

Dismantling

Neha Choksi

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LAMOA at Occidental College
Exhibition: May 22 to June 17, 2017
Closing reception: Saturday, June 17, from 6pm to 9pm

I have been thinking about Alice Könitz's Los Angeles Museum of Art or LAMOA, of her generous, generative and collaborative vision, and of the death of LAMOA. After my exhibition here ends, sometime in June, LAMOA will cease operations as a visible and accessible public space.

I find myself thinking that one will inevitably experience my exhibition as a funeral, a wake, or a visit to the hospital before the final putting to rest. My exhibition will be a foretaste of the death of that space, the free-standing, free-spirited structure wedged on the lawn between a library and an inter-faith chapel at Occidental College.

When faced with fresh materials, a blank page, unused pens, unsharpened pencils, empty gallery walls, or an uninhabited space, I think of the plenitude inside the tabula rasa, the unexplored in terra incognita, a kind of *via negativa* to God or higher powers. I think not of the potential, but of the actual presence of absence. The vibrating infinity and the vibrating emptiness thrumming and traveling like a finger tracing a Moebius strip.

"The most beautiful is the object / which does not exist," to quote the opening words of one of my favorite poems, "Study of the Object," written in 1961 by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert.¹

I find myself asking countless questions:

Is a pile, a stack, or a sheaf of unused materials closer to the infinite?
If I empty myself of all thoughts, as if that is possible before death clears the mind, will I be closer to perfection?
If I lost all sense and sensation, or if I hallucinate after ingesting the right agent, are those not related? Consider lying warmly in a sensory deprivation tank; isn't a sensory deprivation tank self-consciously empty, challengingly blank or aloof, and thus exceedingly inviting like a mesmerizing and attractive magnet. One often hallucinates in a sensory deprivation tank, and then, surely, that experience leads back to the Moebius strip.

I continue filling my mind, thinking of LAMOA:

If I filled a space completely or if I left it vacant, are those not similar gestures?

Does empty space distance us or revive us?

Does the horror vacui distance us or revive us?

Closer to home, thinking about art:

Is a black monochrome the equivalent to a wall of sheer noise or is utter silence a more apt parallel?

Is a monochrome's complete suffusing a suffocation or a generous opening?

Is the monochrome deathly drained or vividly full?

All these questions just because my phone died. Yesterday, the day before the first anniversary of my friend Norman's death, I was given his phone to use. I activated the phone with my SIM card. I turned it on. Many windows were open, all of them from his last night on earth. Dozens of messages unanswered. Over 50 emails. Various apps open. Music he must have last listened to. Videos he had shot. I was on my way to teach a video class and I realize I have been carrying around the last video Norman made before he went to sleep and failed to get up. It was at the yacht club with a band playing live music. Erica and he had been sailing that day and were planning to sail the next morning. Erica and he, entwined and happy, circle round and round and the camera circles with them. She posted it on Facebook after he passed on and I recognized it immediately on the phone's screen. I played it for a friend. The delight on his face makes me miss him even more.

That day in class I screened two artist films, both centering on death and afterlives. The choice was planned prior to my phone situation, and the unintentional intersection of my personal experience and the life of the classroom seemed like an omen, an entirely appropriate and fitting overlap.

The films shown were The Propeller Group's "The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music" and Cécile B. Evans' "Hyperlinks (Or It Didn't Happen)." Both works center on life after death, on the persistence of the dead, in making visible the invisible. The living need light, as one title says. TPG's work is hallucinatory, magical, rooted in a culture full of ritual; it features a gender ambiguous character haunting Vietnam's urban landscape and country-

side. CBE's work is rhizomatic and full of voices speaking from the space of re-created or pre-created characters; it features a digitally rendered likeness of Philip Seymour Hoffman, with other virtual actors including a spam bot, an agorophobic YouTube celebrity, and Haku, a holographic pop star from Japan crooning Alphaville's "Forever Young." Both works deploy captivating music. The dead need music, as the title ends.

