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POLARITIES POLARITÄT



6
PREFACE

34
ET SOUS LA PLAGE... ?
Philipp Felsch interviews Timothy Brennan
on the state of left theory

56
HELMUT DRAXLER
ALWAYS POLARIZE?
Conditions and limitations of a model of argumentation

70
LIBERTY, EQUALITY, SECURITY
Four questions for Carolin Emcke

76
ENTER THE VOID
Roy Scranton and @LilInternet on hyperreality
and reflexive narrative

98
DANIEL COLUCCIELLO BARBER AND DAVIS RHODES
THE TERROR WITHIN

106
ANTEK WALCZAK
GLOBALLY POSITIONED

116
GABRIELE WERNER
HEIMAT
Notes on the enduring renaissance of an idea

4
VORWORT

35
ET SOUS LA PLAGE... ?
Timothy Brennan im Interview mit Philipp Felsch
zum Stand linker Theorie

57
HELMUT DRAXLER
ALWAYS POLARIZE?
Bedingungen und Grenzen einer Argumentationsfigur

71
FREIHEIT, GLEICHHEIT, SICHERHEIT
Vier Fragen an Carolin Emcke

77
ENTER THE VOID
Roy Scranton und @LilInternet im Gespräch über
Hyperrealität und reflexive Narrative

99
DANIEL COLUCCIELLO BARBER UND DAVIS RHODES
THE TERROR WITHIN

107
ANTEK WALCZAK
GLOBAL POSITIONIERT

117
GABRIELE WERNER
HEIMAT
Anmerkungen zur dauernden Renaissance eines Begriffs

BILDSTRECKE / IMAGE SPREAD

129
GERHARD RICHTER

NEW DEVELOPMENT

143
NATIONALE WERTE
Sven Lütticken über die Debatte zum Kulturgutschutzgesetz

ROTATION

150
IST DER MENSCH DOCH NOCH ZU RETTEN?
Svenja Bromberg über Nina Powers Aufsatzsammlung
„Das kollektive politische Subjekt“

155
HEY, MOTHERFUCKERS – HERE IS YOUR
GENERATIONAL NOVEL
Tobias Madison über Seth Price Roman „Fuck Seth Price“

SHORT WAVES

159
Hans-Jürgen Hafner über Daniel Richter in der Schirn Kunsthalle,
Frankfurt/M. / Astrid Mania über Verena Pfisterer bei Exile, Berlin
/ Ana Teixeira Pinto on Jülius Koller at the Museum of Modern
Art, Warsaw / Beate Söntgen über Joan Mitchell im Museum
Ludwig, Köln / Daniel Keller on Peter Fend at Barbara Weiss
and The Oracle, Berlin / Manfred Hermes über Anne Speier bei
Silberkuppe, Berlin

REVIEWS

182
SPERRIGE NAHEVERHÄLTNISSE
Eva Kernbauer über „to expose, to show, to demonstrate,
to inform, to offer. Künstlerische Praktiken um 1990“
im Mumok, Wien

187
DER GESCHMACK DES PRIVATEN
Barbara Buchmaier und Christine Woditschka
über die Sammlung Würth im Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin

193
BENEFITS
Sarah Lookofsky on “Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and
Ethan Wagner” at the Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York

197
NOBODY EVER DID WHAT WE DID
David Rimanelli on Dash Snow at the Brant Foundation
Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut

201
MALEREI MALGRÉ TOUT
Maria Muhle über „Painting 2.o“ im Museum Brandhorst,
München

207
PUNK’S NOT DEAD, JUST DIFFERENT
Gili Tal on “Rum, sodomy, and the lash” at Eden Eden, Berlin

212
WITHIN YOU WITHOUT YOU
Jenny Nachtigall on Carolee Schneemann at Museum der
Moderne, Salzburg

217
FREMDE ZUNGEN
Yilmaz Dziewior über „Slip of the Tongue“ in der Punta della
Dogana, Venedig

222
LOCAL UNION
Rhea Anastas on Union Gaucha Productions at
Artists Space, New York

TEXTE ZUR KUNST – ARTISTS’ EDITIONS

228
THEA DJORDJADZE

230
DANA SCHUTZ

234
AUTOREN, AUTORINNEN,
GESPRÄCHSPARTNER/INNEN / CONTRIBUTORS

237
BACK ISSUES / IMPRESSUM / IMPRINT / CREDITS

LOCAL UNION

Rhea Anastas on Union Gaucha Productions at Artists Space, New York



"Union Gaucha Productions," Artists Space, New York, 2015, installation view

A collaboration begun in 1997 and discontinued in 2010, Nicolás Guagnini and Karin Schneider's Union Gaucha Productions bridged pre-9/11 New York with the city's late-Bloomberg era. This winter, the first focused presentation of the group's full work was exhibited at Artists Space.

Acknowledging the local pressures of the exhibition's site, Rhea Anastas – an art historian and fellow member, with Guagnini and Schneider, of the 2005–06 commercial gallery Orchard – sees the show's context as only underscoring Union Gaucha's relevance: as model for asserting the particular through an embrace of the local, despite capital's homogenizing force.

I felt I could experience the current state of contingency of New York City real estate in the displaced footprint of the exhibition "Union Gaucha Productions" at Artists Space this past winter. For four months, the venerable non-profit was forced to relocate its program entirely to its smaller bookstore space (55 Walker Street) while the property owner of their usual base of operations (38 Greene Street) planned to erect a two-story penthouse addition.¹ This real world-bounded condition of 2015–16 seemed to feed back into the "local" politic (of the time the work was made) that infuses the eleven core films of this show.

The "local," in any case, might be taken as a focal point of "Union Gaucha Productions" (UGP), a coauthored area of activity (operative

1997–2010) founded by New York-based artists Nicolás Guagnini and Karin Schneider to coexist within and alongside their respective individual practices. UGP primarily produced films, and this exhibition, organized by Richard Birkett (Artists Space) and Jacob King, features a diverse yet concise selection of UGP's oeuvre presented in an unprecedented way. Within the display at 55 Walker Street, the viewer could experience these eleven works in ways that cast open the purity (or tyranny) of projected film, reshaping it into a multi-form experience – most notably on a wall specially built in the bookstore's larger upstairs gallery to screen nine films simultaneously.² To see these films (quite literally) together suggests that such a form is native to the work – which, from my comprehension of the work, it is not.

To its credit, the show invites this conflict without combating it. Further, the curatorial idea seems not to have been to imagine a show that would be novel for its exploration of UGP's archive, but rather for its thoughtful consideration of how an edited selection of UGP's output might be read in the present, might engage with the present and have the present engage it in turn. Birkett and King did not (over)reach beyond this grouping of eleven films to pull from what may amount to another twenty-some extant films, drawings, and other work in UGP's archive; nor was UGP asked to produce new films from unfinished material. Instead, the curators (working with Guagnini and Schneider) created a highly specific framework for viewing, arranged as three stages or spaces: (1) a darkened viewing gallery that placed 16mm films adjacent to digital films on a projection wall, accompanied by headphones and a floor fashioned for seating with a layer of

artificial grass; (2) a downstairs screening room staffed by a projectionist; and (3) a hybrid space in the front room (the gallery's bookstore) with the exhibition's largest work, "As Long As it Lasts" (2010), playing on six screens, paired with the show's shortest and smallest-screened work, Jeff Preiss's trailer "Uri Loop (for UGP)" (2015), which hung on the 55 Walker Street front door. Programs were organized as a fourth way of taking in the work: that is, along with that of other filmmakers and producers, including screenings by Juan Downey, Storm de Hirsch, Jonas Mekas, Jeff Preiss, and Jean Rouch, and accompanying talks by Mekas, Preiss (with Guagnini and Schneider), and Michael Taussig (on Downey and Rouch).

