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Allegories of Reification

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Antonio Puente Bever

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One of the theories about the function of cave paintings is that they were meant to help orient the neolithic person within their environment. They would look at the walls of the cave to see the practice of hunting visually mapped out for them, which would aid them when they hunted. This theory makes a lot of sense when we think about our relationship to advertising images. Consider this situation, you're walking down the street upset but not sure why, you look up at a billboard across the street and see a good-looking person smiling holding a can of coke. The photograph seems to be operating much the same way for the modern man that the cave painting did neolithic. It is so it seems mapping out for you how to obtain happiness by route of the can of coke. The obvious problem is that the goal of the advertisement is not to show you how to obtain happiness but to make you buy cans of coke to raise corporate profits. In the neolithic era hunting was essential and the aim of having good hunters was important to keeping the community thriving. While in modern times the aim of coke is to raise profits above all else. Thus, instead of the picture helping to orient the viewer within their environment it purposefully disorients the viewer providing false models of how to obtain happiness for the benefit of the corporation. While this is a simplistic explanation the point is to show the importance of visual models which in our current moment is a contested site. Because of this situation, art to have any relevance at all must exist within a negative relationship to advertising, actively negating their disorienting operations. While there may be disagreement about what is the most effective way to approach negation is, those around the Frankfurt school have created the most comprehensive guide. Frederic Jameson a follower of the Frankfurt school has an aesthetic concept called 'cognitive mapping' a term introduced in

Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, in it he says:

“The cognitive map is not exactly mimetic, in that older sense; indeed the theoretical issues it poses allow us to renew the analysis of representation on a higher and much more complex level...the great Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as ‘the representation of the subject’s Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence’. Surely this is exactly what the cognitive map is called upon to do, in the narrower framework of daily life in the physical city: to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of the city’s structure as a whole.”(Jameson, 90)

He then goes on to say:

“An aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system—will necessarily have to respect this now enormously complex representational dialectic and to invent radically new forms in order to do it justice. This is not, then, clearly a call for a return to some older kind of machinery, some older and more transparent national space, or some more traditional and reassuring perspectival or mimetic enclave: the new political art—if it is indeed possible at all—will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is, to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale”. (Jameson, 91)

While not a perfect overlap Jameson’s idea of the potential political function for art within postmodern society is very similar to the social mapping that the cave paintings provided as mentioned previously. Jameson charts a similar problematic of arts function as being in its ability to orient the viewer within the complex and multilayered environment that makes up contemporary life. Furthermore, I think what Jameson makes evident is that what is at issue here for the contemporary artist is representation. How do we go about faithfully representing a subject when each one is at the nexus of an

infinitely vast and complex network. Jameson is not alone in locating this problem, the philosopher Bruno Latour in his book also from the 90's *We Have Never Been Modern* calls the irreducible complexity within subjects, hybrids. He claims modernity always seeks to “purify” subjects into distinct categories. To give his oft used example, the ozone hole is a product of nature, power relations and discourse all at once. Not one or the other as the modernist doctrines, according to him, would like to prove. I only bring up Latour to highlight the importance unraveling the density that exist underneath subjects (or objects as its more often termed in contemporary philosophic discourse) has been within serious theoretical writings since the 90's. Without going into it too much it's central to many contemporary theories such as Object Oriented Ontology and New Materialism. Before moving on to the next section I think it would be good to clarify by way of another quote by Jameson:

“Achieved cognitive mapping will be a matter of form, and I hope I have shown how it will be an integral part of a socialist politics..” (Jameson, 92)

This first part of my essay is about introducing a contemporary problem concerning representation which is a problem of form more than content. The second part I will introduce Walter Benjamins particular theory of allegory which I contend theorizes a form fitting this problem of representation offering some insight into how to aesthetically deal with the complexity of late capitalism.

