

# *HCL Lab Report #1*

## *Fall/Winter 2011-12*

*Interpretive Essays by Michael Maizels, Scholar-In-Residence*

*Design and Layout by Mike Oleon, Design/Technical Director*

*Kevin Simmons, Executive/Co-Artistic Director*  
*Molly Feingold, Managing/Co-Artistic Director*

*[www.highconceptlaboratories.org](http://www.highconceptlaboratories.org)*

From the  
Artistic Directors

**An evolving arts service organization and interdisciplinary platform,** HCL is for discovering, developing, building, and editing that which was not here before. It is for working, sweating, arguing, and experimenting. It is for the coalescing of new forms -- and the shared exploration of the insights they engender.

Now in our third year supporting the development and presentation of new works by Chicago-based artists, we continue to expand and diversify our commitment, and what it looks like, whether a 5-day Beethoven festival in Pilsen featuring nearly 100 musicians, visual, and movement artists, or a 5-minute play performed at dawn inside a broom closet.

This fall, two new components of our seasonal sponsorship program further embody that interest in focused growth and variety: the addition of HCL's first Sponsored Scholar, Mike Maizels, and the publication of this catalog, *Lab Report # 1*, in which Mike documents and discusses the work and processes of our sponsored artists.

The object itself initiates a signature process of nontraditional presentation and cross-disciplinary collaboration. We have seen how these emphases serve artists and audiences alike, and how they enrich and sustain the creative ecology of our city.

Iterations for upcoming seasons will continue to be undertaken with a spirit of experimentation. We will engage scholars from the social sciences, structure dialogues that bring together emerging and established artists, and explore new methods for engaging diverse publics in the process and purpose of creative interrogation.

HCL is proud to present Lab Report #1. We encourage your ideas, imagination, and input as the endeavor evolves, in concert with the diverse artistic and communal impulses at its origin.

**-Kevin Simmons & Molly Feingold**

# Foreward

When I first agreed to serve as High Concept Laboratories' first Scholar in Residence, and by extension become the author of its first catalog, I was not quite sure what I was getting into. I had written text that accompanied a number of exhibitions, but this was different. Not only would I be geographically separated from the artists about which I was writing, but I would also be describing, analyzing and historicizing things that did not exist yet. This peculiar tense of writing (future tense for the author, but mostly past tense by the time it would arrive at its reader) made for an awkward and enjoyable adventure. It was, in the spirit of the space, an experiment. We hope to make it an annual event.

The work by the artists, however, was predictably excellent. While HCL residencies are not selected according to thematic criteria, a significant thread running through the projects this season at HCL has been the prodigious mixing of media. The art historian Rosalind Krauss has argued in *Voyage on the North Sea* that the notion of medium specificity has come undone, and the HCL artists have continued to demonstrate the aesthetic impact of works in which media are not simply combined, but wildly amalgamated.

Performances like Opera Cabal's *Die Kunst ist Zuper!* and G. Vincent Gaulin's "slow plays" invoke a blizzard of media — cello, video montage, voice alteration, powerpoint, group fitness, and wearable sculpture — towards addressing, respectively, the weight of a crumbling history and the endlessly sprawling present of the digital age. Other artists and collectives like Casey Smallwood and Ensemble Dal Niente fuse pop culture with more erudite sources to examine the history of cultural constructions ranging from the gendered subject to the experimental composer. And finally, directors Kasey Foster and Monica Thomas developed productions that blend dance, puppetry, music and video effects in order to tell lyrical stories that are humorous, uplifting and poignant.

As it is the mission of this organization to find and foster the radically new, many of these artists have never been the subjects of published writing. Nothing written in the present work should be taken as exhaustive or final. Rather, we hope that this publication will serve as the beginning of an artistic, critical and ultimately historical conversation.

