

Cult

OF THE

RUIN:

STRATEGIES OF

ACCUMULATION

Cult of the Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation

Appropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization—these diverse strategies characterize much of the art of the present and distinguish it from its modern predecessors. They also form a whole when seen in relation to allegory, suggesting that postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse, and that criticism will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it continues to think of allegory as aesthetic error.

—Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism”

The twelve emerging artists featured in *Cult of the Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation* work in media as diverse as video, performance, sculpture, light, watercolor and food. Binding these disparate projects, however, is the persistence of methods — or strategies — such as appropriation, reenactment and material accretion to address the perceived gap between records of the past and our present experiences. 20 years ago, art critic Craig Owens posited this gap as a site for allegory, and these strategies as manifestations of the artist’s allegorical “impulse” to return to outmoded forms and systems — or ruins — to excavate their contemporary value. A generation later, the artists in this exhibition can be seen as advancing Owens’s theory, but also clearly deviating from his original definition. In a sense, Owens’s “allegorical impulse” is itself a ruin to which these artists return, their reinterpretations breathing new life into the approach.

Return to the Allegorical Impulse

In allegory, historically distant texts, images and structures are repeated and reinterpreted, supplanting prior meanings. For instance, Craig Owens cites Sherrie Levine’s photographs of iconic photographs as supplanting cultural narratives with ones of authorship in an age of ubiquitous image reproduction. Robert Smithson’s massive earth monuments allegorize Romanticism’s nostalgia for pre-historic ruins, reading a narrative of civilization’s decline through one of contemporary environmentalism. In Sol LeWitt’s obsessive system-based drawings, the structure is the subject of the work. Incessant repetition arrests any narrative possibility, leaving the viewer with a reflection on the arbitrary logic of accumulative systems of documentation. Despite the formal differences between these artists’ practices, Owens argues, the works are part of the same branch of postmodern art, one defined by the artist’s allegorical “impulse” to look back, in tandem with feelings of estrangement from nature and tradition and a concomitant anxiety about impermanence and the modernist narrative of progress. Historically denigrated as deviations from a modern, progressive trajectory, Owens re-frames allegory — and the postmodern aesthetic strategies that manifest it — as legitimate critical practices.

It is, perhaps, a testament to the longevity of this theory that when five curators, all graduate students at UC Irvine, selected artists and works they each wanted to exhibit, the common strategies and forms recall those Owens identifies as manifestations of the allegorical impulse. In *Cult of the Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation*,

we find appropriated images, records, and official histories; the body positioned as a site of knowledge production; the psychological distancing from nature and tradition (even from a past that never really existed); and the processes of accretion, created and documented.

The works on view, however, evince contemporary deviations from Owens’s original theory. For instance, he does not appear to question the stability of the past or the modernist systems of archiving to which his artist exemplars return. The artists in *Cult of the Ruin*, on the other hand, point to the disjuncture between conventional archiving in the first place — family portraits, maps and recordings — and real bodies and experiences, so that this exhibition emphasizes performance, performing subjects and ephemeral exchanges between artist and audience — allegorical strategies that Owens ignores.

Two strategies identified in “The Allegorical Impulse” change more subtly in the works on view. Where Owens only touches on the use of appropriation for critical purposes, the artists in *Cult of the Ruin* employ appropriation as a strategy for critical, often political, commentary on the original sources. Also, the strategies of accretion featured in *Cult of the Ruin* are based on structures created by the artists that never return to specific referents. Rather, as Owens says of LeWitt, their structures are their subjects. Some of the exhibited artworks thus highlight processes of knowledge production, such as mapping or documenting time and change. In others, the artist returns to the body as a site (perhaps *the site*) for allegories of knowledge production.

In addition to the excess implied in the allegorical doubling of images and forms, some works in the show are wrought from multiple histories and identities that are *already in excess* of the modern-era archive or any linear narrative of progress. These histories might include the progression of a family line, qualitative evolution and cultural development, advancement of a nation or of art, etc. Taken together, such works present an alternative logic of nature and culture based upon quantitative happenstance and experience rather than linear qualitative progress.

Today, we might see Owens’s theory itself as an outmoded form — a ruin — to which these artists return. But, rather than the full, nostalgic turn to the past that Owens describes, each artist makes only a partial return to their source, gleaning what remains of Owens’s theory and associated postmodern artworks/aesthetics. And yet, because Owens defines allegory as necessarily a palimpsest, these disparate reinterpretations of the allegorical impulse, in turn, keep the theory alive.

Strategies of Accumulation: Ritual, Record, and Reenactment

Giulio Frigo's works return to an imagined primitive relationship with one's environment, reminiscent of Owens's cult of the ruin. *The Center is Anywhere* (2011) uses a rudimentary mathematic principle to mark the center of a space. Two ribbons divide the gallery, calling attention to the space and our relationships to its marked center — we see and know the center, but can never occupy it, for that is where the ribbons cross. In *Vanishing Point (As long as my brain can think)* (2010), a black acrylic square is painted directly onto the floor and graphite lines radiate from its center. Drawn until the pencil is exhausted, it recalls Owens's strategy of accumulation, where a work's structure is its subject.



