LANDLORD COLORS:
On Art, Economy, and Materiality

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increasingly global interdependent capitalist economies—some affecting specific industries and regions, with others impacting entire countries. Marxist philosopher György Lukács predicted their expansive reach in the 1920s in *History and Class Consciousness*:

> In the age of capitalism it is not possible for the total system to become directly visible in external phenomena. For instance, the economic basis of a world crisis is undoubtedly unified, and its coherence can be understood. But its actual appearance in time and space will take the form of a disparate succession of events in different countries at different times and even in different branches of industry in a number of countries.[6]

The rapid acceleration of the last century is defined by a wild pursuit of economic progress and measurable growth—often growth at any cost—but it is important to note this is a relatively new phenomenon for humanity, which advanced incrementally between the Roman Empire and the nineteenth century. A unifying concern of the artists in *Landlord Colors* is the interrogation of progress against the realities of lived experience. Two decades into the twenty-first century, we stand in the aftermath of so many crises, and live on the forefronts of others, while localized hits of global problems continue to rise at an alarming rate: volatile economies, volatile politics, volatile climate. Something is brewing, a situation has arisen.

It is crucial now to pause, to temper the rapid, to reflect. Through all stages of civilization, art has been a means to understand our human experience—how others have lived and what they value. By focusing on the materials that artists mine for meaning, we can extract individual narratives and regard these artworks as cultural documents of their time. Here we can enact what art historian Petra Lange-Berndt describes as *material complicity*, in which we can expand our understanding of an artwork by tracing the provenance of materials beyond simply the artist's intention.[7]

> To follow materials means not to discuss aesthetic issues of quality, expressiveness, or symbolic content, but rather to investigate transpersonal societal problems and matters of concerns. Within this methodology it is paramount to situate artistic practice with historical perspectives and to open meanings of the materials used to their everyday or non-art connotations.... The path one takes is not linear, not clearly divisible into avant-garde, high modernist, postmodern, and so on. Rather, one encounters entangled, anachronistic layers, incorporating references that point beyond exclusively canonical art-historical boundaries.[8]

This method of following the materials provides crucial insight into

our periods of focus. Furthermore, *Landlord Colors* foregrounds vernacular interpretations of shared materials, positioning them as principal elements in our visual language. To illustrate this in practice, the start of each section of this essay is dedicated to an interpretative reading of an artist's use of stone—a fundament in art, nature, and industry—as a meditative exercise to trace how each artist relates the material to their local context.

MATERIAL WITNESS: DETROIT (1967–PRESENT)

On a street corner in Detroit in the late 90s, Olayami Dabls picked up a rock that was embedded with a piece of iron. This object became the metaphorical basis for his ongoing outdoor installation *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* (fig. 1, p. 81). Broken stone and natural rock are prominent textures of the city landscape. Together, they had composed the structural foundation of a sprawling city, now regarded by many as rubble. In Dabls' view, the rocks—along with his other materials of paint, mirrors, and found objects—are given magic provided by the iron, which is revered as a sacred metal and medicine in African traditions. There is enough iron in each one of us to make a three-inch nail. We can't live without iron. Blood is its color because of iron. All people on the planet are connected to iron. This connection to a fundamental element of life draws the people here, he says, back to Detroit.

Detroit is French for "strait," a moving body of water connecting two seas. Predestined from the beginning, it served as a grand junction for purposes and ideals larger than itself: the worker to employment, the industry to prosperity, America to its dream. In the early twentieth century, Detroit was a model city for the desires of the burgeoning middle class; this extended to the country's black population who were searching to improve their conditions within the institutionalized socio-economic oppression

FIGURE 1

Olayami Dabls, *Detention Center* (detail), 2005, rocks, paint, chairs

of the Jim Crow era. The firsthand accounts of black residents who came here as children, and are now in their 70s and 80s, often recite their grandparents' and parents' motivations in a similarly modest script: Detroit was

