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Layout: Kevin Hanley

studio 246

Jessica Bronson

Laura Owens

Lisa Ann Auerbach

Sharon Lockhart

Dave Muller

Joe-Mama Nitzberg

Timothy Martin
L.A.: Particles and Waves

Over the past year, the **Künstlerhaus Bethanien** has hosted a series of one-month residencies and brief exhibitions by a dozen "young," that is, beginning to early career, possibly "emerging," mostly Los Angeles-based artists. The series, which was never a series in the curatorial sense—and that may well be its charm—came about in a somewhat unusual and makeshift manner. As it happens, KB first invited Sharon Lockhart, an artist who had already shown several times in Germany, to a one year residency which was to culminate in an exhibition of new work. Having spent a few months in Berlin producing and residing, as it were, and having realized that she could not afford to stay for the rest of her term—a person's got to work for a living, you know—she came up with a list of artist/acquaintances among whom the rest of the time would be divided, month by month. Hence, the revolving-door exhibitions of **Studio 246**: twelve residencies for the price of one.

I begin with this curt synopsis of events for a couple of reasons. First, while KB provided organization, space, and publicity for the exhibitions, they were nonetheless largely self-produced, with the artists paying their own travel, material and living expenses, etc. In effect, what KB and Lockhart ended up contriving was an extension and microcosm of one particular stratum of Los Angeles' art economy and culture which is generally devoid of public institutions and support: an ad hoc and constantly mutating network of small, shoestring galleries, artist-organized exhibition spaces and events which is driven by its own energy and exists quite outside the general economy. It is this scrappy network that allows art to thrive in L.A. during recession—an historical case can be made that art thrives here *especially* during recession—and has cultivated most of the L.A. artists with which Europeans have become familiar in recent years. One of the artists in the series, **David Muller**, exemplifies this subculture most particularly, as he has organized numerous exhibitions/events of this type—those known by the Three Day Weekend moniker, about which he lectured in Berlin—and has also integrated that "production" in/as his own artwork, which encompasses the activity itself and a reconvention of that activity with the work of those artists who have been part of it. As far as I am concerned, Muller might as well be the poster boy of the Studio 246 series.

The second reason is related to the first and concerns the arbitrary nature of the series. In terms of this economy of self-production, which I would assert is the most definitive of L.A. art culture, regardless of what may come out of it at any given moment, the Studio 246 series does in a limited sense represent the L.A. art world. It does not, however, represent the dominant representations which have come to be associated with L.A. art, such as the apocalyptic sociology of "Helter Skelter" or, to mention an upcoming survey show being organized by a major European museum, "Sunshine and Noir," which polarizes that theme with a prior one, that is, combines the traditional New York cliché with the typical European one. Studio 246 iterates neither representation, neither rote transgression nor blithe phenomenology—to toss a few more clichés on the pile. But the arbitrary nature of the series and the relative themelessness which accompanies it does reflect a theoretical multiplicity, a thematic of multiple and intertwined themes, which is one attribute of this subculture. Rather than warring theoretical factions, this subculture has tended to foster a kind of theoretical drift or slippage, where certain notions of art appear in work where it is least expected: conceptualism in painting and vice versa, eroticism in appropriation, performance in *everything*, and so on. This is not to suggest mere pastiche, but something more like a deterritorialization of theory as it translates itself in the practice of art. Fittingly, there has been a reemergence of what might be called neo-Fluxus—"Deleuzian" in current parlance—and Situationist attitudes. While this would by no means be applicable to every artist here, it is nevertheless in the air, and permits one to think about very different practices in connection with each other that would otherwise have to be critically held apart.

It is in the sculptural work of **Alex Slade** and the various collaborations of **Kevin Hanley** and **Jonathan Kroll** that this general notion of drifting comes closest to something like the Situationists' *dérive*, that is, a specifically "urban" activity or practice which involves "playful-constructive" behavior on the one hand and awareness of psychogeographical effects on the other. There are, of course, the necessary contradictions here between play and constructiveness—or between letting go and calculating possibilities, as Debord would have it—and these artists handle them, the activities and the contradictions between them, quite differently. For instance, Slade's work, which often comes off as some odd, somewhat frumpy form of domestic civil engineering, always proceeds from construction, from specific built structures. These structures, however static they may be once installed, are types which imply some kind of movement, conveyance or transience of time: bridges, ramps, pathways, overpasses, catwalks and the like, as well as structures which literally stand for or are themselves some kind of *vehicle*. As such, one must consider them both as given forms, completions, and as potentials, noncompletions that are an invitation to movement, whether bodily or in the imagination. In Slade's Bethanien installation a *derive* of sorts is offered through the conveyance of coded