Giulio Frigo *The Center is Anywhere*, 2011



Katie Ammons *How it Goes*, 2011



Jesse Wine *Generation LOL 2*, 2011

Jesse Wine's *Generation LOL 1*, *Generation LOL 2*, and *Generation LOL 3* (2011) resonate with Owens's assertion that site-specific art produces a dialectical relationship between the work and its site — an allegory for culture's impermanence. Similarly, Wine addresses cultural tourism as a form of knowledge production, enacting a transitory art practice in which he appropriates materials he finds "in situ." The work documents his movement, allegorically engaging the context in which it is made and exhibited. In advance of Wine's arrival in Irvine, studio art graduate students used plywood to catch — and record — the excess marks of their own art production, which was then appropriated by Wine to produce plinths on view. Wine departs from Owens, however, in his authorial reflexivity. In their final form, the sculptures denote the support structures — plinths — of traditional artworks, and yet the subject of the work is collective labor and indexical mark making.

Katie Ammons's works are produced live in the gallery through processes of accretion. In *Autotopography* (2011), frozen rocks of ink melt over time, recording alchemical cartographies onto paper below. In *How it Goes* (2011), the frozen ink rocks hang from the ceiling, suspended above paper, recording, in drips, the sculpture's responses to air circulation and temperature, over the course of its installation. Ammons departs, however, from Owens's strategy of accumulation by simultaneously *composing* the conditions for mark making and *letting* the process of accretion autonomously unfold. That being said, the manner in which the materials are allowed to take their course evokes Owens's discussion of ruins sinking into the earth. Juxtaposed against other works in *Cult of the Ruin* that intersect discourses of the performing body and indexes, Ammons's sculptures appear to perform their own record — their own ruin — in the gallery.



Leigh Ledare *Shoulder*, 2008

While the above indexical artworks emphasize anxiety over impermanence, **Ping-Hsiang Chen's** *no-name* (2011) performs momentary impressions. This discursive work bridges Owens's notion of a return to outmoded systems with an accumulative performativity that allegorizes knowledge of the body. If the viewer submits to wearing the interactive sculpture, its flexible silver grid maps the contours of his/her body. Gallery patrons, then, watch each other perform the sculpture, perhaps forming a basis of comparison — one fills out the suit “better” than another, or, alternately, one doesn't fit at all. When unoccupied, the work holds a ghost form of an accumulation of all the bodies that have occupied it. Chen's performative, ephemeral skin further evokes discourses of digital bio-medical cartographies of bodies — the latest reinvention of the body as the ultimate site of knowledge production.

Drawing upon Benedetto Croce's writings, Owens posits that allegory — one form acting through another — can be monstrous, particularly insofar as the allegory supplants high modern aesthetics. **Leigh Ledare's** *The Model* (2008), *Shoulder* (2008) and *The Gift* (2008) are family video portraits collaboratively produced by the artist and his mother, who is directed to reenact real (manifestly benign) family situations as tropic sexual come-ons. Ledare takes up his mother's history, positioning her as a model, dancer and promiscuous young woman, allegorically returning us to the mother/son's Oedipal stage to mine the gap between legible maternal intimacy and incest. Ledare's videos expand Owens's original theory via re-animation of the interpreted past, wherein mother and son can never satisfactorily merge, but can only be repeated — an accumulation of reenactments in monstrous excess of familial relations.



Ping-Hsiang Chen *no-name*, 2010

In *Illuminating the Illuminati* (2009/11) **Marilyn Lowey** recreates — or appropriates — her own lighting configuration, which she originally designed for Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 appearance in New York. Again, we see a combination of allegorical strategies: discursivity, site-specificity and impermanence by way of the audience's interaction. Usually, the mechanisms and aesthetics of power are elided; here the lighting apparatus, the theater of religious celebrity, is fully visible. Power is de-centralized by remixing the otherwise dialectical positions of public address and reception such that visitors to the gallery may position themselves under the divine glow, yet witness the impermanence of that position. Here, Lowey returns to past forms while de-stabilizing traditional authorities. The work engages the gallery as a church-like space, where objects are imbued with seemingly divine symbolic power. Rather than merely receiving knowledge and values from the institution, though, viewers are implicated by participating in the work's production.