FIGURE 5

Chung Sang-Hwa, *Untitled 73-7*, 1973,
acrylic on canvas

Kinds of White, organized by Korean artist Lee Ufan, that is often credited as the first collective presentation of this type of work.[35] Lee Ufan fled Korea in 1958 after the war and settled in Tokyo, providing an important connection for his Korean peers to a larger art discourse and vice versa. He contributed to both the *dansaekhwa* movement and the Japanese *mono-ha* movement, as a painter and sculptor respectively, the latter developing in the late 1960s from an ethos similar to that of *arte povera*. *Mono-ha* ("school of things") was generated in response to the social, cultural, and political climate of the time and carried a particular investment in natural and industrial materials. Lee Ufan's *Relatum* series (p. 137) is a rumination on natural and synthetic materials; the rubber is a product of our industrial world, here it is stretched and weighted down by stones that exist autonomously outside of modernity.

Is materiality connected to *han*? Or, can materiality be a part of *han's* articulation when language has failed? In the face of censorship, perhaps these artworks speak in coded communication to the collective. In her book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry explains our visceral relationship to material objects that carry violent potential: "This is an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain; as a perceptual fact, it can lift pain and its attributes out of the body and make them visible. The mental habit of *recognizing* pain in the weapon (despite the fact that an inanimate object cannot 'have pain' or any other sentient experience) is both an ancient and an enduring one."[36] The connection between violence and the material emerges in the work of Ha Chong-Hyun, one of the most prolific artists to emerge from the *dansaekhwa* movement. His work from the 1970s includes found materials such as nails, newspaper, barbed wire, and a kind of burlap used to transport agricultural goods, which was stretched for painting canvases (pp. 106–7). Within a Korean art context these types of materials were non-traditional, rendering them politically charged

FIGURE 6

Ha Chong-Hyun, *Conjunction 79-9*, 1979,
oil on hemp cloth

and positioning them as tools for a radical confrontation with the representational painting promoted by the government. During the Yushin era, Ha Chong-Hyun created a unique method of pushing oil paint through the obverse side of his burlap canvas with varying degrees of pressure, the paint sometimes drying suspended, a record of the force (fig. 6). The process is emblematic of the performative exertion Korean artists used to communicate the sublimated reality of living under the government's military rule. Now in a prominent position in the global economy, South Koreans are negotiating the consequences of a coerced prosperity.

HANDHELD AND UNHOLDABLE OBJECTS: CUBA (1990s–PRESENT)

In Yoan Capote's *Old Speech*, a microphone stands behind two jagged rocks embedded with loudspeakers and wrapped in chains. Rust results from the structures having been submerged beneath the sea for six months. The weight of rocks anchored it down, drowning its potential for use: the voice, silenced (fig. 7).

Like Korea, Cuba is a small nation where competing ideologies of capitalism and communism have played out dramatically over the decades. In the early 1990s, Fidel Castro declared the Special Period in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union (its primary economic partner), the failure of the sugar cane harvest (its primary

ANDREAS ANGELIDAKIS

Andreas Angelidakis trained as an architect, although he works primarily across the disciplines of contemporary art, curation, and architectural criticism. In the artist's entry for *documenta 14*, writer Nicholas Korody aptly defined the combination of the personal, the civic, and the creative intersectionality of Angelidakis' practice: "His work emerges from the experience of being in place: in Greece, in climate change, in architecture, in psychoanalysis, in the internet, in a body."[1] Central to his investigation is the landscape of contemporary Athens, which he describes as a sort of nightmare of modernist failures—a city suffering from minimal governmental planning, corruption, and alarming population growth over the last century. The definition of ruin is expanded within the twenty-first-century discourse of Angelidakis' practice: nature's eternal contributions (weather and time) and mankind's inherent fallacies (war and politics) are joined by the incredibly expansive virtual world we have created over the last quarter century. Angelidakis is on the forefront of negotiating the future, particularly as increasingly new technologies raise questions about authenticity, memory, and cultural inheritance.

In the video work *Building an electronic ruin*, Angelidakis explores the internet as a parallel world being built and abandoned. Set in the virtual space of Second Life, architecture that the artist creates is not vulnerable to age, gravity, or natural disaster. When Angelidakis sets fire to his constructions in this landscape, it is of no consequence. Second Life was once full of users, but by 2011 was essentially deserted, like many unused portals, platforms, and websites. His avatar traverses a desolate virtual landscape. Angelidakis offers that Facebook, Instagram, and all other future incarnations will quickly follow the same fate, becoming our version of the ancient ruins of Athens and Rome.