Walter Benjamin initially developed his theory of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This theory which is notoriously elusive has very little consensus behind a precise meaning. This is probably due to the way it deconstructs traditional ideas about how meaning is structured. Bainard Cowan one of the preeminent scholars on Benjamin's idea of allegory, claims it creates a new understanding of both culture and ontology.

Cowan says:

“In Benjamin's analysis allegory is pre-eminently a kind of experience....The form such an experience of the world takes is fragmentary and enigmatic; in it the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs....Transforming things into signs is both what allegory does-it's technique-and what it is about-it's content.”(Cowan, 110)

Benjamin sees the nature of experience as something we engage with through signs, thus the mind takes on the role of the writer when experiencing the world. This metaphysical view of the world as writing critiques the notion of presence, the ground upon which the symbol is built. In Benjamin's reading allegory is in contrast with the romantic notion of the symbol. He characterizes the symbol as aiming for a false unity with the idea that

“the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole.”(Cowan, 111)

The symbol was supposed to provide the absolute form of which the individual object participated in, in the platonic sense. But for him the symbolic attempt to unify immanence and transcendence is impossible because of the gap between the realm of ideas and the phenomenal world. He describes the romantic interest in the symbol as a symptom of the coming to consciousness of that impossibility on the cultural level. The romantic era also being the moment when there was a crisis in faith culturally and

philosophically, Nietzsche as the most famous example. This dichotomy between the symbol and the allegory has political implications for Benjamin as well. The symbol playing into the human tendency to forget the past and get lost in some

“symbolic other that is free from all real conflicts, to be fixated by the beauty of this image-actually a kind of Medusa-and fail to recognize one’s own face, the face of history with all its suffering and incompleteness”.(Cowan, 112)

For him the championing of allegory also has to do with the nature of truth. He combats the positivistic notion of truth as facts collected which then become presented. For him this is actually knowledge, whereas truth is impossible to possess and present. For this reason

“this impossibility of presentation leads in Benjamin’s thought to the designation of truths proper mode as representation.”(Cowan, 114)

For him truth is not some kernel contained within but is the form itself which means that representation is not an end but a process. It is the activity of representation within which truth exists. This lack of unity within experience and truth makes the idea of the fragment of prime importance for Benjamin. In the Baroque there was a layering of fragments without a goal in mind, in hopes to attain a “miracle”. This is a radically different idea of how meaning works. He says:

“The basic characteristic of allegory, however, is ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning: allegory, and the baroque, glory in richness of meaning. But the richness of this ambiguity is the richness of extravagance; nature, however, according to the old rules of metaphysics, and indeed also of mechanics, is bound by the law of economy. Ambiguity is therefore always the opposite of clarity and unity of meaning.”(Cowan, 115)

Because of the active nature of truth as process true meaning is not found within clarity but in ambiguity. It is to be found in the open ended process of reading that ambiguity provokes. The key figures within the allegory of the baroque is the corpse, the petrified

forest and the ruin. It is the image of something that is seen as dead from the outside. In the 19th century, the figure of the allegory is the souvenir. Being the image of something dead on the inside. The souvenir is the commodity that try's to force a pre packaged memory, commodified experience incarnate. In both cases it's an image of something fragmented, torn from its context. And for that reason associated with melancholy. The souvenir is the form of the commodity most common in the arcade. In the place of actual experience the souvenir hopes to force a certain relation to intentional memory. It's helpful here to think this through a contrast of the madeleine in Proust, true memory is involuntary as the experience of the memory invoked by the pastry is for the narrator. To defend against the souvenirs impoverishment of experience Benjamin insists on mimicking its form of disinterest. It is with the souvenir that we get a better look at Benjamin's interest in allegory. The use of disconnection, montage, rubble, fragment to combat commodified memory. Up until this last point I had been describing the notion of allegory developed by early Benjamin during his studies on baroque culture. It is his later reflections on allegory in Baudelaire that Benjamin Buchloh writes about in relation to many of the artists he dubs the neo-avant-garde. In his essay *Allegorical Procedures* following Benjamin he has a great analysis describing changes taking place within capitalism where the material world and objects come to be devalued because of the object as commodity has split between use value and exchange value. The allegorical practice of montage through fragmentation and juxtaposition similarly depletes the sign through a splitting, this time of signifier and signified. This depletion of the sign then allows the viewer to redeem the object by the ability to attribute a new meaning. He then

