



Production still from UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY at the Visual Arts Center in the Department of Art and Art History at UT Austin, Spring 2011. Photo credit: Colin Doyle & Adan Shreiber

Something From Nothing

Benjamin Lima

Amanda Ross-Ho: *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY*
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Amanda Ross-Ho's *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY* occupied the soaring Vaulted Gallery of UT Austin's Visual Arts Center for six weeks last winter. It presented visitors with a comprehensive arrangement of all the necessities for the medium-scale production of simple artistic goods: blank stretched canvases,



Installation view from UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY at the Visual Arts Center in the Department of Art and Art History at UT Austin, Spring 2011. Photo credit: Colin Doyle & Adan Shreiber

recycled blank sheets of paper, and basic ceramic vessels. The life of the exhibition was divided into two stages. First, members of the public and the university community were invited to participate at the work stations equipped with art supplies, by learning and mastering the tasks inherent to the production process: for example, at the canvas stretching station, how to stretch canvas. Music helped create a social, studio-like atmosphere. Friends talked to each other, and to strangers. The artist was in residence, present and participating; experts worked side-by-side with amateurs. **1**

After two weeks, production stopped. The canvases, sheets of paper and vessels were collected and neatly arranged at the sides of the room: the canvases in a grid on the double-height wall, the vessels stored in a row of five carts with seven shelves apiece. All of the supplies were carefully arranged: stacked on plastic folding tables, or hung on pegboards on the wall. They looked ready to begin again the next day, as though one had arrived after closing time. But the production was over for good; there was nothing to do but scrutinize and reflect. If the display of materials of skilled labor and the memories of lively activity invited curiosity, the pervasive stillness and emptiness were sobering.

What was the “nothing” designated in the project’s title? The scope of activity, its precise coordination, and the interest of the carefully arranged supplies, all implied that the answer was not emptiness, or futility. On a first impression, the array of blank canvases on the wall resembled a re-enactment of that canonical avant-garde form, the monochrome, and the stacks of white paper and pale pots deceptively resembled the monochrome’s counterpart, the readymade. But this resemblance, though initially striking, is ultimately less significant than Ross-Ho’s elegant merging of two often separate strategies: viewer participation, and materially-derived process. Both of these strategies, the transformation of viewers into physically active participants, and the reorientation of the artistic medium to center on the production process, share parallel genealogies that lead through the radical moves of the 1960s: Happenings and Fluxus, in the case of the former, and post-minimalism and process art, in the case of the latter; the two stages of *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY* called attention to each in turn. In the first, participatory stage of the project, the ongoing buzz of activity – the participatory aspect – was most visible, while later, the materiality of the products came to the fore.

The precision of *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY*’s arrangements, combined with the complexity of its form, allowed for sustained reflection on its operations. There was a lot to look at and think about. In both its stages, the project can be read as a hall-sized composition, whose organization resulted from countless individual choices, made by diverse actors whose moves were not consciously coordinated with one another. It was a case of the spontaneously generated order known in philosophy and science as *emergent*, that is, having an effect produced by a combination of several causes, but not capable of being regarded as the sum of their individual effects.² Here, the project’s patterns develop from large-scale systems of activity, in which there was simply too much going on to follow each individual element, but in which, nevertheless, it was possible to discern overall coherence at the macro level. In contrast, however, to the mass-production monuments of the industrial age— a Ford factory or a shipyard, say— the rationalization and repetition of the production process here was tempered by the voluntary and craft-based nature of the activity. Although visitors were engaged in creating apparently blank, purposeless products, under the executive direction of the artist, this very purposelessness, pursued during leisure time, fostered a sense of play among participants. The “nothing” in the project’s title acknowledges the blankness of the resulting products; all the same, the communal, inviting atmosphere offered more to visitors than simply “nothing.”

In Ross-Ho's work, we can recognize social groups that are both large and small scale, ranging from the several hundred attendees on the opening night to the smaller groups of friends and classmates who arrived over the course of its existence. Although the *FACTORY* invited public participation in a broad sense, the employment of social interaction as a medium was not new for the artist. Relations among an extended family figured strongly in *Half of what I say is meaningless*, the artist's 2008 exhibition at Cherry and Martin in Los Angeles, which included objects produced by several of Ross-Ho's close relatives. *Composite*, 2008, is based on a test shot made by her uncle, a commercial photographer, and using an 11-year-old Ross-Ho as a model. A wooden camera, made by her father for her as a child, rests on top of it. Among other works in the exhibition were *Pregnant Again and Again*, 2008, a quilt hand-sewn by an aunt, and sticker collages made by another aunt. While the collection of these works constitutes a condensed diagram of complex relationships, it also suggests that the latter's entirety remains beyond a viewer's complete grasp. While the depth of the personal relationships within a family necessarily remains hidden to an outside viewer, these images and tokens allow one to grasp a kind of diagram of their structure.

