



Cristóbal Lehyt's *Reduced to Insults*

By Juli Carson

They talk of people now as gardeners talk of leaves for burning...

In the summer of 2002...a senior adviser to Bush...told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend – but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency...The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

- Ron Suskind, *New York Times*, Oct 17, 2004

Five years since the world stage was set for George W. Bush's so-called "history actors," a stage upon which an American empire set out to make it's "own reality" vis-à-vis a world audience left to watch and study the drama as it unfolded, a pronounced fatalism characterizes the political landscape. In this context, the question for contemporary art production entails a renewed investigation into the nature of the real, reality, and realism. As politics (and history) are increasingly viewed through the double lense of "drama" and "narrativity" – witness the recent marriage of YouTube and CNN for a presidential debate – art must (again) interrogate the tenacity of these literary genres within popular culture, precisely at the moment when one's ability to effect "real" historical change is rapidly receding. Even though it traditionally eschews lofty drama in favor of "truth" and "accuracy," realism, by its very nature, is defined by narrative. In contemporary political terms, realism spans ideological poles, serving every messenger of the "truth" by positively – albeit mythologically – identifying "the enemy" (for the Right) or "the victim" (for the Left). Here the realist approach to truth manifests itself as at once a cowboy narrative for the former camp and a refugee narrative for the latter. Through the very *genre* of realism,



the real slips into an infinite state of metaphoric regress. What, then, is the role of the artist concerned with the real?

Art is the negative knowledge of the world...

Cristóbal Lehyt's *Reduced to Insults*, a project that posits "defeatism" as a tactical tool of political and aesthetic resistance, challenges us to imagine a moment of emancipatory events and practices in the very *real* space where the powerful continue to exert their dominance. In this way, by eschewing an oppositional realist approach, *Reduced to Insults*, powerfully resonates with Theodor Adorno's critique of social realism and materialist dialectics. Against realism, Adorno famously argued for a type of "aesthetic distance," a vantage point from which artists would acknowledge the a priori entanglement between real world politics and formalist aesthetics, and it is from this perspective that an artist could wage a critique of real events as a *negative knowledge* of the world.¹ For Adorno, this space of "negative knowledge" is the space of art's critical contradiction, denoting as it does that which exists *between* the real world object reconciled into the subject of art and the actual un-reconciled object left in the real world. Such a position of aesthetic distance refuses to situate an artwork discretely within *either* aesthetics *or* the real world. Rather, the formal art event *vis-à-vis* the world is at the same time an event *in* the world. It is precisely this irreconcilable tension between two poles – art and world – that *Reduced to Insults* seeks to invoke in its interdisciplinary montage of aesthetic fragments, bringing back the question of historical meta-narratives and the critical role of the anecdote in puncturing them.

The anecdote produces an effect of the real...

Etymologically anecdote means "unpublished." For Joel Fineman, it is thus...

...the literary form that uniquely "lets history happen" by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, i.e., it does so only in so far as its narration both compromises and refracts the narration it reports.²



Theorized around Jacques Lacan's notion of an *unrepresentable* "real," Fineman's more recent notion of the anecdote identifies an event that is neither fiction nor history but incongruously privileged as being both. The pulse that the anecdote therefore stages between these poles allows it to pierce and disturb realist grand-narratives of history. As such, the anecdote functions as a type of *tuche* (a contingent surprise or lucky find) in the symbolic order of history, drawing on the fact that anecdotes have the conventional status of being closer to history than, say, the novel. In this way, while anecdotes leave a *trace* of the real within historical texts, they themselves are *not* the real nor do they expose the real. When one takes the anecdote seriously as a stable representation of the real, Fineman warns, one misses it, and it turns to fiction.³ For this reason, anecdotes are anathema to scientists and historians alike. But to artists with designs on disturbing realist narratives from the position of Adorno's aesthetic distance, Fineman's notion of the anecdote is indeed a lucky find.

Let's begin again with the following anecdote relayed by Lehyt:

Reduced to Insults is meant to conjure up the idea of being reduced or left with very little after being defeated but still wanting to put up a fight, even if it is ironic or desperate since one knows it will have no real effect. This reminds me of an incident Sharon Hayes told me. At the end of the 2004 Republican Convention in NYC, there were protestors singing and showing semi-competent critiques of the Right's agenda as the Republican delegates zoomed by in their buses. At the end of the convention, Sharon was surprised to see that the same protestors were reduced to making the simplest of gestures, such as screaming obscenities and mainly just giving the finger, as the buses zoomed by to their exit. Amidst all this, I was thinking about the position artists have because we too are reduced to insults...what one would want art to do – effect tangible, social change – it doesn't. But still, this sense of incompleteness can be production.

In the spirit of incompleteness, *Reduced to Insults* gives us the "schema" of a social narrative – the title, the artwork, this very text – in place of an actual narrative or drama composed of a beginning, middle and end. Lehyt thus stages a series of reduced "situations"

Cover: *Red*, (detail), video, 2006
 Left: *Rome (Arch of Septimus Severus)*, (detail), video, 2007
 Center: *Presidents*, (detail), C-Print, 54 x 40 inches, 2007
 Right: *Drama Projection-Two Heads*, (detail), 32 ink-jet prints, 96 x 72 inches, 2004-2007

that *promise* a connection between the subject of art and the real world in-as-much as they *solicit* a failed connection between the two. Disrupting narrative closure, these artworks-as-aneccdotés lyrically straddle the border between formal disavowal and realist engagement, seducing and repelling the viewer's desire for what modernists used to call the transcendent "aesthetic fact" of art and what realists referred to as the materialist "historical agency" of art.