-Michael Maizels, 2011

# OPERA CABAL

opera

*Die Kunst ist Zuper!*

As one of the only national performance troupes with what founder Majel Connery describes as a “scholarly imperative,” Opera Cabal is exploring the complex territory between musical, dramatic and choreographed performance in order to interrogate the future of opera. Responding to the growing demand for performative scholarship, Connery and the Cabal have dedicated themselves to the notion of scholarly performance. They have placed new emphasis on the dramaturg who, typically relegated to an advisory role, attends every rehearsal in order to continually ground the work in pressing scholarly concerns. With the upcoming launch of the *Cabal Quarterly*, Opera Cabal is set to become the only opera company with its own performance studies journal. And earlier this fall, Opera Cabal introduced operaSHOP, a residency series for experimental artists from fields outside the purview of traditional opera. High Concept Laboratories is pleased to partner with Opera Cabal to host the inaugural recipients, cellist and dancer Teddy Rankin-Parker and video and mixed-media artist Alexander Overington.

Rankin-Parker and Overington collaborated to produce an inter-media performance known as *Die Kunst ist Zuper!* as well as by its alternate title, *This is an Opera We Made*. Layering a dizzying array of source material including a Michelle Kwan gold medal figure skating performance alongside stock screen-saver photography, *Die Kunst* pits the live Rankin-Parker and his partly-improvised performance against the array of recorded media wielded by Overington from his command station in the center of the space.



Die Kunst ist Zuper! featuring Alexander Overington  
and Teddy Rankin-Parker  
photo by Lara Kastner

The work opens with Rankin-Parker battling for audience attention with what might be described as a **video mash-up from Hell**: the opening scene from Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* laid over a 1960s infomercial touting the benefits of futuristic plexiglass, while a computer-generated voiceover attempts to read Gertrude Stein's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* with subtitles derived from an admixture of Oscar Wilde's interpretation of *Salome* and text purely out of Overington's imagination. This visual-auditory-textual cacophony is only the opening salvo in an ongoing struggle between the live performer and the digital-media; Rankin-Parker continually attempts to speak, dance, or play his cello in a way that can overcome, or at least attenuate, the deluge of sensory information and source material.

The overall thematic of the work is of two young artists struggling with the ponderous weight of operatic history. How, as the alternate title seems to ask, can one make an opera? How can opera be made vital and relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when its history is so oppressive and its immediacy so thoroughly supplanted by film, television and a panoply of personal entertainment? The gnawing fear that the work will fail to live up to the (crumbling) legacy of opera surfaces repeatedly in the performance; Rankin-Parker confesses to his fear that their use of digital video will be seen as “copping out,” while in a moment of dejection Overington suggests they simply make a work “talking about how we don't know what we are talking about.” This metastasized version of what literary critic Harold Bloom famously described as “the anxiety of influence” has informed a significant strand of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde, from the Conceptual art critique of originality to the ironic revival of history paintings in the 1980s. Further afield—though equally symptomatic—the sculptor and installation artist Bruce Nauman has made an entire career out of distilling the anxiety of the artist in his studio agonizing over the existential decision of what to make.

This proliferation of overbearing predecessors led art historian Craig Owens to formulate a theory of postmodernism based on the notion

of allegory constructed as the opposite of representation. While in a representational situation an image refers to a thing out in the world, allegory forecloses the possibility of moving outside textual reference. Allegorical images, tropes or characters always refer only to other images, tropes or characters. Owens' closed world of postmodern allegory speaks to the condition of working under the crushing weight of history. As Rankin-Parker and Overington become acutely aware of their work as operatic, they are mired into thinking in terms of precursors with which they cannot hope to compete. These prior works turn into a nightmarish jumble in Overington's montages, crowding each other out as they combine to push Rankin-Parker off the stage.

Nevertheless, the struggle continues against both the noise and the silence of history. Like Lucky and Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Overington and Rankin-Parker **grapple with the bleakness of chaos** and the burden of their responsibility, and strain in search of meaning. It is this search that frames not only the performance *Die Kunst* but also the mission of Opera Cabal, to envision a theoretically engaged future for operatic performance. §



photo by Lara Kastner

# KASEY FOSTER

theater

*Assignment #403*

Influenced by her time at Chicago's multimedia-centric Redmoon Theater, Kasey Foster has collaborated with puppet designer Sam Polce and video projectionist Joe Lewis to stage *Assignment #403* this fall at High Concept Laboratories. The performance incorporates live movement, video and shadow puppetry over the music of the local ambient/experimental collective Impossible Recording Machine. Addressing the branching nature of human relationships, *Assignment #403* relates the tale of two characters who triumph over the pain and boredom of modern life to find a mutual bond. *Assignment #403* works to construct a new myth—that trees are the result of properly united human souls. In the world of the play, human beings are attended by a set of “mechanicals” who always remain unbeknownst to their charges. At the outset, the mechanicals are given a new assignment, the titular #403, which involves creating a new tree by bringing together a pair of individual people.