At the other extreme of social relations, Ross-Ho has also explored the anonymous and transactional spheres of Craigslist and Ebay, and the coercive discipline of police drug busts. Each of these social networks generates its own archive, which is susceptible to being diagrammed artistically. For *Seizure*, 2006, Ross-Ho collected police photographs that documented successful results of drug busts: seized drugs, weapons, and cash, carefully spread out and arranged on tables for the press and the public. These photographs were themselves mounted in a loose grid and used as the basis for a single large laser print. First, one notices the variety of pattern and repetition: row after row of wrapped bills, stacked weapons, and bags of powder. The grids are the result of countless webs of human activity, too complicated to trace or reconstruct. This attention to moments of convergence—where the tangled complexity of life suddenly resolves itself into legible, even pleasing patterns—is a hallmark of Ross-Ho's work; one can see it in the rows and stacks of supplies and materials in the *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY*.

Even the immeasurable, immaterial spaces of online e-commerce sites can be pressed into revealing patterns such as these. Speaking of eBay as a generative source, Ross-Ho described it as "an engine that negotiates image and object beautifully," or a "beautiful system that's set up for accessing physicality through a picture," whereas Craigslist more resembles "a concrete poetry forum or a conceptual exercise

message board.”³ In the case of these vast, anonymous networks, the challenge is how to collect, distribute and render legible representative aspects; this is where the idea of the diagram is significant. If the structures of human relationships range from the exploitative and transactional, as in *Seizure*, to the intimate and secure, as in *Composite*, then *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY* is poised at a midpoint between them. In the project in Austin, aspects of anonymous labor share space with aspects of enjoyable sociability, but like both of the earlier works, it can be seen as part of a larger project of diagramming these relationships.

In Ross-Ho’s work, the concept of the diagram does not have the sense of a linear illustration, but rather that of a material, lived-in arrangement of real things. These diagrams allow viewers to engage with the feel and texture of things, but also shed light on how things circulate and function in systems. Discussing *Half of what I say is meaningless*, the artist described her process of “translating something that was made as a sculptural thing from an image of it, of pulling it through a system back into being something *made* again.”⁴ On another occasion, she said, “Looking to the family as a structure was a way to diagram the relationship between individual elements and a totality while talking about the generational layers embedded in any evolution.”⁵ Ross-Ho’s work shows the possibility of a productive tension between the sensuous attachment to things, and the intellectual understanding of structures, or what she described as “braiding [the] poetic and analysis, a tricky balance achieved by intentionally putting opposing or contrasting structures in mixed company.”⁶

For *Invisible Opponent*, 2005, Ross-Ho worked on a bright, energetic, abstract-expressionist-style painting. Then, she said, “But as the painting developed, I became interested in how it interacted with the physical space of my studio. So I decided to make a work that referred to its own moment of origin, and took a photograph of the painting, showing all the detritus around it. Then, when I took the painting down, the paint had bled through the canvas, leaving a beautiful imprint on the wall, so I cut the wall out and propped it up facing the photograph, leaving the viewer to complete the circuit.”⁷

The missing original painting (equivalent to the “McGuffin” or “constitutive blank” in other contexts) creates a gap into which the viewer can literally step. The genealogical affinity with the blank pieces of *UNTITLED NOTHING FACTORY* is clear. If the material things are what give us access to the system that generates them, the system is what makes the things make sense. The Austin project offered us simple, even ingenuous objects, but the objects were only the concrete aspects of the

system that generated them—a system in which visitors were integral parts. If the gap between art and life there remained larger than that within a creative family such as the artist's, it was still smaller than that of an e-commerce site, in which any notion of "art" is defeated by the infinite quantity and cheapness of the goods on offer, which are furthermore totally detached from whatever life-world they originated in. By taking objects produced by all these differing types of social organization, and counterposing them in structures that diagram these relationships, Ross-Ho's work gives us a way to gauge the contrasts between them. Its "nothing" counts for a lot.

Benjamin Lima is assistant professor of art history at the University of Texas at Arlington.

1 This account of the Factory is indebted to information from Amanda Ross-Ho, Jade Walker and Emily Cayton, obtained in e-mail interviews that were concluded on March 29, 2011. I am grateful to You You Xia for facilitating these contacts.

2 "emergent, adj. and n.". OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press. 27 April 2011 <<http://oed.com/view/Entry/61131>>.

3 Elad Lassry, "Amanda Ross-Ho," Feb. 2010, <http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/3441> (accessed March 10, 2011); Catherine Taft, "Studio Check: Amanda Ross-Ho," *Modern Painters*, November 2010, p. 29.

4 Doug Harvey, "Free Skating: Amanda Ross-Ho's fourth-dimensional axel jump," *L.A. Weekly*, Sept. 26th – Oct. 2, 2008, p. 58.

5 Elad Lassry, "Amanda Ross-Ho" (as in note above).

6 E-mail interview with Ross-Ho (as in note above).

7 Steel Stillman, "In the Studio: Amanda Ross-Ho," *Art in America* (April 2010), pp. 82-89.