

A “spectacle of entrance, exits,
and changing coalitions”

by Solveig Nelson

AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE is the first MFA thesis show in the University of Chicago’s studio art program in which the graduating class decided to come together and exhibit as a single entity. Limitations in gallery space have required expanding the site of the exhibition, from cinemas to emergency exits. While the group exhibition format gestures toward social relations—a collectivity—there is no stable center or singular point of gravity.

The pedagogical format of the “art school” is of course relevant to *AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE*. Yet unlike, say, curator Helen Molesworth’s recent exhibition on Black Mountain College, works by teachers are not displayed alongside that of their students. This isn’t a representation of the classroom, at least not directly, or the formation of an independent collective. It’s also not a theme show. The structure hinges on a deceptively simple chronology of events: the artists in the show entered the program together, participated in critiques together, and will graduate simultaneously.

Artists are oft-times a few steps ahead of art historians and critics. The reverse is also true; contemporary practice comes into contact with art historical discourses from a few steps back. In the 1970s, Lawrence Alloway, best known for his writings on pop art, advocated for a mode of simultaneous criticism capable of “coping with the collection of heterogeneous fact homogeneous in time.”¹ Instead of producing hierarchies of taste and value, he writes, “synchrony provides cross-sections, arrays of simultaneous information in terms of co-existence rather than succession.” The reason for such a critical lens is partly corrective, and intended to “rehabilitat[e] artists and tendencies” that had previously

been “suppressed or under-interpreted.” Further, simultaneity signals an attention to the complexity of conversations that have unfolded between artists in ways that are far from linear. Alloway positions the art world as a *complex present*:

[a] spectacle of entrance, exits, and changing coalitions. There is a multiplicity of styles, irreconcilable according to traditional criteria. It is a domain of multiple causation and divergent developments.

Alloway’s complex present strikes me as an appropriate point of entry into *AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE*, an exhibition featuring the work of Joshua Backus, Brit Barton, Elisabeth Hogeman, Jayson Kellogg, Devin Mays, Gabe Moreno, Anna Showers-Cruser, and Morganne Wakefield. What follows is not a birds-eye view, but rather a speculative response inspired by individual conversations with each artist in their studios about art objects that were before us, as well as art objects that had not yet materialized.

For one thing, there was a recurring concern about what it would mean to bring the individual practices into a singular frame. This is an art historical problem and not just a logistical one. Scholars have narrated the history of American art primarily as a monographic affair. This has been the case despite the prevalence of group exhibitions, the noted influence of alternative pedagogical institutions such as the L.A. Womens Building, and the visual and performative innovations of political movements. The 1960s witnessed the formation of video collectives such as VideoFreex and Queer Blue Light Gay Revolution. The Chicago-based visual arts group AfriCOBRA sought to distill elements from members’ individual practices through an art-school-like analysis in order to generate a collective black aesthetic.² By the 1980s, collectives

The author wishes to thank Brit Barton, Jennifer Cohen, Darby English, David Giordano, Jesse Lockard, Morganne Wakefield, Andrew Yale, Rebecca Zorach, and the MFA 2016 class.

1 Lawrence Alloway, “The Complex Present,” *Art Criticism* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 32–42.

2 My knowledge of the history of AfriCOBRA is indebted to Rebecca Zorach and her exhibition, “AfriCOBRA: Philosophy,” Logan Center of the Arts, June 28–August 11 2013, which included multiple public talks by AfriCOBRA members. See also Rebecca Zorach, “Dig the Diversity in Unity: AfriCOBRA’s Black Family,” *Afterall* 28 (Autumn/Winter 2011): 102–11, and *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music 1965 to Now*, ed. Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

staged meta-exhibitions that performed their own art histories, most famously Group Material's *Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America* (1984), which was later reframed into *AIDS Timeline* (1989), a juxtaposition of art objects, death masks, news journalism, political graphics, and wall text. Meanwhile, artists such as Zoe Leonard and Tom Kalin worked back and forth between direct action visual art collectives and their individual practices—sometimes in friction, sometimes in a more porous manner. For instance, Kalin appropriated Andy Warhol's film *Kiss* (1963) into a direct action “kiss-in” for his video *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* (1989), and this visual strategy was taken up within the collective Gran Fury's *Kissing Doesn't Kill* campaign.³ Collectivity in the 1980s and 1990s was ambiguous, but it was also ambitious. In 1992, lesbian poet Eileen Myles and Chicago drag performer Joan Jett Blakk each ran for president.

