

Art

MONTHLY

NOVEMBER 2015 | No 391 | UK £4.80 US\$7.40

Rosalind Nashashibi

Interviewed by George Vasey

Happiness Inc.

Jonathan P Watts

Lost

Paul O'Kane

Jennet Thomas

LETTER FROM CHICAGO

A Fucking Biennial

There is a rumour that when Rahm Emanuel, the straight-talking Mayor of Chicago, was elected, he said 'I want a fucking biennial'. Whether or not this is true, he has one now. Following on the heels of its art Expo, the inaugural Chicago Architecture Biennial, entitled 'The State of the Art of Architecture', builds on the city's preponderance of public sculptures and landmark buildings to reveal a deeply rooted affinity between contemporary art and architectural practices. And, while Chicago tends not to shout about its achievements, the Biennial does draw attention to a propensity for getting things done, without fuss or fanfare, in a spirit of civic-mindedness.

A case in point might be Theaster Gates's highly anticipated Stony Island Arts Bank, its opening timed to coincide with the Biennial's preview weekend. The site was famously purchased from the city for \$1, with Gates embarking on a fundraising drive that included the sale of engraved marble bricks from the original building in order to transform the derelict site. Located in Chicago's deprived south side, Stony Island sits far from downtown's skyscrapers and shopping malls: certainly, the bus driver seemed to think I had taken a wrong turn on my way there. The building was one of Chicago's few black-owned banks before it closed in the 1970s and this history is integral to Gates's Rebuild Foundation, as Stony Island aims to become a cultural centre and a repository of African-American archives such as Chicago house DJ Frankie Knuckles's record collection and a library of books donated by Johnson Publishing Company, whose *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines defined aspirational black culture. Such socially engaged initiatives often tend towards well-intentioned but aesthetically underwhelming results, yet Gates shows here that he is more than Chicago's second most famous community organiser. Stony Island is impeccably refurbished, with its entry way offering a view of the second-floor libraries beyond, while the upstairs office spaces are elegantly fitted with great slab-like tables and a selection of Gates's artworks. The ground floor is rawer, less finished, than these working offices and hints at its appearance prior to renovation – stripped-back interiors, scuffed and scratched concrete – as well as offering a

suitable exhibition space. As part of the Biennial, the Portuguese artist Carlos Bunga has filled the hall with ramshackle cardboard columns, patched together with brown packing tape, echoing the site's interior architecture and external neoclassical facade.

A different sort of regenerative project has been taking place in Chicago's former meatpacking district as commercial galleries have sprung up, in a turn of affairs that unwittingly brings to mind Upton Sinclair's description of the area's labourers in his 1906 novel *The Jungle*: 'All day long this man would toil thus, his whole being centred upon the purpose of making twenty-three instead of twenty-two and a half cents an hour; and then his product would be reckoned up by the census taker, and jubilant captains of industry would boast of it in their banquet halls, telling how our workers are nearly twice as efficient as those of any other country.' Hopefully, the transition to a post-industrial economy has eased the plight of Chicago's labouring artists somewhat, with the area's galleries offering strong local representation, including Jeremy Bolen at Andrew Rafacz and Scott Reeder at Kavi Gupta. At Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Nathaniel Mary Quinn's densely worked charcoal and gouache drawings remix elements of classical paintings and popular black culture, subversively interjecting elements from blaxploitation cinema and comic books. Like Gates, and other influential Chicago African-American figures such as William Pope.L and Rashid Johnson (both of whom feature in the Museum of Contemporary Art's contemporaneous exhibition 'The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music'), Quinn's work offers a profound re-evaluation of the place of the black artist in the western art historical canon.

Mainly, though, it is the engagement with the built environment that seems to preoccupy artists here. Whether this is simply serendipity, with the Biennial's public prominence and a coinciding exhibition of David Adjaye's architectural practice (which has always displayed a particular sensitivity to contemporary arts contexts) at the Art Institute of Chicago, or whether there is a deliberately cross-disciplinary aesthetic at work, the city abounds with instances of art that addresses architecture, from Matt Siber's sculptures and photographs of urban, commercial structures, devoid of their advertising content, at the DePaul Museum of

Art, to an exhibition of new work by Sean Snyder at Document that includes a projection exploring Daniel Buren's *Watch the Doors Please!*, 1980, where he posted his trademark vertical stripes on passing Chicago commuter trains. At Cornerstore, located in an apartment in the city's Wicker Park region, the artist Jeff Carter uses modified IKEA products to construct two sculptures influenced by Vladimir Tatlin's seminal relief works. Fittingly, the domestic nature of the space recalls the households where early Russian constructivist works were often shown but, in addition, demonstrates a tendency to navigate around the fixed institutional structures of galleries and museums. Carter's assemblages of curved steel and strung wire hover along the corners and walls of the rooms, attuned to the provisional nature and proletarian idealism of Tatlin's originals, which, like his architectural proposition of the *Monument to the Third International*, either no longer exist or were never realised in the first place.

Meanwhile, back at the Biennial itself, one sees this hybridisation from the other direction, where ostensibly artistic practices inflect and influence the ways in which architects are working. In the main venue of the Chicago Cultural Centre, familiar artist 'names' such as Tomas Saraceno, Assemble (nominated for this year's Turner Prize) and Atelier Bow-Wow share space with more established architectural firms. However, it is at the Graham Foundation, and an off-site exhibition of the work of Barbara Kasten, that one realises how deeply ingrained this architectural impulse is. At the age of 79, Kasten has come back to her hometown to show her continuing photographic experiments in abstraction, light and physical structures. Her intensely colourful images, achieved through analogue photography and elaborate arrangements of illuminated sculptural forms, culminate in *Scenario*, 2015, an installation that projects film of shifting colour fields onto an array of geometric plaster shapes. In addition to signalling a new direction in Kasten's practice, the work reveals a profound and prolonged engagement with the perception of our physical environment, a sensibility that one sees manifested throughout the city itself. ■

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