

JOEL KYACK

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Los Angeles Special

KAARI UPSON / JOEL KYACK / SAM FALLS / STERLING RUBY / *Five Questions about Los Angeles* / AMY YAO / AGNÈS VARDA

plus a 16 pages insert on Singapore

Every Rough Edge Is Gone



Joel Kyack talks about how to translate energy into art and go from desire to action

by LAURA OWENS



FEATURE



Joel Kyack: The red light is on.

Laura Owens: *Do you think we can just ask each other questions?*

JK: Sure.

LO: *Do you like to look at art?*

JK: Yes.

LO: *Some artists don't like to look at art.*

JK: I don't find a whole lot that really turns me on but I like seeking it out. Even the stuff I'm not digging is somehow formulating an argument in my own work. Or sometimes when I see something I'm really puzzled by it excites me and shakes me into action.

LO: *Has that ever happened to you with a painting?*

JK: Just recently actually, with your show "12 Paintings" at 356 S. Mission Rd. and Llyn Foulkes's show at the Hammer Museum. There was this one piece in Foulkes's show in particular called *Flanders* (1961–62), where he'd taken a framed painting and just put it in the larger painting. So this reference that he was making to something that he had seen in the world wasn't really a reference, it was just the actual thing stuck into the painting. And because the framed painting felt so

finished on its own, simply by being in a frame, there became this silent conversation between the piece it was and the piece it had now become. All the information I needed was right there.

LO: *I also really liked the Llyn Foulkes show, but was looking more at his use of trompe l'oeil. How it creates these telescoping versions of reality. There's a painted reality, and then there's a painting within that and a painting within that. His use of shadow and three-dimensional collage: "Oh, that's a table..." "No, that really is a table because it's sticking off the painting." In your new work, you're putting these found framed paintings, posters, photographs on the actual painting. It highlights an awareness of the fact that you're constructing this thing. It makes the body of the viewer active. They have to engage with it, and it's a kind of awakening to the process of thought involved in its making. As opposed to a painting that's transporting you to another world, where the body in the gallery or even the physical space in front of the art is much less important.*

JK: Maybe this awareness you're describing serves to get around the linear experience of being transported to another world. Maybe by compounding levels of awareness you allow the work to be this singular, non-linear thing.

Previous page:
Wild Kingdom, 2013.
Courtesy of the Artist and
Praz-Delavallade, Paris

Above:
Self-Portrait as a Cave, 2013.
Photo by Mike Egan
Courtesy the Artist and
Ramiken Crucible,
New York

LO: *I think what you're bringing up with Llyn Foulkes — which happens in a lot of really good art — is that the collage has this element of demonstrating the process, and that is just laid bare. It's like saying: "It's permissible to see how I made this thing. I cut this out of here and I glued it on."*

JK: This revealing of process, or having it be very direct and unrefined, seems radical to me given that the things we generally interact with in our daily lives are so insanely refined. Like a cell phone — every rough edge is gone. It is a thing that is solely about its end use. And when these types of objects fail, even slightly, there's nothing that looks worse. Forget function — it has failed its *intention*. Its like Donald Judd's early sculptures at Marfa, they look like shit because, if just the corner is a tiny bit off, I'm like: "The whole thing's bullshit now." I'd argue that the tiny flaw — which is inherent over time — ruins it because its intention is exactitude. Even getting into a new car feels like a human never even touched it, like some giant robot pooped out this other robot.

LO: *Do you think that means that art has to allow its flaws or have its own self-evidence built into it in order for it to be authentic?*

JK: I think there's other ways of doing it, and I think that depends on how savvy you are. You did it in your last show. I went back to see it several times because I think I was just pissed about why I liked it so much. It was like when I first started playing in bands... We would go to some show and be so excited by the band that we would go and immediately practice at like 1:30 in the morning. What I liked was that it just felt so confident and just all the way, no apologies, all guts.

LO: *It's funny because our artist colleague Michael Decker said to me about that show: "Your art comes across like you were the kid who someone on the playground picked on a couple times and you took it. And then you went home and you came back with some kind of machine that just laid everyone flat." I think he was trying to say it looked like I had something to prove and I over-proved it. But when I was making it I was thinking more like, I'm fucking sick of seeing all this work that is aestheticizing the idea of not trying, this aesthetic encapsulation of something that says, "I didn't try and that's really cool." I just came to the conclusion that it was really embarrassing to try, and I was like, "Oh, now I'm going to try really hard to do it."*

JK: Those paintings have these giant exaggerated gestural marks that seem to have come from smaller gestures, and in that translation of scale and intention — from the actual gesture to the interpretation and remaking of that gesture — you don't leave anything out. The mark is itself, its interpretation, and its representation as a mark — all three.

LO: *I didn't realize until afterwards that this idea of the frame within a frame or the painting within the painting was happening. Those big marks — when I started talking about the work I was like, "Oh my God, that big mark is made out of all these other big marks."*

JK: It begins compounding.

LO: *Like a Russian nesting doll.*

JK: I thought of "12 Paintings" as being really generous. That's something that I think is perceived as not cool right now in contemporary art. It's not cool to be generous to your audience. Shit, your show and Foulkes's felt generous enough that I started thinking that I could make a painting, that I could translate the energy that is, to me, inherent in drawing.

LO: *When I walked in your studio that was exactly what I saw. I was like, "This is an amazing drawing." Because with simple gestures you had really just drawn on the canvas and it felt like a very complete thing with a few marks.*

JK: I had always felt very confident about sculpture or performance or music, but painting felt scary. Maybe about the third time I saw your show I went to the studio and stretched the first canvas. I was just like, "I'm going to do this fucking thing right now."

LO: *How do you go from not stretching a canvas to stretching a canvas?*

JK: Shit, I don't know. I think you go from desire to action when you have no other option. And the second I did it I was like, "This makes sense, so now I've got to go and do this as well."

LO: *I wonder if the argument against painting could be because it has this historical primacy at its center. It's just this thing that gets rebelled against, you know? Maybe it has something to do with it being read as art.*

JK: Very simply read as art?

LO: *If you ask an average person "What's art?" they say, "Paintings." Somehow your brain fully believes in that. With sculpture, you have these materials to deal with. Even a Donald Judd is referring to...*

JK: ...other things made of steel.

LO: *Things that are made for the world have a function and are awesome.*

JK: It's interesting — this referential dialogue with the "real world" that a piece is in conversation with... I'm reading *Artificial Hells* by Claire Bishop right now, and she talks about this interesting point where when an artist does something — let's say you build a community center in the gallery... Her point was that criticism of those sorts of works is almost exclusively reserved for comparison only to other works of art. It doesn't get compared to or measured against the actual thing in the world that it's performing as.

LO: *Like an actual community center.*

JK: Exactly. The merits of the project can — and I'd argue should also — be talked about in relationship to the actual "real world" thing it's in conversation with: the community center, functional steel structures, the café. We can just talk about it as a café. Is it a good café

Next page:

Turn Turn Turn, 2013
Photo by Alexander Basile
Courtesy the Artist

Page 64, below:

The Long Way Home, 2013
Courtesy of the Artist and
Praz-Delavallade, Paris

Page 65, above:

The New World, 2013
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer
Courtesy of the Artist;
Rodolphe Janssen Collection
and Francois Ghebaly
Gallery, Los Angeles

Page 65, below:

Rats Get Fat..., 2012
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer
Courtesy of the Artist;
Praz-Delavallade, Paris and
Francois Ghebaly Gallery,
Los Angeles





FEATURE



or a bad café, compared to other cafés? Since art has gone so far as to include almost any situation, I think it's exciting that all processes are game to any single artist. I think in that idea there's this sense of freedom, and that sense of freedom is a valuable thing to exercise and convey.

LO: *I think making paintings it's weirder though than when you have the kind of fluidity of making art out of many different materials. You're literally using your hand and the paintbrush, and when you feel yourself making the same marks over and over again there's a consciousness to it that is always too self-conscious. And it's what can easily end up feeling stayed and overworked.*

JK: I'm always a little wary of respect in general, and when that sort of self-indulgence happens, it seems like this awkward, weird respect for one's self, for one's own work. It's like exalting what you do and then behaving respectfully towards it. It becomes a trap.

LO: *That's really subtle. That's a quality of dialogue with yourself, knowing you're imitating yourself from a year ago. Or maybe there would be a great sense of freedom in doing the exact same thing every day.*

JK: Hard to say.

Joel Kyack (b. 1972, Abington, Pennsylvania) lives in Los Angeles.

*Selected solo shows:
François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; Kate Werble Gallery, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles;*

*Selected group shows:
Balice Hertling, Paris; Praz-Delavallade, Paris;
Workplace Gallery, Gateshead; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; West of Rome, Los Angeles; Kavi Gupta, Berlin;
CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco.*

Laura Owens is an artist. She lives in Los Angeles.





LOS ANGELES

The infinitude of the private man

BY ANDREW BERARDINI

Andrew Berardini dissects the unsettling work of Joel Kyack to trace certain ideas and themes, in an assorted sample of visions and elements that are as “anti-” as they are deeply and intimately American. Kyack likes Paul McCarthy, the mental isolation and physical vigor of *Into The Wild*, knives, and the ethics of DIY, in solitude, making do. Because in the end, the artist is an everyman, and like all free spirits, must shift for himself, create works that function, however he can.



AGENDA LOS ANGELES

Huntington Gardens
 151 Oxford Road, San Marino, CA
www.huntington.org
 The site of Rauschenberg's revelation and the best place to go with grandma on acid in Los Angeles. Make yourself a fake press pass before you go, they don't look that hard and it'll save you like twenty bucks. Millionaire's trophy spaces cases always make me uncomfortable, but the cactus garden is one of the strangest, spiciest landscapes one might likely encounter anywhere.

Public Art in LA various places
www.nomadicdivision.org
www.westofromeinc.com
www.laxart.org
www.makcenter.org
 There is no doubt that the time has come to reevaluate public art and in Los Angeles they've taken note. Shamim Momim is launching an LA public art initiative, LAND (Los Angeles Nomadic Division). There is also a handful of other public art projects cooking in LA lately, including ongoing projects by Emi with West of Rome, LAXART, plus the MAK center in LA is going public.



This page and opposite
The Knife Shop, 2009.
 Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly,
 Los Angeles. Photo: Kurt Lam.

List of Jobs Joel Kyack Has Done for Money,
 In No Particular Order:

Dishwasher, Tattoo Artist, Graphic Designer, Pizza Maker, Illustrator, Prepress Technician at a Silkscreen Factory, Web Programmer, Math & English Tutor, Art Fabricator, Housepainter, Food Delivery Driver, Maintenance Man at a Townhome Complex, Residential Carpenter, Prop Fabricator, Set Carpenter, Architectural Restorator, High School Janitor, Vegetable Sorter, Art Instructor, Gardener, Assistant Tree Surgeon, Convasser, Art Handler, School Van Driver, Animator, Musician, Artist's Assistant, Butcher, Rock Climbing Instructor, Crate Builder, Fish Monger and Full-time Artist.

As a godfather of the American "rugged individualist", Ralph Waldo Emerson is relatively benign, even if the trickle down of his ideas has been occasionally less so. Best remembered for his essay "Self Reliance", Emerson advocated for a radical nonconformity ("Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."). His work emphasizes a part of the American personality that is not only self-reliant, but believes that the individual and the will of the individual is the force that shapes society. The self-reliant American man became more fully and forcefully realized in the younger Thoreau, who turned self-reliance into a radical political gesture. According to Thoreau, the individual must eschew the comforts of modernity ("Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind"), and risk being civilly disobedient in order to make any progress.

