

## Journal



12/10/17 • Essay : Rachael Rakes

### Notes on Abstraction, Politics, and Arts of the Real

In the below essay, 2017 CAS resident Rachael Rakes discusses the relationship between abstract art and reality. The text is grounded in her ongoing research into how one might begin to repair documentary media's association with form. By looking at examples of how context and politics are communicated through abstract and formalist art practices, Rakes shows how abstract forms can be used to represent lived experience.



Eugenio Espinoza, *Tela en las dunas de Coro*, 1972. Photo: Claudio Perna, courtesy the artist.

“The penalty of realism is that it is about reality and has to bother for ever not about being ‘beautiful’ but about being right.” –John Grierson

I write this having recently opened an exhibition entitled *On Documentary Abstraction*.

1

1. *On Documentary Abstraction* is on view at Art Center/South Florida through December 17, 2017. The show features work by Torkwase Dyson, Eugenio Espinoza, Tomashi Jackson, Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens, and is accompanied by two film screening programs with a variety of artists.

The premise is straightforward: to describe a current constellation of artists who make abstract forms that contain or communicate documentary research.<sup>1</sup>

1. “Documentary research” is indicated here to mean both the research into documents, or to the historical record, and the past, as well a visual journalistic inquiry into, or the examination of the real.

The idea is not so much to identify a new trend as a new necessity. In an image-saturated, overly mediated moment, in which we are constantly receiving new data through the flattened digital forms of news and social media, delivery is profoundly critical. Reconfiguring perspective and perception is ostensibly the task art is up to. My idea here, and I’m certainly not the first one to have it, is to operate on the criteria applied to formalism and representation at the same time by considering how abstract forms can be used to represent lived experience. In applying artistic process to matters of the real—changing the communication agent—the hope is that these new media might influence not only the perception but the reception of urgent phenomena. My research is grounded by a desire to break abstract art apart from Modernist thought with its attendant, still enduring, distancing of form from representation, its attendant distancing of social conditions from visual grounding (and maybe, to put to final rest the zombie of zombie formalism.)<sup>1</sup>

1. This is absolutely a battle that has been waged in pockets of contemporary art history and criticism, from post-modernism on, yet still reveals itself in criticism, press releases, universities, and gallery didactics.



Gyula Kosice, Estructura lumínica Madí 6 (Luminescent Madí Structure No.6), 1946. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

This research splits into a few historical points regarding abstraction. The first is that the Modern art historical construction of abstraction (via Clement Greenberg et al) ignored a centuries-long history of abstract and formalist practices from around the world. It also disregarded Modern abstract artists’ own acknowledgement of visual and contextual references outside of their field. And then finally, there has been an ongoing tradition of Modern and contemporary abstraction from around the world that operates upon or engages with coextensive lived existence. To illustrate this last point, a line can be drawn through examples from early Modern art to the present. Malevich’s obstructionist abstractions heralded the post-revolutionary Bolshevik government through avant-garde tactics.<sup>1</sup>

1. Boris Groys called the Black Square “an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical destruction could enter the space of culture and reduce it to ashes.” Groys, Boris. “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich,” E-flux, Journal #47, September 2013

In 1940s Argentina, Tomás Maldonado and Gyula Kosice applied abstract aesthetics to pamphlets and political posters, as a means to constructing an alternative, collective

society, contending that if figurative art served the ruling class and fascism, abstraction could be the destabilizing art of the working class. <sup>1</sup>

1. Pérez-Barreiro, Gabriel. *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps De Cisneros Collection*.

In 1960s Brazil, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica inserted abstraction into daily life through participation. Clark's modular *Bichos* and Oiticica's wearable *Parangolés*, brought abstract objects to life in order to engage the greater populace in the aesthetics—with the always-potential consequence of positively altering social relations. In the past several decades across the US, Black American artists have been using methods of formal coding and obstruction, referential hiding, and “smuggling” through abstraction in order to represent identity and recover history. Beverly Buchanan's 1970s and 1980s cast concrete “ruins”— large anonymous slabs placed at sites of Black struggle around the American South, and Howardena Pindell's 1970s intricate pattern paintings that incorporated symbols and shapes which obliquely reference painful memories and personal history, are two of many examples of what is now being more popularly considered a movement of socially-engaged Black Abstraction. <sup>1</sup>

1. A thoughtful survey piece among a recent constellation on the subject is Chloe Bass's “Can Abstraction Help us Understand the Value of Black Lives?” published in *Hyperallergic*