Part of what I take to be the history of collectivity and groups is the way that artists have worked with modes of address in their works, a strategy that I see approached with nuance by many of the artists in this exhibition.

Although not directly invoked in the show, I think of James Baldwin's interviews and television performances. In 1970, the *East Village Other* published an interview with Baldwin following the murder of Chicago Black Panther Party Chairman Fred Hampton by the Chicago police. Consider the following quotations:⁴

I don't care what the white press says of the exaggerations of police brutality, I've lived with it all my life. I know, whether the New York Times wants me to believe it or not. I was there and the New York Times was not.

Any Black person in this country at this hour is in some way a Black Panther.

Shooting people in their apartments in the middle of the night creates exactly what they would like not to happen ... something begins

3 Tom Kalin, interview by Solveig Nelson, Artists on Artists Interviews, Video Data Bank, February 2016.

4 Interview with James Baldwin, *East Village Other*, March 1970, p. 3.

happening to the American consciousness—it's not just happening to black people, it's also happening to me.

Baldwin's modes of address to readers transforms subtly throughout the course of the interview, prompted by multiple iterations of the authorial I—me (James Baldwin), me (American), me (white), me (Black), me (artist), me (outsider/queer), me (famous), me (born in Harlem), me (whatever is felt and thought at that moment). Baldwin's modes of direct address generate intimacy without creating “straightforward propaganda,” as some have suggested.⁵ It is my contention that Baldwin has been influential as a figure within *contemporary art*—and not only a repository of searing quotations about race relations in America—because he both amplified a fantasy of direct contact and complicated it.

In the 1960s and again in the 1980s, alternative art institutions championed the group exhibition as one way to produce alternative public spheres. In both decades, artists' responses continued to depart from straightforward propaganda. Consider David Wojnarowicz's essay “Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” published in the catalog of Nan Goldin's group exhibition at Artists Space, “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” (1989). Goldin characterized her exhibition as at once a network of friends, both living and deceased, and a “collective memorial.” She articulated a refusal to allow the government response to AIDS to “wip[e] out our sensibility or silenc[e]” our voices.” Wojnarowicz's prose, however, frames the notion of “our sensibility” as a question rather than a foundation. His opening lines introduce a heightened perception—a mode of vision that the artist likens to the modernist trope of X-rays as well as to the distortions in bodily function caused by illness: “It's like stripping the body of flesh in order to see the skeleton, the structure ... I suddenly resist comfort, from myself and especially from others.

5 Lee Stephens Glazer, “Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections,” *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 3 (September 1994): 424.

6 Nan Goldin, “In the Valley of the Shadow,” in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (Artists Space, 1989), pp. 4–5.

There is something I want to see clearly, something I want to witness in its raw state.”⁷ A chasm emerges between self and other. Yet at the end of “Postcards from America,” Wojnarowicz advocates for the necessity of translating private grief into collective form:

*even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication.*⁸

The same year, Gregg Bordowitz celebrated the ability of video, in the hands of collectives such as Testing the Limits, to “picture a coalition” in the process of its formation.⁹ Wojnarowicz's simultaneity of gestures—not quite a group form, not quite a coalition, and not a shared aesthetic—was more hesitant, closer to the experiment that is *AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE*.

It would be possible to conceptualize *AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE* as specific to the South Side of Chicago: uninterested in the most obvious of art world fashions; meta; dense with historical references that are precisely considered; dead serious about performance (including humor) and the radical legacies of theater. Keeping the middle in play puts pressure on the centers produced by prior art historical narratives. Yet, this show seems equally hesitant to rally behind the “heartland” as an aesthetic sensibility or fixed “outside.” What is the difference between a collective, an artistic collaboration, and a movement?¹⁰ *AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE* poses these questions without fully enacting any one of these terms.

AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE also suggests movement, and indeed, moving image works are an important component

7 David Wojnarowicz, “Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” in *Witnesses*, p. 8.

8 Ibid., p. 11.

9 Gregg Bordowitz, “Picture a Coalition,” *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 182–96.

10 Thanks to Jesse Lockard for asking me to account for these distinctions in multiple conversations.

of the exhibition. MORGANNE WAKEFIELD's *I See Patagonia In Your Future* (HD Video, 2016) hinges on narrative conceits or gestures (the opening sequence features a hitch-hiker's nail-polished thumb) but bypasses narrative as structure in favor of fantastical performance sequences, closer to video art's temporality than, say, *Easy Rider* (1969) or *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Costumed bodies perform in masks and wigs that imply feminine gender but give no indication of the figure underneath. I'm reminded of Joan Jonas's *Organic Honey* performances in her early black-and-white videos, although not because the two artists use the same strategies. Wakefield's use of handmade costumes patterned to blend with the surrounding natural environment (green dress against green field of grass) introduces a theme of analog camouflage that the artist then reverses to opposite effect (whereby fashion functions as a means of standing out); Wakefield's use of props similarly generates humor and interrupts the picturesque landscape.

ELISABETH HOGEMAN's color-saturated projection *And You the Bell* (HD Video, 2016) utilizes a close-up (yet not handheld) camera to record the seemingly everyday domestic movements of her protagonist. If the work clearly invokes Chantal Akerman's masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) in its repetitions of domestic rituals—mixed with a palpable sense of tension or dread, recalling Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995)—it also departs, dwelling in photographic tensions between movement and stillness and the potentials of sound to question narrative coherence. Part of what intrigues about this work is Hogeman's meticulous construction of miniature sets, which are seamlessly interspersed with the depicted everyday.

Equally attuned to materiality, ANNA SHOWERS-CRUSER's sculptures and installations introduce “riotous” fields of pinks, purples, reds. Situated ambiguously between the wall and the floor as centers of gravity, the artist's sculptures such as *Tuck n' Roll* (2015) often reference “flags” in the conventional sense as well as “flagging,” a visual signaling within queer subcultures. Chains of pink latex and silicone or mounds of human hair bursting out of plaster sculptures invoke the biomorphic abstractions

in Lucy Lippard's exhibition "Eccentric Abstraction" (1967) while simultaneously referencing queer-positive sex toys. Installation shots of the works in the artist's studio, a striking accumulation of objects and images, contextualize this work in relation to the artist's networks of objects and practices—a network that extends "outside" the University while challenging that boundary in the first place.

Similarly, DEVIN MAYS photographs small objects found along the route of his walks off campus—from Little Brother Vodka to Newport Cigarettes—and that have been handled, discarded, and partially flattened on the street. The striking black-and-white photographs appear as if three-dimensional and flat all at once. The "look" of advertising in these works provokes questions about how group belonging within capitalism has been transformed by ideas of "demographics," in which consumer objects have been positioned as if expressive of distinct identities. In a subsequent series of performance-based works, Mays attributes to religious groups the affective functions (including hope) often ascribed to historical avant-gardes. Starting with the video *Mascot* (2015), Mays introduces the motif of a painting of a Jesus depicted as Black that the artist found in the County Line Trade Center flea market in Detroit, Michigan. Utilizing the painting in live performances as well as photography, Mays does not simply resolve the painting into kitsch—which for Clement Greenberg in his 1939 essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" meant a precoded message transmitted to a passive viewer. In contrast, Mays produces a sense of depth through multiple means, translating the social space of the flea market into social confrontations in the performance and amplifying tensions between singular performer and audience.

If Mays investigates hope as a formal procedure, JAYSON KELLOGG takes on the violence of group belonging in his remarkable video *Camaraderie* (2014). As a participant, Kellogg recorded a small group of U.S. military soldiers stationed in Iraq as they playacted with each other in response to recent experiences of violent confrontation. The gunshots off camera raise unsettling questions about the status

of the video as both fantasy and documentary. While the behavior on camera reads as disturbing, the soldiers seem to participate in a group ritual that is not experienced, on their part, as self-exposing. Additional videos by Kellogg including *This Is Me* (2014) utilize direct address to the camera shot against a decontextualized black background, an overtly theatrical scenario that nevertheless continues to focus on the politics of gesture.