I can refuse to categorize UGP's work and call it *heterodoxy* (approaching its films, say, in terms of production style or avant-garde practices and histories), but I still have to ask, what is this work telling us? Perhaps, above all, it is a telling "with." The films are heavily inspired by a cast of scholars, artists, performers, musicians, and filmmakers who populate them, including (to give only a partial list) Jonas Mekas, Annette Michelson, Frantz Fanon, Reinaldo Laddaga, Yve-Alain Bois, Suely Rolnik, Lygia Clark, Fabio Kacero, Tunga, Eugenijus Varkulevicius, Leven Betts Studio, and Ikeba. UGP engages these artists' work (and in some cases their personas) in multiple ways – as mentors/teachers, intellectual models, cast members, accompanying musicians or contributing technicians, scratch-artists, and so on. Notably, all of these figures – variously associated with New York City, Buenos Aires, Rosario, Rio de Janeiro, and other social, cultural/intellectual, or bohemian milieus – connect UGP's films to the regions with which Schneider (b. 1970, Brazil)



"Union Gaucha Productions," Artists Space, New York, 2015, installation view



Union Gaucha Productions, "Phantom Limb," 1998, film still

and Gagnini (b. 1966, Argentina) personally identify. UGP's Portuguese-inflected name asserts a non-sovereign realm of collaboration and an idea about local knowledge. *Local* equals situatedness in time, culture, and context.

Thinking about "Union Gaucha Productions" and Artists Space leads me to ask the question: Does the way Artists Space works with artists on exhibitions like this one actually depend on space, on occupying a physical footprint and taking up space in our global field of many institutions of multiple scales? Are there other ways that curatorial commitments to artists and/or histories are (or may be) expressed? Could the physical aspect of exhibitions actually matter less than the present struggle to have a footprint in Manhattan or Brooklyn often makes it seem?

What I surely don't mean to uphold is any dualism that sets the monetary in opposition to the non-monetary, since we know that economic conduct involves both. As I visited 55 Walker twice over the final weekend of the show, I tried to make sense of what I would call, in non-technical terms, a feeling of estrangement – a thought-space that I see UGP's work actively taking up through the terms of postcolonial experience as we know it in visual art, philosophy, and literature. What occurred to me as I saw the films was how, even though the experiments of UGP were made in the center of New York, a self-estrangement on par with something more extreme (like the affects of social estrangement captured in Juan Downey's "Video Trans Americas" series) is generated within the collaboration's acts of community, place, exporting, and importing. In this show, the local is manifested in films; via experiential, material, and cognitive qualities; as a transit or passage (with readiness as

much as doubt about making that passage); and as disturbance. UGP's 1998 work "Phantom Limb," in particular, is a deeply true artifice built out of an embodied telling of modernism's lines of development in three countries – Poland, Brazil, and Argentina – cross-connecting hard-won access to archives and artists' estates with original footage of the works of Katarzyna Kobro and Lygia Clark, and with Unism and Neo-Concretism. The dominant sense of "Phantom Limb" is how much is expressed by the artists' taking into their hands of the actual works – by, for example, their decision to film an origami practitioner holding and playing with a Clark Bicho.

Many UGP works use found footage and mime known experimental vocabularies. And yet what interested me in watching them again were the ways they dealt with the body caught in/as film. Each film is a perceptual and cognitive journey through some captured piece of history: "The End" (1999) and its footage are from a documentary on the US National Gallery; New York's Times Square is featured in "Square Times" (2001). History and the self are destabilized through contact with the other, and equally through contact with the ocular itself – the fragmentary condition of seeing and being seen, with all the controls, pleasures, and blocks that involves. The way that sexual-difference critiques and postcolonial discourses are opened – I want to say, dilated, like the pupil of an eye – by these films is something that marks their time and ignites questions about the reception of these ideas then and now.

Visiting the show, I requested "A Vide de Infra-Tunga" (1999, co-created with Brazilian artist Tunga) and "Portrait of a Lady" (2000) for screening downstairs. In "Portrait of a Lady,"

Ikeba, a black woman living and working in New York City in the late '90s, models painted Picasso figures, one embodying exercise of a pair of film works that generate contemporary ideas about such monuments of Museum of Modern Art modernism as Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" and Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." This art-study aspect of Schneider and Guagnini's practice shows them chewing through the big topics of the ocular and culture's knot of languages, desires, identities, and competencies.