Highly lyrical despite its total lack of spoken or written language, *Assignment #403* began the way a number of Foster's productions have, from the inspiration of music. Foster initially encountered what was to become the stimulus for *Assignment #403* two years ago, when en route to perform at a concert in St. Louis. Foster recalls that an Impossible Recording Machine album hooked her from the opening song, creating a reaction she compares to a pointer dog stiffening in sole focus after it finds its mark. The structure and mythology of the work grew out of the narrative suggested by the hypnotic music.



Photo by Omar Robles

Thinking of *Assignment #403* as invoking a wordless mythology suggests a re-envisioning of the nature and function of myth itself. While one typically thinks of myths in terms of their content—the phenomena they seek to explain and the characters with which the action is dramatized—Foster’s work points to the way in which myths build social bonds by dispelling anxiety. A shared way of explaining the cause of some occurrence can knit a group together, especially when this explanation attends to a source of shared anxiety. Foster’s work not only constructs an uplifting story about the origins of love, but also addresses and helps to dispel the tensions around our very real set of mechanical familiars—smartphones, social media, and the ever-present email.

In terms of facilitating unmediated communication, *Assignment #403* also serves as the centerpiece of an open and sociable event that will include free admission, free refreshments, work by local artists in the lobby as well as child musicians as warm up acts. Additionally, there will be six “trailers” presentations before the main feature—all featuring live local music (Charles Kim, Jeff Thomas, Mark Messing, Charles Otto, Mikhail Fiksel, and Kevin O’Donnell) that has been set to choreography by Foster along with Dav Yendler and Drew Dir. As Foster herself describes the event, “Every single person in the audience will be smiling. They’ll probably want to go for a walk afterward. The night itself is a gift to the audience.” §





*Rehearsal for Assignment #403*

# ENSEMBLE DAL NIENTE

music

2011-2012 Season

**One of the nation's premier new music collectives**, Ensemble Dal Niente has been bringing adventurous modern and classical music to Chicago since its founding in 2004. Fresh off the honor of receiving the Kranichsteiner Stipendienpriese at the 2010 Darmstadt Summer Course—the first time that an ensemble has been awarded this prize at the world's most prestigious contemporary music festival—Ensemble Dal Niente will stage a number concerts this season, including cellist Russell Rolén's appearance at High Concept Laboratory's Open House. Dal Niente's fall season began with a program of Italian music at Chicago's Mayne Stage on September 29<sup>th</sup>.

This program embodied two of the ensemble's many commitments, namely bringing the best of cutting-edge European music to American ears, as well as performing works that bridge the sonic gap between avant-garde classical and modern popular styles of music. After opening with Franco Donatoni's 1975 work *About*, a light and fast trio for violin, viola and guitar, the evening moved on to **two epically strange works** that span five centuries of musical history. The ensemble interwove movements from Fausto Romitelli's *Professor Bad Trip* (1998-2000)—a monumentally psychedelic ensemble work inspired by Henri Michaux's writings about his experiences with hallucinogens—with three 17<sup>th</sup> century works from the infamous Carlo Gesualdo, a legendary and eccentric composer whose most notorious act was the public murder of his wife and her lover in Naples in 1590.



*The Eternal Tao (2010) by Kyong Mee Choi, A multimedia opera.  
World Premiere performance at Ganz Hall*



*"Growth" (2010) by Marcos Balter,  
World Premiere performance at Mayne Stage  
Photo by Omar Gutierrez*

Romitelli's *Professor Bad Trip* is a singularly inventive piece of music. While the engagement with psychedelia is not as novel as might be assumed—precedents range from Hector Berlioz's 1830 *Symphonie Fantastique* about the opium-addled life of a young artist to the wine-soaked rites of the Dionysian Mysteries in pre-Classical Greece—Romitelli's appeal to the music of modern drug cultures creates a profoundly original sonic experience. The work's mutating soundscape, ranging from lush and complex harmonies to moments of piercing surprise, captures the sense of diffused melting that characterizes the mind-states of tripping and of dreaming.

