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Archive Fever

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Before he died in 1994, Guy Debord made a final documentary film for Canal+, *Guy Debord, son art et son temps*. Toward the beginning of the film, an aerial camera circles a stretch of Paris as we hear typical French street music echoing in the Haussmann-style boulevards and over the murky Seine. The camera lingers a moment over the scene before rising up to reveal that what we've been looking at isn't Paris but a Hollywood set, somewhere in the desert outside Los Angeles. *Sous les pavés, California*. This flattened, two-dimensional Paris, half a world away from France, is not not-Paris so much as it is an embodiment of Debord's idea of the immaterial qualities ever present in a city, those "precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment"¹ that not only define "Paris" but inflect our experience of it, calling into question our understanding of the city as a place—physically, ideologically, and emotionally. Debord called this field of study "psychogeography." It's important to begin here, with Debord, because Dustin Yellin, in his own (cheekily titled) *Psychogeographies*, has transposed Debord's critique of these "laws and effects"—history, place, events, bodies—to a critique of the process by which we represent and think about the human form itself. That is, us. You. Me.

Yellin doesn't make things; he makes accidents. He experiments, which he has compared to "catching butterflies or identifying birds."² The *Psychogeographies* happened by accident—through experimentation with material, through processes of trying, failing, and failing better. Yellin has written that he discovered resin (the material he used for his earlier collage work), and which he later replaced with glass for the *Psychogeographies*, by accident. He discovered resin's toxic property by accident, too. He told me one afternoon that his work's reference to Guy Debord also happens to be somewhat of an accident, however happy an accident it turned out to be. He writes: "You work through certain ideas and experiments over a long period of time—years, or the whole life of your practice, for that matter—and you start to knit things together, so there might appear to be a group of works but they all sort of lend to and inform each other."³

Each of Yellin's *Psychogeographies* is a collage body (each randomly assigned a number as though to suggest a series in disorder) comprised of clippings from magazines and books, paint and paper. Taken together, they form a monumental phalanx of one hundred collage bodies, which Yellin considers a single body of work. Yellin has formalized the central task of art—to archive: feelings, objects, events, selves—in his large glass blocks, recalling in their extreme



Detail of *Psychogeography 47*.

hermeneutical diversity (forms within forms within forms, images within images within images) both a past in which the representation of the human form was art's most recognizable enterprise and a future in which that enterprise is deeply complicated by the fact that the human form has been shredded, reformatted, revised, and redesigned, made precarious and permeable by technological and ecological shifts. They refer to particular art historical periods, particularly modernist collage and the redefinition of spatial relations via Cubism. They also evoke science-fictional futures in which we cryogenically freeze ourselves to be shipped to some other, lush world.

But Yellin is not a geographer of that world—or any particular world. Instead, his work abandons geography, history, place, and events altogether. His figures inhabit the psychotopos of the geographers themselves, those denizens of a world both immediately familiar and unfamiliar, figures whose existence points only toward the process by which they came to be. There is no rationale or logic to their seemingly sudden materialization in glass, except for the paradoxical visualization of logic and rationale's twinned absence. Speechless, their silence seems ludic or drunken. And yet their silence fills the frenetic, high-definition space between chaos and organization in which we define our bodies and lives by their relation to social networks online. Broken up, collaged: in their networked forms, the *Psychogeographies* are a seemingly infinite series of linkages, more like micro-Internets than human beings, getting to a now of total sprawl. In this sense, Yellin visualizes the intervening visual economies that embed other, larger systems within us in order to underscore our permeability (despite the work's thick glass): one body, in the contents of its images, might suggest an ecology (our most vexed field of inquiry) as diverse as a subtropical forest; another might organize around and into an imaginary landscape. Another might suggest a city. Another might suggest nothing at all, only brushstrokes of paint.

The sprawl and diversity of the *Psychogeographies* is layered into a play between its variety and its redundancy. While each piece (and all pieces together) offers superabundant imagery and collage, there is a crucial, blurring excessiveness to the collage figures contained within the glass, suggesting that despite so many differing and unique details and colors, they can all nevertheless meld into a single figure. The critic Marjorie Perloff writes: "For each element in the collage has a kind of double function: it refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentiality it seems to assert."⁴ When

you get up close to one of the *Psychogeographies* and you place your face to the glass, the individual elements of the collage reassert their (often opaque) histories, whatever the guesswork required to place the image back in its social or historical context. This particular harmony between the part and the whole is echoed in Group Mu's 1978 manifesto, which deals in part with collage:

*Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.*⁵

In Yellin's work, however, there is a third, unexpected dimension to these pieces that offers a very particular melancholy to them, one rooted deeply in the tenuous, "temporary composition" of collage. When I walked around many of the pieces in Yellin's studio one Sunday, I was struck by the moments when I passed around the sides of the sculpture and how, at those side angles, its contents virtually disappeared. Despite the dense, intricate interplay between the images and paint on multiple levels of the sculpture, each layer of collage remains flat, and so anchored to a two-dimensionality that our bodies transcend.

