

## To refuse/to wait/to sleep

Clint Burnham

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c'est d'aimer d'Andrzej Zulavski (*Body Double X*, 2000) grâce à la technique de l'incrustation. Il s'y révèle touchant en Romy Schneider de pacotille, déboussolé en Jacques Dutronc, mari mal dans sa peau de clown triste. La série des *Body Double* (titre-hommage au chef-d'œuvre de Brian de Palma) se visionne en retrait, comme une rencontre en tête à tête avec l'artiste polymorphe.

Cet art du travestissement qui ne le dissimule pas toujours tout à fait, Verna l'expose à plusieurs reprises. Là, par défaut, avec cette scène vide au milieu de l'espace, drapé de lourd velours taché — comme une *Oxydation Painting* de Warhol —, rehaussé de quartz (une verroterie dont il a d'ailleurs paré un tondo de sa série *Paramour*, produite lors d'une résidence chez AxeNéo7, à Gatineau, et exposé à la Manif d'Art de Québec lors de l'édition 2017) se déroulent périodiquement des concerts et des performances. Inactif, le dispositif n'a rien de déceptif, il incarne les moments de retrait nécessaires au travailleur rigoureux qu'est Verna.

Au MAC VAL, sa pratique se révèle assidue, réfléchie, loin d'un mouvement expiatoire et cathartique. La vengeance est froide comme les ires de ce dieu-déesse, tantôt Barbarella, Méduse, Pan ou diva-cuir. Donnant le tempo à cet étonnant don de transformiste, malgré une identité visuelle hautement reconnaissable, un immense diaporama égraine des photographies de Jean-Luc Verna nu, prenant la pause. L'exercice y combine grandes œuvres de l'histoire de l'art et moments musicaux d'anthologie, soit un absolu de la culture érudite et populaire de cet homme. Le Kouros d'Agrigente datant de 500 ans avant Jésus-Christ se combine ainsi avec Patti Smith dans son intro de *Horses* et le salut de la *Valse Frantz* de Barbara (2011). Verna s'y dévoile le corps un peu moins tatoué qu'aujourd'hui, face à l'objectif, bras et paumes ouverts de façon symétrique, la jambe gauche avancée très légèrement en marche. Il est le Kouros. Il est Patti Smith. Il est Barbara. Il peut être le *David* du Bernin et Siouxsie à la fois, le *Christ* sur la croix de Goya et Freddy Mercury pendant l'ovation de Wembley en 1986, Kim Phuc photographiée par Nick Ut et Diamanda Galas. Sans artifice, l'incarnation réussit la prouesse d'être parfaite. Comme avec *Body Double*, Jean-Luc Verna fait croire à l'impossible, endosse avec brio tous ces autres et parvient à se départir de lui-même tout en dévoilant sa nudité en format monumental. L'expérience est fascinante. Elle offre une parfaite élégie au mort qui n'occupe pas encore la pierre tombale couverte de quelques atours (parfum précieux, bijoux, blouson de cuir...).

Enterrement des illusions, vanité des plus classiques, ce *memento mori* combine mélancolie et sérénité, offrant un moment de répit dans ce déferlement parfois violent et cru qui s'échappe de la multitude de dessins plus ou moins morbides et blasphématoires alentours, rehaussés de fards scintillants suivant une technique qui lui est propre. Jean-Luc Verna exulte et se précise, se multiplie pour ne faire qu'un, avec un brio exagéré et impeccable.

Bénédicte Ramade est critique d'art en France et à Montréal. Chercheuse postdoctorale invitée par l'Université de Montréal, elle travaille sur l'anthropocénisation de l'histoire de l'art. Elle est également commissaire d'exposition (*Patrick Bérubé, En principe...*, Maison des Arts de Laval, 2016; *The Edge of the Earth*, Ryerson Image Centre, 2016).