This kind of radical self-reliance has wended its way through the years to take all kinds of forms: the pamphlet of epigrammatic self-awareness that populates the ever-burgeoning self-help sections at bookstores, the dangerous thrill of adventure tourism, the fierce independence of hardcore survivalists, the endurance tests of extreme sportsmen, the *Anarchist's Cookbook*, Herbert Hoover's oft-repeated "Rugged Individualist", the environmental movement (complete with a book by the Union of Concerned Scientists called *Thoreau's Legacy: American Stories About Global Warming*), libertarian separatists holed up in remote self-made bunkers like the Unabomber, as well as Thoreau himself serving as a cited inspiration for a cavalcade of American (and world) heroes, muckrakers, anarchists, and artists including Martin Luther King, J.R., John F. Kennedy, Mahatma Gandhi, Upton Sinclair, Emma Goldman, and B. F. Skinner. Artists haven't missed the link between the civilly disobedient Thoreau and a few of the darker scions of this tradition, picking up on Thoreau's passionate challenges to the idea of the self. But these challenges for both Emerson and Thoreau were purposeful, to explore and progress the evolution of the individual.

In a journal entry from 1840, Emerson wrote in his journal a phrase that so beautifully sums up the earnest and sometimes dangerous energy of Americans when he wrote: "In all of my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man."

The infinitude of the private man has no better representative (in all of its encouraging and troubling incarnations) than Los Angeles-based artist Joel Kyack. Emerson and Thoreau serve as a foundation, in my mind, for the work of Kyack, not only because this sense of "the infinitude of the private man" but because of this strange of things stated above (nature boy trekking to libertarian separatism) seem to be wholly embodied, with all of their contradictions, in Kyack.

A resident and participant of Fort Thunder in Providence, Rhode Island, in the waning years of the twentieth century, Kyack lived and contributed to that space, which famously held a collection of misfits, riffraff, and RISD grads and served as a place where noise-rock outfits played, art projects were spun out and destroyed, and impromptu mattress wrestling parties flourished. Other than just by trying to be an artist in a tight-knit and relatively isolated community of individuals, Kyack collaborated in a numerous noise-rock outfits,

including most notably Landed (and currently Street Buddy), until he turned himself professionally to the pursuit of visual art. Kyack's practice, evidenced by his voluminous resume above is wedded to this American do-it-yourself vision of labor, the same strange spirit of the writers of "Self Reliance" and "Civil Disobedience," through mutated, evolved, misunderstood, debased, and reinvigorated through time. Many of his projects like *The Dam*, 2006, (a photo of a performance by Kyack standing in the middle of a river with a sheet of plywood, trying and failing to act as a human dam) and the video *At sunrise, New Year's Day, hike to the highest point you can and jerk off until you come*, 2007, (self explanatory) involve nature and isolation, but in which the body becomes a primary tool in reacting to it. And his action in *Radio Mountain*, 2007-8, is not unlike Thoreau's cabin at Walden, except for Kyack the cabin is an isolation chamber for making music with an FM transmitter being the only one-way mode of communication out.

Meeting with Kyack is like meeting a character out of a Kerouac novel ("mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars" from *On the Road*). Ideas burst out of him as he rattles off his numerous projects at a frenetic pace, most of them lavishly drawn as blueprints that resemble something between a teenagers marker and collage doodles carefully wrought in the boredom of fifth period and what they are, surreal handmade works of art.

He's in the spirit of what Jerry Saltz once called (in a *Village Voice* essay of the same name from Nov. 29, 2005) "Clusterfuck Aesthetics." The "living overlord" of this invented movement, Paul McCarthy, is described by Saltz in this same article as "a kind of dirty-old-man, raving-lunatic warlock whose autoerotic, sadomasochistic crack-head stories are replete with bodily fluids, babbling nincompoop characters drawn from politics and fairy tales, red-nosed reindeers mounting elves, and demented Santas defecating chocolate into the mouths of female helpers". Kyack is inspired by McCarthy, but not in McCarthy's live vivisection of contemporary pop mythology (Santa Claus and Uncle Walt Disney), but from a simple set of gestures involving the body, but one that's unafraid to explore the mythos of Americanness. It's just that Kyack's quarry comes from a different place than the desecrated pop of McCarthy.

It's an ethos that amalgamates the fierce and fiercer self-reliance credo of Emerson and Thoreau, working-class punk rock DIY, Allan Kaprow's happenings, and the less art-philosophical references of extreme sporting, survivalism, home improvement, and the makeshift mechanics who have to always make do. Kyack mixes all this with a tireless gusto and earnestness (not unlike the DIY-ers of all stripes: home improvers, punkers, and hunters). Knowing about art history can often become an ouroboros, a snake eating its tail, of institutional critique until the art dematerializes into the deadened sterility of pure theory. But thankfully this mixture is not just an all-in proposition for Kyack, and more a moment when the black box of the imagination is fed with a certain kind of knowledge, that it starts to spit out a series of fevered imaginings.

My first interaction with Kyack's work, was in one of these thoroughly involved imaginings made sculpture titled *The Knife Shop*, 2009, Kyack's debut solo show after having graduated in 2008 from USC's MFA program. *The Knife Shop* was a manic agglomeration of things, all endlessly riffing on the knife as a subject, and included a knife making workshop complete with a mini forge and improvised anvil, a display table with an array of hand made knives, a half figure with a television screen for a head and yellow work glove holding a host of blood red globs, the same work glove is shown up on the chunky television monitor/head shooting through the air in a loop that never seems to meet its destination. On another end of the sculpture is another figure made of sheet-foam housing insulation and multicolored packing tape that looks like it's been repeatedly used for knife aiming practice with an old timey sign for a head stating unequivocally "You Can't Put The Shit Back in the Goose". On the opposite end of this, there's a constant fountain of red liquid streaming into a red beer bucket, and numerous odds and ends including two disembodied eyeballs resting atop red food coloring jars (the red in the fountain) on top of a boombox box with a handful of model trees. The whole ramshackle contraption, unlike a lot of kinetic work, seems to work in its own roughhewn fashion. The sculpture is, in its own way, a monumental triumph of the fiercely handmade. In the press release for the show, Kyack in an interview with "spiritual advisor/aesthetician/chemical coach Hani Bobo":

jk Well, I'm looking at the knife in all the ways I can think to look at it – as a tool, a weapon, an object, a symbol. To me, these interpretations seem to slip around each other pretty easily because the knife's form is so simple and constant, yet its uses span such an immense spectrum, and the results of these uses encompass such a huge range of form and emotion.

kk I see what you mean, but I wonder – what is this work in celebration of?

jk The knife is the gift of agency...

This agency is deeply synonymous with the this can-do American "self-reliance." Besides McCarthy and (though briefly mentioned) Kaprow, there's another artists I feel like Kyack is channeling, namely Bruce Nauman. Though Kyack wasn't aware of it when he made the piece, there's a famous legend, I may have even heard from Nauman's friend and colleague Richard Jackson, that Bruce Nauman almost gave up making art for knife making, but the task took so long to make a knife he might as well make art, but this idea of craft and the handmade permeates Nauman's work, even though like Kyack's, it's realized as post-minimal messiness. (In a piece in the Feb. 21, 1997 issue of the *New York Times* about Nauman and wife painter Susan Rothenberg, Michael Kimmelman writes: "There is a sense in his own work of labor as art, an oddly American notion of do-it-yourselfism that is not about esthetic bliss but about the beauties of science and craft.")

And when Kyack figures out how things work, it's not difficult for him to start building ideas out of them. In his sculptures, one can tell that the concept likely comes from some deeper consideration, but one which drops all the didactic meanings, and let's the skills, visions, and materials take over.

In *The Knife Shop*, Kyack made a series of knives by hand and played with this in the installation, each of the knives representative of some new gesture. One is a series with the New Hampshire State motto, "Live Free or Die," (a Thoreau-esque statement), emblazoned on its naked metal; others include a knife made from broken Budweiser bottle, six knives cut from a six foot two-person saw, a knife made from an old mailbox, five knives made from an ice hockey stick found on a frozen lake, and several skinners made from discarded circular saw blades. The knife in Kyack's not only gives him a sense of agency as a tool, but as a mode to explore meaning, especially in its relationship to the handmade, the body. Such issues in the hands of a lesser artist would look like a literal listing of the meanings of an object, but with Kyack he manages at some point to let the twisted strangeness of the subconscious take-over to make something infinitely more rich in meaning than any kind of literal thinking through could ever succeed.

And the sculpture, in the end, is beautiful, not because it's the slick finish fetish of an LA school, but because it is almost all quite obviously made-by-hand and much of it likely scavenged. It's a monumental sculpture both in idea and execution, and I can't imagine it costing more than a few hundred dollars to make, though perhaps with skills that may take years to acquire. Imagine taking one of his knives in your hand and looking about the assembled construction, think hard about the power of this simple tool of ancient origins, the agency it gives you, before setting it back and stepping away.





Opposite - At sunrise, New Year's Day, hike to the highest point you can and jerk off until you come, 2007. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Above - Double Barrel, 2008. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Josh White.

DI ANDREW BERARDINI

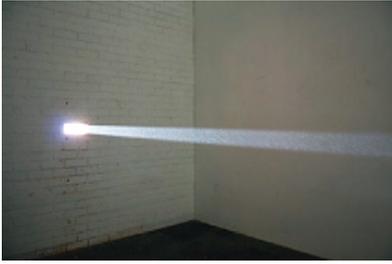


Andrew Berardini disseziona la sconcertante produzione di Joel Kyack, per rintracciarvi alcune idee e costanti, un campionario e un assortimento di visioni ed elementi tanto classicamente “anti”, quanto profondamente e intimamente americani. A Kyack piacciono Paul McCarthy, l’isolamento mentale e il vigore fisico che si provano *Into The Wild*, i coltelli, e l’etica del fare da sé, in solitudine, arrangiandosi. Perché l’artista è, in fondo, un uomo qualunque, e come tutti gli spiriti liberi deve cavarsela da solo, creare opere che funzionino, in un modo o nell’altro.

Lista di lavori che Joel Kyack ha fatto per soldi, in ordine sparso:

Lavapiatti, Tatuatore, Grafico, Pizzaiolo, Illustratore, Tecnico in un laboratorio di serigrafia, Programmatore web, Insegnante di matematica e inglese, Falsario, Imbianchino, Corriere di cibo a domicilio, Tuttofare in un complesso residenziale, Muratore, Attrezzista di scena, Macchinista di scena, Restauratore architettonico, Usciere scolastico, Imballatore di verdure, Insegnante d’arte, Giardiniere, Assistente di un chirurgo botanico, Corniciaio, Allestitore, Conducente di scuolabus, Animatore, Musicista, Assistente di un artista, Macellaio, Istruttore di arrampicata, Costruttore di casse, Pescivendolo, e Artista full-time.

