



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2010

University Exhibition Development and the Gallery as Studio

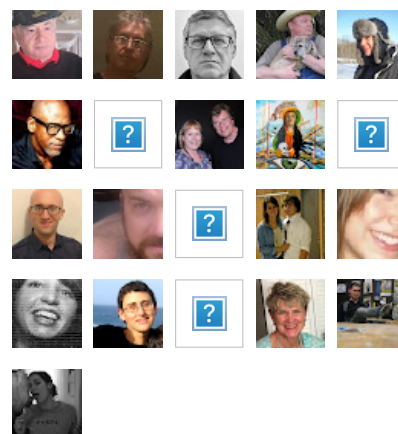
Guest Blogger:
Abdul Goler
Assistant Curator,
DePaul University
Museum



Exhibition design and production and all that is entailed in the development of successful shows--from the first inklings of ideas to the writing of didactic text and hanging of work to the public programming--takes on a distinct nature at the DePaul Museum. We are a small staff within the university community consisting of three persons that share responsibilities yet also play particular roles, often overlapping duties in the process of maintaining the museum facilities and caring for the works of art in our collection. As a result of operating parameters, we actively engage the larger university community's expertise and areas of interest. This allows for a kind of collaborative experience to mounting exhibitions and the curatorial process that is unique to university museums and to DePaul. Because of this nature, in a sense, our galleries here at the museum become the working space by and in which we forge together the concepts that are initially rendered on paper. The exhibitions are the three-dimensional fleshing out of concepts and concerns that serve to educate and often titillate our general public and the university community at large. The DePaul University Museum galleries are laboratories that give voice to ideas.

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Studio Chicago is a yearlong collaborative project that focuses on the artist's studio through exhibitions, talks, publications, tours, and research. It is a collaboration between core partners: The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, Columbia College Chicago, DePaul University Museum, Gallery 400 at UIC, Hyde Park Art Center, Museum of Contemporary Art, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and threewalls.

The project's website is www.studiochicago.org.

The Studio Chicago blog is a forum

Working with the artist Mark Curran during the installation of his exhibition *The Breathing Factory* provided great insight into this collaborative process that I'd like to share.

Site as production studio / production site as studio:

[The Breathing Factory: A Project by Mark Curran as engaged ethnography and the implication of the subject as object](#)

I'd like to start by comparing Curran's work in *The Breathing Factory* as currently exhibited at the DePaul University Museum to that of Greta Pratt in her series *Liberty* from 2009 currently on exhibit at [The Mattress Factory](#) in Pittsburg. There is a tacit understanding in both of an underpinning collective effort, which is in fact necessary for both projects to work as multi-layered anthropological studies. Both are tailored to specific sites and I might argue performative in nature. Curran captures the hauntingly hollow syncopated ballet of robotic arms—along with the eerie whoosh and hum created by the machines' programmed movement—within a high tech Hewlett Packard plant in Leixlip, Ireland. Leixlip was Europe's largest IT production and research and development center, modeling itself on California's Silicon Valley. Rather than form the backdrop to the exhibition, the large digital prints of these machines vie for prominence with the human population of workers that inhabit the plant, growing and shrinking with the needs of the global economy. These workers present themselves and are presented within this framework as disposable as the paper "clean room" suits they must don to protect the machines from human contamination.



Greta Pratt's series is also concerned with the flux of global markets, but deals with a more downtrodden collection of workers who have turned to performing in and of itself in order to make ends meet. Pratt photographically documents individuals who wave at passersby and dance on street corners wearing full-length Statue of Liberty costumes. These "wavers" work for Liberty Tax service. Most were

for discussion about topics generated by the project over the course of the year. Guest bloggers are invited by Studio Chicago Core Partners to post for one week, and these posts are moderated by Core Partners.

Comments are encouraged and dialogue is welcomed. Inappropriate and off-topic comments will be removed at the Core Partner's discretion.

For any questions, please email us at info.studiochicago@gmail.com.