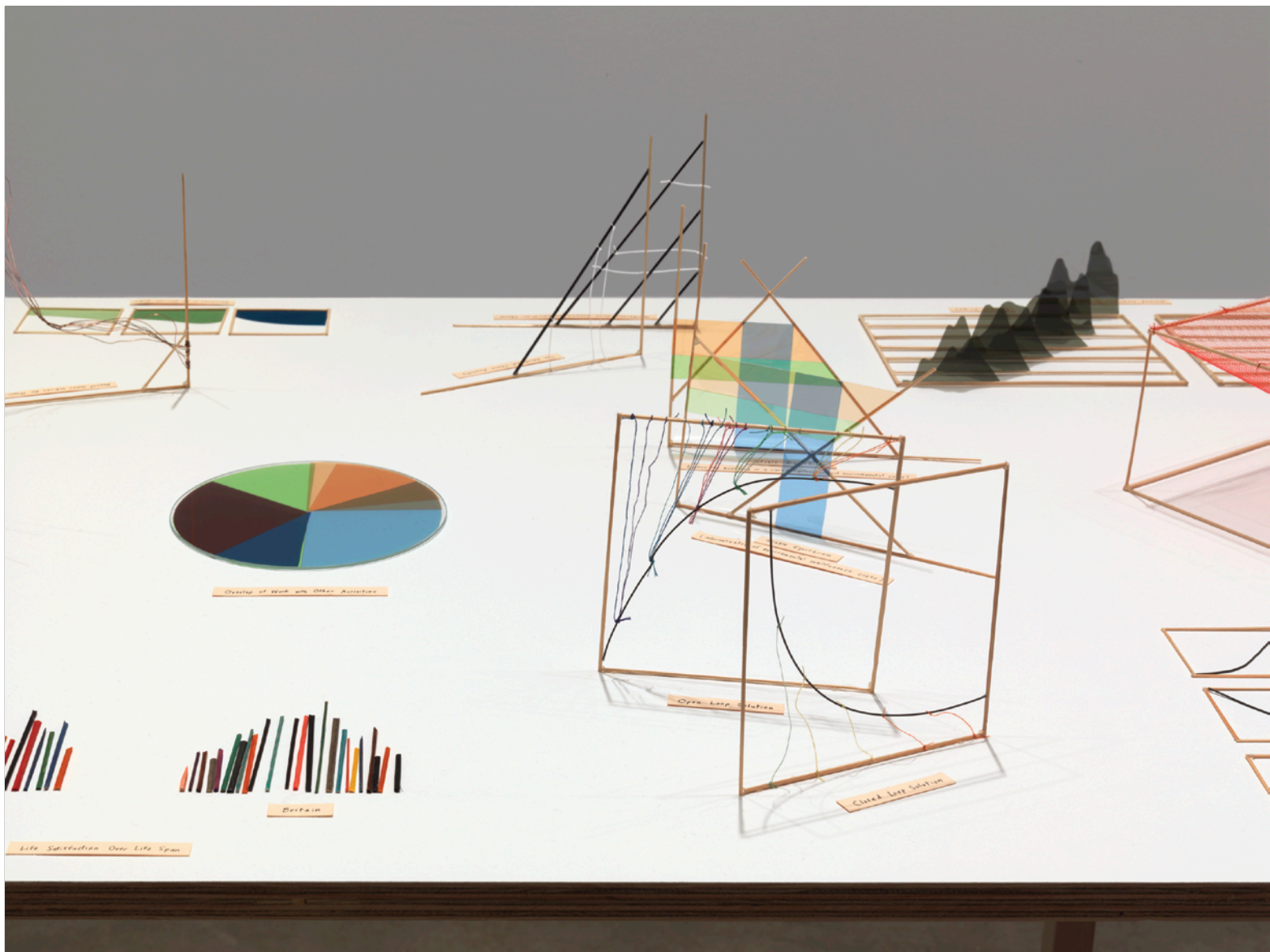
## To refuse/to wait/to sleep

Clint Burnham

**MORRIS AND HELEN BELKIN ART GALLERY  
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
VANCOUVER  
JANUARY 13 –  
APRIL 9, 2017**

There is a contemporary discourse that is characterized by a high level of linguistic abstraction that seems to obscure, from the ordinary bystander, extreme levels of profitability, speculation, and institutional superstructures. I am referring not to contemporary art, but the financial sector of capitalism, which is the target of a new group show at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver. In the exhibition, work by Melanie Gilligan, Goldin + Senneby, Gabrielle Hill, Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, Marianne Nicolson and the Raqs Media Collective engage with the "economy" as metaphor and material. Work bifurcates into one of two tendencies: the turn to the amateur





(Hill's found sculptures, Ibhgy and Lemmens' handmade graphs, Gilligan's social media-phobic video art) and the reappraisal of historic signifiers (Goldin + Senneby's financialized performance, Nicolson's *détournement* of an imperial flag, Raqs Media Collective's video of a Bresson photograph). The question the exhibition raises, perhaps an unanswerable one, is, to put it bluntly, how does a badly made video or a graph reconstituted as Tinker Toy art really provide us with a cogent alternative to the current financial mess?

Hill's works—easily the most impressive of the artworks in the present show—are all scavenged from what geographers call a “brownfield” zone—polluted or post-industrial land, in this case, East Vancouver's False Creek flats. Here Hill, who grew up in the locale, repurposes detritus to craft a beautifully drooping and elongated basketball net (*Tidal Economies*, 2014), or a Jean Arp-like sculpture (*Horse*, 2017), and objects that may lie on the floor or propped against a wall or perched at the top of a room divider or otherwise reference vernacular practices.