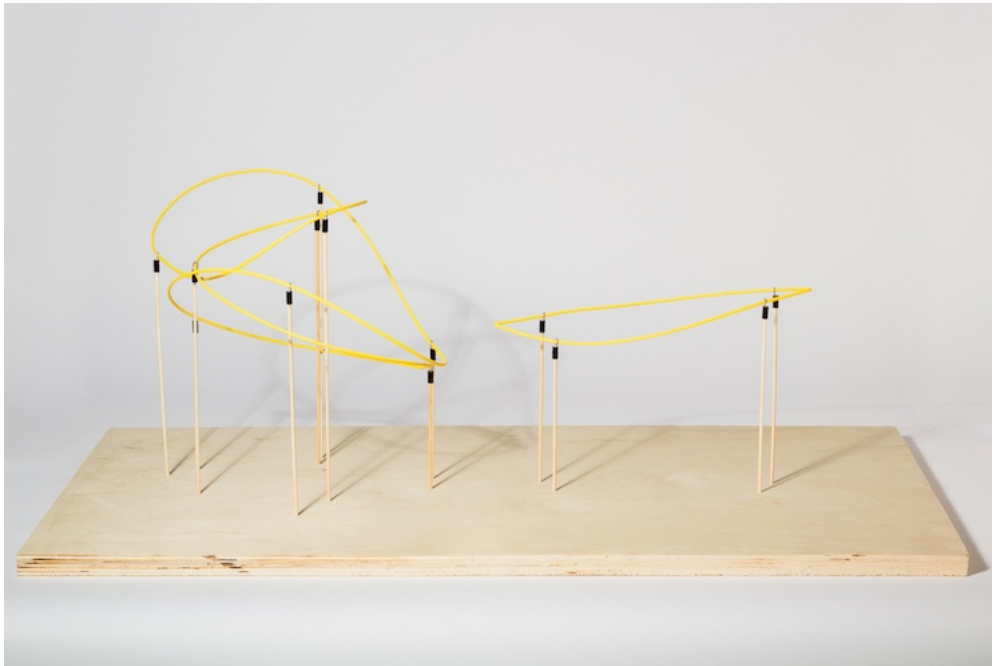
Howardena Pindell, *Carnival at Ostend, 1977*. Image: Spellman College

Finally, in this exhibition and surrounding research, I want to suggest a small way to recuperate documentary. After many years of programming and writing about moving image art, especially in the experimental documentary realm, I have been thinking about how we can make steps towards repairing documentary media's association with form. It's important here to remember that documentary was an art form before it became an extension of ethnography, or was later bound up with the goal of creating *impact* for its subjects and audience. John Grierson, who coined the term documentary in the 1920s, defined it as the “creative treatment of actuality,” that is, a form of art dealing in the real. My research furthermore attempts to think of documentary as a practice in art, separate from documentation; separate from the interpassive, faux democratic terms of popular contemporary nonfiction brought about by the mainstream documentary industry and rise of the “social issue doc.” <sup>1</sup>

1. I'm referring here to a whole industry with a range of perspectives, styles, and budgets, but to give some larger examples, directors like Alex Gibney, Michael Moore, or even Adam Curtis, whose work aims to create social change through expose, antagonism, and typical filmic narrative devices.

Documentary's entrance in the *contemporary* art sphere, or the so-called mid-2000s “Documentary Turn”, along with hybrid and structural documentary practices in the cinema have helped to call the form back to the “creative treatment” concept, while separating documentary art from indexing only to photographic media. <sup>1</sup>

1. At the same time, placing documentary practices into the contemporary art field has introduced a whole new set of problems or avenues of critique for the mode, as attends any socially-engaged art in the contemporary art sphere.



Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, 32 a) Natural Movement of the Hand b) The Shortest Path After Operator has Been Trained. 2016. Courtesy the artists

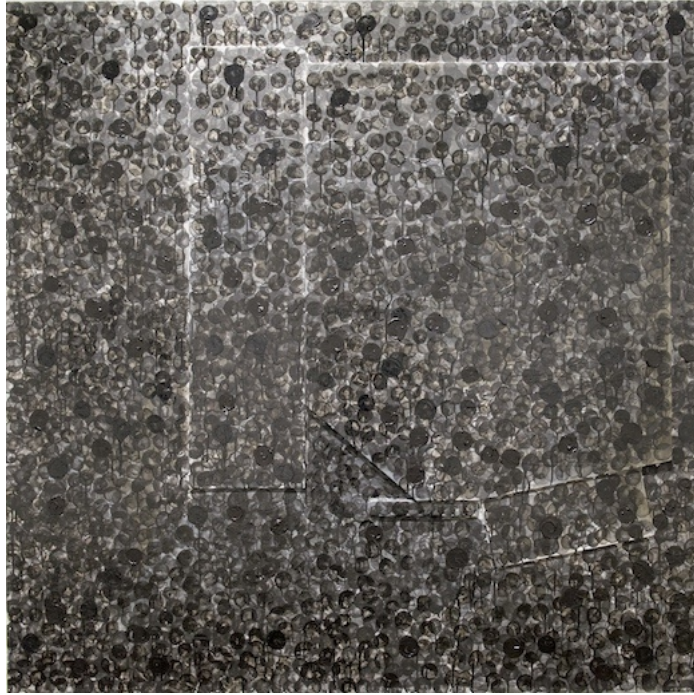
Each of the artists in this exhibition studies complex current and historical phenomena and materializes it into aesthetic objects, embedding their research into abstract forms. Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens' works transform graphic representations about mass production, human labor and economic thought into simple forms that resemble shapes and line formations found in Modern Abstract art. Ibghy & Lemmens' recent series *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation* comprises numerous small sculptures that are based on graphs and diagrams portraying and analyzing human productivity from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, showing in spatial form early Taylorist and Fordist analyses. Drawn from a wide range of disciplines, including work science, scientific management, economics, and psychology, the forms illustrate various efforts to increase efficiency through understanding the pressures on and movements of the body. The sculptures subvert the authoritative nature of the originals by representing them as abstract objects and at the same time suggest how the aesthetics of data visualization structures perception and buttresses capitalist ideologies. Ibghy and Lemmens' re-visualization is then not only about communicating history; it also performs historiography on the visuals that have helped to shape it.

