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Our Literal Speed: Events in the Vicinity of Art and History

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If one were to choose a representative image from Our Literal Speed (OLS), the second installment of the three-part event seductively, if abstrusely, billed by its organizers as a 'media-pop opera', 'live pedagogical concept album' and 'administrative *Gesamtkunstwerk*', it would not be that of Chicago's South Shore Drill Team performing at the behest of the artist Theaster Gates, nor the artist Mary Ellen Carroll delivering David Joselit's 'Lecture on Reenactment' as David Joselit. Rather, it would be the image of the flickering green light of artist and self-appointed symposia documentarian Rainer Ganahl's camera as its electronic focusing device calibrated the conditions of each potential shot.

Ganahl's camera's green light was omnipresent at OLS: materializing upon projected PowerPoints, surfacing on participants' faces, cropping up at coffee-breaks, interrupting, in short, the sensation of presence the live event as genre is intended, however ironically, to secure. Intruding into the audience members' visual field, the green light was a dogged reminder that OLS was being obsessively recorded and documented, and that what would be preserved and disseminated of the sometimes exhilarating and often maddening experience of that weekend would be fragments: images and sound-bytes, iconic summations of an event that constituted a stretched, compressed, and spasmic flow of time.

The green light both punctuated our concentration and wrenched us back to attention. It declared our co-presence with the operations of representation as well as the split-second delay between the awareness of this unfolding and the precise moment when such a representation was actually made. And so this green light – the liminal image of an image in the making – functioned paradoxically to body forth the split between anticipation and retroactivity that perhaps best conjures the notion of 'our literal speed' in and around art and history: the reflexive condition of being too early and too late at the same time.

While Ganahl's camera's green light inadvertently thematized OLS's preoccupation with the temporal delays and preemptions of its own staging, the slippage between live event and its representation was most self-consciously at work in the multiple 'theory installations' of the Jackson Pollock Bar, which consisted of one or several live actors lip-synching prerecorded texts at a podium or on a stage while mimicking the understated but tightly coded body language typical of academic lectures. For those, such as myself, who had neither attended the first OLS event at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe nor seen the Jackson Pollock Bar in action, the first of these 'installations' was probably the most effective. In this performance, a so-called 'Peter Weibel' mouthed a prerecorded welcoming address, presumably made by the real Weibel, the acclaimed video artist and director of the ZKM, while a closed-circuit video of the surrogate's performance was projected onto the wall behind him. The ventriloquizing effect of the lip-synch became familiar (and even a bit tiresome) after the Jackson Pollock Bar went on to channel the MOMA Picasso–Braque symposium and Art and Language's interview with avant-garde rocker Mayo Thompson but, in this first instance, the layering of pre-recorded audio, live performance, and simultaneous video made for a particularly uncanny effect. The sensation was of seeing a live body attempt to ape its prerecorded image, when in fact both representations coincided. This cleaving of presence led to an attendant displacement of the viewer. Attention shifted incessantly between the body on view, its projected image, and the disembodied sound emanating from neither. Repetition, reiteration, and feedback – mechanisms that, not incidentally, were once understood as core processes of learning acquisition – here provided a study in distraction.

Performative interventions such as these were a hallmark of OLS. Some were clearly planned by the speakers themselves. Tony Cokes and Andrew Perchuck gave their collaborative presentation 'Margins and Bubbles', which interspersed spoken remarks with snippets of pop music (later revealed to have been drawn from Guantánamo Bay torture repertoires), in front of a projection which alternated between an early video work by Cokes and a PowerPoint presentation containing text from David Joselit's and Tino Sehgal's conversation at the first OLS conference in Karlsruhe. Other interventions appeared to catch presenters unaware, as when a photographer, first innocuously then with increasingly audacity, circulated around the speaker's podium during W.J.T. Mitchell's and Christine Mehring's lectures at the Art Institute of Chicago's grand Fullerton Hall auditorium, shooting all the objects on stage – microphones, floor panels, table legs – except the speaker him or herself. Still other presentations were marked by performative absence, as in Darby English's eloquently minimal PowerPoint on the little-known 'Deluxe Show' of 1971, one of the first racially-integrated exhibitions of abstract artists in the US. English's presentation, for which he neither spoke nor appeared on stage, consisted of a timed sequence of text, photographs and blank spaces unfolding silently on screen. These elliptical fragments of evidence posed the question of historical narration at an operative level, asking the audience to construct, rather than ingest interpretation as the very experience of the presentation itself.