L.M.

1 Nicholas Korody, "Andreas Angelidakis," *documenta 14*, https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/945/andreas-angelidakis.

Building an electronic ruin, 2011, video still cat. no. 1

El peso de la culpa (*The burden of guilt*) is one of Tania Bruguera's iconic works, originally performed at her home in 1997 at the same time as the Sixth Biennial of Havana. It has since been restaged in different parts of the world. As the audience entered the space, Bruguera stood barefoot with a dead sheep wrapped around her neck and a Cuban flag woven with human hair hanging behind her. The performance consisted of the artist drinking small amounts of soil mixed with water, which references a pre-Columbian suicide ritual. Bruguera explains, "Eating earth, which is sacred and a symbol of permanence, is like swallowing one's own traditions, one's own heritage, it's like erasing oneself. It's electing suicide. What I did was take this historical anecdote and update it to the present."[1] At its core, the piece is a political comment on Cuba's precarious economic situation during the 1990s, during which food shortages reached such height that a popular local saying developed: "We are eating soil." The phrase comes from the context of the Special Period, when the Soviet economy that supported Cuba disappeared and the country was defenseless in the face of the international market and its sanctions.

The piece emerged from a time when Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta was a central influence on Bruguera's thinking and methodology, as seen in her intersection of earth and body as material. Both artists conjure mythic and metaphoric ties to the natural world as a way to negotiate societal conditions of displacement, identity, and subjugation. Bruguera extends her investment in the human condition into activism, as evident in her "Manifesto on Artists' Rights" presented to the United Nations in 2012, and exhibited as part of *Landlord Colors*.

A.G.F., L.M.

1 Octavio Zaya, *Cuba: los mapas del deseo* (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 1999), 239–57.

El peso de la culpa (*The burden of guilt*), 1999, photograph, performance documentation cat. no. 8

Dora Economou, *The dark, the dark*, 2015, pumice stone, paint

LUCIO FONTANA

Lucio Fontana has an impactful place within the art historical canon for his punctured holes (*buchi*) and violent cuts (*tagli*) to the surface of his works, particularly in stretched canvas. Fontana was one of the artists enveloped in the *art informel* movement of the late 1940s and 1950s, a term that was coined by French critic Michel Tapié to describe informal gestural processes and artworks that eschewed the figural, geometric, and structural. Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale* (*Spatial Concept*) series is a demystification of the illusionary space of painting. Through his cuts and punctures, Fontana opens the surface to real space, exposing the canvas's inherent material quality as an object with no autonomous communication of its own, yet rife with conceptual potential. The vast interpretations of the series are chronicled in its wildly varied trajectories in scholarship: the destruction of art history; fetishistic psychoanalytic theory; projections of "the void;" and the political context of fascism, among others.

Art historian Anthony White positions Fontana's work within the context of Italy's declining postwar economic miracle: "They embody a genuine desire for overcoming the drudgery and grind of industrialized labor. The 'Cuts' propose a utopian moment of uplifted grace that nevertheless remains entirely contained within the materiality of muscular energy."[1] *Concetto Spaziale, New York 7* is perhaps a crowning example of this argument, in which Fontana's use of brass—an industrial material—elicits connections to the rise against a societal mindset predicated on mass production, a critique that also seeded the *arte povera* movement, then on the horizon. Less stylized and surgical than the precise cuts incised on Fontana's monochromatic canvases, the harsh cuts in brass conjure a visceral experience of a real wound sustained.

L.M.

1 Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 241.