In qualità di padrino del “rugged individualism” americano [letteralmente: individualismo ruvido, ma anche, in senso traslato, forte, solido, determinato. Termine coniato da Herbert Hoover in un famosissimo discorso del 1928 e, da allora, entrato nel lessico statunitense. NdT], Ralph Waldo Emerson è, tutto sommato, relativamente benevolo, benché lo stesso non valga sempre per gli strascichi delle sue idee. Noto soprattutto per il suo saggio sull’autosufficienza, Emerson è stato portavoce di un anticonformismo radicale (“Chiunque voglia essere uomo dovrà essere anticonformista”). La sua opera esalta un aspetto della personalità americana incentrato non solo sull’autosufficienza, ma soprattutto sull’idea che l’individuo e la sua volontà individuale siano la forza di cambiamento della società. L’americano autosufficiente ha in seguito trovato una realizzazione più piena e potente nel giovane Thoreau, che ha fatto dell’autosufficienza un gesto politico. Per Thoreau, l’individuo deve rifuggire i comfort della modernità (“Quasi tutti i lussi e i cosiddetti comfort della vita moderna non solo sono tutto fuorché indispensabili, ma si rivelano veri e propri ostacoli all’elevazione dell’umanità”) e spingersi fino alla disobbedienza civile per raggiungere il progresso.



Top - *Year of a Million Dreams*, 2006-7. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Right - *The Dam*, 2006. Photo: Anthony Lepore. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Quest'idea di autosufficienza radicale si è fatta strada, serpeggiando attraverso i decenni e assumendo forme di ogni sorta: l'autoconsapevolezza epigrammatica dei pamphlet che popolano le mai così floride sezioni di autoaiuto in libreria, il brivido del turismo d'avventura, la fiera indipendenza dei *survivalist* più hardcore, le prove di resistenza degli sport

estremi, l'*Anarchist's Cookbook* [manuale per la costruzione artigianale di esplosivi e altri strumenti genericamente utili all'insurrezione, diffuso inizialmente nel 1971, NdT], il citatissimo discorso di Herbert Hoover sul "Rugged Individualist", il movimento ambientalista (con tanto di libro a cura della Union of Concerned Scientists e intitolato: *L'eredità di Thoreau: Storie americane sul riscaldamento globale*), i separatisti libertari barricati come l'Unabomber in bunker fatti in casa: Thoreau stesso è stato citato come fonte d'ispirazione da un vero e proprio plotone di eroi, anarchici, artisti e trafficanti di tutto il mondo, fra cui Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, il Mahatma Gandhi, Upton Sinclair, Emma Goldman, e B. F. Skinner. Gli artisti non si sono fatti sfuggire il collegamento fra la disobbedienza civile di Thoreau e la progenie più cupa di questa tradizione, riprendendo le sfide poste da Thoreau alla nozione di io. Ma queste – tanto per Thoreau quanto per Emerson – erano specificamente mirate a comprendere e incentivare l'evoluzione dell'individuo.

In una pagina del suo diario, datata 1840, Emerson riporta una frase che riassume splendidamente l'energia degli Americani – un'energia tanto schietta quanto, alle volte, pericolosa: "In tutte le mie lezioni non ho insegnato che una dottrina: e cioè, l'infinità dell'uomo privato".

L'infinità dell'uomo semplice non ha miglior rappresentante (nelle sue incarnazioni più incoraggianti come in quelle più disagevoli) di Joel Kyack, artista di stanza a Los Angeles. Emerson e Thoreau, ai miei occhi, costituiscono le fondamenta dell'opera di Kyack, non solo per via di questo senso di "infinità dell'uomo privato", ma perché tutte le stranezze ad esso connesse (dal trekking dei boyscout fino al separatismo libertario) paiono incarnate alla perfezione, nelle loro contraddizioni, in Kyack.

Kyack è stato fra gli abitanti e gli animatori di Fort Thunder, a Providence, Rhode Island, negli ultimi anni del Ventesimo secolo, contribuendo attivamente alla vita dello spazio, notoriamente abitato da una variegata collezione di disadattati, contestatori e laureati della Rhode Island School of Design. Era un posto che viveva di concerti noise-rock, di progetti artistici inventati e immediatamente distrutti, di battaglie improvvisate a suon di materassi. Oltre che semplicemente tentando di essere un artista in una comunità d'individui strettissima e relativamente isolata, Kyack prende parte a svariate formazioni noise-rock, fra cui principalmente Landed (e, ora, Street Buddy) per poi dedicarsi professionalmente alle arti visive. La sua pratica, evidenziata dal corposo curriculum di cui sopra, si sposa perfettamente con la visione americana del lavoro come DIY: vive dello stesso spirito che animava gli autori di "L'autosufficienza" e della "Disobbedienza civile", benché mutato, evoluto, frain-

teso, volgarizzato e rinvigorito dal tempo. Molti dei suoi progetti – come *The Dam*, 2006 ("La diga": foto di una performance in cui Kyack si teneva in mezzo a un fiume con una plancia di compensato, cercando invano di formare una diga umana) o come il video *At sunrise, New Year's Day, hike to the highest point you can and jerk off until you come*, 2007, ["All'alba, a Capodanno, arrampicati più in alto che puoi e masturbati fino a venire"], autoevidente – chiamano in causa la natura e l'isolamento, ma facendo del corpo umano uno strumento fondamentale per interagire con essi. Anche la sua azione *Rado Mountain*, 2007-8, richiama la capanna a Walden di Thoreau, ma nel caso di Kyack questa è una stanza isolata acusticamente in cui suonare musica trasmessa direttamente a un'antenna FM (che a sua volta è l'unico canale di comunicazione con l'esterno).

Incontrare Kyack è come incontrare uno dei personaggi di un romanzo di Kerouac ("Pazzi di vita, pazzi per parlare, pazzi per essere salvati, vogliosi di ogni cosa allo stesso tempo, quelli che mai sbadigliano o dicono un luogo comune, ma bruciano, bruciano, bruciano, come favolosi fuochi artificiali color giallo che esplodono come ragni attraverso le stelle", da *Sulla strada*). Le sue idee schizzano da tutte le parti mentre elenca freneticamente i suoi numerosi progetti, quasi tutti presentati con disegni tecnici un po' leziosi, a metà strada fra le curatissime pagine di collage e disegni elaborati da un teenager per sfuggire la noia della quinta ora, e ciò che effettivamente sono, e cioè opere d'arte surreali, fatte a mano.

Kyack riflette lo spirito di quella che Jerry Saltz, nell'omonimo articolo sul *Village Voice* del 29 novembre 2005, ha definito "Clusterfuck Aesthetics". Saltz descrive il "sovrano in vita" di questo immaginario movimento, Paul McCarthy, come "un vecchiccio un po' sporco, con l'aria da stregone impazzito, che racconta storie autoerotiche, sadomasochistiche, gonfie di crack: storie piene di umori corporei, di personaggi farneticanti presi di peso dalla cronaca politica o da una fiaba, di renne ubriache che si scopano gli elfi, di babbini natali impazziti che defecano cioccolato nella bocca delle loro assistenti". Kyack si è ispirato molto a McCarthy: non tanto alla sua vivisezione della mitologia pop (Babbo Natale e lo zio Walt Disney), ma ai semplicissimi gesti corporei con cui non esita a esplorare il mito dell'americanità. Le prede di Kyack abitano un territorio molto diverso dal pop dissacrato di McCarthy.

L'etica di Kyack amalgama il fiero credo autonomista di Emerson e Thoreau, il punk rock DIY delle classi operaie, gli happening di Allan Kaprow, con riferimenti meno artistici o filosofici agli sport estremi, al *survivalism*, al bricolage, alla meccanica raffazzonata di chi si è sempre dovuto arrangiare. La domestichezza con la storia dell'arte può spesso diventare un serpente che si mangia la coda, un Uroboro di critica istituzionale che porta l'arte a smaterializzarsi nella morta sterilità della teoria pura. Fortunatamente, però, in Kyack questa commistione è ben più che una generica proposizione con dentro un po' di tutto:



Radio Mountain, 2007-8. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Anthony Lepore.

è proprio nel momento in cui saperi di un certo tipo vengono introdotti nella scatola nera dell'immaginazione che questa inizia la sua febbrile produzione di immagini.

La mia prima interazione con l'opera di Kyack mi ha visto di fronte a una di queste sue compresse fantasie trasformate in scultura, *The Knife Shop*, 2009, in occasione della sua prima personale, dopo il conseguimento del master alla USC l'anno precedente. *The Knife Shop* è un forsennato agglomerato di cose – tutte imparentate col coltello – che include un laboratorio per la fabbricazione di lame, con tanto di mini-fonderia e incudine improvvisata, un tavolino espositivo con una serie di coltelli fatti a mano, un mezzobusto con una televisione al posto della testa e un guanto giallo che stringe una manciata di grumi rosso sangue; lo stesso guanto appare sullo schermo della tv/testa, scagliato in aria in un *loop* che sembra non raggiungere mai l'acme narrativo. In una zona diversa della scultura si trova un'altra figura realizzata in fogli di schiuma isolante e nastro adesivo multicolore, che pare essere stata adoperata a lungo come bersaglio da un lanciatore di coltelli alle prime armi; al posto della testa ha una logora insegna che dice "You Can't Put The Shit Back in the Goose". Appena di fronte, una fontana perpetua di liquido rossastro sgorga da un barile di birra – rosso anch'esso; è circondata da un assortimento di cose diverse, fra cui due bulbi oculari appoggiati su un barattolo di colorante alimentare rosso (il rosso della fontana), sistemato in cima allo scatolone di una ghetta blaster con una manciata di alberelli finti intorno. Questo insieme caotico e sgangherato, anche se con una ruvidezza tutta sua, funziona – al contrario di molta arte cinetica. La scultura, in un certo senso, è il trionfo monumentale del fieramente fatto-in-casa. Il comunicato stampa della mostra riporta una conversazione fra Kyack e Hani Bobo, "guida spirituale/estetica/chimica":

jk Insomma, guardo il coltello in tutti i modi in cui lo si può guardare – come utensile, come arma, come oggetto, come simbolo. Mi pare che queste interpretazioni si eludano a vicenda con una certa facilità, perché la forma del coltello è talmente semplice e costante, e tuttavia i suoi utilizzi coprono uno spettro immenso, così come i loro risultati compongono una gamma amplissima di forme ed emozioni.

hb Capisco cosa intendi, ma mi chiedo, cosa celebra questo lavoro?

jk Il coltello è il dono della possibilità d'azione...

Questa possibilità mostra profonde analogie con lo spirito fattivo dell'autosufficienza americana. Oltre a McCarthy, e all'appena ricordato Kaprow, c'è un altro artista da cui Kyack mi sembra, in parte, attingere: Bruce Nauman. Benché Kyack non ne fosse al corrente durante la realizzazione dell'opera, c'è una famosa leggenda – potrei persino esserne venuto a conoscenza dall'amico e collega di Nauman, Richard Jackson – secondo cui Bruce Nauman per poco non

aveva rinunciato alla carriera di artista per dedicarsi alla fabbricazione di coltelli, per poi scoprire che ci voleva così tanto tempo a farli che, a quel punto, tanto valeva fare arte. Quest'idea d'artigianato, di manualità, ha permeato comunque l'opera di Nauman, anche se, proprio come quella di Kyack, nelle forme disorganiche del postminimalismo. (In un pezzo sul *New York Times* del 21 febbraio 1997, parlando di Nauman e di sua moglie Susan Rothenberg, pittrice, Michael Kimmelman scrive: "Nel suo lavoro si percepisce come arte il suo intervento manuale, una nozione stranamente americana di fai-da-te: una ricerca non della perfezione estetica, ma della bellezza della scienza, dell'artigianato.")