goes on to talk about Duchamp's readymade as allegorizing the act of creation because of the use of an anonymously produced object which negates the signification of sculptural production and its separation of materials and process. Thus, through a different type of depletion those conditions of production that create the frame of artistic practice normally invisible become not only visible but the point of focus. In a very straightforward manner Buchloh outlines the horizon of the allegorical that comes from Benjamin's late reading of Baudelaire. He says

"It's procedures of appropriation, its depletion of the confiscated image, the superimposition or doubling of a visual text by a second text, and the shift away from purely perceptual attention to an act of reading, from the central substantive structure to the device of the frame, all make it correspond eminently with the demands of the allegory in the definition that we have suggested. Where perceptual data are withheld or removed from the traditional surface of display, the gesture of erasure shifts the focus of attention to the appropriated historical construct on the one hand, and to the devices of framing and presentation on the other."(Buchloh, 181)

Of the post Duchamp allegorists Buchloh identifies a few different positions. In American Pop, where to use his example of *Flag* by Jasper Johns, Johns appropriates an image from popular culture which dictates the formal characteristics in advance of its creation, making a claim for a relation between abstraction and iconic representation thus fusing low and high culture. The problem for Buchloh with this move is that it reproduces pop as an abstract universal condition without historically situating that condition within its own circumstances of legibility. It contains a false radicality finding middle ground

between the shock of Duchamp's readymade and the demands of the market for authorial craftsmanship. Besides falling short of the historical demands of the readymade it also doesn't meet the criteria of Clement Greenberg's formalism, which requires the work of art to have a self referentiality that empirically reflects the material conditions that determines the perception of the object. Conditions that advanced abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock through his drip paintings met which laid bare the materiality of paints viscosity. According to Buchloh it wouldn't be until the conceptual artists of the neo avant-garde who would properly marry the historical implications of the readymade with Greenberg's self referential formalism. An example of this is Dan Grahams allegorical Homes for America, a work of extremely dense complexity. In this work he is able to simultaneously connect the serial logic of minimalism and pop art making the mass distribution of the arts magazine the readymade structure and economic ground of the artwork (arts magazine article) which depicts another form that exists at the intersection of pop and minimalist seriality, the tract house. These photographs are made with another mechanism of serial logic, the brownie camera. To put it more concisely, Graham not only employs seriality as a formal means as many other artists of his generation were but while employing it contextualizes the formal device within the specific historical/economic situation that gave rise to its widespread use.

While there is a lot to be parsed out from the section above as it relates to my own work and thinking, one of the important formal elements of the allegorical as it relates to my work is the emphasis on fragmentation and layering. Layering as an operation within a work itself but also between works, layering as something both literal and metaphorical. Given that I so often work in time-based mediums mostly either in slideshows or 3D animation layering becomes a very literal aspect of the construction where one image follows another at the speed of 1 every 10 seconds for the animation or 30 every second for the animation. I mention this to highlight the fact that unlike painting, for example these works unfold over time. In my thesis show, which ran in a museum I had two animations and one slideshow playing on a loop. The viewer doesn't know where the works start or end unlike when you encounter video in the cinema, which often builds meaning through a narrative progression. Instead within these works meaning is built in fragments and layers. Associations build on top of each other within real time as you move through space. You can't behold all the works at once so no matter how you navigate through the room memory becomes a crucial element in putting together the pieces. The aspiration for the exhibition itself was to work like a film, through a principle of montage. Montage works by overlaps and disjunctions, it's through a basis of continuity that you gain insight into the structure of the whole. If you follow one character the whole movie the narrative has clarity but if every scene you follow a new character the narrative becomes unfixed. Each work is distinct but there are certain overlaps between that one can follow as they move through the exhibition. Moving from