Romitelli built on the work of his mentor Gérard Grisey, whose masterpiece *Les Espaces Acoustiques* Dal Niente performed in excerpt last year, to explore the way that musical sounds can be combined in unexpected ways. Grisey was a pioneer of spectralism, a musical movement that, in parallel with structuralist film and modernist painting, sought to explore the physical limits of its medium. Spectralists analyze the acoustical properties of notes produced by instruments and thereby seek to deconstruct music as it is traditionally viewed. Using their analyses, they combine and recombine overtones in novel ways. The influence of this approach is audible in *Professor Bad Trip*; new sounds are created when tones are pulled apart and reassembled across disparate instruments like muted trumpet and electric guitar. This, plus an unusual melding with gestures associated with 1960s and 70s popular music, **creates a result that is equal parts Grisey and Jimi Hendrix.**

Nevertheless, the pairing with the work of Carlo Gesualdo sought to debunk the misapprehension that experimental music such as Romitelli's *Professor Bad Trip* is a contemporary phenomenon. While Romitelli's blending of violins and cellos with electric guitars, kazoos and thai gongs will strike listeners as radically daring, Gesualdo's unusual and non-functional combinations of major and minor chord variations still sounds fundamentally unfamiliar despite the nearly five hundred years that have elapsed since its their conception. Additionally, Dal Niente's arrangements of Gesualdo's works, which were originally composed for voices, take advantage of the modern instrumentation

called for in *Professor Bad Trip* and better enable listeners to appreciate how audacious Gesualdo's late-Renaissance compositions truly were. This considered approach to concert programming reflects Ensemble Dal Niente's concern with demystifying avant-garde music. In the words of executive directory Ryan Muncy, "We hope our audience will approach contemporary repertoire like they would approach any other musical experience. The means are different but the project of experimental music is remarkably consistent." Instead of a forced listening for orienting features in music that is designed to subvert expectations, Dal Niente hopes to foster a mode of attentive immersion in which the sound can wash over the audience. The result is a deeper appreciation of the significant structure of music as it manifests itself in an array of historical and contemporary forms and genres, ranging from the Renaissance Italian to the popular American. §



*Ensemble Dal Niente, October 2010 at HCL  
Photo by Nelson Fitch*

# G. VINCENT GAULIN

performance art

*IS THIS YOU, WANT?*

**A rare hybrid of writer, director and performance artist,** G. Vincent Gaulin is a true artistic innovator. For this season at High Concept Laboratories, he will present the continuation of *IS THIS YOU, WANT?*, the latest development in his ongoing exploration of a new mode of dramatic presentation he has termed “slow plays.” Performed and produced under the pseudonym SCARCITY, these slow plays are not representations but are rather original presentations of events staged in a relentless real-time that does not stop even between performances. Thus far, the sprawling intermedia work involves theme songs, audience participation, powerpoint, group fitness, sermonizing, a staged memorial, activated sculpture and numerous written schemas.

As of the writing of this essay, Gaulin is in the midst of performing *Population*, the first of three slow plays that comprise *IS THIS YOU, WANT?*. Reprising the format of the Goldilocks story without its eponymous human, *Population* follows the story of three bears: Discipline Bear, Etiquette Bear and Pleasure Bear. Addressing the intersection of personal sexuality and sociopolitical agency, these three characters map onto the expected pursuits of gendered subjects —the masculine striving for martial discipline, the feminine aspiration towards societal manners, and the queer quest for personal pleasure. This fall, audiences can live alongside Discipline Bear as he struggles to distinguish his newfound pathways to self-discovery from a wholesale slide into desire



DISCIPLINE (2010)

for Pleasure—a complex conflation of the pursuit of autonomous male fulfillment and same-sex desire in the name of another bear.