Such orchestrated disruptions offered a refreshing acknowledgment of the performative scaffolding that undergirds the peculiar ritual of the academic lecture. (And who has not contemplated the absurdity of its unacknowledged performativity while at a late-afternoon session at the Annual College Art Association Conference?) Thrown into relief by the organizers of OLS, however, the ambiguity of these interventions, and the anxiety on the part of the audience and participants in identifying them, often resulted in a wholesale trumping of content by form. The medium was the message, and insistently so. And while most of us would argue that form and content are inextricably intertwined, the conflict between the impulse to critically defamiliarize academic conventions and the urge (and necessity!) to effectively communicate to an audience was both striking and spectacularly unresolved.

Perhaps for this reason, an unmistakable and somewhat surprising vein of sincerity coursed through the elaborate stagecraft and dissembling irony of OLS. This was a sincerity that did not approximate the traditional academic colloquium's aspirations to transparent communication so much as the considerably more messy procedures of the art school studio critique, when the object of attention is insistently in process, not simply in terms of its material and conceptual development, but with regard to its reluctant transition from private to public space. Indeed, with its spray-painted sheets proclaiming '*Gesamtkunstwerk!*' and mind-boggling capacity for self-reflection, the production of OLS 'as artwork' wavered between the haphazard monumentality of a Thomas Hirschhorn sculpture and the scintillating narcissism of a Yayoi Kusama mirrored environment. In this practice-oriented sense, the overarching tenor of OLS often reminded me of a sculptural affect that the artist Byron Kim, in a series of Yale MFA critiques a few years ago, rather brilliantly described as 'pathetic and endearing': pathetic because the weight of history and institutional discourse is so heavy that its engagement only seems possible by way of intentionally childish gestures of public solicitation; endearing because such gestures often betray the intelligence, candor and necessity of this solicitation at the same time.

Thus, if Rainer Ganahl's camera's green light bodied forth an event's liveness at the moment of its deferral into representation, one might say that OLS's strategic citation of studio practice functioned to highlight reception as a process of collaborative interpretation in which double-speak, misunderstanding, rhetorical repositioning, and feigned inauthenticity are in fact integral to genuine communicative exchange. While the former brought us back to our bodies as irrevocably split presences condensed through acts of representation, the latter questioned what might occur when the sum of such bodies coincided in a single space.

A sort of chemical interaction between these two operations occurred several times over the course of the weekend. These were moments when, to repurpose a phrase from Joselit's presentation, a public *was* ignited, sometimes despite itself. The most dramatic of these moments was triggered by the artist Tania Bruguera, who organized an open panel discussion with Weather Underground members Bill Ayers and Bernadette Dohrn at a nondescript hall rented for the concurrent Art Chicago fair on 1 May. Speaking to a relatively heterogeneous crowd of

academics, artists, art world types, and activists, Ayers and Dohrn extemporized on topics ranging from the imposed silence Ayers withstood during the final months of the 2008 presidential election, to the historic workers' marches for an 8-hour work day in Chicago in May 1886 that culminated in the infamous Haymarket Square incident and the founding of International Workers' Day (May Day). In the dialogue that ensued, Ayers and Dohrn were aggressively questioned (heckled might be a better description) by a number of fringe political types – the impatient student revolutionary, the reactionary pessimist, the myopic party henchman – who attempted to douse the speakers' palpable joy with the all-too-familiar language of political disillusionment, apathy, self-righteousness, and misdirected ire. While audience members, myself included, became alternately astonished and enraged, Ayers and Dohrn responded with a kind of generosity and humor one might only acquire by living for years underground. (For those wondering whether art can have a purpose, here is their answer: 'Pay attention, be astonished, write about it.')