E quando Kyack capisce come funzionano le cose, non gli viene difficile prenderle come punti di partenza per costruire idee. Nelle sue sculture s'intuisce che, con ogni probabilità, il concetto deriva da considerazioni ben più profonde, ma private di ogni senso didattico: così che i talenti, le visioni e i materiali hanno la meglio.

In *The Knife Shop*, Kyack ha costruito a mano una serie di coltelli, per poi giocarci nell'installazione: ognuno di essi rappresentava un nuovo gesto. Ce n'è uno che fa parte di una serie col motto dello stato del New Hampshire ("Live Free or Die", una frase che ricorda Thoreau) incisa sul metallo nudo della lama; fra gli altri si conta un coltello ricavato da una bottiglia rotta di Budweiser; sei coltelli intagliati in una sega lunga oltre due metri da due persone; un coltello ottenuto da una vecchia cassetta per le lettere; cinque coltelli ricavati da una mazza da hockey ritrovata in un lago ghiacciato; svariati coltelli prodotti da vecchie lame per seghe circolari. I coltelli di Kyack comunicano il senso della possibilità d'azione non solo in quanto utensili, ma anche in quanto modalità d'esplorazione del significato, specialmente nel suo rapporto col fatto-a-mano, col corpo. Tematiche simili, nelle mani di un artista di minor spessore, prenderebbero la forma dell'elencazione letterale dei significati dell'oggetto, ma Kyack riesce a un certo punto a lasciare che la perversa stranezza dell'inconscio prenda il sopravvento, producendo qualcosa di infinitamente più ricco e significativo di quanto il pensiero letterale avrebbe mai potuto creare.

E la scultura, in fin dei conti, è bellissima: non per via della perfezione della sua patina losangelina, ma perché è chiaro che è quasi interamente fatta a mano, a partire da elementi che per la maggior parte paiono di scarto. È una scultura monumentale tanto nell'idea quanto nell'esecuzione, e tuttavia è difficile credere che la sua realizzazione costi più di qualche centinaio di dollari, benché forse richieda talenti acquisiti nel corso di anni. Immaginate di impugnare uno dei suoi coltelli, osservando la costruzione nel suo complesso, pensando al potere e alle origini antichissime di questo semplicissimo utensile, alle possibilità d'azione che offre, prima di rimetterlo a posto e andarsene.

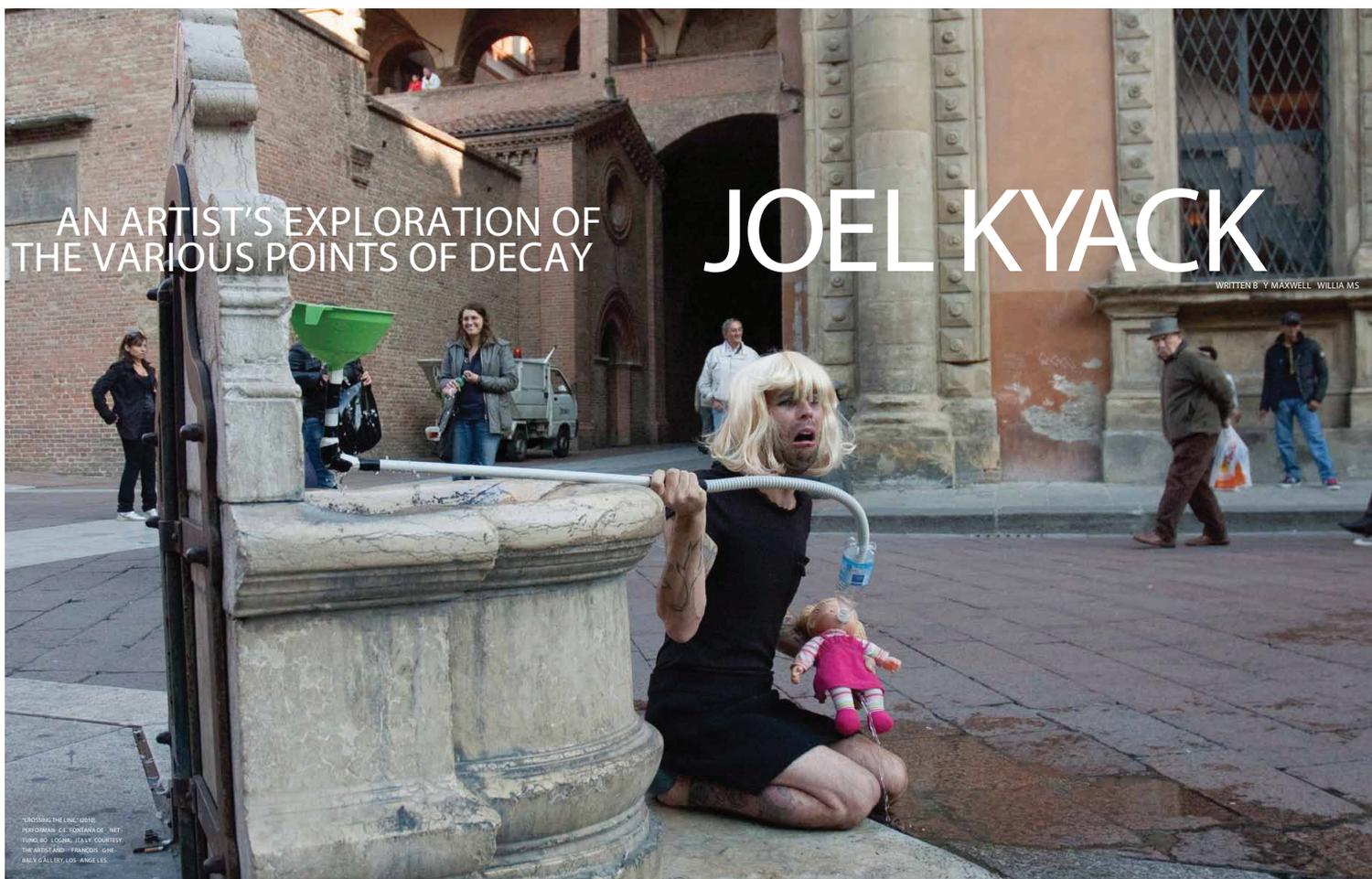


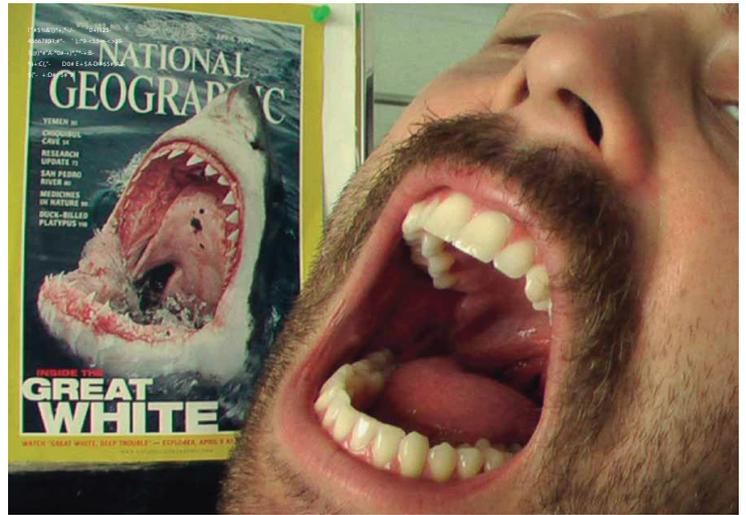
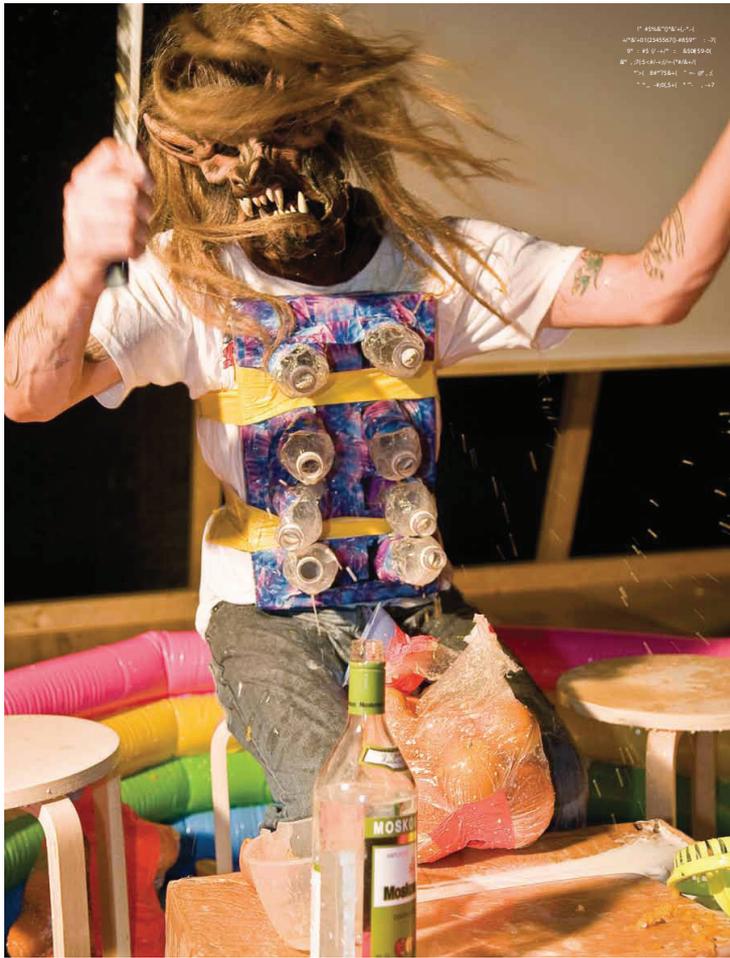
This page - *The Greater the Goal the Deeper the Hole*, 2008. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Chebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Anthony Lepore.



FLAUNT

Williams, Maxwell
Issue #122 July 2012





YOU ARE BORN, YOUR HEART BEATS BILLIONS OF TIMES, YOUR LUNGS TAKE HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF BREATHS, AND YOUR BODY BUZZES ITS ASS TO KEEP RUNNING AS SMOOTH AS A LAMBORGHINI. THEN, INEVITABLY, LIKE A LAMBorghini WITH 50,000 MILES ON IT, NO MATTER HOW RICH YOU ARE OR HOW POWERFUL YOU FEEL, YOUR BODY BREAKS DOWN. YOU CAN FIGHT IT FOR ONLY SO LONG. LESIONS AND AMPUTATIONS AND DISEASES TURN YOU TO A LUMP OF DROOPING FLESH AND NOTTING ORGANS. THAT'S PRECISELY WHEN ARTIST JOEL KYACK'S CURS PECK UP.

Kyack's multidisciplinary practice focuses largely on the human body's tendency to fuck up. Through work that some might consider grotesque—a performance in which Kyack's "body" is sliced in half at the torso with Kyack's top half pumping "blood" into both ends from a metal bowl, or gross humanoid sculpture with a computer monitor head playing a video of a knife stabbing while the body holds a mass of bloody entrails, or repulsive "you, cum, piss, and shit all get an equal share," Kyack explores death, dying, and the functions of the body with a cartoon-like fascination. It's gut-busting stuff.