forms: the ramp-like construction in Studio 246 leading to the exterior window and corresponding colored tubes placed upon the grounds below, extending into the surrounding neighborhood. Muller's videotapes of park benches, chairs, etc., running in the gallery along with Slade's ramp, serve to reinforce this directedness toward what is elsewhere. Yet to engage the work formally, to take one's cues from how it is structured, is firstly to get moving, and ultimately to move away from the work *as form*, to digress from it—or egress, as the case may be. Once one follows it outside—maybe all the tubes are waiting out there, or maybe they have been carried off by children at play, dogs, rummaging grandmothers, the litter patrol, what have you—one inevitably discovers that the movement of the work sets the city into relief, that is, as a series of transient locations and perspectives, including those of the gallery and the stuff within it. This is movement that does not necessarily lead back to the work itself, or, for that matter, that necessarily leads at all. It can become just another modality of traffic within the city, one primarily marked by its unhurried pace and purposelessness, which is to say its artfulness, and an attention to the surroundings that are its frame of reference.

Where Slade plays with an idea of structuring unstructuring, proceeding from construction and form toward that which is quite outside it and given over to the active observer or participant, Hanley's recent photographic work, such as that shown at the Bethanien, plays with a similar idea, although he approaches it from the opposite direction. Hanley has often used a practice of *derive* in his artwork, sometimes literal *derives* involving several collaborators—and a fair bit of recreational drinking—as a means of generating forms through chance discovery, forms which are then subjected to further driftings of a more aesthetic nature. The overall result is an insistently heterogeneous practice, including live performance, installation, photography, and computer manipulated media, much of which is connected by an ongoing thread of mutation and deterritorialization. To a certain extent it is a *system* of mutation in that it involves the repetition of certain aesthetic codes—most notably, primary color codes—which set the mutations into relief, suggesting the possibility of their interconnection. In contrast to his performances, Hanley's photo-based iris prints do not so much enact the *derive* which may have generated them; they exist rather as an encoding of it. One is put into the position of having to interpret states of passage or flux from static and often cryptic glimpses of what is irretrievably past, much as one does with photo stills of live performance. Such is the case with the "Dresden Pre-Occupation" prints at the Bethanien and, one gathers, with Kroll's images, which were produced within the framework of a loose collaboration between the two artists, and derived from their respective travels. Hanley's images taken inside a train enroute from former Yugoslavia to Berlin, which are at once private and impersonal, geographical and hypergeographical, strain the who-what-when-where question of photo documentary to the point of pure speculation and gambit—something has happened, nothing has happened, everything will happen—and they suspend each moment in question in a pool of primary, fluidic, emphatically present color. This is the work's most surprising turn. It is the kind of universalizing color that wants to signify numerous identities and places all at once, yet by the same token remain autonomous, nationless, without boarders. Hanley's geopolitical route seems to terminate in aporia: color as color, not sign.

A drift between aesthetic and documentary polarities of the photographic appears variously in the work of a number of other artists here. **Lisa Ann Auerbach** assembles groups of snapshot-like photographs that appear both as peripatetic micro-essays of the commonplace—with an emphasis on the myriad epiphenomena and incidental effects which we daily ignore—and as casual, idiosyncratic typologies, that is, typologies which seem to excuse themselves from any claim to historical or classificatory high ground. The documentary vein of the work is concerned as much with the peculiarities and aesthetic patterns of "bad" photographs—invasive and overly busy backgrounds, partially obscured subjects, flash flares and reflections, distracted framings—as it is with the things set before the camera, the supposed things of interest, which, as I have suggested, are usually of little interest in themselves. On one hand, Auerbach uses this to bring an immediacy, a noisy-yet-appealing musicality, to her work; on the other, to defer any overserious consideration of the photographic subject, which is, in effect, to defer documentary values in favor of aesthetic ones. Connections and counterpoints within the groupings, which are often absurdly obvious, are therefore just as likely to suggest a subject or theme that isn't, that is perhaps a riddle of the obvious, or addresses that aspect of the superficial which is always inscrutable, mysterious, deflective. While there is much in this work that suggests a form of *vanitas*, that the photographic subject of subjects is the artist herself and therefore always accounted for, personal narrativity is far less interesting here than that which tends to pull it apart, the freedom of the subject or theme to be elsewhere, or perhaps not to be at all.