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formerly unemployed, some were homeless, and all according to the artist, who conducted first hand interviews, happy to have a job even if it entailed dancing on a street corner. Thankfully, the artist redeems these individuals through the use of portraiture situating them within the American urban landscape in a composed dignified manner, turning them into the iconic symbol of Liberty itself.

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Artist: Greta Pratt; Title: Liberty, 2009; from the Likeness exhibition at [Mattress Factory](#).

Image courtesy of [Mattress Factory](#); Photo by Tom Little

Both sets of images share similarities in their use of portraiture captured through digital photography, and both situate the production of their work in site-specific ways, as well as the use of the interview process in revealing the inner workings of the subjects. Both groups of work also rely on the space in which it will be shown and is tailored not simply to fit each venue, but to meet the intellectual needs and framework of each site.

Curran's exhibition however is different in its tone of almost stoic resignation in the face of seemingly unstoppable capitalist interest. Needless to say, this gives a very wry twist to the work. The initial ethnography was initiated and completed in 2006 when Ireland was still riding the high crest of the wave of its economic boon. The work is prescient really; looking at the images of the workers and reading their collected interviews following the aftermath of the global economic meltdown one can't help but wonder where they are now and what has happened to them.

The workers he portrays stand stone-faced to meet you eye to eye within the factory that is their source of income, but also their undoing. This is the unsettling environment that one enters when walking into the galleries at the DePaul University Museum. One enters the factory and through the use of various tools becomes a part of the factory; the museum apparatus the artist uses subjugates the viewer to the role of

object because they act as the means by which the viewer projects his or her self into the machinations of the global economy. We are forced to consider the wide sweeping impact of the financial downturn and whether or not its full effects have been felt or are still yet to come.



The artist provides many methods for viewers to engage with the exhibition that manipulate and distort the nature of museum displays. I found the hanging of the large format c-print photographs to be one of the subtlest manipulations of museum technology in the exhibition. Rather than insist, as most artists probably would, upon the framing of the images to protect them from potential harm, the vivid images were hung with a combination of bull clamps and dry wall nails. In the repositioning of some of the photographs it became clear that the paper medium upon which the digital images were printed was indeed fragile, as the shifting of the bull clamps left corners and seams abraded. The result of the hanging, the artist confided, was that the images would convey a more tangible sense of vulnerability as they quite literally hang precariously by tooth and nail, trembling at the slightest vibration within the gallery. The labels for the photographs are also hung in the same manner, lending these objects a highly ephemeral quality, somewhat akin to tissue paper in the wind.

While the large photographs seem to represent the “art” I would argue that the factory and the inner lives of the workers are truly illuminated through the presence of the documentary materials the artist developed for the exhibition which included digital displays of video of the factory and a power point presentation of office workers in their cubicles. One of the most interesting appropriations of museum technology is the stack of eight and a half by eleven-inch double-sided pamphlets printed in small type and folded into eighths. Displayed on a pedestal under a low hanging bare halogen light, most visitors assume it is an art object and don’t bother to pick one up and read it, let alone take one with them. While Curran’s stack directly references Felix

Gonzales-Torres' use of the ephemeral and the absurd, it is the real utility of the object that is most important here. This museum brochure like publication has such information as a map of the Dublin metropolitan area including Leixlip, a bar graph comparing the political, economic, social, and personal indicators among leading industrial nations, quotes from economic policy makers and theoreticians regarding globalization, and most importantly interviews with workers at the Hewlett Packard plant about their experience working in the "most globalized economy in the world."

The presence of such materials disallows for a neat sense of distance or bifurcation of the experience into viewer and viewed, but instead works to entangle the viewer with what is being viewed. This further charges the site-specific nature of the exhibition as an interactive one and undermines its typical nature as a spectator event. Despite the sparse nature of the work and its display, one leaves the exhibition affected not so much by the "art" per se, but by the documentation of the effect of the global economy on people's lives. The photographs work in tandem with the other aspects of the exhibition to create a sense of a lived shared experience, or a gestalt view, which is the art.