Marilyn Lowey *Illuminating the Illuminati*, 2009/11

Tatiana Istomina's *26 Portraits* (2010) "confiscates," as Owens says, representations of Soviet and Russian Secret Police. Although contemporary Russia has governmental, political and ideological structures that claim distinction from the former Soviet empire, Istomina urges us to examine the seamless history of KGB and FSB (Russia's current national security agency). "The FSB's official website provides the list and official portraits of all KGB/FSB heads from 1917 to the present day," she says, "from Dzerzhinsky, a revolutionary and close friend of Lenin, through Ezhov and Beriya, instigators of the Great Purge, to Russia's current prime minister, Vladimir Putin, head of the agency in 1998-1999." Istomina recreates these portraits as watercolors, and displays them chronologically. The medium and intimate size are reminiscent of colonial travel documentary watercolors — subtle, picturesque forms that occlude their violent context. In this way, Istomina highlights the fissure between two official truths — that the KGB and FSB are separate, and that they form a continuum — and the violence they connote.



Tatiana Istomina *26 portraits*, 2010

In her video, *Headless* (2010), **Ash Eliza Smith** returns to the haunting gap between nature and civilization through richly imaginative sequences and dream-like logic. Her strategy is reminiscent of Owens's description of photomontage as ceaselessly serial without definitive resolution. Such accumulations are found in the visual vocabularies connoted in Smith's work: fashion photography, music videos and nature television shows. *Headless's* combination of performance, video montage, and land art conjures Owens's discussion of hybrid art forms as manifestations of the allegorical impulse. The idea of the hybrid is also present in Smith's protagonist, an androgynous, nymph-like figure in flashy synthetic fabrics, who performs not only the estrangement between nature and modernity, but also the gap between paradigms of male/female genders and the lived experience of them.



Nico Vascellari *Untitled Song*, 2005

Nico Vascellari also appropriates paradigms of the family portrait, along with romanticized associations of percussive musical performance with untamed nature. In so doing, he explores impermanence through physicality. *Nico and the Vascellaris* (2004) is an intensely physical video portrait of the artist and his family, conveying at once loving support and the discomfort of being constantly tethered. As Vascellari sings, screams and breathes into the microphone, his father must hold the temporary ceiling that frames his son below his chin, cutting his head from view. His mother must hold it above her head, causing her arms to shake uncontrollably under its weight until Vascellari's sister moves in to relieve her, thus abandoning her own position as the neon sign-holder. A nostalgic, photographic fragment frames the excesses of family dynamics, but they are fully, viscerally, on view here.



Ash Eliza Smith *Headless*, 2010



Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly *Park Avenue... shit; I'm still only in Park Avenue... Every time I think I'm gonna wake up back in the jungle*, 2010

Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly's perpetual performance, *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* (2011), takes up Owens's theory of the fragment to address notions of masculinity. The fragments they mix and remix, act and reenact, are performers' and audiences' bodies, objects, costumes, choreography, scores, and ideas. Over the course of the exhibit, these elements are recycled for reuse in successive iterations of the work. The work ritualizes behaviors associated with rehearsal, as their manifestations accumulate and allegorically supplant each other. "The attempt," the artists say, "is to create performances that index themselves and account for the processes of their own making." Here we see again an allegorical return to past forms aimed at destabilizing monolithic cultural and political commentary. By remixing traditional roles of dancer and audience, and paradigms of rehearsal and performance, they call attention to, and intervene on, aspects of culture often blindly performed and witnessed, such as masculinity or hetero-normativity.

Miles Ake's *Beach Boys "I Get Around (Fade-out)"* (1964) (2007) appropriates an anachronistic tape recording that repeats the eponymous phrase between long stretches of blank tape. As Owens describes of works defined by an accumulative or endless series, this reinterpretation of the Beach Boys' recording arrests any progression of the song. Instead, the work reflects back onto its own material base and its points of contact on the gallery walls. The result is a bridging of art discourses surrounding transcendent self-reflexivity and grounded site-specificity.

Ake also performs with four other members of *notch*, an ensemble that produces ephemeral exchanges between themselves and the audience, in which they prepare and serve a menu composed specifically for the event. The artists engage a return to the ritual, and intimacy, of breaking bread, interpreted through contemporary discourses of consumption. Despite its impermanence, *notch* marks a recorded event: the opening of the *Cult of the Ruin* exhibition.



Miles Ake *Beach Boys "I Get Around (Fade-out)"* (1964), 2007

Exhibition Zero

Cult of the Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation is an inaugural exhibition, the first graduate student-curated exhibition at the University Art Gallery, of many to come, under the new Critical and Curatorial Concentration in UC Irvine's Studio Arts department. This was an experiment; not quite a model for the students beginning here in Fall 2011, but the beginning of a new archive nonetheless. This show is dependent on subsequent iterations to distinguish its place in the Gallery's history.