Taken together, the *Psychogeographies* form an archive of both gestures and images ("completely accumulative," Yellin has said of his own work, yet never totalizing). In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida recalls that the word "archive" comes from the Greek word for "house." As he notes, an archive is a very particular house, one that was legally designated a space for important papers—the material required for maintaining both the house that kept the archive and the culture that surrounded it.⁶ Yellin archives material/images/gestures by including them in his malleable, shifting subjects, redefining what is "important" (what is thought to somehow define the subject) by including images of all kinds: sports stars, works of art, domestic objects, plants, animals. There is no privilege conferred on one image over another. Rather, they are rigged in place by an internal logic that dictates that all images are somehow related, producing (again) a "redundant variety" within his fragmentary, distended figures.

For Derrida, peculiar ghosts emerge from the "excess of life which resists annihilation"⁷ (the archived material) and haunt its trans-generational memories. In the case of Yellin's work, these ghosts might be said to take the form of the figures encased in glass, bodies born out of the "excess"

that never fully annihilates. Which is, of course, the point. All the disparate meanings and contexts of the images Yellin has collaged wind up in the graveyard of a consciousness that cannot express itself beyond the fact of its being trapped. They are mesmerized at the edge of meaning, standing in indeterminate purpose. He sets the sprawl on glass, in layers, instead of on canvas or some other opaque surface in order to render a certain fixed quasi-ethereality to the sculpture. Almost. The glass counterbalances the collage's ethereal nature, underscoring the permeability of the "subject" by allowing light to pass through it while simultaneously asserting the sturdy physicality of the works, the bodies of the subjects. They are big—and present. Like people in a room.

While the Psychogeographies are often compared to the Chinese terra-cotta army of Qin Shi Huang or are read through their title and theoretical referents, the more logical comparison is actually closer at hand, just around the corner at Pioneer Works, the multi-hyphenate arts center run by Yellin. In that massive space, attached to his sprawling studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the living bodies of artists, scientists, writers, curators, community organizers, hackers, historians, musicians, local kids, parents, and visiting friends can almost always be found doing and making things, much like Yellin a few feet away, generating singularly and together as intricate a series of systems—of information sharing, art, music, curation, scientific research, and general community—as those collages fixed in the glass bodies of Yellin's sculpture.

Down by the shores of the East River, Pioneer Works is, crucially, not a (white) cube. It doesn't have any of the defining features of a typical art or gallery space. It is a rectangle, a renovated iron works, a hall of rooms and windows. It is a space that does not strive to "transcend" its place-ness. It argues against art as "portable currency," the phrase Brian O'Doherty famously deployed to describe art made for the homogenizing cube. Pioneer Works is open, subject to intervention and to the influence of the outside. It is steadfastly local, attracting artists and neighbors in Red Hook (and beyond) whose multiform practices and lives compose its community. And their diversities fold back into the collaged elements of the Psychogeographies, forming a dynamic symbiosis between the sculpture's bodies and Pioneer Works' living ones. It is a relationship of shared inquiry and community, all of which is integrated into a larger engagement with art. It is, in a sense, an artwork—a psychogeography—unto itself. As Yellin says of Pioneer Works:

For me, it's a sculpture. [...] This is another version [of Yellin's Triptych]—a living version—of that, but it feels like it's all the same. It's just like you're working in layers you're seeing through, whether it's layers of glass or layers of people, and eventually all those layers are in harmony and in unison to sort of make something like this possible.⁸

Yellin's work as a psychogeographer doubles in Pioneer Works, expanding his immediate practice as an artist to include community activist, advocate, friend. It is a crucial component to his own work as a sculptor—and refers to the collage-forms of the Psychogeographies by offering its own living collage of bodies.

Is it crude to finish talking about Dustin Yellin by talking about the bathroom, where only our least desired detritus usually finds its end? I think I should. I own a clear toilet seat filled with seashells. The toilet is a site of expulsion—it requires no decoration and efforts to do so always strike me as a crude distraction from the event the toilet's open mouth so readily anticipates. What I appreciate about my particular toilet seat, however, with its gorgeous, broken little seashells, is that it doesn't distract; rather, it lyrically reverses the toilet's primary function—the removal of detritus—by freezing refuse of that larger body, the ocean, into a mosaic in memoriam to loss and transience. When I see Yellin's massive glass blocks with their dissected, fragmentary bodies figures (and faces and landscapes), I think about the struggle against the other, more totalizing event our body anticipates, openmouthed: its own, final expulsion. Yellin's work offers a counterpoint to waste and loss and transience by suggesting that anything, whatever it is of our lives (and others' lives), might be preserved for us to keep, to make into art, against the force of history trying to sweep it all away.

NOTES

1. Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," trans. Ken Nabb, *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 6 (September 1955), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html>.
2. Edwin Bolta, "One on One with Dustin Yellin," *New Things*, August 12, 2012, <http://www.ilikenewthings.com/allthetime/2012/08/17/one-on-one-with-dustin-yellin/>.
3. Ibid.
4. Marjorie Perloff, "Collage and Poetry," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), <http://marjorieperloff.com/stein-duchamp-picasso/collage-poetry/>.
5. Ibid.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
7. Ibid.
8. Chris Wallace, "Dustin Yellin," Interview, May 17, 2012, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/dustin-yellin/#>.



Above: Dale Henry Exhibition. Pioneer Works. 2013.
Following: Detail of *Untitled Landscape*, 2014.
pg. 32-33: Detail of *The Triptych*. 2012.