



wreckers  
records  
redeemers

**SANDY DE LISSOVOY**

**KENT FAMILTON**

**ANDY FEDAK**

**DAVID KELLEY**

**JOEY LEHMAN MORRIS**

**NILS SCHIRRMACHER**

**GABIE STRONG**

**HONG-AN TRUONG**

**UCI STUDIO**

**2008**

**ART MFA**

# Remembering Site

As serendipity would have it, this year's UCI MFA thesis show takes place during the 40th anniversary of the global post-war Cultural Revolution, that moment known simply as "May '68." This historical event, instanced by the international uprising of students, workers and intellectuals seeking a *better way of life*, marked a pivotal moment when modernist dialectical idealism morphed into postmodernist deconstruction of truth-claims made in the fields of aesthetics, politics and identity. On the level of idealism, 1968 gave us the General Strike by 10 million French citizens, the Summer of Love in San Francisco and the Days of Rage in Chicago. On the level of deconstruction, 1968 also laid the intellectual groundwork for much of the critical theory relevant to art producers today, from Daniel Buren to Rosalind Krauss, Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin and Jacques Lacan to Luce Irigaray. As such, 1968 represents a paradoxical site that at once built up and tore down the ideal subject (of art, politics, and self). For 40 years hence, these two intellectual trajectories have battled it out in academia, mass culture and the art market. Amidst all this, a growing number of young international artists have tenaciously held the orthodoxies of modernism and postmodernism in the balance by willfully occupying the fence between the sites of presence/memory, utopia/dystopia and analysis/lyricism. The 2008 UCI MFA class enters this stage with a sense of urgency and conviction, wary, as they are, of nostalgic returns to the past but mindful of the political and aesthetic histories that precede them. For this group of artists it is thus a question of complexly refashioning *that old thing called site* into its most expansive poetic definition within the field of contemporary visual culture.

As for the site of 60s neo-avant-garde art, it is well-known that the founding color field painters (informed by Clement Greenberg) and the subsequent minimalists (informed by Krauss) both under-determined the symbolic connotation of their respective abstract projects. Witness the cold war rhetoric of MOMA's Alfred Barr that attended Jackson Pollock's drip paintings in the early 50s or the culture wars of New York City that initiated the demise of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in the late 80s. Through different tactical engagements with different

mediums, Kent Farnilton and Sandy deLissovoy hold out against modernist claims that abstraction is inherently apolitical *as well as* the dialectical postmodernist claim that political content relies on the rejection of formalist abstraction. Farnilton's abstract paintings and drawings, which come about through an informed analytic eye and "intuitive" (unconscious) decision-making, attempt to make space an actual substance rather than a transcendent emptiness or concept. In the process, Farnilton ingests, invites and rejects all that surrounds him, be it music theory, jazz, literature or the architecture of Los Angeles. The result is a paired down organization of an environment that signifies as neither an analytic fact nor a symbolic fiction but rather as a fragment of both, becoming something new for the viewer along the way. This produces a Brechtian type image that intentionally hovers awkwardly between success and failure. De Lissovoy's installations, in turn, re-employ a branch of phenomenological minimalism that explored the boundaries between architecture, sculpture and painting, what Michael Fried derisively called "theatre" and Krauss more influentially coined the "expanded field." De Lissovoy is equally informed by the *Junkspace* project of Rem Koolhaas and the Neo-Concrete work of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, in which the viewer's participation with an environment or sculpture begins as formal experimentation and opens up into social interaction. Likewise, de Lissovoy's installations elicit the viewer's participation, allowing the work to unfold as it pushes back against the rigidity of the contemporary built environment. The work invites us to enter spaces that may be fragmented, prohibitively small or suggest their own constant modification.

The attempt to translate formal propositions into social critique defined a branch of 20s Surrealism spearheaded by André Breton who famously argued against any realist didactic approach to cultural transformation. He instead advocated a general disruption of bourgeois taste and norms, conventions without which normative society would be untenable. This strategy entailed perverting good classical form by introducing an unexpected, uncanny or paradoxical element into bourgeois sites of art reception. It was this lens that informed the rediscovery of Duchamp in the 60s by key neo-avant-garde artists interested in visual paradox. Andy Fedak and Joey Morris's respective projects can be understood in this context. Fedak's video manipulation of 3-dimensional objects in "five dimensions" – vertical, horizontal, depth, time and vector – attempts to break from the hierarchical visual conventions of Hollywood cinema that parasite the laws and structures of global capital. Fedak's primary concerns are contemporary religion, art and politics vis-à-vis the conventions of idolatry that attend all three. His visual approach to these subjects, however, is definitively surrealist. As he puts it, "I like to think of the pieces as trying to hit a golf shot on what's known as the *dog-leg*, where you curve the ball around a blind corner. We can't see these ideas directly, so we have

to approach them at a hooking *surreal* angle.” Continuing the theme of visual paradox, Morris’s photographs frame movement within stillness, distance within closeness, and interiority within public space. In this way, his photographs give us something we have already seen that he has contingently re-situated. Morris does this, however, without taking recourse to those meta-plans indicative of 70s conceptual, photographic systems analysis. Many of his images deal with the American southwest, evoking all the philosophical mythologies that attended the well-known F64 Group, specifically those photographs taken by Weston. Again, Morris mobilizes this familiar visual paradigm as a conduit for endless physical change and instability in face of the “universal eternity” of American values that Weston’s canonical photographs mythologically purported to maintain.

