

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Exhibition: Hands Up / Hands down:
Vito Acconci, Sam Lewitt, Scott Lyall, Pieter Schoolwerth,
Jimmy Raskin, Raha Raissnia, Paul Pagk, Matt Bakkom

Dates: July 11 – August 20, 2006

Reception: Tuesday, July 11, 6:30 – 9 PM

Opening on Tuesday, July 11th, 2006, Miguel Abreu Gallery is pleased to present “Hands Up/Hands Down,” a group exhibition that focuses on traces of the body in the making of images.

In the fall of 1969, Vito Acconci stood in the woods near Woodstock, New York. He raised his arms with a camera in hand and snapped a picture. He then lowered his hands and snapped another picture. The resulting ‘photo-activity,’ titled “Hands Up/Hands Down,” combined these two photographs with a short explanatory statement; nothing more, nothing less. Part of the radicality of this piece lies with the way it unequivocally severs photography from both its ‘documentary’ and ‘pictorialist’ traditions, as it reveals the automatic, quasi-robotic nature of its technological operation. Simultaneously and crucially, the work foregrounds the artist’s body in absentia as its ultimate subject, as the human agency that determines the basic parameters of the image, but in turn resists being determined by it. Here the image is obviously no extension of the artist’s gaze; here the artist’s thoughts and possible intentions are separated from what the viewer will actually see.

If the lives of today’s citizens are more than ever impacted by an invisible network of immaterial forces, and if artists are more and more concerned with channeling these abstract currents into the fabric of their work, let us revisit the trace of Mr. Acconci’s slapstick, yet disciplined gesture. Is there not an oblique premonition in play of an epochal shift towards an information economy, a cultural environment in which the ubiquitous camera contributes heavily to the robotization of social relations? Again, “Hands Up/Hands Down” points towards this ominous development by objectifying it, yet keeping it at bay.

In his excellent essay on the work of Douglas Huebler, John Miller discusses Vilém Flusser’s pessimistic claim that “ ‘the photographic universe’ is a closed system that not only fails to represent phenomena, but also excludes them.”¹ Miller adds later that “in Flusser’s sweeping historical overview, the linearity of writing gave rise to the historical consciousness, which the photograph then eroded, reinstantiating a kind of magical thought that confuses cause and effect (making it irrelevant whether, for example, the cock crows because the sun rises or the sun rises because the cock crows).” So at this fast forwarded point in history, when things have accelerated further, perhaps yes we are left amidst the dust of infinitely transformable and exchangeable bits and pieces of mostly electronic data, in a place where, as Scott Lyall observes in a journal entry from 2001, “to everything is apportioned a beggars share of information.”

Things come back to life in another entry, however, in which Lyall ponders upon the folds in a dandy’s cravat: “Beau Brummell had the look of a man without content, he writes, – the look of a photo – cultivation of a shadow’s survival. When he elevated the folds of his necktie to drawings, he made a new image of the figure, fully subject to commodity. ‘I am the folding of the tie beyond desire, and am ephemeral’. But there was one problem: that the knot in the tie must seem effortless, as if drawn in the absence of every discernible aesthetic judgment. As soon as it was seen, though, it was style and instantly recognized, sometimes copied. To repeat it exactly broke the charm of the audacious new subject. Mr. Brummell worked through the night on his folds of indifference. He perfected the impression of what, when seen, would mean nothing... Henceforth, drawing finds itself on the ‘jouissance’ of being, of fantasy-existing without direction or consequence.”

Reading these insightful lines, surprisingly, made me think that they could be brought to bear on Paul Pagk’s daily drawing practice, in which an insistent graphic impulse, in search of matter, color and space, like the three cardinal nutrients of survival, constitutes at once the beginning and the end of art. There is a simple breathing quality to this repeated activity of the hand, one that is worlds apart from Lyall’s attempt to pinpoint the conditions under which the opening of a ‘subjective procedure’ in art becomes possible.

For Jimmy Raskin, it all began with a decision to jump and slam his body into a corner a few times while an audiotape of his early notes on the Poet was playing in a boom box. The corner jump became an image of a corner man, which became a diagram, before turning into a figure of the tightrope walker in the Prologue of Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra.” The table – or rather the raised plane of thought – presented in this show, is populated by an arrangement of sculptural incarnations of the key figures and diagrams that have emerged from his ongoing meditation on the Poet, as he encounters his problematic double, the Philosopher, on the road to the New Being. The trace to be followed here is that of the artist’s body at the point of inception of a turbulent movement of thought, a body that leaps into the Unknown and finds the fundamental split subject of Raskin’s continued exposition.