Torkwase Dyson's black and white acrylic on board paintings reference the history of violence against Black Americans in the U.S. <sup>1</sup>

1. From a report conducted by the Equal Justice Initiative, 2015

Part of her *Strange Fruit* series, which includes painting, drawing, and sculpture, they spatially visualize instances of the over 4,000 lynchings that occurred in the U.S. between 1877 and 1950. The background patterning is inspired by landscape architecture plans, geometric maps, and statistical reports, which appear as grids, lines, and geometric shapes. Atop these framing elements she applies glosses, gradients and geometric shapes, creating a visceral surface that contrasts with the lines of underpainting. These elements come together to communicate both the data and residual trauma on humans and the landscape from these acts of public terror. In doing so, these past events are transposed into the present, foregrounding the manner in which this violence continues to influence race relations and the political, social, and economic conditions of Black Americans today. These works fit into an overall practice by Dyson, in which she has engineered a new form of data representation through abstraction, offering a way to see Black history through spatial and visual terms.





Torkwase Dyson, *Strange Fruit (She He)*, 2015. Courtesy the artist

Contending with another facet of Black history in the US, and employing an entirely different conceptual frame, Tomashi Jackson's recent works simultaneously reference the history of segregation in the US and the theoretical legacy of American abstraction. Jackson's process for these works originated in the study of transcripts from historic American Civil Rights court cases, such as *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, alongside works and writing by mid-century abstractionists such as Josef Albers and Barnett Newman. The comparison suggested similarities in the language used to describe artistic and societal rules about color interaction, each with their own distinctions and terminologies, for example legal discussions about integration resembling ideas in Albers' *Interaction of Color* regarding "purity" and "mixing." The resulting pieces combine painting, sculpture, textiles, embroidery, and printmaking into sculptures that are both structured and emotive. Jackson's *Grape Drink Box (Anacostia Los Angeles Topeka McKinney)* is a materially complex work that uses vernacular and technical materials to show the permeation of color and form into social life, and includes elements of photography that are embedded to look like afterimages. Its multi-referent title provides a key to the many past and recent situations of violence and discrimination layered within this body of work, and an ongoing visual scholarship that views racism through the language of color theory and abstract aesthetics.



Tomashi Jackson, Grape Drink Box (Anacostia Los Angeles Topeka McKinney). Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York.

This text, and the exhibition, are each introduced with a series of prints taken by Eugenio Espinoza, a key figure of the 1960s and 1970s Latin American Avant-Garde. These photographs document his grid interventions, in which he placed a large cloth printed with the iconic Modernist design into real life scenarios and encouraged visitors to his exhibitions to interact with it—literally placing abstract aesthetics into lived existence. The gesture was meant to undermine Geometric abstraction's obsession with the grid, but also serves as a playful reminder of the evidentiary potential of lines and forms. The contemporary works in this show—merely a few among many current practices—echo that gesture by demonstrating the artistic and communicative potential for deploying documentary through formalism, and proposing what a post-figurative documentary practice might look like.



Eugenio Espinoza, Localizaciones III, 1973. Image: Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami, and the artist

Note: Elements of this text were presented by the author at a talk held at Prosjektrom Normanns, Stavanger, as a part of the CAS Residency in Art Writing in June 2017.

---

*Rachael Rakes is a curator, critic, and teacher from New York, currently working as an editor for the Brooklyn Rail, programmer at large for Film Society of Lincoln Center, and an editor at large for Verso Books. Rakes has recently contributed criticism to Art-Agenda, Artforum, and Ocula, and organized exhibitions for Art Center/South Florida, A.I.R. Gallery, The Knockdown Center, ISCP, Malmö Konsthall, and the Hessel Museum of Art. From 2010-2013, Rakes was Assistant Curator at the Museum of the Moving Image. With Leo Goldsmith, she is at work on a book on radical filmmaker Peter Watkins, which received a 2014 Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. Rakes is a graduate of the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and currently teaches a critical history of socially-engaged art at The New School. She has recently been a Curator in Residence for the CPR: Mexico program, an Arts Writer in Residence for Contemporary Art Stavanger, and an MFU fellow with BHQFU and ArtCenter/South Florida.*