The idiom of Gaulin's extraordinarily complex body of work stems from the performances and videos of pioneers like Allan Kaprow, Nam Jun Paik and Yvonne Rainer, or even Bertholt Brecht, who sought to challenge the notion of dramatic staging as the recapitulation of a neatly framed narrative. In different ways, these figures worked to **question the problematic metaphysical and political assumptions underpinning traditional acts of storytelling**—expectations about the stability of narrative form, the passivity of the audience and the importance of hallowing (male) heroes. The results were new forms of dramatic presentation that brought revitalized immediacy to the interactions between environment and action, script and staging, as well as presenters and viewer/participants. Gaulin's work continues these important explorations, particularly insofar as these avant-gardists considered their work to be a reply to the homogeneous landscape of spectacle. Recognizing that entertainment is a deep human need, these figures sought to push back against the expected boundaries of their media and recast them in terms of creativity and choice rather than simple consumption.



*G. Vincent Gaulin photo by Omar Robles*

While Brecht framed his dramatic defamiliarizations as antidotes to the passivity of traditional narrative and Paik positioned his interventions against the domestic absorption of television, **Gaulin's slow plays take on the endlessly ramifying nature of digitalization** as old and new media become slurred and copied through the internet. For Gaulin, the narrative and intermedia tangle of the slow play speaks to the swirl of memes, instantaneous news, archived oddities, broadcast personal minutae and advertising cacophony that comprises what art historian Caroline Jones has termed “the mediated sensorium.” This teeming archival jungle is predicated on creating a perpetual present of want without end, decay or death. By contrast, Gaulin describes how essential it is that **his characters have “room to die,”** to create an expanded awareness of time, of self, and of experience beyond the present. This is not to rail against digital technology as inherently tyrannical, but rather to investigate the ways in which it can both streamline as well as complicate questions of desire and agency. The alternative world of the slow play interrogates these everyday contradictions within a gradual unfolding of time that enables one to examine the nature of the wanting itself—to ask, *IS THIS YOU, WANT?* §

# MONICA THOMAS

dance/video

Series A

**A dancer and choreographer trained in both dance and traditional theatre,** Monica Thomas' thoughts on choreography and movement have been informed by a range of influences—encompassing Chicago dance legends like Molly Shannahan (Mad Shak Dance Company) and Peter Carpenter (Columbia College) alongside the caricatured locomotion of John Cleese in the “Ministry of Silly Walks” (Monty Python). For this season at High Concept Laboratories, Thomas will be collaborating with filmmakers Adam Tanquay and Chris Adamescu to make her first foray into dance-film. While Thomas relishes the excitement that stems from the fleeting nature of live performance, her films will enable her to more closely tune the audience's attention to the significant fragments of a dance performance that, in their evanescence, may be frequently missed. In her words, she can more easily say to her audience, “Hey, look here now!”

Thomas and her partners will work on a series of three films that will each feature a different relationship between choreographer, film-maker and dancer. The first, *I Am Not An Animal*, reveals Thomas' interest in a range of Surrealist painters, from the renowned early 20<sup>th</sup> century master René Magritte to the comparatively less well known Donald Roller Wilson, who still lives and paints in Thomas' hometown of Fayetteville, AR. Magritte and Roller Wilson construct dreamlike scenes in which the border between oppositional elements—solid and transparent, heavy and light, human and animal—have blurred. Roller Wilson in particular



*Super 8  
stills for trace*



*Raw Still from I Am Not An Animal*

is well known for his treatment of animal subjects engaging in decidedly human behavior, sitting for portraits or puffing on bubble pipes.

Similarly, Thomas' dancers cavort in a variety of animal-esque locomotions that **range humorously from the nimble** (playful duets accompanied by music composed originally for Wile E. Coyote) **to the lumbering** (Pilobolus-style lifts create a multi-pedal hybrid who trundles around to the score from *Dumbo*). The work will enable filmmakers to selectively frame the performance and apply post-production effects to heighten the surreal effect of the dancers as human-animal hybrids.

The second film, *Experiment*, takes a novel approach to the filming of dance. For *Experiment*, Thomas has invited ten Chicago dancers of a variety of ages and backgrounds to perform solo in an empty rehearsal room. The performances are to be recorded and then digitally mixed to create a fluid ensemble performance that never actually took place outside of its realization in video. While the work's fixed-shot aesthetic and laboratory-like conception recalls the work of video art pioneers such as John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman, the playful and open nature of *Experiment* transcends the austerity of early video art.