We dance, enmeshed in ritual and hyperlinks. The living and the dead coexist, co-infiltrate. And yet, how does comparing a living thing with a dead thing make sense? How does comparing, say, living Arabic to dead Latin help us? A lobster in the pot to a rabbit in the meadow? Norman in the video to Norman in the urn?

And Norman's ashen body, if not his being, is now an object imprinted with residual subjectivity. It is gratuitous, not generous.

Isn't this a world saturated with longing and mourning, desire and death? I want to reckon with this foresight, if I may call it that, in my work for LAMOA. I want to assemble something at LAMOA that has in-built the forewarning of passing away, of death, of stasis, of regrouping before the reincarnation.

I want to go backwards.

Ada Leverson, a novelist and friend to Oscar Wilde, suggested that he take the step of publishing a book that was all margin.

I want to make my exhibition at LAMOA function as all margin, a space imprinted with residual subjectivity. It will be gratuitous instead of generous. It will be another kind of body. With the center collapsed, the margin emanates without. My LAMOA will be an exhibition without walls that flips the trope of using empty space as art. The body of the margin swells; it is simultaneously philosophic and aesthetic.

The phone is about 3 × 5.5 inches and weighs a fraction of the weight of his urn, which is on Erica's shelf, right next to the cameras he loved to use to document his work in theater and next to the television on which Erica and I watched the 2016 election as it unfolded, and where she curled into a foetus when Wisconsin looked doomed.

Alice's LAMOA is around 12 × 8 feet in plan, say 10 feet tall. About the size of a large garden shed or a couple of manatees in love. Currently it is on the lawns of Occidental College as a "platform for an organic institution that lives through participation." It has witnessed so many exhibitions over its life, since it first opened in December 2012 in Alice's side-yard. And yet, unlike Norman, this death of LAMOA is foretold.

I have been wondering about which gesture of mine at LAMOA will signal both death and afterlife. (And even if it is not obvious to anyone else, how can I honor Norman who sits in my bones and on my tongue.)

What does it mean to disappear without invoking magic? What does it mean to remember when each act of remembering is a creative act? As Friedrich Schlegel says, "No poetry, no reality," a rather romantic way to express that our experience of the real is dependent on the work of poetic imagination.² To put things together, to organize a memory, is to transgress on the authentic, is to create a vision anew.

When I was first invited by Alice to exhibit at LAMOA I asked if I could destroy some portion of the structure and she asked what part I was thinking of. I remembered Meg Cranston telling me about a work she had done at a sculpture park in Europe where the only instruction had been to the groundskeeper not to mow a certain square of lawn over the course of the exhibition. I asked Alice if I could remove and destroy the floorboards, let the lawn grow. She had readily agreed because she thought they were scuffed beyond reuse. I was thinking of inking the floorboards to make prints of them, of the surviving marks of use. It would be a way to overburden the space with itself, its echo, its memory.

Although this idea fulfilled my desire to signal death and afterlife, I found it too aestheticized and emotionally temperate, whereas my soul howled hot and angry, full of passion. Sometimes I felt that if I filled LAMOA with a single stick of dynamite it would be the same as emptying it of itself; materializing the empty space that allows the artist, the dreamer, the fantasist, the hallucination itself free play. As an artist, I would be both fulfilling and abdicating the role of seeing into the future.

But at that point I had not yet visited LAMOA as sited on the lawns at Occidental College. I did go a couple of weeks ago, and on a whim asked Alice if I could stone the structure. Her immediate alarm was palpable. I interpreted her response to mean that by stoning her beloved structure I was somehow violating her generosity, or at least her faith in artists. I then modified my query. I was thinking about how to weave the marks the rocks leave into the flesh of LAMOA as a mutual entanglement, something tender, despite the assumed aggression. I asked: Could I stone it from the inside? She felt easier about that. Somehow the visibility of the outward action and the external attack on the structure felt invasive whereas contaminating, hurting, pock-marking and eating the space from within felt homely.³ The interiorized (as if self-inflicted) violence was acceptable.⁴

The violence.

I stayed with the violence long after I forgot about the floorboards, the dynamite, the rocks.