The pulse puts into action an infinite permutation...

At first glance, Lehyt's situations offer a promise of dialectical clarity. Upon further inspection, however, they actually produce an intellectual contradiction. A small video projection captures the image of a boy juggling for money at an intersection in a third world city. The song "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" can be heard among the ambient street sounds. Failing repeatedly, the boy never manages to get the trick right. Our hearts go out to him. And yet, aided by the "peep show" nature of the work's installation, the boy's masochistic attempt to master the task mirrors the viewer's sadistic desire to witness this failed act. Voyeuristic complicity in the spectacle becomes tangled up with humanist sympathy. A message stenciled onto a gallery wall adjacent to the video projection stops us in our tracks: PLEASE DONATE. But to what, to whom? Meanwhile, another larger projection, blinking and pulsing to the throb of a human heartbeat, presents an interior view of Rome's Septimus Severus arch. Stuck to the arch's peak, as if impaled, is an uncanny figure. Is the subject of this image the figure of a fallen soldier? Or is it the viewer's own point of view that of a soldier's returning home under the arch? Or is it both? Against good academic form, it could be argued that this state of intellectual non-differentiation – one in which humanism is sadism, subject is object – produces a realist depiction of the current political landscape, a state in which reality can only be aimed at but not achieved in any stable form. In this worldview, reality is a non-dialectical *operation*, not a concept or a metaphor.

If we consider Lehyt's project as a radical form of *non*-dialectical realism, then a theoretical precursor to the work would be Georges Bataille's operation of the *formless* – that which serves to declassify all classical form. Writing in the 1930s, Bataille argued "for academics to be satisfied, it would be necessary...for the universe to take on a form." Against good academic form, what the formless instead designates "gets crushed like a spider or an earthworm."⁴ One of the keystones of the formless would thus be the non-dialectical operation of *heterology*, the science of what is entirely *other*. In this universe, "form" pulsates in a non-differential state of being, both soiled *and* holy, evoking a realm perceived as a gob of spittle. Indeed, Yves Alain-Bois interprets the formless through the pulse, which "puts into action an infinite permutation that...annuls metaphor through metaphoric excess."⁵

The pulse, however, should not be reduced to the mere blinking of light. As Bois argues, it also implies the flickering metonymic skid of contradictory associations that a given artwork puts into play, a movement that relates to Lehyt's drawings. *Presidents* is a C-print made of images culled from a Chilean article representing various doodles made by several American presidents. The drawings are at once silly and serious. The content – cartoons – is "kitsch" while the form – hand drawing – is "genuine." But if we refuse the conventional dialectic between form and content, accepting that each is the ground for the other, then what we

have is the "authentic" hand of presidential signature re-encoded as *genuine kitsch*. Lehyt doesn't limit this critique of authenticity to others; in *Drama Projection*, he turns the lens on himself. Consisting of an image the artist made "as if he were someone else," the work's initial drawing session entailed the production of hundreds of images produced rapidly and repetitively to mechanize the process and thus undermine the truth-claim associated with the artist's hand. After one image was selected, Lehyt photocopied and photographed it, segmented it by computer into 32 individual parts, and then enlarged it as a mosaic to produce a chiasmus between the original mark of his hand and the seriality of the process. The "gesture" here is not one of traditionalist mark-making, but that of transgression – of the artist's authentic presence and identity.

Ultimately, nothing is more imperative today than a critique of conventional notions of authenticity, presence and identity in the space of art. The concomitant sense of incompleteness and contradiction that attends such a critique defines a contemporary form of political resistance in a time of great moral positivism. On this note, what Adorno wrote in 1962 could just as easily been written today: *Newspapers and magazines of the radical Right constantly stir up indignation against what is unnatural, over-intellectual, morbid and decadent: they know their readers...This hostility to anything alien or alienating can accommodate itself much more easily to...realism.*⁶ But if – as I have argued here – a field of contradiction is the repressed "real" of our times, then Lehyt's situational artworks, which court intellectual paradox, might indeed constitute a new form of critical "realism" at the dawn of the 21st century. Sure, it might constitute a form of realism at which we – the artist and the viewer – can merely aim but never definitely grasp. However, it is precisely in this aim (rather than realism's goal) that the curtain might finally close on the positivist history actors in our current political theater.

- 1 Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," (1959) in *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 160.
- 2 Joel Fineman, "History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 72.
- 3 For an explication of Lacan's "real" see: Bruce Fink's "The Real Cause of Repetition," in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Feldstein, et al, eds., (New York: Suny Press, 1995).
- 4 Georges Bataille, *Encyclopediea Acephalica*, (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 52.
- 5 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless; A User's Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 32.
- 6 Adorno, "Commitment," (1962) in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 179.

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