The final work will entail the re-envisioning of *trace*, a performance that Thomas choreographed last year which deals with questions of embodied memory. Originally envisioned as a quartet for four dancers, Thomas will be restructuring the work as a trio between herself and two layers of video. Thomas will be working with archival Super 8 footage shot by her grandfather in the 1950s and 60s. This footage will be interspersed with the film of the performance as well as projected onto the performance itself. Of the three works, *trace* will involve collaboration between dancer and film-maker on the most equal footing. The filming, which will involve close shots from a handheld camera, will position the film-maker as a kinesthetic participant in the dance rather than as a visual enhancer as in *I Am Not An Animal* or a detached observer in *Experiment*.



*Rehearsal for I Am Not an Animal*  
photo by Chris Adamescu

While each of these works explores a unique approach to the mediation of dance through filmed recording, they all attest to Thomas' signature playful and open style. *I Am Not An Animal* may appear more straightforward or silly than the lyrical *trace*, but **Thomas' body of work evinces a consistent feeling of lightness, regardless of the weight of the topic** she addresses. As Thomas explains, this lightness is essential because her work is centered on involving the audience in a shared experience with the dancers. Such a connection is predicated upon an audience's willingness to enter into the world any choreographer constructs. In Thomas' works, the audience finds a world of open possibility, even when the playful exuberance is tempered by a poetic melancholy. §

# CASEY SMALLWOOD

video

*They're Better Out Here, Aren't They?*

**Utilizing an intricate layering of live performance and recorded playback,** Casey Smallwood's work addresses the subconscious ferment brewing just underneath the surface of quotidian reality. To mine this psychically charged material, Smallwood constructs role-playing exercises that result in performances in which the behavior of her subjects becomes screened through fictionalized scenarios. For Smallwood, such screening functions through the idiom of mathematical addition; when an actor adds a character on top of his or her own persona, a previously unknown term results on the other side of the equation.

In earlier works like *Making Pretend* (2008) and *Endearment Exercise* (2008), Smallwood uses the consumption of Hollywood films to examine the structure of mother/daughter relationships. In *Making Pretend*, Smallwood's mother Susie Smallwood, a frequent subject in Smallwood's videos, reenacts scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* with props found in her father's family den. While the homemade quality of the reenactment lends the film the poignant sweetness of an intimate family moment, Smallwood's works quickly developed a darker and more ambivalent tone. In *Endearment Exercise*, Susie takes on the role of Emma Horton from the 1983 film *Terms of Endearment*. She recounts Emma's arduous struggles with her mother in a matter-of-fact way that seems to straddle a line between first-person plot summary and confessional talk therapy.



*Raw Still from They're Better Out Here, Aren't They? (2011)*



*As Yourself or As Me (2011)*



*Four Scenes for Mother (2008)*

In a pair of works from 2011, Smallwood's investigation of parental dynamics and media consumption turns to the discomfiting territory of parental sexuality. In *Penthouse 7*, **Smallwood mounted the re-photographed pages of her father's collection of Penthouse magazines.** While the earlier work demonstrated the way in which the viewing of Hollywood cinema is predicated upon identification with characters, *Penthouse 7* explores the psychic distancing necessary for the consumption of pornography. As Susie's reenactments replicate the process of character-identification, the father's disembodied gaze is redoubled by its presentation through the objects of its lust. In *Four Scenes for Mother*, Susie narrates sex scenes from four popular films from the 1990s—*Ghost*, *Pretty Woman*, *Basic Instinct* and *Sliver*. This narration is presented in split screen with the reenactment of these scenes based upon Susie's descriptions. By insisting on the female perspective detailed by a female narrator, Smallwood challenges the notion of a structurally male cinematic gaze posited by Laura Mulvey in her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."



*Making Pretend* (2008)

As a whole, Smallwood's work resonates with a number of feminist artists who rose to prominence in the 1980s. Artists like Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine all sought to explore the way in which popular culture—from advertising images to filmic characters—frames the condition of feminine subjectivity. But Smallwood's videos also have an important touchstone in the contemporaneous work of Eric Fischl, who sought to re-situate the Freudian narratives of psychosexual maturation within the confines of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century suburban home. Freud was however notoriously mute of the development of the feminine psyche, and Smallwood therefore works in territory that the Freudian Fischl could never really touch.