Kyack took a long time to finally get to art making, so he has something of an *outré* view. He always dress, and he even attended the mecca of all that is East Coast trash art: the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). There, he formed a noise rock band called Landed and proceeded to release 10 full-length albums and tour for seven years. After Landed ran its course, Kyack became a tattoo artist in New York, where he refined his drawing skills and became familiar with bodily fluids, before falling in with a carpenter. After plying his trade as a part-time wood butcher, and becoming intimately familiar with materials and the skills needed to manipulate them, Kyack began to apply newfound dexterity into his work. Since 2007, he's exhibited eight celebrated solo exhibitions, and his work continues to be hailed by everyone from *The New York Times* critic Holland Cotter to NPR.

Kyack, who lives in Los Angeles and shows with François Ghéghaly in Galer City, remains an enigma, an artist who handcrafts his sculptures and participates in his performances in an age when fabrication is king and the artist's hand is rarely seen. For the Frize Art Fair's first New York edition in May, Kyack has been working 15-hour days in Pennsylvania, turning an old landscaping van into a monstrous carnival game. He is exhausted when we chat on the phone—perhaps the sleep deprivation is catching up to him. It seems like the only body Kyack doesn't seem to think about is his own.

How did you transition from making music to making studio art?

I didn't make any art for a long time—like seven years. I played music, and toured, and made records, and just partied my ass off. I was doing whatever the fuck I wanted. Landed plays now only very rarely. We're going to play at the Whitney at the end of May with Dawn Kasper, who I do performance stuff with. She's in the Biennial, and she asked Landed to come play and do a performance with her.

I was getting frustrated that I didn't know how to do things. I could do one thing (music) that would earn me the money to then pay someone else to do all the other things—that's pretty much the contemporary Western world. I wanted to learn these hands-on things, and I just bullied my way in. I was living with a carpenter, and I started helping him renovate a carriage house. I was just there to help paint and hold things, but really quickly I got into it and started working for him, and then working on sets with him, and then I started working for an architectural restorer.

I wanted to have an idea, listen to the idea, and be like, "How do I best serve this idea?" I guess I was trying to assemble this deep quiver of skills so that, when the time came, when I felt like my ideas had come together enough, that I would be able to execute the ideas in a way that felt urgent and urgent because I had this skill with this material.

With carpentry, you inevitably become a part-timer (when you learn the trade). You learn a familiarity with the material, and with using your hands—that's when you decide to approach that material as play. You can turn the skill off; you can turn it on. I'm trying to make this work that has an energy to it that feels like the person just finished it.

How do you know which direction you want to take something? Do you start with an idea of the direction you want to take?

I'm constantly exploring three ideas. I come back to these ideas of personal or individual agency; one person's ability to do something. That can be a lot of different things that happen conceptually or physically in the work—hopefully as both. Also, I'm often dealing with our relationships with our bodies! around the malfunctioning, alteration, and decline of the body. And I would say the third thing would be human's relationship with nature, and by extension, through that observation, nature's relationship with itself.



Those three points work because they're things that are very basic, universal things. They're not so esoteric that you have to read a full-page press release to access the work. Like, when I'm dealing with some liquid shooting out of a body, we all know what that's about. *Laughs*. But there's a way to put poetry into those things that are usually thought of as 'gross,' or things we don't think of. We don't think about our bodies falling apart. The things that we push down are often the things that really define who we are.

Why do you think people don't think about bodily functions and liquids inside the body?

The body, like any other machine, is not something that you consider until it malfunctions. You don't consider how anything works... your car, your computer, your body... until something goes wrong. Then you've got to figure out what's wrong and how to fix it. So, we're hard wired so that, when we're feeling good, it's time to just fucking enjoy ourselves. *Laughs*. Go out, have a good time, get laid, get drunk, go on a canoe trip. You don't sit around and think about the inevitability of death, but it always comes back

to that. That guarantee is the real one thing we all share: things die, things fall apart, things go away.

Does this interest in the decaying body surface in your daily life? Say, instead of small talk about the weather, you bring up ailments?

Absolutely. *Laughs*. The sharing of those things—that's what makes us human. Empathy is the thing that separates us from the other animals. It's in those moments that real human connection happens. There's nothing like being with someone you love when they're dying. I just saw a video on YouTube the other day that blew my fucking mind. It's a guy who had his foot amputated right below the knee, and he keeps it in his freezer, and he takes it out and shows it to the camera for about five minutes, and it starts to defrost, and he says, 'I got to put it back.' When a foot or a hand is cut off, that's a big gesture. It means a lot more than just the physical act of chopping one's hand off.

It's an ailment. I'd give my left leg.

When you begin your life, your relationship to your body is something



four years old until I was 18. I'd work the booth. Physically, the idea for my piece at Frizee manifested itself as a county fair-style game, which is more an art installation in a performance space than it is a traditional game. The piece is called 'Most Games are Lost, Not Won,' which is a quote from a baseball manager named Casey Stengel. Baseball is a game of statistics, so you're never hitting .500. Goofing on the idea of 'art fair,' I decided to incorporate a different kind of 'fair.' Instead of these art fairs being these non-descript spaces where you go and you set up a booth, pack it up, and then take it somewhere else, this booth is a self-contained thing on wheels—it is its own little world. I've taken the architecture of it and cut holes into it, and I've made the whole thing into an abstract form of a body. There's a mouth area that's in the back that has a game where you try to launch a ball down the throat of this open mouth that also looks like a splinter-like orifice. There's a target inside, and the ball just fits through the hole. You have to have the speed and everything right to get it in there. Chances are, you don't. One in thousands will get it.

In the center, there are two eaves that open up like traditional fair-style booths, and there are these two played rickshaws, and the inside is like the inside of a body, but very abstracted. The walls are all wavy and they look like guts, and in the center, there's a children's pool, and it's raining blood into it. There's a rain machine in the center, and it's raining red liquid into it, and then floating in there are these little bobbing cylinders that have the same target markings as the mouth, and you throw these rings onto it. But they're in the water and they're bobbing around, and the ring just fits on it. You have to hit the motherfucker just right. If you do win, fastened to the outside of the booth are full-length mirrors that have paintings on them of all the systems of the body. They're painted at scale, so that when you look at yourself in the mirror, it's transposed on your body. The game is free to play, you get one shot, and if you win, you win the piece. If you don't win, you get a little fair-ride ticket, and on the ticket it says, 'Most games are lost, not won.' A guy I play music with and I will work the booth. One of us will be in the booth working the pool game, and the other will be on the ground with the crowd working the other game.

How important is the element of participation to you?

The playing of it is really important to me, because I'm taking the notion of the contemporary art fair and inverting it. Whereas the contemporary art fair is predominantly incredibly rich, bougie people who are showing up, and through wealth, connection, privilege, they're getting what they want. With my 'booth,' there's art available, but no money changes hands and it's solely based on your luck. As far as consuming the art, some bums has the same chances to get it just as some huge international collector.

This piece addresses, too, the idea of an actual winner. Even though it's damn near impossible, there is this idea of you can like actually walk away with a work.

That's what keeps you going. It's 'offert.' But I don't have the answer to what it is. What is the win? What is the thing keeps you going? What is it that gets you out of the bed? What is that makes you go on, in front of all the adversity that goes in the world? Maybe I think about the idea of 'win,' or getting it right, because I play the game of art where there is no concrete answer to that. It's not like I'm a sprinter, and I can say, 'I'm the best in the world, and this is the time.' There is nothing I can do that somebody can concretely say, 'This is great.' You can always argue with what someone about what's great art, but I mean you can't argue with who the richest man is.

that's really right. The way little kids use their bodies is very direct. They don't have that fear of death yet, their mortality isn't really a part of it. As you get older, you begin to change that relationship with your body. You fear it, you're ashamed of it, you're ashamed of your desire. It's an idea that pops up in classical modes. Maybe I'm doing some updated version of that. But always perverted.

What are your thoughts on age, and what it is about humanity that makes us fear getting old?

A lot of people can remember, as a kid, doing something totally fucked up. Now, they would never do anything crazy. Once you start realizing that life ends, you're going to do everything you can to make it as long as possible. If someone gave you a rulebook about: 'If you don't do these things, then chances are, statistically speaking, you'll last longer.' I think most people are practical, and that's what they'll choose.

Can you take me through what you're working on for Frizee?

When I was going up, my father was the Grand Marshal of the country fair in my town, and my family ran a three-game booth. From when I was



2

Shown by
François Ghebaly
Gallery F32

Biography
Born 1972
Lives in Los Angeles

American interdisciplinary artist Kyack received an MFA from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, in 2008, and a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 1995. In 2011 he had the solo shows "Escape to Shit Mountain" at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, and "River/Stream/In-Between" at Kate Werble Gallery, New York. The solo project "Superclogger" (2010) took place in collaboration with Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and LA><ART, Los Angeles. In 2012 he will have a solo show at Brand New Gallery, Milan.

Focus Joel Kyack

Wielding materials ranging from gorilla masks to Astroturf, Joel Kyack explores a goofy, DIY existentialism, and an anarchic, insecure, nature-obsessed masculinity. His deadpan works include: *Dam* (2006), a futile attempt to stop a rushing creek with a piece of plywood; *5'56"* (2011), a cluster of makeshift plastic-bottle hourglasses containing Los Angeles beach sand; and *Pine Woods Municipal Band Tryout* (2011), a diptych in which a jutting tree stump and the denim-clad butt of a man planting a sapling play a trumpet duet. *Superclogger* (2010), an itinerant performance Kyack presented in a Mazda truck with Michael Hayden, featuring puppet plays with sound sent over an FM radio transmitter, prodded LA commuters stuck in smoggy traffic into meditating on chaos and failure. KK

1
Incident at Stoney Lake
2011
Mixed media
76 x 76 x 68 " (193 x 193 x 175 cm)
Courtesy of François Ghebaly Gallery

2
Growing Pains
Leave Stains
2011
Performance
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of François Ghebaly Gallery

3
Superclogger
2010
Photo of the performance in Los Angeles traffic
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of François Ghebaly Gallery



3

Joel Kyack

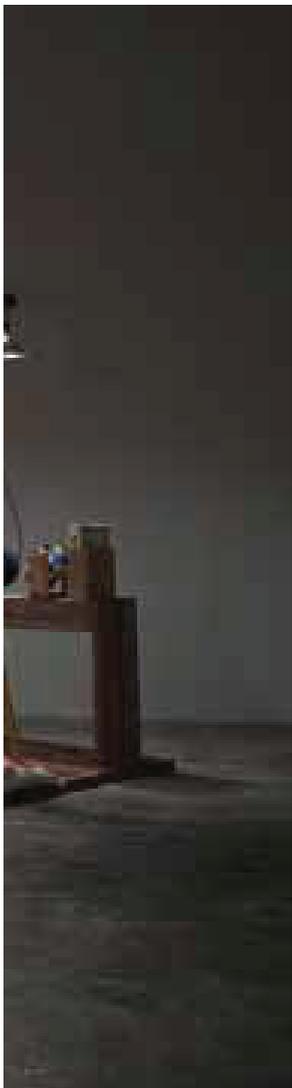
Joel Kyack brings the country fair to Frieze New York, with a performative, participatory installation that invites visitors to try their luck and win a prize—an art work.





Left:
 Crossing the Line
 2010
 Performance at
 Fontana di Nettuno,
 Bologna
 Mixed media
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of Brand
 New Gallery

Opposite:
 The Knife Shop
 2009
 Mixed media
 276 × 96 × 60"
 (701 × 244 × 152.5 cm)
 Courtesy of François
 Ghebaly



Joel Kyack is an American sculptor and performance artist based in Los Angeles. In 2011 he had the solo shows "Escape to Shit Mountain," at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; "River / Stream / In-Between," at Kate Werble Gallery, New York; and in 2010 he mounted the exhibition "Superclogger," at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. He has a forthcoming solo show at Brand New Gallery, Milan, in 2012.