Concetto Spaziale, New York 7, 1962, brass cat. no. 17

JULIO LLÓPIZ-CASAL

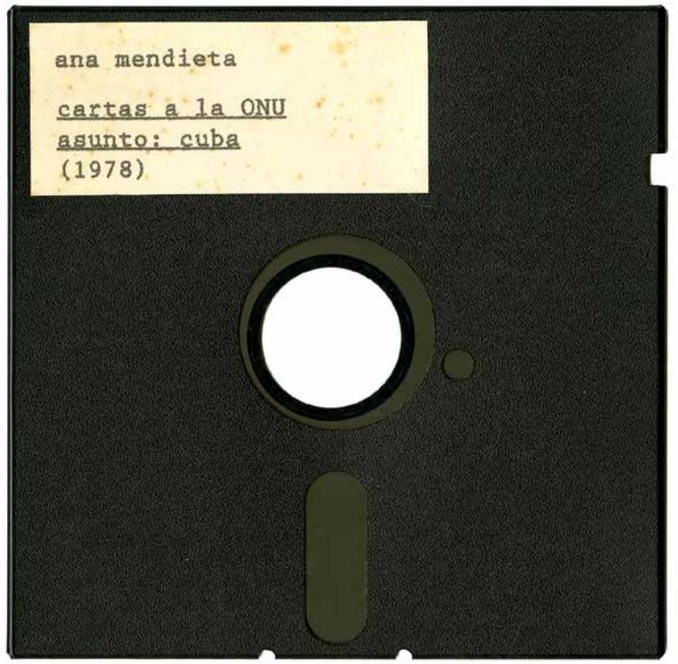
Julio Llópiz-Casal navigates the complicated spaces of archive, memory, and art history across twentieth-century Cuba. Cuba is a place where notions of a local avant-garde are a contentious subject in a country that heavily self-edits its own history, particularly with regard to the United States.

Archivo I and *Archivo II* consist of two floppy disks that claim to contain personal letters by Félix González-Torres (1957–96) and Ana Mendieta (1948–85), two American artists of Cuban origin who came to prominence in the contemporary art world during their respective lifetimes, but whose careers were tragically cut short. The floppy disk assigned to González-Torres purports to be documentation of letters the artist had written to his family in Camagüey in central Cuba, while the other disk contains letters that Mendieta sent to the United Nations with the subject line: "Cuba." Both are speculative correspondences; no proof exists to confirm them. The lack of clarity around what constitutes factual information, propaganda, and urban myth is a pervasive condition throughout Cuba.

The selection of the floppy disks is purposeful, as this was the format used by the Cuban security agency to store such information. Llópiz-Casal's archives assert that more than data is obtained under espionage. Personal and cultural memory is also captured and rendered inaccessible to the island's everyday citizens. Furthermore, the disks act as a metaphor for a country trapped by obsolescence—both materially and ideologically.

A.G.F.

Archivo I, 2014, paper label, magnetized floppy disk cat. no. 33



Archivo II, 2014, paper label, magnetized floppy disk cat. no. 34

GILDA SNOWDEN

A stalwart and admired figure of the Detroit art scene for decades, Gilda Snowden often engaged with the city for inspiration and content. One example is her series *City Album: Department of Railways 1929*, which incorporated charcoal rubbings of manhole covers she found while biking through Detroit. Snowden described her work as autobiographical, in that she reaches back to her ancestors who came to Detroit via the Great Migration from the American South. She authored several series with the word "album" in the title, which collectively can be interpreted as the artist's poetic visual scrapbook. In the 1980s, she also created a series of *Constructions*, which were combines featuring found materials and often bound with rope.

Functioning almost like an oracle, the painting *Silent Preacher* was created in 1986, a year before the significant loss and gain for the artist with three family funerals—her mother, father, and uncle—and her own wedding. At the center of the work are two old-fashioned wooden mail slots with a small metal nameplate that reads "THE SILENT PREACHER." Written to its left is the word "tithe." Tithes are the one-tenth contribution of earnings given to the church, a lifetime of individual sacrifice for the benefit of a collective. The multilayered, three-dimensional encaustic piece has a textural surface into which she carved a tic-tac-toe form with three X's occupying some of the boxes with no adversarial O's. In addition, Snowden includes a tornado-like figure in the lower left corner of the painting, and also on the back of the construction, which is hidden from viewers. Snowden herself was not necessarily religious, but the work bears the coded negotiation of upheaval being mediated by sacrifice and ceremony. Snowden herself might also be regarded as the silent preacher who existed as a shaman-like conduit between the seen and unseen, reality and spirituality.

T.R.A., L.M.

Silent Preacher, 1986, mixed media on wood cat. no. 71