At the other end of the spectrum—albeit, the videographic end, which is and must be something else entirely—**Jessica Bronson**'s video installations dispense with the conventional subject in a far more deliberate way. She too deals with epiphenomena and incidental effects of an everyday sort, as well as those of a more technological and rarefied nature, including manipulations of the video image itself. However, instead of posing them as mere points of interest, something with which one

may become fascinated, she stages them in such a fashion that they are consumed, obliterated by that fascination, in the sense that the fascination soon becomes its own object. The effect is consumed in its affect; the phenomenon by its resonance in the consciousness of the observer. "Red Line 7000," for example, which is derived from documentation of Formula One road racing, contemporary and archive, is so occupied with complex spatializations of sound, temporal expansions and contractions of the moving image, and entangled vectors of speed, force and bodily mobility, that to say it is about what it depicts would be to reject the work entirely. If it is "about" anything, it is about the body orienting itself within the world of forces—that is, the doing of it rather than the knowing about it—and how at some basic level of orientation the external real, the somatic, and the oneiric converge. Thus, the work may come off as hypnotic, dreamlike or *dynamically distracted*—to pinch one of the artist's favored terms—but remains nonetheless enworlded. There is no pretense to the transcendental here, just acknowledgment that the reality of the effect is continually reframed by its affective force. If Bronson may be said to participate in, and perhaps extend, something like a "tradition" of West Coast video installation—think of those big video boys who currently haunt European museums—it is that she approaches the realm of the effect/affect without thematizing it beforehand—this has usually meant along existential lines—or presuming its revelatory value. As such, her work achieves a kind of realpolitik of the sensual effect quite distinct from this "tradition," yet stays equally distant from the unreflective horse trade of Hollywood techno-magic.

There is an historical thread running through some of this work which is worth noting, as it deals with history without proposing revisionist or newly reasoned—and presumptively superior—perspectives on it, such as the much-maligned strategies of past conceptualism and appropriation are now *assumed* to have proposed. Nor does it hold up its attitudes toward the history with which it deals as its primary justification, the reason why it must be good art. This work tends to put its passions before its reasons, be they ludic, sentimental, or intensely sincere, and thereby assumes a license to trespass on unfashionable or impolitic historical territories without the pretense of transgression. **Sharon Lockhart**, for example, produces photographs within a very wide historical and aesthetic bracket that includes screen-test documentary, German New Objectivism and nineteenth century Romantic forms of landscape and portraiture. In one sense, this mix puts her squarely in a contemporary, radical pictorialist camp, where everything is presumed to be posed or staged and the truth claims of photography are put aside. Thus, there is the possibility of equivalence in her work between the affective values of portraiture and landscape, object and scene, and the viewer must contend with this, putting their subjective response ahead of their capacity to identify and interpret. What separates Lockhart from this camp is the nature of her historicism. She is not looking for either fond reminiscences or witty *detournements* but ways of seeing that are to a certain extent locked up in history—and are always locked up in time, that is, her pictures are always perceptibly *slow*. What she then does with these ways of seeing ceases to depend on history. They are, well, *awakened* and have a present task before them. With the strongest, most complex photographs, or between a number of simpler ones, one runs a gauntlet of contesting visualities that in one moment can seem like an exhausting test of faith, and in another like an uncanny, perplexing return of first experience.

Of course, the photographic and the historical necessarily have something in common: the rupturing of the continuum of time. The question becomes what one does with or within this rupture. **T.J. Wilcox** and **Joe-Mama Nitzberg** both use it as an occasion for stripping the self of centrality or fixity and reconceiving it as a distribution of desires and pleasures, which implies an image of self that runs contrary to what Identity Politics has in recent years demanded, particularly within photography: the iconic self. Wilcox's appropriations from popular culture and history ostensibly deal with the construction of subjectivities, which in itself is nothing new. But rather than force perspective on the subject, they spin in the opposite direction, making perspective less and less possible. His short film, "The Great Escape," a collage of movie excerpts and animation by the artist on the theme of Marie Antoinette's fantasy and fate, flirts with expose vis-à-vis the social construction and mythos of great courtesans, yet ends up lost in Marie's ecstatic and self-immolating desire. Here Wilcox plays with the idea that there is no self at the core of fantasy, no root thing other than the fantasy itself. Even the image of the artist, which is faintly reflected in the television screen off which the movie segments were shot, seems more like an erasure than an affirmation of some master desiring-subject regulating the fantasy by remote control. This stands in austere contrast to Nitzberg's theatrical "self-ish portraits," as he calls them, which revel in the image of a master desiring-subject and would never permit it to appear in anything less than its most resplendent ultraflesh and trim. That is not to say he identifies with it unequivocally; indeed, he deliberately works that end of the image spectrum where the self is posed as a sublime and impossible opacity, a glossy, impenetrable surface. He insists on maintaining the ambiguity of face and mask at all times, and seemingly extends it to all surfaces of the portraits, hence their absolute theatricality. Yet the remarkable and funny thing about his identification with the created self-image is its idiosyncrasy and earnestness. In one photo series, for example, Nitzberg discovers and plays with the

rabbinical and utopian themes connecting Boy George's public persona, the "Onement" paintings of Barnett Newman, and his own sexual/spiritual self-concept. It's a stretch, but he makes the connections stick. Still, it is not the autobiographical self which ultimately dominates here, nor the cultural icons embraced, but a circuit of relations among historical and autogenous realms. It is an open circuit—or, to acknowledge its burlesque character, an "open call"—of seemings, beings, and longings irreducible to iconic identity, but surrounded and permeated with it nonetheless.