Pieter Schoolwerth, for his part, is becoming more and more a painter of the contemporary figure in search of its image through the process of painting. In “Workout,” an older man pedaling on a stationary bicycle confronts a reflection of his idealized body in a mirror, as the stiff and freewheeling movement of paint disfigure him in the middle ground. The question of whether he ‘wants’ the thin and transparent young man listening to his iPod on the right side of the picture remains undecided. Through a succession of appearances within the composition, the depicted body traverses several image regimes before reflexively folding into the body of paint itself.

In “A Scene For the Library: Mott Haven,” Sam Lewitt ingeniously stages a commemorative text about a trip to a remote branch of the New York Public Library during which, while the photocopy machine was warming up, he found time to examine a haphazard display about the Piccirilli Brothers, the “renowned marble carvers of numerous revered American monuments, including the lions seated in front of the main branch of the NYPL.” From his consideration of “the enlarged photographic documents, obviously abstracted from the archives, and the peeling papers of the information panels,” Lewitt generates a trip into memory lane that weaves a series of short reflections and suppositions on the effects of technical innovation in the burgeoning age of mechanical reproduction. Lewitt invites the viewer/reader to “search for (think) disparities and gaps even within a seemingly unified image.” In this cinema screen size work, which presents a sequence of dark to light photocopies of the artist’s photomontaged text, “the film-like frame’s power of spatialization has had its dimension of temporal movement subtracted. We are not left with a film, but something like a script immediately realized as image; like an image whose immediate form of existence is given to collection as a multiple (a spatial proliferation).” The trace of the sculptors’ hands chiseling the stone into the shape of a lion is one of the potent ghosts in this story. Lewitt proposes an allegory of a past that lays dormant in both the city’s most ubiquitous monuments and those objects resigned to the dust of collection.

A shaft of light on darkness remains a force of to be reckoned with in Raha Raissnia’s exiled, gestural paintings. As if scratching the arid earth from too close a range, the architectonic balance of her black and white shapes seems to emerge from an extended battle. It manifests an aura of trust and solidity. There is no need to attempt calling to mind uncertain references to nature or to the cosmos, for those are refuted before they can prove themselves. Here the mind is made to wonder and the body shows.

Matt Bakkom’s “New York City Museum of Complaint” has taken the shape of a 48-page tabloid format newspaper to be distributed in public parks in Lower Manhattan and available for pick up at the gallery during the months of July and August. The publication reproduces a series of letters from the New York City Department of Records that “have been drawn from the archive of mayoral communications that contain all written messages sent to the mayor of New York City since 1700. In our research,” Bakkom says, “we have attempted to locate and reproduce a range of examples of civic dissatisfaction. It is our hope that they provide you with a refreshing form of rational entertainment and distracted instruction in the various styles and strategies of civic/self expression.” The language and very calligraphic arrangement of some of the gems in this opus convey a stunning sense of belief in the democratic forum from a bygone era, so it seems.

To conclude, it should be noted that the intention behind this exhibition is in no way to propose that the hand of the artist, or rather the trace in the work of art of whatever body it may be, should be taken to express an alleged moment of freedom in the image. It is assumed, indeed, that the body can only perform within the confines of a particular situation that precedes it, and that an image can acquire potency only in as much as it affirms its construction within the articulated parameters of the work’s position in a historical sequence. This is when the artist’s ‘disciplined’ body is in action. These histories can then be argued for or against in terms of how true they are, how well they function, and how useful they might be. At this juncture in history, however, the trace of that body in the making of images can be said to operate as at least a minimal moment of interpellation that initiates an important process of recognition in the viewer. It has a way of striking me as the singular element that cannot be immediately integrated into the free flow of abstract information. And as such, it can be raised to the status of an organizing principle.

Thank you to Sarina Basta for letting me know about Vito Acconci’s “Hands Up / Hands Down.”

For more information or for visuals, please contact the gallery at 212.995.1774.

Gallery hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 11:00 AM to 6:30 PM

¹ John Miller, “Double or Nothing,” *Artforum*, April 2006, pp. 220-27.