-Meredith Goldsmith



David Wojnarowicz *A Fire in My Belly*, 1987

The National Portrait Gallery's 2010 exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* originally included **David Wojnarowicz's** 1987 film *A Fire in My Belly*. Under pressure from various fronts, the director of the gallery, Martin Sullivan, removed the work from the exhibition. Most notably, Catholic League president William Donahue decried *A Fire in My Belly* as "hate speech pure and simple." Wojnarowicz made the film in response to the persecution of people with AIDS. Wojnarowicz's lover, artist Peter Hujar, had just died of AIDS, and Wojnarowicz himself would die in 1992. *A Fire in My Belly* depicts – amongst numerous other social icons – ants scurrying across a crucifix. The montage is not a commentary on Catholicism, but in Wojnarowicz's words is "a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours."

Incoming House Speaker John Boehner and incoming House Majority Leader Eric Cantor took it one step further. They pressured the gallery to close the exhibition on the grounds that *A Fire in My Belly*, as well as the exhibition, was an "outrageous use" of tax dollars. The National Portrait Gallery is an arm of the federally funded Smithsonian Institute, but the exhibition was privately funded. The exhibition is currently still on display until February 13th, 2011, and debates around it are ramping up nationwide.

In presenting "difference and desire," *Hide/Seek* foregrounds portraits of the post-Stonewall LGBT community. With the removal of *A Fire in My Belly*, the impact of mobilizing portraiture to represent those who are culturally marginalized vanishes. In the spirit of our exhibition at UCI – and in an effort to reanimate the dialogue that surfaced during the so-called culture wars of the 1980's – the curators of *Cult of the Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation* are presenting Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly* as a "ruin" that exemplifies the debates surrounding censorship in the arts. Our hope is to reinvigorate – and perhaps to reinvent – the power of art as a political document in an era of cultural malaise.

-Sarah Beadle

Featured Works:

Miles Ake

notch 47, (with Keith Pasko, Satomi Nagata, Robbie Saavedra, and J.R. Valenzuela), 2011
Performance

Beach Boys "I Get Around (Fade-out)" (1964), 2007
50 feet 1/4 inch reel-to-reel tape
Dimensions variable, 2mn 30s (each loop)

Katie Ammons

How it Goes, 2008
Rubber inner-tubes, ice, ink, rocks, and paper
14 x 9 x 8 feet

Autotopography, 2008
Ice, ink, and rocks on paper
40 x 80 inches

Ping-Hsiang Chen

no-name, 2011
Rubber, plastic
Dimensions variable

Giulio Frigo

The Center is Anywhere, 2011
Ribbon
Dimensions variable
Courtesy Galleria Francesca Minini

Vanishing Point (As long as my brain can think), 2010
Acrylic paint, graphite
11.5 x 11.5 feet
Courtesy Galleria Francesca Minini

Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly

Reusable Parts/Endless Love, 2011
Performance
Produced by Moving Theater and made possible with the support of Charles Cowles and the Cowles Charitable Trust.

Park Avenue... shit; I'm still only in Park Avenue... Every time I think I'm gonna wake up back in the jungle, 2010

Single-channel video
9 mn

Produced by Moving Theater with residency support provided by Park Avenue Armory.

Tatiana Istomina

26 portraits, 2010

Watercolor

Series of 26, each 6 x 9 inches

Leigh Ledare

Shoulder, 2008

Single-channel video

9 mn 6 s

The Gift, 2008

Single-channel video

9 mn 24 s

The Model, 2008

Single-channel video

4 mn 26 s

Marilyn Lowey

Illuminating the Illuminati, 2009

3 - HMI 575w Parabolic Aluminum Reflector Fixtures

with barn-doors, assorted cables, neutral density gel media,
assorted pipes, chains and clamps

3 - 10 amp wall circuits

12 x 12 x 14 feet

Ash Eliza Smith

Headless, 2010

Single-channel video

9 mn 20 s

Nico Vascellari

Untitled Song, 2005

Single-channel video

2 mn 55 s

Courtesy of the artist and Monitor, Rome

Nico and the Vascellaris, 2004

Single-channel video

5 mn 43 s

Courtesy of the artist and Monitor, Rome

Jesse Wine

Generation LOL 1, 2011

Wood and paint

5.5 x 41 x 25 inches

Generation LOL 2, 2011

Wood and paint

48 x 9 x 9 inches

Generation LOL 3, 2011

Wood and paint

39 x 13 x 6 inches

David Wojnarowicz

A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress, 1986-97

Single-channel video from 8mm film

13 mn

Courtesy of the Fales Library and Special Collections,
New York University, the Estate of David Wojnarowicz,
and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York



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Cult of the Ruin: Strategies of Accumulation

January 6 - February 5, 2011

Opening Performance by notch with Miles Ake, Keith Pasko,
Satomi Nagata, Robbie Saavedra and J.R. Valenzuela

Closing Performance by Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly

Curated by:

Sarah Beadle, Meredith Goldsmith, Flora Kao, Scott Klinger,
Lauren Merage, and Aaron Valenzuela

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