It is difficult to imagine how the conception of self in **Frances Stark**'s work could take the form of an image, let alone a photographic portrait—and it doesn't—despite the fact that it is unwaveringly self involved. Here, the self is conceived, like Lacan's Unconscious, as a "discourse of the other"—the emphasis here being on "discourse"—a matter of what it grasps, collects, and finds itself in rather than how it may itself be seen. Stark's primary construction is that of an omnivorous reader—of literary works, popular magazines, and documents of various sorts, including those pertaining to or produced by her—a reader which is always in some sense reading itself reading. The self becomes an invisibility at the "center" of reading, a predicate, and remains invisible regardless of how much it points to itself as subject. It is not surprising then that vision is not the dominant sense here, that vision must yield to something else. What is surprising, and the most characteristic quality of the work, is that it yields to the sense of touch. To say this work is about reading, or that which is being read, is to emphasize the content of her appropriated texts over the means by which she appropriates them: her ubiquitous use of tracing. Stark's tracing of letters, words, paragraphs, etc. is neither writing, grappling with language's generation of meaning, nor drawing, grappling with the meaning generated by line, but an attempt to reconcile reading with touch, the linguistic with the haptic. Whether this touch is the touch to which reading may aspire, or the touch which the devoted reader imagines—who among us has not fondled a favorite text, or attempted to inhale it?—it remains an invisibility intimately affined with the constitution of self. The connotation of slow, redundant labor in Stark's tracings certainly affects the sense of time or retrospection in her text pieces, and in that says a lot about her personal relation to the texts themselves. But to play with the word as a kind of touch, as a bodily domain, is to approach a mystery of language that exceeds any individual story or fabric of identifications, and to approach the essence of Stark's romanticism as well.

Discursiveness and tactility together may be an odd couple indeed, but not an inappropriate theme with which to end this zigzagging text, or organize a few remarks about the paintings of **Laura Owens** and **Carl Bronson**. Actually, it's a shame they could not have shown together, for although they share a taste for candied colors and an interest in non-representation, their conceptions of painting couldn't be farther apart. Tropes of abstraction abound in Owens's desultory and eclectic works, but their rather infectious enthusiasms are less a matter of belief in abstraction than an enjoyment of looking at it, that is, from a distance and somewhat askance. It seems that a painting is never just a painting with Owens, it is always a painting *somewhere*, a painting situated among other things, within it and around it: a painting in the midst of a picture. One might suppose that her work is *about* paintings, not in some historicist sense, but in the sense of being about being in a room with paintings, being *around* them, which is really not much of a speculation considering that it sometimes illustrates or cartoons precisely that, the work in the Bethanien included. While this makes it somewhat homey and nonconfrontational—and, of course, representational, which is to say nothing against it—it also gives it an odd kind of distance and expansiveness, a periscopic ability to look around corners and take everything in, including itself looking. This kind of latitude is the key ingredient of Owens's considerable inventiveness, and the one which is prohibited by Bronson's. Bronson's abstract work never looks around corners. It just hangs there, frontally posed, intensely focused on what it is and what it does, and even in series remains inscrutably complete. In this sense, it is both confrontational—one either engages it or fails it—and fragile—as perhaps is all frankly abstract work, that is, work that doesn't lend itself to translation—in that its pleasures are always entangled with its difficulty. To speak of completeness here is not to suggest some kind of airy wholism. Bronson's work is extremely slippery, mixing stunning optical phenomena with raw, even brute, materiality in a fashion that either blurs the distinction or deems it superfluous, suggesting that the visual *is* the tactile and vice versa. Permeating all of this is an elusive personality I can only describe as gender-bending. It is not the sort of gender-bending that personifies or narrativizes the work, thus ritualizing it, but a more confounding sort that tends to short circuit any associations with prior *butch* or *femme* abstractionisms. It is an absurdity that keeps you accounting—the sex of this particular pink, blue, yellow, and so on—until you forget what you were accounting for and move on, that is to say, move *in*. Within the completeness of Bronson's abstractions there is a great deal of movement, perhaps not so much of the drifting or discursive kind but a circularity, spinning outward while holding itself together. It is movement with a repeating pattern or pulse, yet one that remains, at least for the observer, unmapped beforehand.

studio 246

Alex Slade

Kevin Hanley

Frances Stark

Jonathan Kroll

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T. J. Wilcox