



Nurhan Gokturk, First floor installation. Photo: © Travesia Studio.

“Anarchitecture” and New Orleans Art

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A BUILDING WITH A VIEW:
EXPERIMENTS IN ANARCHITECTURE
Contemporary Arts Center
New Orleans, LA

IN THE ESSAY “Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Legacy of the 1970s,” Philip Ursprung describes the original context of the “Anarchitecture” exhibition held in March 1974 at the artist’s exhibition space at 112 Greene Street, New York. Matta-Clark intended to unify the show through photographs researched in the city’s archives. The poorly documented exhibition, which featured works by Laurie Anderson, Suzanne Harris, Jeffrey Lew, Richard Nonas, Tina Girouard, Jene Highstein, Bernard (“Burnie”) Kirschenbaum, and Richard Landry, eventually consisted of those as well as Dadaistic texts and images of collapsed train cars and various disintegrating objects.

The representations in that show appear to correspond closely with Matta-Clark’s 1974 project, *Splitting*, a performative work in which he used a chainsaw to dissect a suburban New Jersey house, causing its halves to gently sag apart. Photographs of this work portray a hulking, swooning home, the content of which is attributed to Matta-Clark’s separation from his partner, Carol Goodden, as well as the nature of the experimental art world of New York in the 1970s. That environment was being developed into the white cube gallery scene that it is today – and in reference to this, the work marks a split from one world and the next. It is telling that 112 Greene Street, originally a space for essentially an artist collective, would become “White Columns” gallery, a primary exhibition space that has shown some of the most profitable artists’ works of the late-20th and 21st centuries.

A core group of the artists in the “Anarchitecture” show of 1974 met regularly to discuss ideas that led to the development and use of the eponymous term. Also in difference to the com-



Helen O'Leary, First floor installation. Photo: © Traviesa Studio.

moditized, object-based art trade that speedily and further developed in the Post-modernist age of the 1970s and 80s, the Anarchitecture group made not-things, and deconstructed the idea of art into beliefs, concepts, and conversations – all with serious intent. Ursprung remarks on the conflict of the exhibition against the nature of the “art” being made by the group – it seemed hypocritical to exhibit a show of things when the intended content was emphatically anti-thing. The anarchical stance implicit in the term emphasizes this viewpoint.

The title for the exhibition “A Building with a View: Experiments in Anarchitecture,” on view throughout the Contemporary Arts Center, appropriates Matta-Clark’s term, and references the notecards on which Matta-Clark wrote conspicuously Dadaist phrases. The first part of the title recalls Matta-Clark’s most well-known works: the chainsaw incisions he made into buildings to provide a new view.

The exhibition text loosely references the “form of thinking” that the Anarchitecture group embraced as work. The free-form intention of the show at the CAC, which references the “community of friends and artists” in New Orleans and “space as

a social and formal condition” incorporates works culled from an open call earlier this year. The call asked for submissions from artists with experience in New Orleans that investigated language as a means of art making, social conditions, excavation of history, and the “paradox of construction through destruction,” all themes present in Matta-Clark’s work, as well as keenly felt within our local memories.

The show, which is intended to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the CAC’s beginnings, spreads over the building’s three floors. The text points out that this building was reappropriated as an exhibition space – it used to house the inventory and headquarters of the K&B drugstore chain, and was donated in the early 80s to meet the purposes of the CAC. In this sense, the building itself is part of the exhibition, and it is fitting to consider its history of change in the context of this show – which will apparently continue through the “redevelopment” of its galleries. The sprawling interior is cramped with closely spaced works throughout, a testament to the thriving, vibrant New Orleans art world.

Works on the first floor explore the contrast between analog and digital realms and histories, considering the broadened



Ted Calas: Second floor installation.

“interconnectivity” that rules contemporary life through the Internet, a social space. Upon entering the gallery, a tornado-shaped tower of cut vinyl records pairs with large-scale cyanotypes, all by Nurhan Gokturk. The prints are inscribed with Twombly-like scrawl; the medium references architectural blue prints, and the mostly illegible, superimposed language recalls ancient methods of recording and rerecording written or drawn information for various functional or esoteric purposes. The vinyl – metaphorically “spinning” in a wind-tower - is also inert and unusable, and asserts its nostalgic cultural value; all the records are cut with music, and serve as a dead history of the form. In both cases, these works reappropriate outdated forms of design and inventorying, and suggest the comparative slowness of and intense longing for analog methods in a digital world. Still, they are forms of social communication.

Helen O’Leary’s sculpture, *Shelf Life of Facts*, also suggests outdated and outmoded historical recording methods, in its accumulation of Tinker Toy-like tiny paintings strewn throughout

a structure resembling a wiry installation by Judy Pfaff or Sarah Sze. The little objects seem like tokens, arrayed in various groupings along the sculpture’s low-lying pedestal bases. The title suggests the ways history is rewritten and rearranged – that there is a “shelf life” to the truths we hold. Though the area is delineated with “do not touch” warnings, interactions with the viewer’s own rearranging of these bits might clarify this content. However, O’Leary, a Brooklyn-based artist who was a resident at the Joan Mitchell Foundation in New Orleans in 2016, has good reason to protect the extremely delicate parts of the work.

