

Collective Projections and the Politics of Place

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COLLECTIVE PROJECTIONS AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE

Fredric Jameson concludes his essay in a recent issue of *New Left Review* by stating that contemporary political struggles are concerned primarily with land.¹ He argues that artists are increasingly interested in space, rather than time, which has led to a loss of historicity—which is certainly regrettable—but also a bolstering of collective action concerning land, real-estate, and private property. In our current period of global capitalism the urgency of this struggle is deeply felt and expressed in a myriad of forms.

Collective practices in the arts demonstrate one particularly poignant form of this struggle. Artists, such as Daniel Young and Christian Giroux and the collective Postcommodity, address the politics of the places within which they reside, while inhabiting varying degrees of utopianism or criticism. The video work produced by these artists belies its often deadpan structure and apparent simplicity by challenging the social and political context of the places within which they work. The collaborative nature of their production furthers this challenge, as they implicitly undermine the individualism that our contemporary consumer culture is founded upon. While these artists demonstrate an interest in the politics of land that corresponds to Jameson's assessment, they are not interested only in the present—as he claims most contemporary artists are—but rather develop a critical historical reflection that runs across and throughout their work.

The Politics of Place and the Legacy of Colonialism

This critical historical reflection is perhaps most thoroughly developed within the work of the

collective Postcommodity, which consists of members Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, Kade L. Twist, and Nathan Young. Their recent exhibition at A Space Gallery in Toronto challenges Marc Augé's notion of the non-place, where a space is said to be without history and identity.² In the exhibition's didactic material, Elynn Walker argues that Augé's binary, which positions place against non-place, follows the form of similar binaries, such as history versus prehistory or civilization versus savagery, and in effect "does more to hold colonialism 'in place' than it does to actually call it 'out of place,' offering an alibi for European notions of terra nullius, Manifest Destiny and now global capitalism." It is true that these current and past forms of colonial dominance either negated historical reflection or subscribed to a limited, conservative history, which left little room for alternative histories and cultural perspectives.

In response to this, Postcommodity confronts the viewer with a critical rereading of both the past and present. Their video *Gallup Motel Butchering* (2011), depicting a woman butchering a sheep in a motel bathtub, was projected on all four walls of A Space's main gallery space. It is a difficult but important work, with close-ups of some of the most brutal steps of the butchering. Unlike within global capitalism, where war and oppression are overlooked or diminished, the work does not conceal violence but focuses on it, encircles you in it, making it almost impossible to look away. The woman doing the butchering is a young Navajo woman, and the motel is located in Navajo territory, near Gallup, New Mexico. The slaughter depicted is an important element of the Navajo culture, as the sheep provides

sustenance for the community. It is also symbolically significant, however, since the act constructs a space of "Indigenous cultural autonomy," as Walker writes. A fairly plain motel bathroom, which would certainly qualify as one of Augé's non-places, becomes charged with a cultural self-determination that rejects consumer capitalism. Producing one's own food opposes the imperative to passively consume, but this work goes further, aligning this mode of production with a call for Indigenous sovereignty that refuses to forget traditions that colonial powers have attempted to erase. Here place is deeply politicized, but not without a historical reflection that places this politics within a broader cultural context. Some of the scenes in *Gallup Motel Butchering* are rendered at a slower frame rate, drawing out the action and giving the viewer a deeper sense of presence. This reflection and presence opposes the colonial erasure, allowing for the action to be all the more immersive, as difficult as this immersion may be.

Collective Projections at Four Frames Per Second

Though far less direct in their approach, Daniel Young and Christian Giroux have demonstrated a sustained interest in the complexities of the places they inhabit, but they have focused more on how this is expressed within the built environment. Their recent work *Berlin 2012/1983* (2015), which explores the city where they both now live, consists of static shots of buildings that were constructed either in 2012 or the mid-1980s,³ and which are here projected in a dual-channel video. The viewer sees, on the right, the older buildings constructed before the fall of the Berlin wall





Postcommodity, *Gallup Motel Butchering* #1.

and, on the left, the more recent buildings. Every few seconds a flash of black can be seen, disrupting the scene like a quick blink of an eye. The black is caused by the video's extremely slow frame rate, which is less than four frames per second. Each building is shown for a minute or so, with the two projectors so in sync that even the black flashes line up. As the full video runs for over two hours, it seems to ask for a quiet reflection that verges on meditation.

This reflection is influenced in part by a lack of speech and text in both *Berlin 2012/1983* and *Gallup Motel Butchering*, as well as by the similar strategy of slowing frame rates and allowing the videos to develop gradually without overt direction. While both engage with a fairly defined political context, Young and Giroux's work seems more intent on maintaining a distance and asking questions. How might the fall of the Berlin wall be expressed in the built environment? Does the opening that was created, with the increased globalization that followed, demonstrate a shift to a more global form of building?

I left the video reflecting on this broader political economy, somewhat disappointed by its refusal to engage with the issue further, though that seemed in a way the point. As with other work by Young and Giroux, including *Infrastructure Canada* (2010-2012) and *Every Building, or Site, that a Building Permit Was Issued for a New Building in Toronto in 2006* (2008), the video is shot in the style of a land survey, following a documentary format that appears to claim a degree of objectivity. But we should know better. Just as a

non-place will not be devoid of history or identity for everyone who inhabits it, the camera likewise cannot stand outside of history.

The significance and nuance of history does, however, often elude us. Frederic Jameson, in his essay "The Aesthetics of Singularity," relates his notion of the singularity to time much in the same way that the non-place is related to space. He writes that a singularity is "a pure present without a past or future,"⁴ which is not to say that nothing came before or will follow, but that the event in question is considered without a temporal context. He argues that artists are increasingly creating event-based works that obscure this context, producing them "not for posterity, nor even for the permanent collection, but rather for the now."⁵ I suspect that it may not be this simple. If artists are not producing for the permanent collection, it may be more due to the influence of their precarious working conditions and broader austerity measures than to their narrow interest in the present. While many artists are in fact concerned with an abstracted event that exists outside of time, others, such as Postcommodity or Young and Giroux, focus more intently on the concrete, exploring the events that define our collective past.

The levels of engagement present in the work of these artists are emblematic of some of the many ways that we can engage with critical thought and historical reflection. Whether from a cramped motel bathroom or a sprawling city, the places that these artists inhabit are seen as deeply political, and those

politics are in turn questioned. These places are elevated and emphasized, which is significant since, as Jameson writes, "land is not only an object of struggle between the classes, between rich and poor; it defines their very existence and the separation between them."⁶ As is evident in *Gallup Motel Butchering*, one's culture is continually constructed and reconstructed within lands that are significant to their communities. The land is often both the site and content of their struggle, and the events that surround these struggles are, as these videos remind us, of the utmost importance.

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Michael DiRisio is a Toronto-based writer and visual artist. His writing can be found in *Art Papers*, *Afterimage*, *C Magazine*, *Esse*, and *Public Journal*, among others, where he typically addresses the intersections between labour, politics, and collaborative art practices. He holds an MFA from the University of Windsor and is currently Digital Projects Coordinator for *C Magazine*.

1 Jameson, Fredric. "The Aesthetics of Singularity." *New Left Review* 92 (March/April 2015): 130.

2 Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Trans. John Howe. London and New York: Verso, 1995. 77-78.

3 The "83" in the year "1983" is crossed out because the artists were not certain of the exact date of construction of the older buildings that they filmed.

4 Jameson, *op. cit.*, 113.

5 *Ibid*, 111.

6 *Ibid*, 130.