

## Ground Zero Redux

"You won't say that I hold the present too high, and if I do not despair of it, it is only because its desperate situation fills me with hope."

-- Karl Marx in a letter to Arnold Ruge from May of 1843.

The term Ground Zero was first used to name areas directly below atomic explosions (beginning with the Trinity Test Site, Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945). It later came to signify reinvention or rebirth through acts of leveling, collapse, total destruction or reduction to essences and *tabula rasa*-like states. Many historical moments have been retroactively associated with the term but the singularity of its meanings might now seem anachronistic within an increasingly hybridized, global society (characterized by a constant flux and simultaneity of perceptions and determinations of meaning). Ground Zero mythologies persist despite this. 9-11 continues to be a dominant example, as both a point of departure for the "War on Terror" and a reconfiguration of seemingly *everything* that existed beforehand.

The present is further complicated in relation to ideas of Ground Zero by the proliferation of identities, demographics, and products within the global market place. While stuff and subjectivities continue to accumulate exponentially, regional specificity is destroyed, languages, cultures, species and habitats are erased, and the common threat of ecological collapse increases. Perhaps most importantly, despite the plurality of values and beliefs contributing to a growing world culture, we continue to witness the reduction of others to Ground Zero-like states -- what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called "bare life"<sup>1</sup> -- an expulsion from political community through incarceration, statelessness, denial of rights and resources, torture and extreme poverty.

In 1967 the Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse called for what he described as the end of utopia: "Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so. We also have the capacity to turn it into the opposite of hell. This would mean the end of utopia, that is, the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities."<sup>2</sup> In 1989, the American essayist Francis

---

1

See Giorgio Agamben's book *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

2

This is from a lecture entitled "The End of Utopia" which Marcuse delivered at the Free University of West Berlin in July of 1967 (see [www.marcuse.com](http://www.marcuse.com) for an english translation of the lecture transcript).

Fukuyama announced the arrival of just such a Ground Zero moment - a collapse of ideological struggle exemplified by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the triumph of liberal democracy within a newly emerging global marketplace.<sup>3</sup> After considering the ongoing conflicts that have flourished since, it's not difficult to posit Fukuyama's "End of History"<sup>4</sup> as another utopia wreaking havoc in the world (the extremity of concentrated wealth in the 21st Century speaks to this alone). Almost twenty years later, any continuation of a so-called post-ideological and perpetual present seems very detrimental to the vast majority of life on Earth.

Finding contemporary meaning in the creative potentials of Ground Zero can seem pointless (and perhaps ethically bankrupt) in the face of such disappointment, violence and contradiction. Contemporary art as a professional sphere might only exacerbate this problematic enterprise. When the absence of meaning or truth, as revealed by contemporary art, does little more than support the status quo of societal relations within global capitalism, connections between moral and creative efficacy can seem tenuous at best.<sup>5</sup> I believe many artists today feel trapped by this dilemma and struggle to re-examine historical revolutionary artistic praxis in the hopes of finding solutions. In doing so, the brutal essentialism of past avant-garde Ground Zero scenarios seems unavoidable (consider the mechanized destruction celebrated by the Futurists, the leveling of the "Old World" called for by Situationist stratagems, the hierarchical classifications and exclusionary conditions of post-war formal abstraction, etc). Despite this, such returns render visible the "often violent collisions of a past that has been recuperated in bits and pieces and a present badly in need of insight into what has been."<sup>6</sup> A multitude of singular

---

3

See Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).

4

Ibid.

5

This might seem inevitable if we accept something like Frederic Jameson's assertion that postmodern representation is "not conceived as a dilemma but an impossibility, and what can be termed a kind of cynical reason in the realm of art displaces it by way of a multiplicity of images, none of which corresponds to truth."

See Jameson's book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 212.

6

Michael Jennings, "The Permanent Catastrophe: Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 46.

possibilities previously shut out of the construction of history might reconfigure our understanding of the present. Is art able to restore what has been frozen out of, or ossified by, corpuses of official comprehension -- what has been exiled somewhere between fixed limits of perception, understanding, and radical otherness?

The works in this exhibition present a diversity of creative intentions while engaging with various Ground Zero trajectories in an exploratory manner. It has been my curatorial intention to question the forgetting of possibility that occurs in the aftermath of Ground Zero scenarios (both past and present, in art and life). While in dialogue across a variety of material, narrative and conceptual concerns, perhaps these artists and their works can restore some points of departure (and their endless contents) to consciousness. Maybe they'll make "the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance."<sup>7</sup> Together they could form a kind of Ground Zero Redux.

