grooming, eating, working, playing, or praying, regular human activity is devoid of unique purpose or value in Ishida's world. Instead, these activities are mere practicalities or functions of the drone-like servants to a dystopian capitalist hive.

Questions arose for me in exploring this exhibition. Were Ishida's pursuits as an artist a remedy for the

Tetsuya Ishida, *Abortion*, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas. Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



suffering depicted in his paintings? Are his images a critique focused more on his own existence or on the world he saw around him?

I did not find answers in the wall text, but I do feel there is something revealed by Ishida's conservative approach to painting. The materiality of paint takes a backseat to the illustrational nature of his particular cultural narrative. Within the universe of broadly surrealistic artists, this places his work closer to the Magritte or de Chirico end of the spectrum than to that of Dali or Ernst. Moreover, his use of the male figure, the aforementioned "everyman" or "salaryman," and a distinct lack of female subjects seem unintentionally to reveal his own position of privilege in Japanese society, which remains far more patriarchal than many modern Western nations.

This exhibition only features five paintings with female subjects (only two of whose faces can be seen; two more are depicted in erotic advertising in *Browsing*) compared with dozens and dozens of renditions of his repeated male figure.

One of the strangest, and perhaps more controversial depictions, at least through a contemporary Western lens, is *Abortion*. A male figure sits on a bed on which a woman lies with her back to the viewer. Under the bed runs a stream with grass, rocks, and a monochromatic baby in some kind of carrier. The male figure looks down at the stream. Although at a glance he looks almost relieved, when I stepped closer to the painting, I saw a deep sadness on his face.

This is the figure in the exhibition with the greatest amount of depth and complexity, at least among those I encountered; still, given that it is a painting about abortion, it says a lot that the male figure is the one shown struggling with the situation while the woman reclines on the bed, presumably in a state of physical trauma but without identity or a clear intellectual struggle—at least not in a way that is consistent with the rest of Ishida's paintings.

Other depictions of women include *Convenience Store Mother and Child* and *On Holiday*. In both, the woman is depicted as a mother figure. These painterly tropes harken back to the Christian altarpieces both pre- and post-Renaissance, adding complexity to Ishida's relationship to the history of painting but still reducing the role of the woman to one that makes her a satellite to the male-centered narrative.

One could make the case that the artist is male and that therefore, through his treatment of the self-portrait, it makes sense that the figures are predominantly



Tetsuya Ishida, *Recalled*, 1998, acrylic on board. Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

male as well. But Ishida explicitly rejected the notion that the figures were representative of him as an individual, leaving them to exist as self-portraits that represent the part of him that is this clone of the “everyman”/“salaryman.”

Though the content of Ishida’s work pertains heavily to a bleak outlook on life—an existence in which identity is reduced to an ultra-conformist notion of non-self—there is enough work here focused on the wide range of struggles experienced by the “everyman”/“salaryman” that this existence looks far more substantive than that of a woman in postindustrial Japanese society. This is not to say that Ishida himself is sexist—rather, it is merely to point out that he was deeply bound to the social structure he dissects with his painterly inquiry.

There is somewhat of a welcome exception in one of the stronger paintings in the exhibition, *Recalled*. This image, which depicts what may be a family observing a worker making some kind of adjustment to a disassembled man in a box, is one of the more ambiguous of Ishida’s larger works. Again, the female figure is likely a wife and mother overseeing the recall of her failed husband, who is but a product. Here, the notion of failure is assigned to the male, but it seems that the woman in the image bears the burden. She displays the same affect of dystopian ennui that is characteristic of the male figures throughout the works in this exhibition.

Whether inadvertent or not, Ishida’s many allusions to tropes of Western painting, such as surrealism and mother-and-child iconography, also hint at an internal conflict of identity. Unlike the celebrated work of Takashi Murakami, whose ‘superflat’ aesthetic embraces Japan’s artistic past while blending it with imagery

from Japan’s pop-culture present, Ishida’s pieces seem to ignore a patently Japanese aesthetic. Instead, Ishida’s *modus operandi* feels longingly aspirational rather than monumentally triumphant.

This begins to answer my lingering questions about his artistic pursuits in the face of his struggles with identity. It seems that in spite of his drive to unveil the true nature of life as a salaryman in postindustrial Japanese society, he still had a kind of blind spot that prevented him from breaking free from it. In an untitled painting from 2004, a year before his death at the age of 31, there are no figures. Instead, the image depicts a bedroom in which an elevated mattress has a pleasant stream with grass and rocks running underneath it. Books are stacked on the mattress. There is a peace to this image—but is it the peace of the grave?

Like the stream in which the baby can be found in *Abortion*, the stream in this image seems to be a metaphor for death. If Ishida’s only answer to escape from this life is death, my question may be answered. Either way, as with any artist who leaves this world so young, we can only wonder where their work may have gone and where it may have taken us.

Evan Carter

Evan Carter is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about Documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.

“Ishida: Self-Portrait of Other” is on view at Wrightwood 659, located at 659 W. Wrightwood Avenue in Chicago, from October 3 through December 14, 2019.

Tetsuya Ishida, *Untitled*, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas. Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



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