"The outer gaze alters the inner thing, by looking at an object we destroy it with our desire."⁵

I realized that, yes, I do desire, I want to dismember LAMOA with my desire.

I want not to represent within the walls, I want to present the emptiness within. To present not sign but space. In this, the work of art exceeds its container, it is no longer an image but an expanse. (I want to stage the space—as theater; not memorialize it—not as museum.) I want to disassemble the entire body of LAMOA, back into its constituent parts: all those doors, posts, beams, hardware, concrete footings, corrugated roof, floor boards and a whole host of nails.

Alice's material list:

- PVC roofing material 7 sheets
- 4 in. × 6 in. × 10 ft. posts 6 pieces
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 12 ft. rafters 12 pieces
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 16 in. spacers 30 pieces
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 8 in. spacers 3 pieces
- Roughly 90 roofing screws
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 160 in. wall plate 2 pieces
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 107 in. wall plate 2 pieces
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 8 ft. rail cover top 2 pieces
- 2 in. × 4 in. × 70 in. rail cover top 4 pieces
- 2 in. × 6 in. × 8 ft. rail cover side 4 pieces
- 2 in. × 6 in. × 70 in. rail cover side 8 pieces
- 2 in. × 6 in. × 71 in. cross braces 4 pieces
- 2 in. × 6 in. × 97 in. cross braces 2 pieces
- 8 ft. aluminum track 4 pieces
- 70 in. aluminum track 8 pieces
- 24 track wheels
- 4 ft. × 8 ft. × ¾ in. cabinet plywood for floor 3 pieces
- 4 ft. × 8 ft. × ¾ in. cabinet plywood for subfloor 4 ½ pieces
- 2 in. × 8 in. × 110 in. floor joists 12 pieces
- 2 in. × 8 in. × 7 in. floor joist spacers 12 pieces

- 2 in. x 3 in. x 6 in. joist hangers 26 pieces
- 8 in. x 154 in. siding 2 pieces
- 2 in. x 8 in. x 103 in. siding 2 pieces
- 3 in. x 4 in. x 7 in. post anchors 6 pieces
- 16 in. x 16 in. x 2 in. concrete squares 6 pieces
- 24 machine screws
- 200 wood screws

If the work of art exceeds its container my work is in reassembling the body of LAMOA for the wake. I don't want to put it in an urn. I do not want to bury it.

I have a score to help me make this work. This score exists not merely as an instructional chart, but as a paean in praise of transience, our lives after all the dyings. The score says: Reveal an ontological void where there was once an object. The work will be a revelation around an honest emptiness, a constructed openness; there will be nothing hidden.

Michael Thompson, a sociologist famous for his Rubbish Theory, argues that rubbish, our waste or leftovers, occupy a cultural space between the transient and the durable. So I embrace rubbish. I embrace the leftovers of LAMOA.

I have a couple of options as I see them:

I can lay each constituent component of LAMOA on the grass, embedded just enough in the ground to be flush with the soil, in a pattern like an unfolded carton, or scattered afield all along the lawn in groupings of kin material and shapes.

I can restack the pieces of LAMOA upside down. I can reorganize them so that the roofing material touches the soil and the concrete footings weigh everything down from up in the air. The pile will be within the footprint of the dismantled LAMOA.

This latter option is, finally, the one I choose to enact. Dust to dust as reincarnation.

This is tabula rasa as created, not as something given to us. This is action itself, not substrate therein. The whole disassembled into its constituent parts plays with figure-ground relationships (or composes a new figure-ground relationship). My work will be both figure and ground, my exhibi-

bition will provide context and object at once.

Norman is figure and ground for me, and now that he is gone, I remember him, the negative space he has left behind, and each remembering is an act of invention.

Learning to see negative space is healthy. Mourning is a healthy adjustment to reality.

Tragic wisdom, to use Stanley Cavell's phrase, in helping us acknowledge the limitedness of human understanding, brushes us close to the void.

This death is finite. But the dyings remain potentially infinite.

Is this a tragedy or a triumph? I will leave that for you to decide.

LAMOA is dead. Long live LAMOA.