In the autumn of 2003, Marlene Yuen walked around the Vancouver neighborhood of Mount Pleasant taking photographs with her Holga camera. On one roll of film, she shot images of Praise International Church, a stunning Tudor revival styled building (as well as a fire truck at a nearby station). In the early morning of January 6th, 2004, the church was reduced to a blackened shell by an accidental fire. Yuen quickly photographed the changed site with the same camera, accidentally double-exposing images of the church before and after the disaster. For her, the event she was documenting "felt like a ground zero of community relevance"<sup>8</sup>. This was Vancouver's third-oldest church, situated on a "heritage block" (sometimes known as the "church block"). Today a new condominium development has replaced the church altogether. In a new bookwork by the artist, these unique photographs assist in poignantly addressing the rapid gentrification of a historically rich neighborhood.

In Gwenessa Lam's *Vancouver*, numerous drawings collectively provide an aerial view of downtown Vancouver (particularly False Creek) and its surroundings. Arranged in a grid-formation, the drawings relate to aspects of mapping which incorporate lines of longitude and latitude to systematically divide areas into segments. The dotted, almost globular patterning of the drawings suggests internet and satellite imaging while reducing the "mark" of the artist to something less than gestural. The slight blurs and erasures that result can also contradict the conventional pixilation of low-resolution, digital surveillance images, suggesting both the black and white aerial photo-documentation of destroyed

---

7

Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 73.

8

From notes the artist gave me during the development of this exhibition.

Axis cities at the close of WWII and the formlessness associated with Surrealist conceptions of the enform. By literally drawing the city by hand, Lam reveals the tensions between intimate, immediate experiences of place, and distant, mediated representations of them.

Nick Lakowski's paintings are created entirely out of acrylic latex (between 10 and 15 poured coats) removed from substrates and stretched over frames or an object (in one of the works exhibited a found framed picture is used). The paint becomes incredibly sensitive during this process to some of its own inherent qualities - its weight, its tendency to stick to itself, its softness, its elasticity, as well as its limits of tensile strength. His work addresses primary issues of support. What is paint like when its substrate is removed? Lakowski's references/returns to Russian Suprematism & American Minimalism are mediated by an ongoing negotiation of his own socialization (involving amongst many other things his work as a house painter, leisure time, poverty, a Fine Arts education, creative invention and process). His dedicated experiments with obscuring and revealing locate the material thresholds of things before they fall apart.

A few years ago Martha González Palacios began to bring texts directly into her work as a means of better understanding them. These texts have already been integral to her practice and have been integrated (in most cases) through literal translation, drawing, copying and overlapping. Jorge Luis Borges' *Biblioteca de Babel* (*Library of Babel*) describes a fantastic, disorienting and infinite place inhabited by librarians surrounded by all possible books. The artist traced this text letter by letter from the original Spanish, producing a visual facsimile that with close inspection reveals the manual process used to create it. For both the maker and viewer, the meaning of phrases and words starts to dissolve in a manner reminiscent of speech when slowed down. Letters are revealed as objects. In her effort to become more intimate with Borges' text she intentionally loses the connection that reading provides while forging new relations within states of becoming.

Jeremy Isao Speier's finely crafted assemblage/tableaus suggest a post-industrial nostalgia for the industrial, pre-digital era while retaining an alienating distance from such imagined pasts. Obsolete technology and unmodified hardware store materials explore utilitarian concerns while revealing the continued relevance of various crises of representation brought about by the conditions and effects of modern life. Structural approaches in the work resemble the grid logic of Plasticism and later American geometric abstraction, as well as the tectonic modularity of some modernist architecture and minimalist sculpture. Fragmented narratives and images share compositional grid arrangements with monochrome-like processed wood and plastic surfaces. The modestly scaled and poetically associative qualities of the works (often related to Surrealism and Joseph Cornell by viewers) are in stark contrast with the

explorations of meaning in representation affiliated with photo-conceptualism, reconsidering them as intimate and deeply psychological.

In a new evolution of the work *Dustclouds*, Julie Andreyev projects two moving pictures on opposite sides of a hanging screen shaped as a cartoon-like cloud or thought-bubble. Both projections bleed into each other and share a hypnotically rhythmic compositional flow that suggests a kind of animated gestural abstraction. One loop is derived from news footage of the collapsing World Trade Center Towers. The other is taken from the 1998 Hollywood film *The Siege* (an action-thriller involving radical Islamic terrorist cells blowing up buildings in Manhattan). The fictional representation inscribes the reportage — it's like a movie. The resulting palimpsest questions the construction of 9-11 in time and source while dramatizing an avoidance of the incomprehensible (such as death and the horrific) through identifications with simulacral references. As such, the piece distills and examines the ways in which many people tried to make sense of events as they unfolded on September 11th, 2001.

Jeremy Todd, February, 2008.