For *They're Better Out Here, Aren't They?*, her latest work that will be completed during her residency at High Concept Laboratories, Smallwood will build on prior performance works such as *The Host and the Guru* (2011) that utilized ensemble casts. But while such works were not filmed, Smallwood will record the improvised actions of a host of actors, who will remain in character for the duration of the shoot—up to eight hours. **Such a marathon filming session will push the tension** between the character personae that the actors will assume (including roles such as the Screenwriter and the Medicine Man) and their own projections of self. Much like Warhol in his famed *Screen Tests*, Smallwood will work to foster a deeper understanding of self in her actors and her audience through the untiring eye of the camera.

Embracing mass culture and challenging theoretical constructs, Smallwood's videos are produced with a signature blend of charged content and deadpan delivery. It is through this mixture of the popular and the erudite, the scandalous and the straightforward, that Smallwood probes beneath the surface of identity formation. Smallwood's works consistently emphasize the multivalent nature of role-playing—suggesting that the notion of performance structures not only the craft of the actor but also the experience of daily life. §

# Barry Le Va and the Postmodern Aftermath

by Mike Maizels

Beginning in 1966, Barry Le Va began to execute ephemeral installations composed out shattered glass, scattered ball bearings, scraps of text, strewn felt, sprinkled chalk, sharpened meat cleavers, and in one particularly vivid work, smears of his own blood, sweat and skin. Le Va, who is the subject of my dissertation, was influenced by his burgeoning interest in the Sherlock Holmes and began to conceptualize his works as crime scenes—zones of apparent chaos out of which the detective-like viewer could adduce a structuring logic. From the aftermath, order might emerge.

Le Va was far from alone in his exploration of the poetics of material chaos. As part of a loose-knit group of artists working in the wake of minimalism, a movement that had privileged hardened forms and pristine surfaces, Le Va and his contemporaries emphasized an aesthetic of “process.” In place of a minimalist appeal to ideal geometry and shimmering visual clarity, the so-called “post-minimalists” created work that was at times grungy and doggedly material—composed out of substances like lead, latex, chicken wire, neon tubing, and cement. At other times, post-minimal work was vanishingly immaterial, consisting of ineffable ideas, inaccessible sites, unwitnessed performances and impossible projects.

The work of Le Va and his generation contains a number of the seeds of what was to be soon called postmodernism—a dissolution of the notions of skilled craft production, medium specificity, historical durability, and

visual accessibility. While this interest in instability was perhaps the defining feature of the late-sixties moment, Le Va's conception of his work as a sculptural/criminal aftermath is, so far as I am aware, entirely unique. And in its uniqueness it provides a singularly articulate, and very early, formulation of the crux of what would come to be called the postmodern condition.

While the notion of postmodernity necessarily resists simple encapsulation, the conception of epistemological inaccessibility is one of the most important leitmotifs in theories of the postmodern. Thinkers from Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard to Rosalind Krauss have emphasized the way in which a postmodern appreciation of the radically constructed nature of experience provides no privileged position from which to view an authentic, stable or "true" version of reality. This is not to deny the existence of an external world but rather to insist that that our cultural, linguistic and even biological framing prevents us from ever confirming our beliefs about this world. According to such a view, the world-in-itself remains inaccessible. We are only ever privy to its residues, its traces, its aftermath.