the slideshow to the animation on the floor you first would see people holding certain objects like iphones, vapes or cans of soda then you would see digital models of those objects decontextualized sitting on shifting textures. Or if you move from the sculpture to the animation across from it Untitled(With Bouncing Soles) you'd go from looking at yourself reflected in a chrome ball to looking at the chrome base of a chair reflecting everything in its environment but the method through which its visualized. And within all three of the monitor works there's a specificity to their display that attempts to emphasize them as sculptural objects and articulate themselves in particular relation to the viewer. This is just to trace a few of the connections between the works.

The circular logic of mirroring that Benjamin Buchloh describes in relation to Dan Graham's *Homes for America* has been important to the ways I've been thinking through individual works of my own. For example with *Untitled (With Bouncing Soles)* the interest in this gesture of a tapping foot came through thinking about the experience of video as one surrounded by anxiety. Anxiety because the viewer of video art often encounters the work unaware as to the length of the work as well as the boredom that often accompanies the experience of video. The relationship between boredom and anxiety being of interest to Heidegger. Within the work you see a tapping foot which both mirrors a potential anxiety but definitely a heartbeat. Projection is an important element within a psychoanalytic theory of film, it is how we identify with the characters so that we feel some of what they feel. Within the animation projection first happens with the mirroring of anxiety between the bouncing shoe and the viewer but then when you enter the shoe the viewer is literally projected into the POV of the shoe. The 'animism' of the shoe reflects the trope of bringing objects to life through animation, the most famous example being *Toy Story* but also an element within many Pixar movies. The relevance of which is that Pixar is responsible for much of the innovation within 3D modeling. The environment this action takes place within mirrors the actual space that surrounds the work. For every new context the work is within the floor and the wall will be swapped out to reflect its where its physically situated. With the display of the work, it is positioned a few feet away from the wall by way of a stand so that it is vertically oriented and the bottom of the monitor is touching the ground. Depending on where you are standing in relation to the monitor will dictate the relationship between the baseboard in

the video and the baseboard behind the video in the actual room which will at times line up or not. When the viewer notices these kinds of relationships between the video and the space around the video their eye will unfocus on one and refocus on the other. The viewers own refocusing of the eye is also something that the virtual camera is constantly doing as it focuses on various parts of the virtual space.

The slideshow, Untitled(Saturday & Sunday 12-6) is made up of photographs of a social type, namely what one might call a "bro" photographed at the same mall and escalator from the same spot every weekend from 12-6 for a couple of months. I photographed every man that fit that social type somewhat like a casting call. What interests me about that social type is the way it is articulated through social codes such as fashion as well as gesture and its historical situatedness. While the term bro goes back to the 70's at the time it was mostly used by black men. Starting in the early aughts it was used primarily by white men to describe other mostly white men. I displayed the slideshow on a monitor that was positioned so that the bottom was touching the ground. The monitor was slightly shorter than the average height of a man at 70". Because the men were stepping onto the escalator they are all looking down to watch their step. Through the position of the monitor and the point of focus at the feet the viewer is also in a position of looking down, which creates a heightened bodily awareness through the connection. Because of the specificity to the subjects the slideshow is also experienced differently depending on ones gender or race. The bro is oft held in contempt by many different social groups, art circles included. As it is a typology one is caught up in a game of similarity and difference when viewing multiple images. In this typology the game is oriented around the men's presentation of their masculinity because of their gender, age, affluence and the location of the mall. There is a spectrum in relation to queerness, with one man being all but certainly queer donning a shirt that says "Bussy" which is slang for "boy pussy", referring a man's anus. Because of the long lens I am photographing you can see many details on the individual's person and there is a straightforward voyeuristic aspect to the looking. The tension between the public and the private is heightened both by the presentation of identity offset by the intimacy

of a specific gesture and the monitor which is a mode of viewing associated with the home
where one is presented with public images