Written on Saturday, April 15, 2017, Erica Stewart's home, Inglewood, CA

Revised on Friday, May 19, 2017, my home in Bombay, India and

Monday, February 26, 2018, Asma Kazmi's office, UC Berkeley

1 To resume Zbigniew Herbert's poem, "...neither/blindness/nor/death/can take away the object which does not exist...now you have/empty space/more beautiful than the object//more beautiful than the place it leaves//it is the pre-world/a white paradise/of all possibilities...." The poem is in Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott, with an intr. by A. Alvarez (Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 104–8; and in *The Collected Poems: 1956–1998*, trans. Alissa Valles (Ecco reprint, 2007), pp. 193–196.

2 One of Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenaeum* fragments in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 70.

3 Anthropologist Michael Taussig's notion of defacement is apt, as pointed out by Dan Bustillo in an e-mail correspondence in favor of me stoning LAMOA from within. They write, "The version of LAMOA that appeals to me most is the stoning from within. I find it way more powerful (and it is also closer to my own interests and research: the element of secrecy and privacy...). I also think of the immortality of the witch, of the accused, of the person who was stoned. I think of the building as a body here, whereas the lawn inside becomes too much of a plot, a burial. I know I mentioned this already but re-reading your text made me think of Taussig's notion of defacement. In his book, *Defacement*, he departs from Robert Musil's idea that the most striking thing about monuments is that we barely notice them. Musil says that "we cannot say that we do not notice them, but that they de-notice us." Taussig pushes this idea a little further and says that monuments and statues seem invisible (or achieve a status of invisibility) and become animate when they are defaced. Basically they are so invisible that their defacement is inevitable and when they are defaced they become visible, so

there is a contradiction in 'defacing' a state monument for example as an act of protest. BUT he also says that it is not simple to say that defacing a monument refines the monument and through it, state power. For Taussig, this defacement issues "a hemorrhage of sacred force." Defacement becomes a sacred act in a way. He also explores "the status of buffers" and the relationship between center and periphery and says that "Friendship is a buffer. So is secrecy." I am thinking of your mention of the margins here, the interior violence of stoning, and presence of absence." April 26, 2017.

4 Alice wrote back via e-mail upon reading a draft of my text: "[...]When I set out on establishing LAMOA the exhibitions were seen as a collaboration between two artists. My structure was perceived as an exhibition space, but it was clear at the same time that it was also an art project, a sculpture that I made. After running LAMOA for almost five years it became less of a collaboration between two artists and more of a curated exhibition space. I feel that with your engagement with the structure you turn the situation back into a collaboration. I'm glad you decided on stacking the parts in the end, rather than destroying them. I wanted to clarify my reaction, which in a polite conversation at an opening might have not come across entirely: I see LAMOA and other things that I create as an extension of myself [I feel connected to them]. I'm not particularly attached to the replaceable physical parts that constitute it, but the gesture of throwing rocks at it is both a symbolic and a real act of violence against the thing that I put into the public space. ...To me the gesture of violence doesn't make any sense directed at an institution that you describe as generous. ...[I]t felt less violating to have the stones thrown out from the inside [because] it would have felt slightly more sanctioned, like a play about violence within the perimeters of the theater. But you're right, it would have been

just as aggressive, and to be honest I was less excited about it than I let on. ...Both acts of course are staged acts of violence, with the former I'm openly at the receiving end, with the latter I might just be hosting a ritual, but it may in fact be that I'm at the receiving end of a more sadistic act." In a subsequent follow up e-mail, she clarified: "Let me reiterate that I don't find anything more positive or homely about self-directed aggression than other aggression, on the contrary. It was maybe a wishful misunderstanding of your proposal on my part. It's a question of direction: Somebody hurling stuff at the museum, directing the aggression towards it on one side, versus somebody throwing stuff out: undirected mad aggression that doesn't get past the walls. I saw a possibility to not read the second one directed at the museum, but at an unknown. That's why I felt slightly more comfortable with it, it seemed to not be directed at me so much." May 14 and May 15, 2017.

5 As fiction author and Columbia University professor Ben Marcus notes in *The Age of Wire and String* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), p. 3.