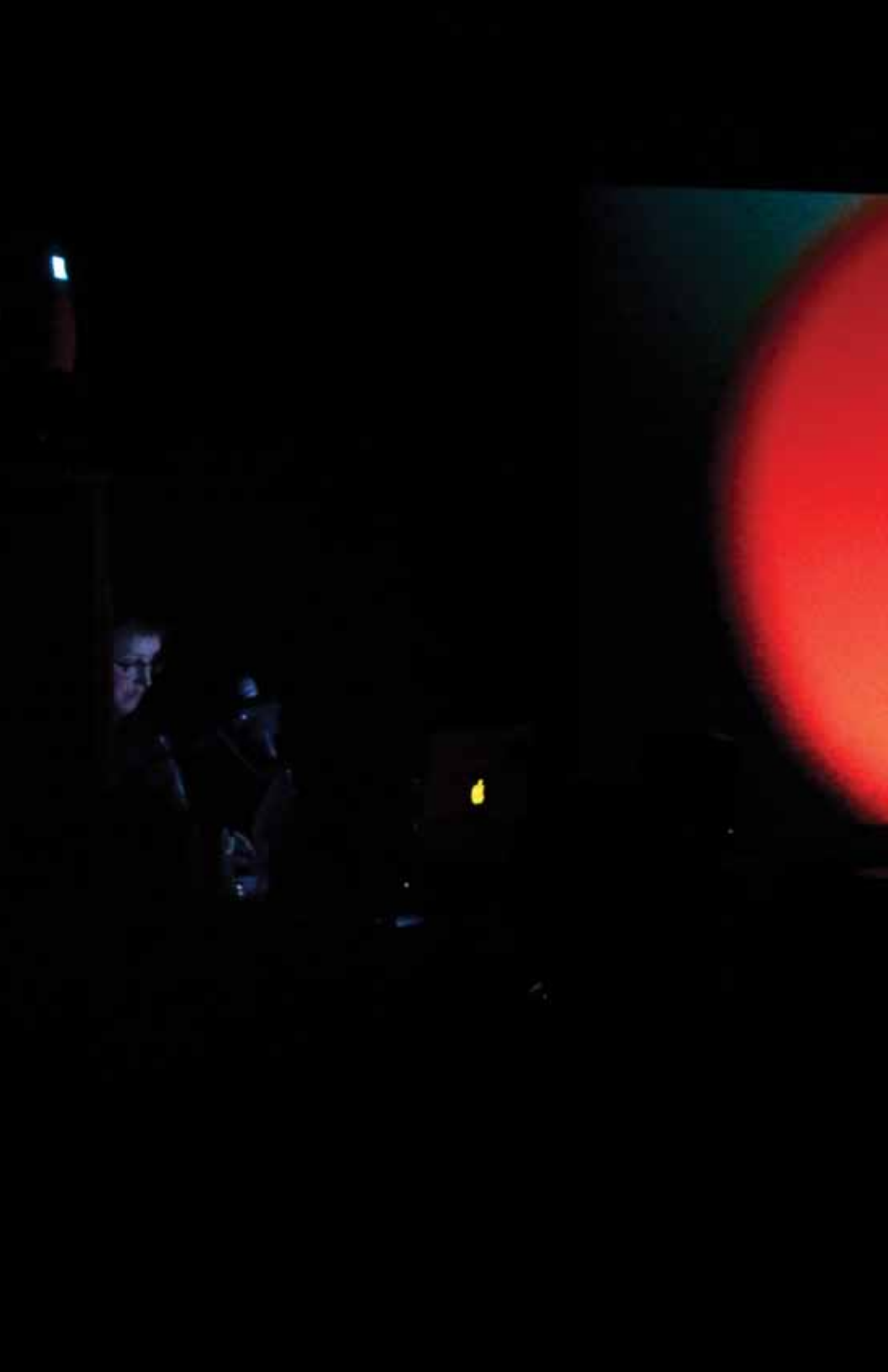
In this way, Le Va's conception of his works as the remnants of an explosive, even violent, outburst of energy exemplifies a postmodern epistemological skepticism. The truth of the event—the work's construction and meaning—remains foreclosed to the audience who must dwell in a postlapsarian world of occluded information, scattered remains and unverifiable beliefs. The moment of a present truth is always already lost. This condition of disappeared meaning and ghostly absence nearly anticipates the written formulations of postmodernism in the writings of Krauss, Derrida and Lyotard. Nevertheless, the existence of Le Va's sculptures as authored works attests to the possibility, always tantalizingly out of reach, of discovering order. Not simply nihilistic celebrations of violence and chaos, Le Va's works speak powerfully to the struggle to find order and meaning in a universe that seems at every turn to resist it. §





*Barry Le Va,  
Cleaved Floor  
(Studio View),  
1969-1970.*

*Image courtesy  
Mary Boone Gallery, NYC*





Die Kunst ist Zuper! featuring *Alexander Overington*  
and *Teddy Rankin-Parker*  
photo by *Lara Kastner*