Reactions to these exchanges were so strong that by the end of this panel most of us had jumped to our feet, consulted with our neighbors, clapped, booed, whistled, moaned, belly-laughed, eye-rolled, and otherwise affirmed, against the cynicism of the hecklers' comments, a fundamental and animating belief in political efficacy and change. Only the next day, back at the Art Institute of Chicago's Morton auditorium, and appropriately enough after Carrie Lambert-Beatty's compelling presentation on 'the para-fictional', did it become public knowledge that Bruguera had planted the fringe hecklers, unbeknownst to Ayers, Dohrn or the rest of the crowd. At this point, a temporary public was ignited yet again in an attempt to process what had occurred, as audience members and conference participants engaged each other and Bruguera, who was seated in the crowd, in a heated discussion about the ethics of the political theatre she had produced.

Here, a curious thing happened: audience members and participants who had adroitly maneuvered the complex layers of dissemblance, artifice, and construction within the regulative spaces of the art history conference seemed betrayed that such performative interventions would have made their way into the divergent, and assumedly more 'straightforward', realm of political activism. I would imagine that most OLS participants would agree that art and politics form a false binary. Yet the distinction between artifice and authenticity that underlay that debate inadvertently positioned politics within a 'real' more privileged than that of art. For this reason, I want to conclude with Greg Bordowitz's suggestion during that discussion to specify 'the real' so frequently invoked that day. For it seemed that the implicit equation between the political and 'the real' that bubbled to the surface in such feelings of betrayal and disappointment was one that positioned the would-be political import of the Weather Underground event as precisely the missed encounter with the real of Lacan's well-known account of the *tuché*, which is to say imprisoned in the unassimilable form of a trauma endlessly repeated but never resolved. This, it would seem to me, is precisely what Ayers and Dohrn would *not* concede within their formulation of political action, whether the hecklers in the audience were performing as part of an

explicitly artistic intervention or acting out a set of world views that are more common than we would like to think.

In her comments during the discussion, Bruguera said of her artistic practice, 'I am interested in making citizens.' Following from their discussion the day before, Ayers and Dohrn, I think, would return with the equally pressing statement, 'I want to make art count.' If, as artists and art historians, we are serious about analyzing 'our literal speed' through the space of the institutions that support, regulate, and occasionally inspire us, it is imperative that we consider art and politics equally as conditions of possibility and conditions of representation in which the differential between pre-determined script and imaginative action does not cordon practice into zones of disciplinary coherence, but is itself the coherence of 'the real'. And here I mean specifically to understand 'the real' not as a missed encounter, but, in the colloquial sense, as the very substance of the everyday. This 'real', as the pragmatic experience of institutional critique, studio practice, teaching, and even elaborately-choreographed art history colloquia have taught us, is shot through with artifice, temporal disjunction, and misplaced expectations, none of which make their practice less sincere. As Bordowitz asked Joselit's surrogate on OLS's opening night – 'Is originality a fact or a feeling, and if it is a feeling, is it any less urgent?' In reply, the surrogate paused, and then hedged her bets.

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Drawing a Picture of Our Literal Speed[1]

But what does it mean to say that a presentation is the presentation of presentation? Is this even conceivable? (Alain Badiou, 2006: 28)

A picture is worth a thousand words, the old adage goes, indicating our common appreciation of the range and signifying power of an image. What happens if we were to turn the old cliché on its head and ask, what type of picture begins to take shape through literally thousands and thousands of words spoken, written, performed, presented and re-presented? This is the question one confronts when dealing with a conference/event that announces on the main page of its website: 'An Axiom: Our Literal Speed Is Art Without an Image'.[2]

Day One of Our Literal Speed (OLS) 2009 seemed to open ordinarily enough on a pleasant evening after a day of rain with a lecture on reenactment by Yale University art historian, David Joselit, at the University of Chicago's Art History Department. We learned quickly, however, that as one participant put it: 'We aren't in Kansas any more', when a woman (we later learned that she was the conceptual artist Mary Ellen Carroll) took to the podium and announced that *she* was David