Cecilia Alemani Your commission for Frieze Projects is a country fair style game trailer. Can you talk about the genesis of this work and how it relates to your personal history?

Joel Kyack Most games are lost, not won (2012), inserts a different model of "fair" into the art fair setting. The game booth at a country fair is already wonderfully interdisciplinary—sculpture, painting, installation, and performance. I have long been drawn to doing something with one because I already enjoy the combination of those media. I realized quickly that the invitation from Frieze Projects was the perfect opportunity to make this piece, and

I began thinking about the work functioning in an art fair context as an experiential counterpoint, a leveler. The booth is free, and any attendee of the fair can participate, with occasional luck being disproportionately rewarded with works of art as prizes. It distorts the mechanics of the art fair booth by introducing the element of chance into acquisition. It's a place where money, reputation, and connection provide no advantage. When I was growing up, my family was involved in the country fair that came to our town every year. We ran a three-game booth trailer, and my father was one of the organizers of the event. I felt it was a complex stage to construct and perform on, so I'm here exploring those possibilities.

Alemaní What kind of dynamics do you want to create between you, the trailer, and the viewer?

Kyack I guess my ideal would be something of a cross between an authentic country-fair game experience and an art performance/installation. This is an environment where the odds are stacked against the viewer, yet I want him or her to

“If they win, they leave with art, as they would in the art fair if they decided to acquire something.”



Growing Pains Leave
Stains
2011
Performance
Kaleidoscope ARENA,
Macro Testaccio,
Rome, mixed media
Courtesy of
Kaleidoscope

still feel compelled to play. That will be the responsibility of the installation and performer to create that space. If they win, they leave with art, as they would in the art fair if they decided to acquire something. But winning art in a game of chance is a very different experience from buying it. I want the dynamic to reflect this obvious difference.

Alemani It seems that themes of chance and failure are integral parts of this project. Do these concepts play an important role in your work?

Kyack Yes. If chance and failure are, as I see it, fundamental to all experience, then they become places of connection, spaces of use, they reference some elemental part in us all. I like to use that. They're both a bit scary, or rather exciting, perhaps, and that's good too.

Alemani This is not your first public art work. In 2010, you realized one of your most well-known art works, *Superclogger* in Los Angeles. Can you talk about that with particular regard to how the piece interacted with the audience in the public sphere?

Kyack *Superclogger* interacted with an unsuspecting audience on their turf—in their vehicles, gridlocked on the congested freeway. The piece consisted of a series of four puppet plays that took place in the back of a capped pickup truck. A sign directed motorists to tune in to a particular radio station to hear the soundtracks to the play. It became a performance en route where the work came to the viewer even though the viewer was actually “nowhere.” They watched something visual happening

outside of their car, while they listened to the audio inside, on their car radio. The same compartmentalization of experience will happen with most games are lost, not won as well—the installation inside the booth and the performance of the “carnies,” the gaze of the non-participant viewer from outside the booth, and the exchange that happens at its lip when a viewer becomes a player.

Alemani Throughout your work there is a recurrent theme connected to the tradition of Americana. How do you relate with the history of your own country and how to you integrate it in your work?

Kyack I relate to it with requisite ambivalence and good boots. I integrate it the same way.

Alemani Often your sculptures depict grotesque human bodies, partly mutilated and almost decaying. Do you feel any affinity with the tradition of the American grotesque, as seen in the work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy?

Kyack Without a doubt, especially McCarthy. His raw energy in performance and object making, and I find his embrace of the base is very intense. The first piece of contemporary art that really shook me was an image I saw when I was 18 from the performance *Death Ship* (1981). For me, then, he was opening a space to communicate our most basic guarantees—our lives will end, things will change and fall apart. Making this sort of work is a celebration of those guarantees.

Alemani In previous performances, you pushed your own body to the extreme of



Left:
 Incident at Stoney Lake
 Mixed media
 72 x 79 x 60"
 (183 x 201 x 152.5 cm)
 Courtesy of François
 Ghebaly

Below:
 Superclogger
 2010
 Performance on
 various highways, Los
 Angeles
 Mixed media
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of François
 Ghebaly, LA<>ART,
 and The Hammer
 Museum

physical and mental exhaustion. How do you translate this aspect into sculptures or installations?

Kyack I try to employ an energetic style of object making or performance that is defined by an overall lack of refinement in construction and material selection. I'm interested in materials of thrift and convenience, and I want to see a hand in their manipulation. I want the viewer to feel as though the work was finished five minutes before they arrived, that they're seeing it in its raw workings, just discovered, no edges yet smoothed. Objects need to retain a visceral sense if they are to set themselves apart from other objects, mass-produced ones. An object that values itself is already dead.



WALL STREET JOURNAL

British Art Carnival Wakes a Big Apple Isle
Jennifer Maloney
May 4 2012

The Frieze Art Fair had arrived in New York, and brought with it a touch of the London fair's signature spectacle. Planted on an island just east of Manhattan, the fair offers a carnival trailer where visitors can toss rings to win art, an outdoor children's-art project set to the score of Mendelssohn's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and—amid very serious art for sale—a smattering of interactive, chuckle-inducing works. Fairgoers cracked walnuts, for example, between the legs of a Barbie-like mannequin.

Frieze's original London iteration began in 2003 and has become a major date on Europe's art-fair calendar. Fairgoers at a preview Thursday said the four-day U.S. offshoot, which ends Monday, was a stop worth adding to art's busy spring season, despite the challenge for locals and visitors alike: how the heck to get there.

The fair's 180 gallery booths occupy a long, serpentine tent hugging the edge of the island, with windows on the East River and Manhattan. With no restaurants in walking distance, Frieze offers dining areas catered by well-known New York eateries. In Thursday's chilly and overcast weather, only one child arrived to participate in Tim Rollins's "Midsummer Night's Dream" workshop, though the artist said he expected a full complement on Saturday. Streaming off the ferry, people did stop to toss rings at artist Joel Kyack's carnival trailer.



artnet[®]

Frieze Projects 2012

Emily Nathan

May 2012

The New York version of the Frieze Art Fair, May 4-7, 2012, only opened to the public this morning, and already it has garnered its share of complaints. Sprawled across from the Harlem Mall on Randall's Island in the East River, a 20-minute ferry ride from Manhattan's Murray Hill, it's expensive -- \$40, tickets online only! -- hard to get to, smells a bit like sewage, and inside it's pretty much art-fair-as-usual.

But if you're not there to buy, Frieze Projects -- an annual program of artist commissions curated this year by Cecilia Alemani, the new director of High Line Art -- makes the trip worthwhile. These eight installations and performances by John Ahearn, Uri Aran, Virginia Overton, Ulla von Brandenburg, Rick Moody, Joel Kyack, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., and Latifa Echakhch, all but one of which are located outside the big white tent, are scattered about the island like lost children, unmanned by guards and appealingly lacking the mercenary energy of eager dealers.

Los Angeles-based artist Joel Kyack's cynical *Most Games are Lost, Not Won* is a country-fair game trailer, good humouredly parked across from a fancy Van Leeuwen ice-cream truck, which he has turned into a giant body. One game takes place in the trailer's "mouth" and the other in its "ribcage," and though most won't win, Kyack says it's about "leveling the idea of acquisition." Thus his games' prizes, presumably -- a series of full-length mirrors on which he has painted an isolated function of the human body, from fallopian tubes and a uterus to the endocrine system. If you win, you can gaze forever at yourself in the mirror, but the grotesquely obvious fact of your human body, one you share with everybody else, will be mapped all over you.





Frieze: London's finest art fair goes stateside
Laura McLean-Ferris
May 7 2012

...Like the London edition, there's a sculpture park and a series of projects – here curated by Cecilia Alemani – most of them outdoors by the waterside. Continuing with the circus theme, some of these have a pleasingly creepy "sideshow" take on their position to the "big top" next door: Joel Kyack has made a fairground game trailer based on the human body, entitled, Most games are lost, not won – the distorting mirrors on its side include images of internal organs, whilst Ulla von Brandenburg has created an outdoor shadow theatre near the pier...





Virtual Walkthrough of "Escape to Shit Mountain" With artist Joel Kyack Williams, Sarah
September 15, 2011



"Well", the bartender says, leaning into the bar in a familiar way, "let's think about time as being linear in fact and cyclical in nature."

Last weekend artist Joel Kyack opened his second solo exhibition, *Escape to Shit Mountain*, at Francois Ghebaly Gallery in Culver City. Kyack provided some insight into the exhibition—a multi-part installation meditating on time and our perception of it—and his practice at large by giving ForYourArt a virtual walkthrough. A *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980* Participating Gallery exhibition, *Escape to Shit Mountain* is on view through October 30, 2011.

I began *Incident at Stoney Lake* by making the shishi odoshi fountain at its center, with no idea of how I might use it. I liked it because I saw the potential for water to move something back and forth, and that seemed metaphorical to some grand tectonic measure of time. From there a very loose evolutionary narrative began to take shape with the painting and the apes. The piece and the entire show grew out of that initial fountain investigation.



This begins the first (lowest) level of the implied mountain created in the gallery installation. The trunk of a chopped-down tree and a man planting a sapling share an awkward conversation via duet for trumpet (original score for installation) in the diptych *Pine Woods Municipal Band Tryouts*.



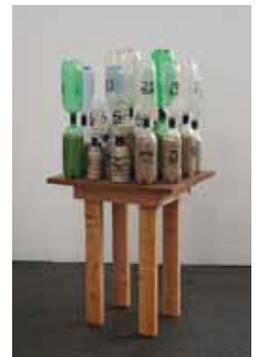
Good Things Come (To Those Who Wait?) constitutes the second, or middle, level of the gallery installation and the second of two diptychs. A tin-can telephone is employed posthumously by two gravestones in intimate conversation at a desert hillside miniature golf course cemetery.



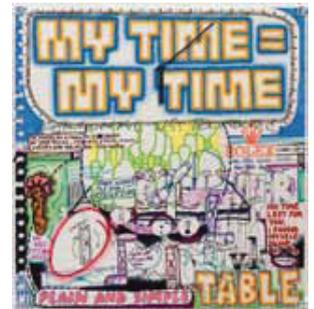
Snowblind steeply caps Shit Mountain with an icy slope where a bathroom sink rises from the snow and a black liquid runs endlessly from its faucet.



5'56 is the amount of time (in minutes and seconds) that is the total time of all the hourglasses on the table added together. At the opening someone stole 22 seconds worth, so maybe now the piece should be called 5'34. Here Los Angeles beach sand adds to its intrinsic relationship to time (the process of it being ground down from larger matter) by itself becoming a mass that a value of time is ascribed to.



MY TIME = MY TIME is a drawing / study for the piece 5'56. These drawings are made simultaneously with the sculptures as a way for me to work through developing ideas.