The monitor on the floor Untitled(Object Selections) is the most straightforwardly sculptural. It is structured around repetition of a format. Three objects and a textured ground are made visible by a spotlight, their location shifts around the rectangle of the monitor. They are visible for 10 seconds at a time. The objects are all handheld more or less and relate to things you could have in your pocket. Because it is illuminated by a spotlight around the edges is the black monitor which cuts to black between each sequence and you are left looking at a monitor sitting on the ground which then becomes an actual sculptural object cut between virtual objects. There is a constant shifting between perception of the medium you are viewing through, and the things displayed by that medium. You go from looking at virtual objects sitting on a virtual floor to an actual object sitting on an actual floor. The awareness of the floor being a specifically sculptural concern. The objects are somewhat lifestyle based like specific drinks or smoking devices and so they tap into that genre of still life which act as absent portraits. They are all scaled to real size so there is an element of trompe l'oeil. The final aspect of my thesis show is the ball bearing which is titled Untitled. It is the size of ball bearings that escalators use, which is about 20 times larger than the ball bearings computers use. Pretty much any object that moves uses a ball bearing, embedded in these moving objects is an ultra-shiny chrome ball that reflects everything around it. The ball bearing is like the chrome heart of objects. Situated on the wall it becomes the only way to view all the works at once. It also becomes a moment for the viewer to see themselves. But of course, in a highly distorted way. It somewhat functions like the mirrored balls in the corner of stores so that cashiers can make sure no one is stealing. The ball bearing acts as both a

mechanism of movement and surveillance.

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What is at stake for Jameson, Benjamin, Buchloh and Graham is the issue of history. They are all very explicit about this including Graham who talks about his work moving from an interest in phenomenology to historical memory in the 80's. While all of their interests in history are slightly different, they all have something to do with the ability for historical situatedness to combat the amnesia induced by spectacle. Because of this importance of history and Dan Graham's acute awareness of this early on. Perhaps even being the first artist to fully grasp this his work really becomes the model for art of the 21st Century in many ways. As Buchloh's analysis shows, an analysis Graham mirrors in his own writing about his work in "A History of Conceptual Art" the operation he's often involved in is an interest in a phenomenological experience that's specifically historically situated. In this way he marries an interest in form and social context. As his writings are explicit about, he's not just interested in glass's formal qualities but those qualities in relation to historical forms like window displays. He often references Benjamin's interest in the "outmoded" or "just past" because I think he is acutely aware of how our perceptual experience of things are more informed by memory than the extended present that the phenomenology of minimalism relies on. The importance of these insights is he's one of the first Avant Garde artists to push away from abstraction. He's not trying to isolate phenomena to focus on certain aspects at the expense of others. This is important because abstraction has become the law of consumer culture, we are constantly being pushed to ignore social context in favor of surface qualities. Because he's avoiding abstraction Graham develops a kind of layering, gender, suburbs, seriality, alienation, gaze, mirroring, consumerism, readymade, transparency, architecture,

industry, reflection, site, music, privacy, spectacle, performance, distortion, time, theory,
and displacement can all exist within one work or maybe two.