Tools used in exhibition:

Projection of still images of office workers in cubicles at the plant (digital projector, white Mac Book, DVD)

Projection of digital video capture of machines shielded from view behind a curtain of plastic with sound (digital projector, DVD)

Projection of Power Point display of interviews of workers (digital projector, DVD)

Digital display of robotic arms in motion (white Mac Book, DVD)

Notebook of collected "hand written" notes of workers' accounts (facsimile)

Series of ethnographic accounts professionally printed on architect's paper for distribution stacked in gallery on table

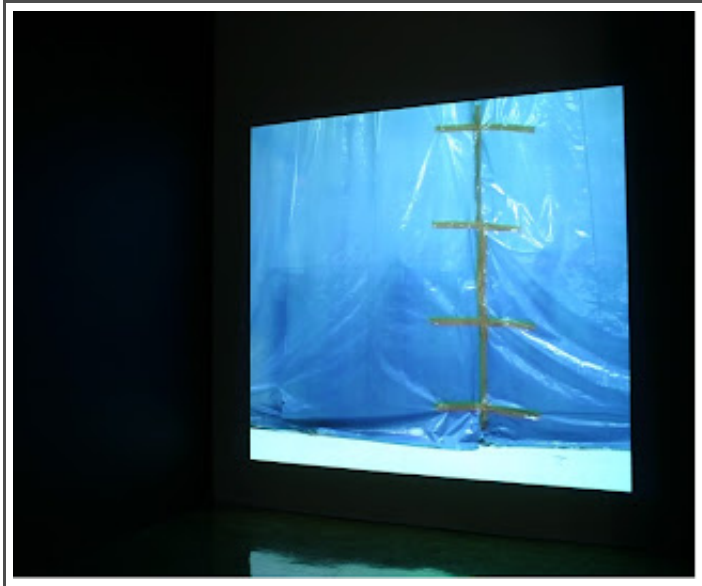
Audio Sound track of ambient factory sounds (CD)

Working with the artist for the installation, the importance of the conceptual nature of the exhibition became apparent. The framework of the exhibition was to act as the means of telling and sharing stories, of which many were told over the course of four days of positioning work, hammering in nails, painting surfaces, and plugging in cables. Some of the stories told were ghost stories, which seemed apropos given the faded glory of the once mighty Celtic Tiger that loomed large over the project. The looped continuous projection of digital video of a plastic curtain presumably hiding a machine from view further highlights the haunting nature of the exhibition. The plastic curtain in the video is comprised of two pieces of material taped together in a pattern that our director Louise Lincoln commented as being almost suture like in appearance. Staring at the moving image, we watch hopelessly bewildered as this ghost in the machine rattles and hums, “breathing” ominously behind the curtain.

It follows the pulse of the market and can change over to six or seven days of production overnight, uses market opportunities and risks optimally to create value. The break-even point in capacity usage remains low and market peaks can be taken as well. When the production process becomes flexible, then working hours and working conditions must also become flexible. Not only on the factory level. The new ‘breathing rhythm’ must also make headway at the social level: the time rhythm in society, the labour market, the educational system and the remaining institutions of the welfare state.

The target is a breathing factory

(source: Peter Hartz, Chairman, VW (1996) The Company That Breathes: Every Job has a Customer)
cit. in Curran, 2010



The fact that Curran generated the idea for The Breathing Factory through the course of working on his doctoral degree through the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice at the Dublin Institute of Technology also positions the gallery as a space for critical inquiry into the nature of shared experience as it unfolds within a museum setting. Over the course of the exhibition's run I will digitally video the installation in order to capture the comings and goings of visitors within this mix of ambient, visual, and textual cues. This will be done not just to archive the event, but also to learn how people interact with the exhibition and if the tools used provided visitors with the means to make sense out of the exhibition. In this way, The Breathing Factory becomes a site by which new knowledge is both accumulated and generated.

A native of Detroit, MI, [Abdul Goler](#) is the assistant curator at the DePaul University Museum and a budding scholar of the work of Romare Bearden. His specialized areas of study and inquiry include critical race theory, museum education and interpretation. Abdul completed his M.A. degree at Seton Hall University and was an Academic Year Intern in the department of Modern Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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