ARTINFO

“NADA Best Booth Prize Awarded to Two Galleries”

December 2 2010



MIAMI— The New Art Dealers Alliance fair is nothing if not innovative, and in that spirit the three judges of NADA's best booth prize — LAND founder and curator Shamim Momin, W magazine feature editor Armand Limnander, and ARTINFO executive editor Andrew M. Goldstein — opted to split the honor between two stands, one for curated presentation and one for art-content "punch." The former citation went to New York's Kate Werble Gallery, the latter to François Ghebaly Gallery of Los Angeles for its single-artist booth devoted to Joel Kyack. Two bottles of champagne were procured to celebrate the awarding of the \$7,000 prize (this year divided into two \$3,500 chunks) sponsored by 7 for All Mankind jeans.

Werble's display stood out for the caliber of its assortment of artwork playing on the tradition of Minimalist art. Featuring a black wooden sculpture by Ryan Reggiani on its floor that resembles Frank Stella's early paintings — it's called "Untitled (Art for the Floor)" — the stand also holds a hanging chain piece by Sarah Wood that recalls Fred Sandbeck's string works, a playful array of colorful resin-and-styrofoam stools by Christopher Chiapa positioned on shelves (titled "Stool Sample"), bright lenticular pieces by Gareth Long that riff on the design of J.D. Salinger's iconic paperback covers, and a photograph by John Lehr.

In the solo-presentation section of the fair, François Ghebaly occupies a prime slot that, while nestled in the back, affords beautiful views of the blue waves crashing on the beach outside. The selection of Kyack's work exudes electricity and inventive dazzle. In the center of the booth are three tongue-in-cheek fountains: a plastic eight-foot-long salami-and-cheese hoagie flowing with water dyed white to resemble mayonnaise, a rough-hewn figure spouting yellow water from a tube emerging from its crotch, and a filing cabinet with two breast-like pink balloons and a stream of red water streaming from a sports cooler. The liquids, Ghebaly explained, cover the spectrum of colors that ooze from the human body.

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Other works in the selection include a photograph of the artist posing, mouth agape, in front of a poster of a great white shark ("Self Portrait With Great White"), a photographic collage, paintings of empty frames, and pictures of a puppet show Kyack performed out of the back of his truck on L.A.'s highways that had characters discuss spiritual ennui and feelings of confinement.

It's somewhat fitting that the best booth prize went to both Werble and Ghebaly — coincidentally the two galleries have done programming together after meeting at last year's NADA fair, where their stands were positioned across from one another.

The Miami Herald 

"A sandwich that's a fountain and more good ideas at NADA"

December 2 2010

The New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA), one of the first satellite fairs to emerge around Art Basel Miami Beach, opened Thursday at the Deauville Beach Resort with 91 galleries exhibiting in two ballrooms.

Created to give emerging galleries a presence among Basel's heavy hitters, NADA saw strong sales during a preview from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., said director Heather Hubbs.

Additions this year include a sculpture garden featuring works by female artists and commissioned by Canyon Ranch condominiums next door and NADA Projects, a collection of nine small booths to give greater exposure to young gallerists.

"We wanted to invite some spaces that are non-commercial, alternatively run," Hubbs said.

Among the most eye-catching booths is that of Francois Ghebaly Gallery of Culver City, Calif., which exhibited a collection of unusual works by Joel Kyack. Kyack's pieces include sculptural installations made of found objects and working fountains. One was a 4-foot sandwich splashing water into a clay flower pot; another featured a Coleman cooler atop a filing cabinet streaming red liquid into an open drawer.

Kyack, who lives in Los Angeles, has "a fascination with liquids and fluidity," Ghebaly said. Another Kyack work involved photographs of a traveling puppet show presented from the rear of a pick-up truck on a California freeway during rush hour. Motorists were advised by a sign to tune in to a radio station to hear the dialogue, Ghebaly said.

Michael Ned Holte



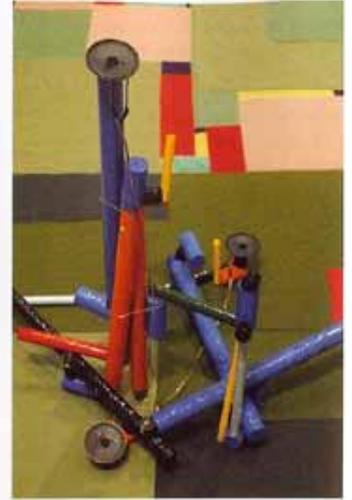
Michael Ned Holte is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*. His writing has recently appeared in the exhibition catalogue *Richard Hawkins—Third Mind* (Art Institute of Chicago/Yale University Press, 2010) and the Web journal *East of Borneo*, for which he profiled legendary independent filmmaker Roger Corman. This past summer he was an artist-in-residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts, California, and he is currently visiting faculty at the California Institute of the Arts.

1

Joel Kyack, *Superclogger* (LAXART, Hammer Museum, and various freeways around Los Angeles) This summer, a random sample of LA's commuters were treated to an unexpected puppet show from the back of a Mazda truck, with a sound track transmitted to its audience via short-range radio. The subject of the four occasionally heartbreaking acts, written and mostly performed by Kyack, was chaos. And depending on who witnessed it, *Superclogger* either added to the insanity of the freeways at rush hour or provided an improbable calm at its center. While in the works for several years, the mobile guerrilla theater seemed a crafty riposte to the spectacle of Marina Abramović occupying the vast atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York all spring: This artist, too, was present, albeit anonymously and briefly, before disappearing into the traffic without further explanation.



2. Above: View of "Michelle O'Marah: A Girl's Gotta Do What a Girl's Gotta Do," 2010, Kathryn Brennan Gallery at Cottage Home, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.



3. Right: Steve Rodon. *Translation (notes, lines, flaks)* (detail), 2005, wood, acrylic, polyurethane, handmade quilt, audio equipment, sound. 65 x 28 x 27".



1. Above: Joel Kyack, *Superclogger*, 2010. Performance view, Los Angeles freeway, 2010. Photo: Anthony Lepore.

Art Review:

Issue 44

“Joel Kyack: Superclogger”

Berardini, Andrew

September 2010

Traffic can be murder in LA. News plays the same story over and over, and all the other radio stations seem to be on commercial break. The broken air conditioner belches out hellishness, so the window's down. Some baby's breath of wind keeps it down, though the grate and screech of the highway, along with the dust and smog, almost make it worth closing again. You're baking in the constipated heat of the summer, stuck between two freeways on an arching cloverleaf, bored fingers thrumming the sticky leather of the steering wheel, waiting for a break, any break, in the traffic.

An unmarked truck with a cab creaks open its back window. A shoddy, handwritten cardboard sign is held out: tune in to this radio station. FM dials shift over. A play begins. It's a puppet show, felt-faced and hand-operated. No names but those of the characters. This is not an advertisement or some kind of media stunt, familiar enough in LA. Nothing is being sold.

The people of LA, stuck in their cars, go nuts. Cell phone cameras flash from driver-side windows, and cars angle sharply for a better view. The plays are rather sad, but not without humour. A black intellectual makes an unsuccessful pass at his assistant, two immigrant construction workers sing of ice cream castles, feather canyons and the inevitability of change in a Joni Mitchell tune (*Both Sides Now*, 1967) turned duet, Lee Hazlewood bemoans the price of success and a snobbish talking shrub gets murdered by a ten-year-old boy.

Too many art folks make bland concessions to LA being a city of cars. Usually this involves slapping an image on a billboard, which no matter how many times it's tried, never seems to get any better with age. But this is different. The plays are produced by artist Joel Kyack, who has finally made an artwork that suits the distinctive character of the city. Kyack has produced four miniplays to be performed by puppets from the back of his truck when stuck in traffic, the dialogue and music sent out on a weak FM radio signal. Each play, from about four to seven minutes long, features some singing and people dealing with failure, frustrated desire, being stuck. The tales are told with a literate humour and function well as plays, but even better as an artist's strange gesture about what public art can be. Rather than heavy metal sculpture plunked onto a corporate plaza or defanged 1960s radicalism passing as community art, public art can be this, a whimsical gesture thrown into the stream of the unfortunate grind of life in LA. Unexpected and unexpectedly great. A break in the traffic.

Which then shifts. The truck disappears into a sea of cars, their chrome glittering in the California sun.



'Superclogger': Free Theater on L.A.'s Freeways

Ulaby, Neda

August 11, 2010



Amy Walters/NPR

Unlike most L.A. motorists, Kyack and his collaborators actively seek out the most congested sections of the highway. The tailgate sign tells other drivers how to tune in to the show's dialogue.

In a parking lot near the Golden State Freeway, Los Angeles artist [Joel Kyack](#) is stripping right down to his underwear. He squeezes into a black bodysuit that makes the skinny 37-year-old look even skinnier, and pops open the back hatch of a dusty white truck. He's setting the stage — quite literally — for another installment of his first large-scale public art project: a rush-hour puppet show.

"It's tight," Kyack ruefully admits, waving to the innards of his mobile theater, set up for two puppeteers. "There's an FM stereo transmitter right there, a CD player. ... The puppets are stacked on either side, and that's in the order we do the shows."

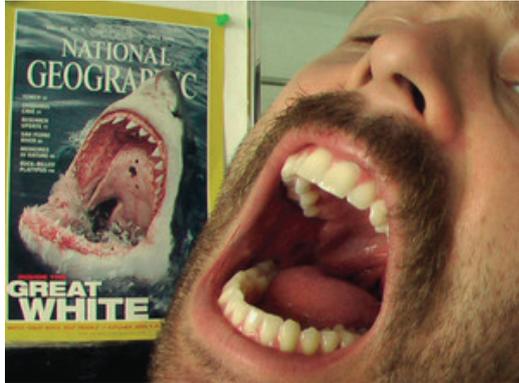
The show, called *Superclogger* after L.A.'s endlessly clogged freeways, was conceived with Kyack's friend Peter Fuller. Fueled by a determinedly low-tech aesthetic, it stars a cast that suggests a group of funky, grimy, homemade Muppets, acting out short vignettes on themes that might speak to people stuck in traffic. Coping with uncertain conditions, for instance, or the state of being controlled.

"I like chaos," Kyack observes. "I like things that are moving in and out of control, like negotiations of agency and resignation. And for me, the traffic jam is that."

Kyack studied at the Rhode Island School of Design as an undergraduate, then earned an M.F.A. from the University of Southern California in 2008. He's exhibited his work in some well-reviewed shows, but this is his first time working in the medium of puppet theater. (Or in traffic.) The show plays out in the bed of that pickup truck, with the sound broadcast over a low-power FM signal that car radios can pick up if they're within 200 feet.

Right before hitting the 101, Kyack consults with his driver and fellow puppeteer, artist Michael Hayden. Their conversation is the exact opposite of most L.A. drivers' before hitting the road.

"We'll go down on Exposition and get on, like, 37," Kyack suggests as the others nod. "It looked like it was really jammed." When informed that a major sports event is hopelessly tying up traffic, Kyack can barely contain his delight. "We're gonna be able to do like three performances between here and the 101!" he crows.



Courtesy of Joel Kyack
Artist Joel Kyack — here, in a self-portrait as Great White — has made works in a variety of media, but *Superclogger* is his first attempt at a public art project involving puppets.

Unfortunately, that turns out not to be the case. Shortly after NPR producer Amy Walters and I follow Kyack onto the freeway in my rental car, the artist gets pulled over by the California Highway Patrol. He doesn't get in trouble. But then again, the cops don't quite buy his academic theories about offering a space of engagement for drivers to reflect on the chaotic structures of their daily routine.

Curator Cesar Garcia — of the nonprofit group [LAXART](#), which sponsored the show — said he made sure in advance everything was legal.