Post-colonial art and discourse, on the other hand, are inherently paradoxical. Its practitioners are concerned with Diaspora or the migratory subject, be it of art, people or philosophies, which requires the subject always being both *here* and *elsewhere*. The foremost treatise on this dual state was written by the Martinique psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, whose 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* described in first-person the splintering effect that European colonial hegemony had on its subjects. In different ways **David Kelley** and **Hong-An Truong** take up Fanon’s legacy, extending his analysis to consider European and American presence in Japan and Viet Nam. Kelley’s video installation re-stages Robert Rauschenberg’s 1964 Tokyo performance where he made his final Combine painting – *Gold Standard*. In Kelley’s installation of the same name, archival television footage of anti-American student protests by the Zenkyoto activists are combined with cinematic re-stagings of Rauschenberg’s original performance with local actors. Kelley’s re-staging of real and imagined situations in the actual sites where they are presumed to have taken place attempts to expose the inextricable link between realism and fantasy in post-colonial memories of neo-avant-garde aesthetics and anti-AMPO demonstrations. In the end, *Gold Standard* unfolds as an homage to an under-exposed moment in the history of American-Japanese post-war relations. Truong’s video work, influenced by Chris Marker, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Stan Douglas, addresses war trauma and linguistic translation in the context of post-colonial Viet Nam. Using video loops and multi-channel projections to depict her “subject,” Truong proposes an a-temporal awareness meant to betray any *complete* understanding of the self vs. the other. While the loop suggests a kind of eternal return, it also defers any conclusive narrative understanding of Truong’s depicted subjects and, by extension, any stability of the *viewers’* position vis-à-vis these subjects. This suspension of binaries – self/other, then/now and here/elsewhere – marks a return to a type of 80s film/video practice. In so doing, Truong’s work allegorically evokes the current neo-colonial global crisis.

The crisis that Western democracies face today in re-defining civil rights in relation to national security concerns recalls Giorgio Agamben’s writings on the “state of exception,” e.g. the deferral of constitutional procedures during a state’s time of real or perceived siege. France and Germany enacted this “exception” during WWI and WWII. While Republican ideals may well have been intended, such protected democracies resulted in the most dystopic realities of the 20th century. As Agamben explains “...the end of the Weimar Republic clearly demonstrates that, on the contrary, a ‘protected democracy’ is not a democracy at all, and that the paradigm of constitutional dictatorship functions instead as a transitional phase that leads inevitably to the establishment of a totalitarian regime.” Indeed, the discredited belief in democratic utopias marked the end of modernism’s program, though the concept of an exterior “enemy” – against which utopias define themselves – has since persisted.

Against this cultural backdrop, we can consider **Nils Schirmmacher’s** work, whose “structures” are derived from two sources: the replicas of 1920’s German housing that made up German Village, an Army test site used for the development of incendiary bombs during WWII, and a chicken coop designed by Charles Weeks, the founder of two utopian colonies in California during the early part of the 20th century. When the individual histories of Nazism and California utopianism are visually combined to the point of being unrecognizable as separate entities, their particular approaches to isolation and the sublime resonate within a compressed space of difference. In this 20th century cleft between the elation of an ideological ascent and the horror of ideology descending, contemporary islands of zeal and brutality can be contemplated. **Gabie Strong’s work considers the cultural mythos of Southern California military-industrial complex. Her photographs of bound periodicals from public libraries depict various US defense industry data reports, yet her suggestive titles and date structures reveal a larger system corresponding to Paul Virilio’s theory on “Pure War.” The serial nature of her presentation formally renders a visual datum line through the gallery, revealing the context of war vis-à-vis the artist’s lifetime. Strong thus employs the visual strategies of 60s Conceptualism in service of two things overtly repressed by those orthodox “systems analysis,” e.g. realism and subjectivity. And it is here again - as in the work of her peers - that we can grasp the hopeful collapse of modernism’s most tenacious aesthetic dialectic: the political site vs. the poetic site.**

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Juli Carson

Director University Art Gallery  
Associate Professor, Studio Art



**Gabie Strong**

Above:  
*Battery*, (BCN-127, Whites Point, California, 1942) 2008  
Color Photograph, 48 x 60"

Overleaf:  
*Datum*, (Langson Library, University of California, Irvine, 1971-2007) (detail), 2008  
4 of 16 Color Photographs, 14 1/2 x 18"



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UCI Studio Art MFA exhibition at LA×ART, June 28 - July 10, 2008

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**Kent Familton**  
**Andy Fedak**  
**David Kelley**  
**Joey Lehman Morris**  
**Nils Schirmmacher**  
**Gabie Strong**  
**Hong-An Truong**

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