As objects, Christopher Saucedo’s large digital prints of vintage comic book covers and Annie Laurie Erickson’s digital photographs are the clearest examples of the digital/analog relationship described in the exhibition text as the “fierce return to materiality” that “compete[s] with the virtual environments that seem to define social arrangements of the 21st century.” Charred and missing parts within Saucedo’s images reference his methods of branding his work, as well as point to literal historical “holes,”



Generic Art Solutions: *Flight*, 2014. Ink on acrylic mirror, dimensions variable. Photo: © Traviesa Studio.

as well as – in this context - the openings in Matta-Clarks’s cut out intersections and openings. While there is this formal reference to problems inherent in historical social space, simply put, these are digital prints of traditionally printed material. They speak of the head-spinning speed and ease of reproducibility the digital age has brought forth, as well as the desire to collect and preserve what were once considered utilitarian and even base materials, not unlike Gokturk’s record tower.

Erickson’s towering, oblong photographs of data server interiors, laced with a complicated network of wires, lights, and buttons, depict a cacophony of color and texture that is methodically ordered to create digital space. The photographs, too, are digital prints, and the materiality of their form and subject matter contrasts with the immaterial space the subjects are responsible for making.

It was recommended at the entrance of the exhibition to take the CAC’s spiraling ramp upwards to enter the second floor of the exhibition, where two stunning figurative paintings by Ted Calas greet the viewer. This gallery explores formal intents, as related to space – whether the illusionistic or sculptural creation of it through form, or how space becomes occupied by focal point

and shifts in the “field of vision.” The play of vision’s movement across the picture plane to various points of emphasis is activated by the figures painted into sparse environments in Calas’ work, whose relationships within the paintings also suggest the “aesthetic and political” connotations associated by the space they take up, and where the eye rests. Gender and age roles are apparent in their relationships.

Just further into the gallery, Jennifer Odem’s installation of two resin-coated fabric sculptures and one mixed media painting relate to domestic environments. Odem makes fiber-based work that firms immaterial space into negative shape, akin, in a reversed way, to Rachel Whiteread’s casts of negative space. The delicate, lacy, flexible materials she uses are frozen in deceptively loose and flowing drapes over nothingness. The two sculptures broadly reference furnishings and frame an interior that is punctuated by a small painting that reads as a decorative element, much like a household interior would be lovingly appointed with wall hangings and warm blankets. The sentimentality contrasts the inflexible rigidity of the fabric forms, held in place by hardened resin.

Generic Art Solutions’ *Flight*, an installation of convex



Manon Bellet, Third floor installation. Photo: © Traviesa Studio.



Robert Tannen, Third floor installation. Photo: © Traviesa Studio.

mirrors printed with the image of a falling man, fill a wall facing the back of the gallery, where they reflect blackness that is interrupted by the presence of the viewer. The subject matter recalls Yves Klein's infamously deceptive, manipulated photograph, *Leap Into the Void*. The reflective material of this work implicates the viewer as a participant in the spectacle. The shiny, sleek surfaces and the violence of the act of falling, combined with the mirrored reflection of the audience, suggests the distance between viewer and violence that is lengthened by the repetition of similar material in the digital realm. More directly, they are clear examples of the question about who and what "commands the field of vision" in works on the second floor, as sight shifts between the colored reflection of the viewer and the achromatic print of the falling figure.

The third floor can be read as an entire installation dominated by Manon Bellet's wall of burnt silk paper fragments, titled *Brèves braises (brief embers)*. The work on this floor "embraces anarchitecture's refusal of fixity" belied by the term's associations with object making – and there is both presence and absence in this work. The burned fabric is a relic of a larger presence, with a specific history, reduced to fragile bits in an ephemeral installation. Recent (and increasingly more frequent) fires in the north- and southwest United States have incurred similar losses and transformations. The association that destruction specifically has with the loss of homes is emphasized by the presence of a deconstructed tent, part of an installation by Elizabeth Shannon titled *ENCAMPMENT*. Though the installation directly references World

War I, in general, the tent is a temporary and vulnerable structure that yet provides warmth and protection – a site of transience and contrast. Map prints surrounding the perimeter of the gallery and flat, white, terrain-like sculptures, all by Robert Tannen along with collaborators Matthew Foreman and Carly Lynn Neel, relate to the landscape that is consistently affected by natural forces, never in a state of stasis.

The monumental scale of this show attests to the CAC's presence in New Orleans' art history. It reaches far to various facets of the curatorial theme. Its grandness and breadth stretches long ways in some of the work, but at the same time each work within this show can be singularly contextualized within the exhibition's frame.

The history of New Orleans' art scene is a lengthy and particular topic to tackle, and though it may seem that no survey of arts in the city would ever adequately summarize or communicate about its nature, it is a bold step to take as a new leader takes the helm of this institution's visual arts. The simultaneous, paradoxical existence of object and formlessness present in the concept of anarchitecture parallels the local paradox of under water and above ground – and if anything, the work in this show demonstrates that kind of paradox and the impossibility of forming and clearly communicating about one single thread of thought within our city's art history. This show peers into a plane of that shifting history – much like Matta-Clark did in his work, with his chainsaw. □