JOSHUA BACKUS's paintings, oil and acrylic mixed with enamel, shift between reading as an accumulation of layers that are built up toward the viewer and a surface that has been effaced to reveal glimmers of its undersides. While playing with such old-school discourses of figure/ground reversals, Backus cross-circuits the painterly edge with the messier, oscillating edges of electronic media. Bold applications of bright yellow along the edges produce a dissonance with the centrifugal abstract marks in the center, positioning the edges as *interference* in addition to a metaphoric boundary between object and world.

BRIT BARTON's black & white video *Making Knots* (2016), a close-up of hands attempting to perform the game cat's cradle, thematizes the ways in which artists have courted proximities to and staged distance from the objects they produce. The mark of the hand signals authorial presence but also departs from fantasies of face-to-face contact. (Contemporary art could be read through its fascination with the semiotics of hand movements. I always think of Bruce Nauman's body molds—such as *From Hand to Mouth* (1967)—which deconstruct the indexical rhetoric of self-portraiture, casting the body of a woman in place of the artist's own.)¹¹ Barton juxtaposes *Making Knots* with the sound piece, *Making Noise* (2016); a voice admonishes, "Do it again, Stop, Start over, The other way, Finally." Read together, the diptych suggests the risk of, or pleasure in, failure. Barton's

11 See Lorraine Sciarra, "Bruce Nauman, January 1972," in Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 166, as well as a later interview with Joan Simon in the same volume, "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1988 (January, 1987)," p. 325.

site specific installations and collages featuring architectural motifs continue to foreground *gesture*—as both a represented action and as a set of rules about the performances that initiate her artworks.

If art history has eclipsed groups in favor of monographs, it has also tended to minimize the role of figurative sculpture in postwar art. GABE MORENO enters into such a lacunae confidently, without disavowing either abstraction or representation. Moreno's standout *Admiral Fridge, Stripped* (2016), a bodily-scaled sculpture comprised of a refrigerator that has been stripped to display its insulation, produces a visceral effect in the viewer while also functioning as a thought experiment. (Again, I'm reminded of Nauman, in this case his early mold sculptures that were purposefully displayed inside out). Moreno mobilizes surrealism's reversals between interior and exterior to great effect without the look of surrealism *per se*. *Admiral Fridge, Stripped* has been repurposed into an artwork and yet still carries electricity when plugged in. Thus the sculpture functions equally as a sound piece and, like much of Moreno's diverse practice, is site-specific. Suggesting and deviating from Robert Gober's amazing sinks (hand-crafted, psychologically dense, and sometimes featuring running water), Moreno's work references a minimalism whose legacy has already been reframed by queer and feminist artists.

Unfortunately, identity politics has been received within the academy as the very reductiveness that the art objects and artists considered within its rubric pushed against. *Village Voice* critic John Perreault noted in the early 1980s, "One idea is that [gay art] is art done by gay artists on gay subjects for other gay people."¹² Dissatisfied, Perreault promoted a more deconstructive stance: "whatever else it may do, true gay liberation does not support the status quo. It works toward being non-separatist, anti-ghetto, anti-racist, and pro-feminist." Likewise, New Queer Cinema filmmaker Derek Jarman wrote in response to calls for positive images in the early 1990s: "What was positive? White, middle class,

12 John Perreault, "Gay Art: I'm Asking, Does It Exist? What Is It? Whom Is It For," *Artforum* 19 (November 1980): 74–75.

male? ... You can't make work in categories, and if that's gay aesthetics, let's get rid of it."¹³ Refreshingly, *AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE* displays an impressive capacity to speak across/between former chasms, reconfiguring rather than flattening the unresolved conversations of the past.

AND NO ONE FISH IN THE MIDDLE invokes the legacies of movements, collectives, and group aesthetics and then suspends these tendencies as questions—questions to be rushed toward, or stepped away from, or approached obliquely, all according to the needs of each individual artist. It's both subtle, and a provocation, all at once.

13 Derek Jarman, "Queer Questions," *Sight and Sound*, September 1992, 34–35.