

john ros' activations

i.

In ros' *untitled: 18 malden rd* (2016), a diptych takes root at the center of the gallery. Two precisely stacked, modest sets of paper are placed in the large room. On approach, the sky has fallen. Next to a greyscale reproduction of clouds--taken by a camera pointed straight up-- lie the swirling, pastoral patterns of a QR code. I scan the technoscape with my phone, and the screen produces that first image in color: here is Google Map's 'street view' of the sky I stand below. Formal resemblance gives way to anxious recognition, as I'm thrust into my own surveillant act.

I gaze backward, thinking we are far away from the pure skies of Alfred Stieglitz' *Equivalent* series, from his conviction that no form but the cloud could match our range of inner expressions. The sky was something that belongs to everyone, Stieglitz felt, and it brought the opportunity for different bodies to exchange something in collective looking. With ros' clouds, the equivalence I gain is between my body and the technologies that map me; of a pernicious looking that distorts the exchange.

But I also catch Walter Benjamin staring back. Characterizing a new reality for countryside dwellers after the First World War, he wrote of the sky as the limit: "nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body." A leitmotif of Benjamin's writing is his warning of the approaching storm: we are dangerously immature in comparison to our technological capacity for destruction. Yet his disenchantment stems from deep fascination with how a creative body might attune us to historical continuity amid rapid technological change and accelerating violence. ros, too, sees tomorrow's bodies in yesterday's clouds.

ii.

In ros' *untitled: se1-49* (2015), an altar—of stacked plywood, high street glass, fragments of a concrete mold and fleshy cement run-off—nearly blocks the entrance to his small studio. I get low to admire this structure composed of commercial and artistic rubble, and my attention is diverted: to the craggy peaks of cement that follow a long rectangular form behind me, smoothed over with a sky of foamy white plaster. This central form feels like an inside-out landscape, incompletely fusing the human and the industrial.

Around the slab, the space is reconceived as the concrete mold that produced it. Towards the back wall, a jutting rectangle *in situ* shares the sculpture's dimensions. The drawings that hang opposite the slab, meanwhile, are the same shape of the piece of the wooden mold that rests atop the altar. The fluorescent light is made to echo wooden planks from the concrete mold as well, that hang on the opposite wall. This harsh light, repurposed by the glass protecting the drawings, produces a meditative glow.

The cast-off and run-off forms, layered on the walls and floor, had me choosing the corners: not because I was backed in to them, but as spaces to breathe. And there, it was like being joined by the artist himself, re-approaching a greater experience of opening up and closing off. This was the last installation in ros' then-studio, and it was partially a response to the eviction of he and fellow artists by a real estate developer that was about to destroy the building. The parasitic economic cycle was the grounds- and the walls- for building creative ones.

iii.

I would also describe this by saying that ros' unconventional material choices, always linked to activating the space, produce a sounding that tunes one into a different plane of experience altogether. They make me think of Fred Moten's synesthetic, material conception of sound, about things already there, waiting to be heard and felt. Some have called the feel of those frequencies in ros' work a buzzing. They are about what his reclamations carry: the terrain for continuous play and improvisation in which one becomes attuned to various outsides and histories working their way in.

Walking in New Haven, Connecticut, late in the day, *untitled: chamberlain* (2014) vibrated for me. The sun was reflecting too strongly off the windows of the art space, initially obscuring what was inside; but in a nearby nook, a pattern of light-activated-white levitated above the austere page upon which it was printed. Inside, I learned that the fence-like form was abstracted from iron latticework in the gallery. It was visible above me all along, but lost to the huge window that it framed. When I went back out to observe this, the sun had shifted just enough so that the glass that had once divided the gallery from the street had entirely dissolved in ros' play of forms.

The street's architecture--grates and lines and cast shadows-- came through into the gallery as material bodies. Standing there, the gallery's landscape extending public space, my effort to see inside was given back to me as an invitation to see the surrounds. With ros, quiet or empty places are beautiful orchestrations in wait: opportunities for a border work and a new experience of listening.

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