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Figure 1. Untitled(With Bouncing Soles)



Figure 2. Untitled(With Bouncing Soles)



Figure 3. Untitled(Object Selections)



Figure 4. Untitled(Object Selections)



Figure 5. Untitled(Object Selections)

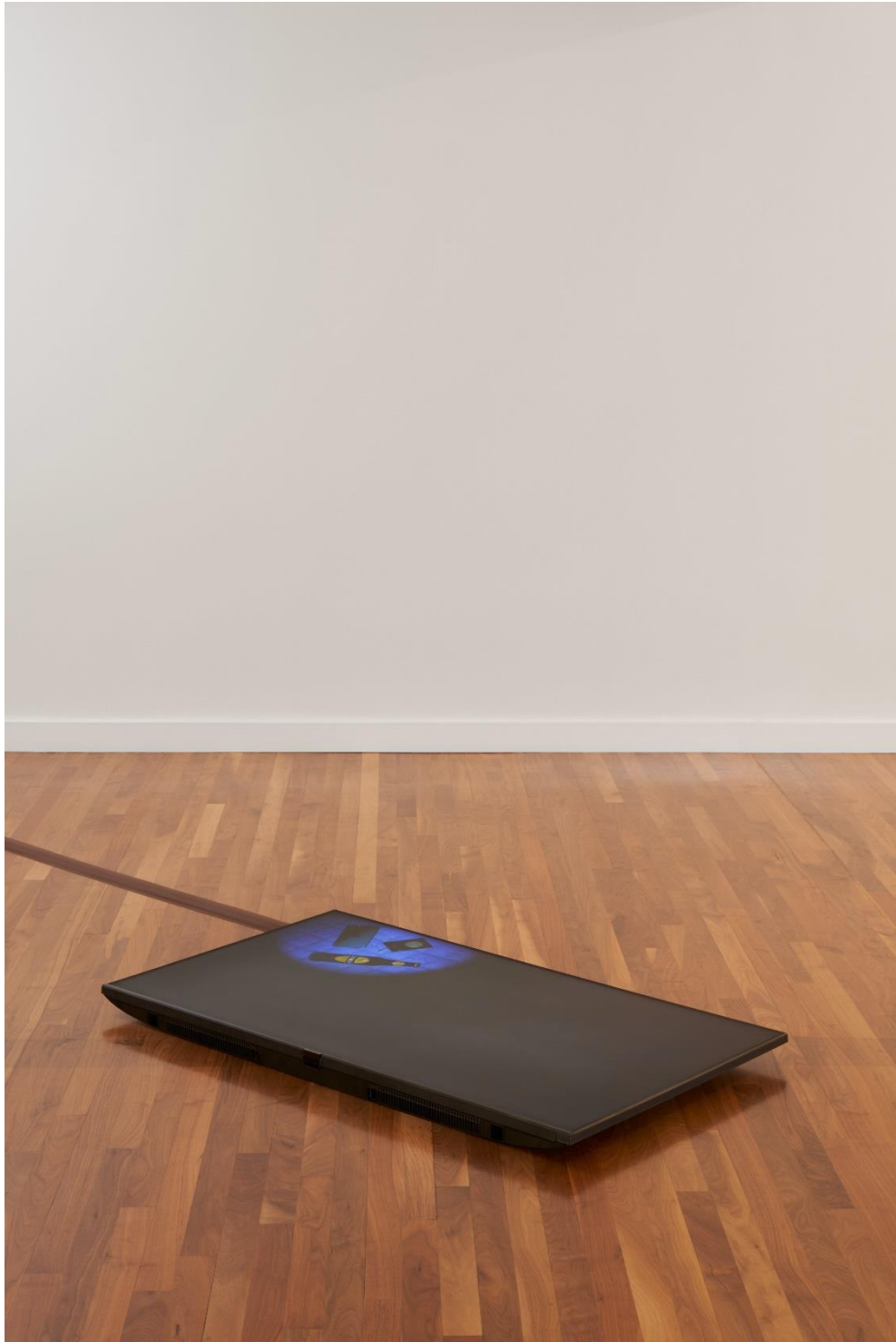


Figure 6. Untitled(Object Selections)



Figure 7. Untitled(Weekends 12-6)



Figure 8. Untitled(Weekends 12-6)



Figure 9. Untitled(Weekends 12-6)



Figure 10. Installation Sweeney Gallery



Figure 11. Untitled



Figure 12. Untitled