*Carpet for a Sharp Fence* (2016), for instance, is a roll of carpet used to pad a barbed wire fence, so as to make crossing the fence less dangerous. Hill's sculptures or objects do not all achieve the same ends however, which is, presumably, to draw attention to the beauty and ingenuity to be found in neglected spaces. Knowledge of *Carpet for a Sharp Fence's* origins—in the social practice, a *bricoleur*-like adjustment of carceral architecture via the “roll ends” of carpeting—overtake any perception of the sculptural artwork itself. Indeed, one is tempted to paraphrase Walter Benjamin's trenchant remarks about a text of Ernst Bloch's: it is as if “arriving at the scene of an area devastated by an earthquake [one] can find nothing more urgent to do than to spread out the Persian carpets.” I am evidently spending some time on Hill's work because of its suggestive rigor; if I am correct in detecting the minimalist program at work here (but also *arte povera*), *Eviction Monument* (2017), made, we are told, of “granite, foam, concrete and wire” is suspicious for what appears to be epoxy holding together the scavenged material. Like a Carl Andre work, that is, it



challenges the viewer not to fall back on a Michael Fried-like rejection of the sculptural for its “theatricality.” Rather, coming up to a work that appears to be about to fall over, one is inescapably aware of one’s body. And yet, unlike an Andre (or a Nairy Baghramian), here we have a work that is less precarious than it seems. So it is the opposite of the minimalist conceit, and yet therefore all the more theatrical. Of course, no progressive art critic in Vancouver would dare approvingly cite Fried, and so, in a loser-wins logic, Hill’s sculptures gain what they have lost, made, as they are, in the precarious 21st century, rather than the flush 60s, they cannot.

*To refuse/to wait/to sleep* is an uneven exhibition and the unevenness may be structural, may be related to what Trotsky called “uneven development,” or the ways in which capitalist economics work at different scales and with different tempos in different parts of the world: so people may have cell phones but still live in shacks. This condition is appropriate to an exhibition about economics, but here the uneven development has to do with different aesthetic fields. Thus while Ibgby and Lemmens’ materialization of economic graphs are totally up to date (but via an Etsy aesthetic that indulges in an allegory of the crude and the hand made), Gilligan’s *The Common Sense* (2014) series of videos seem out of time, both formally and in a generational sense. Gilligan’s videos (four of which were on display at the Belkin but all of which can be viewed online at <http://thecommonsense.org/>) tell the story of a slightly futuristic society in which a dental dam-like implant allows or forces its users to communicate by telepathy. There no doubt is more of a back story, but the episodes seem to be merely badly acted scenes of university lecturers worried about their students not paying attention, or people enduring crap jobs. Thus the precarious economy and social media distraction are conveyed, but with lower production values and a less thrilling plot than an average episode of Charlie Brooker’s TV series *Black Mirror*.

Even the inverse is true, as when the Raqs Media Collective takes a Henri Cartier Bresson photograph of a crowd at a failed bank in Shanghai and remakes it as a video portrait à la Gillian Wearing. Now historical frenzy becomes *not* Bresson’s clichéd “decisive moment” but that very moment stretched to a six-minute video pose, as if historical trauma (or at least panic) were suddenly something we can sneer at. That is, unlike Gilligan’s po-faced *auteurism*, here it is artistry of the bourgeois photojournalism type that is scorned.

Of course it makes perfect sense, then, that one now sees critiques of finance capitalism emerging in the art world. There may be a way to take this analysis to the next level, to argue that Gilligan’s work is a comment on the precarious nature, not only of the contemporary artist, but also of the artworks... (Third Cinema, lo-fi pop, *arte povera*)... making a virtue of necessity. Which may sum up the entire project of this exhibition (curated by the extremely capable Lorna Brown). The question of necessity encountered in artistic practice as a limit to the work of art: art in which the problem with neoliberal economics covers different ideological tendencies (so the left-wing Thomas Piketty would be as bad as the right-wing Milton Friedman in that they both rely on forms of abstraction, from formulas to graphs). In some strange way, then, Marianne Nicolson’s inversion of the British Columbia flag (recalling imperial nostrums about the empire on which the sun never set) relies on an aesthetic preference for colonial-era button blankets

of North-West Coast indigenous people, as if the ingenuity of the colonized (in a gesture that recalls Ibgby and Lemmons) were a match for smallpox, militarized invasions, and capitalism. Also, the hedge fund-financed performance of Goldin + Senneby (which, the day I visited, meant a super chatty actor trying to pass us his resumé) offers the contradictory thesis that art financed by the stock market is somehow radical, or at least subversive.

Clint Burnham teaches at Simon Fraser University. He has recently written on Raymond Boisjoly (*Espace Art Actuel*), Brigitta Kocsis (grunt gallery), Walker Evans (*Scan*) and William Burroughs (*Breathless Days, 1959/60*, eds. Serge Guibault and John O’Brian).