UGP made public work that issued in part from the artists' marriage at the time. To read the work considering this aspect of lived life is to recognize a feminist imperative to do so, and to link that necessity with the urgencies of the position of the everyday within histories of experimentalism. The particular kinds of agency that can be gleaned from this independent, cooperative way of working arguably link improvisational qualities with a parallel "force field of the marital proscenium," to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideation. What Kosofsky Sedgwick means is that way that marriage is "constituted as a spectacle that denies its audience the ability either to look away from it or equally to intervene in it."³ Both Guagnini and Schneider can be seen on film filming (along with curator Sarina Basta, who is seen looking through a camera though not actually recording footage) in "As Long As it Lasts" (2010), a 191-minute multiscreen digital video. The work combines two videos: a tracking shot from a car driving uptown from 23rd Street to Harlem on Madison Avenue; and a reel of interior museum scenes with the artists, the results of a cluster of days spent filming inside the closed MoMA building with a seven-person

cast (Mike Smith in character as Baby Ikki, Jonas Mekas in scenes with artist Olivier Mosset, and Leigh Ledare with Basta cast as lovers in conflict against the backdrop of the museum's collection). In the fact of the video's original placement on nine screens behind MoMA's ticketing desk, I discern that UGP made a feedback tool (with its social-psychological dimensions). The kinship and intimacy of artistic community here play as a private form of talking back to the institution's displays of ownership of modernist objects – of modernism.

During the show's final week, the exhibition's live programming was moved from 55 Walker Street's downstairs screening room to its upstairs artificial-grass "park," to borrow the curator's word for the astroturfed gallery. First, Gillian Walsh presented a project based upon found coding systems and choreography, arranging dancers inside the gallery – their bodies set this movement from downstairs to upstairs in motion. A few days later, Lukas Ligeti improvised a musical score for "Phantom Limb," a percussive surround and a ritualizing of film-viewing. I visited the soundcheck in lieu of Ligeti's closing performance. Standing in the gallery with UGP's films and videos turned off, I could now actually see that the wall constructed to screen the 16mm and digital projections was built from low-cost oriented strand board and had been painted in varied beige-brown hues to bring the different projections into a similar range of brightness. This modest, everyday stagecraft had something to tell of the exhibition-as-proscenium (and every projection as a light theater), of the respective sense and values of actual space and the more abstract or imaginative space of thought – of gazing and looking – and of our



"Union Gaucha Productions," Artists Space, New York, 2015, installation view

ultimately unfixed and contingent disunity in beholding Union Gaucha Productions at Artists Space.⁴

"Union Gaucha Productions," Artists Space, New York, November 7, 2015–January 10, 2016.

Notes

- 1 Use of all but a small office section of Artists Space's 7,500-sq. ft. space on the third floor of 38 Greene Street was made difficult in the course of negotiations with their landlord this past spring and fall. First it appeared that the floor would be rendered inoperable for a four-month period between September 14, 2015 and mid-January 2016 due to construction by the building owner, who was beginning to carry out plans for a two-story rooftop penthouse addition (see <http://artforum.com/news/id=55085> and [http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/artists-](http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/artists-space-gallery-suspends-shows-in-landlord-dispute/)

- space-gallery-suspends-shows-in-landlord-dispute/). After the gallery went through with this partial closure, the planned pre-construction work was never executed. At the time of writing this review, Artists Space is opening an exhibition at 38 Greene Street of Cameron Rowland's work, "Cameron Rowland: 91020000." Artists Space (founded circa 1973) has rented the third floor of this building in the landmarked SoHo Cast Iron Historic District since 1993.
- 2 Public screenings of UGP's films have not been frequent, with notable exceptions. Private screenings in the context of the studio or the artists' live/work space were to my mind the artists' preferred manner of dissemination.
- 3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, NC 2003, p. 72.
- 4 The author would like to thank Robert Snowden and Robert Dewhurst for conversations and comments that contributed to this review.

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