"There's nothing that leaves the vehicle, nothing that exits the vehicle," Garcia says firmly. "The truck has been modified; the seats are bolted on the bed of the truck. They're wearing seat belts; it's insured."

And Garcia says Kyack has basically memorized the section of the FCC handbook that proves what he's doing is allowable. The artist says he's mainly interested in raising questions for Angelenos who spend so much time on the 5, the 10, the 101 and the 405.

"How you navigate, how you make the world that you want around you, and how you compromise with what the world's giving you," Kyack explains. "And I think that formally, the traffic jam is sort of the perfect metaphor to explore that."

Kyack sees elegance in the controlled choreography of vehicles of different shapes and colors moving toward and away from each other. And he says he enjoys reaching the people in them — people who don't necessarily visit art galleries — and proving that public art can be more than just a big bronze sculpture.

Superclogger ends in late September, with a big event sponsored by the [Hammer Museum](#).



"Joel Kyack: Superclogger on KTLA"

July 2010



Los Angeles Times

'Superclogger': Puppet shows for the congested freeways of L.A.

Mizota, Sharon

June 11, 2010

Joel Kyack hopes his mobile theater helps commuters see other possibilities in their surroundings.



Artist Joel Kyack and his mobile puppet show, "Superclogger," perform in the back of a truck on the 210 freeway during rush hour. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times / June 1, 2010)

The freeway appears regularly in L.A. art — works by Ed Ruscha, Dennis Hopper and Catherine Opie come to mind — but rarely does art grace the Southland's concrete corridors. There is graffiti, of course, and a smattering of decaying murals, but for the most part, the freeway is an artistic wasteland.

Until now. Coming to select rush hour traffic jams this summer: "Superclogger," a mobile puppet theater by Los Angeles artist Joel Kyack. Accompanied by fellow artist Michael Hayden, Kyack performs shows out of the back of his nondescript white pickup truck for anyone who happens to be driving behind it.

Commissioned by the Culver City non-profit LAXART, "Superclogger" began its crawl through the Southland's most congested stretches of freeway on June 1, on the 405. (Kyack monitors the flow of traffic on Google Maps to find the slowest spots.) Additional shows will appear sporadically through Sept. 25, when they will be featured in an event at the Hammer Museum. Upcoming dates and freeways are listed on the LAXART website (www.laxart.org).

"Los Angeles has such a long history of cars and car culture that it almost seemed like a perfect project to see how a young, emerging artist would respond to this context," says Cesar Garcia, curator of public art and programs at LAXART.

Starting roughly at 5 p.m. on designated days, lucky commuters will see the back of the pickup's shell top swing open to reveal an energetic hand puppet dressed like a heavy metal musician. If they tune their radios to the frequency written on a cardboard sign on the tailgate, they'll hear crashing guitar chords and a gravelly announcer's voice say, "Welcome to 'Superclogger'!"

What follows are four vignettes, each between 4 and 7 minutes long, in which characters discuss the vicissitudes of fame, friendship, snobbery, artistic integrity and love. An aging country singer laments the price of success; a naive young boy confronts upper class pretensions in a surreal conversation with a talking shrub; two construction workers shed their tough guy image with a karaoke version of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now"; and an isolated writer sets aside his novel for a lucrative screenplay and love.

All the scenes are about "characters sort of negotiating their want or their desire to make a world around them," Kyack says, "and then the will of the world often times putting up those blocks."

Kyack doesn't mind if people don't get the connection between the stories and gridlock; he doesn't even expect them to watch the entire show. "If someone saw 30 seconds of one of the plays, I think it's just as good," he says. For him, the content is secondary to the show's potential to transform the space around it. The plays are "kind of a trick, or that point of entry for someone to come in and then experience this performative space," he says.

Kyack hopes the novel experience of seeing a puppet show while idling in traffic will jolt commuters out of isolation in their cars and help them see other possibilities in their surroundings. For one thing, drivers might be more aware of the potential for a fender bender and exercise caution while watching the puppet show. But there are also larger questions about what behaviors are acceptable or permitted within a given space.

"How much have you forfeited?" he asks, in his typically emphatic, animated manner. "How much have you resigned? How much space? The highway is a complete forfeiture to the government. To their rules, to their land grab."

Case in point: Driving east on the 210 on a recent Wednesday afternoon, Kyack and Hayden quickly push the puppets out of sight as they pass a Highway Patrol car on the side of the road. "We're not doing anything illegal," Kyack says. "The truck is modified with seatbelts. I'm completely in compliance with the FCC." Since the transmitter radius is only about 100 feet and it broadcasts on unused frequencies in the area where the truck is driving, Kyack says the project does not require a license from the Federal Communications Commission.

California Highway Patrol spokesman Mark Garrett was not aware of any incident reports regarding the project. "There's no specific law that prohibits someone from doing something like that as long as they're seated legally," Garrett said.

For all its careful planning, the project has a decidedly handmade, impromptu vibe.

"I'm not a puppet maker. I'm not a playwright. This is the first time I've done either one," says Kyack. He wrote the scenarios, made all the puppets by hand and recorded the music, sound effects and voices (his and Hayden's) over a period of about eight months. Pre-recorded on CD, the soundtrack is broadcast from a small FM transmitter in the truck. The two men dress in black with cheap black pantyhose over their faces and sit in seats installed by a friend of Kyack's, master welder Peter Fuller. There is no curtain; the puppeteers' forms, if not their faces, are discernible behind the puppets.

"Materially, both for the modifications to the pickup truck and the puppets, I'd say it was just under \$300," says Kyack. This low-budget approach is integral to the project and his work in general, which also includes sculpture, installation and non-puppet performances.

"Legitimacy is so often informed by the financial backing," he says, "I like to think I'm operating in opposition to that, where I'm showing people that ideas can happen very simply too."

The Masculine Mystique

Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Chris Burden may have blazed the bad-boy trail. But a trio of provocateurs is muscling into their territory | *Photography by Peden + Munk* |

Back in the '90s, when French deconstructionist theory ruled the academies, macho art was considered a suspect endeavor. "Maleness was seen as something you needed to get control of and rationalize. People were terrified of talking about what it was to be male in terms of anger, strength, power. These issues were kind of taboo," says sculptor Thomas Houseago. Today, he is among a group of guys—along with mixed-media master Sterling Ruby and emerging performance artist Joel Kyack (all three, coincidentally, one-time construction workers)—who are redefining the role of the he-man in contemporary art.



Thomas Houseago

In the just-opened Whitney Biennial, an enormous figure, easily 20' tall standing, crouches in the middle of a gallery. Sitting almost ape-like, its feet and hands, rough with plaster, splay across the floor. But the sculpture, titled *Baby*, isn't all undeniable hulk. From certain angles, it's clearly jerry-rigged, precariously held up by exposed rebar.



TOUGH GUISE *From top:* At his studio, artist Thomas Houseago stands amid three works-in-progress. "Every sculpture in its way is a Frankenstein. Because you are making a human form that is of course not human," he says; his new piece, *Baby*.

For artist **Thomas Houseago**, whose appearance in the Biennial is his first, the piece is emblematic of his approach to masculinity. "On the one hand, my work has a very animal, physical presence, but, at the same time, it's vulnerable and very fragile," he says.

Houseago, 37, is himself imposing, with a thick red beard and burly build that are, nevertheless, buoyed by waves of enthusiastic energy. His interest in masculine themes goes back to his childhood in the testosterone-flooded, hooligan-controlled town of Leeds in northern England. "At that time, people thought nothing of beating someone to a pulp on a Friday night. I had friends with their ears bitten off in fights," says Houseago, who was raised by his mom, a teacher, and two half-sisters. "My dad left by the time I was eight or nine."

Getting out of there was a necessity. "Leeds makes you insane," says Houseago, who moved to London

for art school. "I think art saved me." But it didn't pay the bills. He and his wife, painter Amy Bessone, who is known for her large-scale, figurative works, met in Amsterdam in 1994. "We were so poor. We were really doing the bohemian thing," he says. Six years ago, when the couple came to L.A., Houseago left everything behind. "There's a landfill in Belgium with like 50 sculptures in there," says the artist, who lives in Tujunga Canyon with Bessone and their two young children.

After toiling at more low-paying jobs (construction, extra work), Houseago—whose work is influenced by the primitivism of Picasso—won his first U.S. solo show in 2008 at David Kordansky in Culver City. A few weeks ago, at his downtown studio (he's since moved to Boyle Heights), the artist was preparing for his solo debut in NYC, at Michael Werner. The jumbled scene looks as if a giant or two has been blown up. Two monumental legs sit amid large, mask-like faces drawn on boards, a jutting jaw, and pieces that make you think of male and female genitals. "I've always been fascinated with how male and how dominating I am. I think men unchecked are really dangerous," he says. "So you need to watch that and be ultra-aware of it." —*Degen Pender* CONTINUED...

"I'm interested," says artist Joel Kyack, "in how we strive simultaneously for something both glorious and pathetic."



A RIVER RUNS THROUGH HIM
From top: In *The Dam*, a 2006 performance still, Joel Kyack challenges Mother Nature, standing in Unami Creek in his hometown of Harleysville, Pennsylvania; a collection of cutting instruments from his 2009 installation, *The Knife Shop*.

Joel Kyack

In his itinerant life, **Joel Kyack** has worked as a fish monger, butcher, dishwasher, drummer, tattoo artist and construction worker. The dangerous setting of this last gig provoked the creation of his 2008 piece, *In Preparation of Right Arm Loss—Workweek Jerseys*. Five days of shirts are mounted on a wall, each tailored for the seemingly inevitable injury. "My work definitely deals with what could be considered stereotypical emblems of masculinity," says Kyack at his Pasadena studio, located behind a century-old farmhouse where the artist lives. "I know this world both as an individual in my own body—exploring risk, exertion, glory, failure, pain—and as a participant in a larger social network of men."

Kyack's practice is wedded to this American vision of labor, owing a kinship to Emerson and Thoreau as well as the DIY punk movement. In *The Dam*, 2006, he stands in a river with a sheet of plywood, trying (and failing) to act as a human barrier. His most ambitious project, *The Knife Shop*, 2009, shown at Kunsthalle LA, captures in one rambling, single-room installation his fierce spirit of self-determination. A rattletrap masterpiece, complete with a

fountain gushing fake blood, the work looks like it was made by an industrious, psychedelic mountain man who's fashioned a collection of knives from such items as discarded circular saw blades, a broken Budweiser bottle and a hockey stick found on a frozen lake.

As a teen, Kyack lived in a house in rural Pennsylvania with just his father and grandfather. "They were tough guys. Their outlooks on life were hard and humorous. Injury was joked about as a consequence of a rich and active life. But inside their rubric, I found the inability to communicate on a real emotional level, a profound fear of the inevitable decline of the body," says Kyack, who graduated from RISD in 1995. After staying in Providence for a few years (as part of Fort Thunder, a noise-rock-influenced live-in artists' space), he moved to L.A., getting an MFA from USC in 2008.

Up next? Later this month, Kyack—in conjunction with LA><ART—will unveil a mobile puppet theater during highway traffic jams. Drivers can watch the short, existential plays until the gridlock breaks, while audio is available via short-range FM transmitter. After that, he'll begin a month-long (or so) residency this summer at Chinatown's Francois Ghebaly Gallery, a performance experiment involving alter-egos where he'll basically be the art for much of the exhibition. Says Kyack: "I don't see much difference between my art practice and the rest of my life." —*Andrew Bernardini* 