For an Art History of There There
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Those who know Peter Schjeldahl’s 1985 lecture “Chicagoization” will recall that it draws its main insight from the way art appeared to him when he “was haplessly, crazily young in Chicago” and the fissure that resulted between his residual “boondock roots” and emergent “urban maturity.” Like Parisization, say, or Newyorkization, or Londonization, or Berlinization, Chicagoization emerges from the flash of insight that “sophisticated art of all times has a profound independence from places, and the places that host it show the peculiar dissociation, the gregarious impersonality that we call ‘cosmopolitan’.” Where we differ, however, is that contrary to our fully supernaturalized peers (each “only technically a place at all,” Schjeldahl tells us), we are also afflicted by the nachträglich shudder of apprehension that Chicago is a place after all, one that sows “a darkly rooted worldview, the distillate of local history, politics, ethnic makeup, religion, power structure, social class, and so on.”

Chicagoization, in other words, both reaches for the antiseptic thingliness and soulless materialism of the commodity form that drives the highlife of capitalist globalization—in the liquidity of our financial sector, or the spectacularity of our consumer sector, or the conceptuality of our artistic sector, say—and, more than its peer processes, falls back on the lowlife viscera of lived material production: the funk and filth of boondocks and slaughterhouses and rail yards and redlined, gun-saturated, service deserts that orbit our radiant finance/consumer/art hub like discarded fuel pods.

Schjeldahl’s premise, and mine too, is that this push and pull between abstraction and abjection, between cosmopolitan shamelessness and provincial shame, is our singular vitality, our “there there.” An art history that takes to heart such a vitality thus would look to the intercourse of labor and form in order to push modernism further along in its interminable struggle pitting elemental, material being against the pull of Parisnewyorklondonberlin’s twin
fetishes—the futuristic dream of fluid, indifferent placelessness and the nostalgic, entropic nightmare of sedimented, intractable place.

Such a distinction between our characteristic aim and theirs could look to a range of moments for its art history—for example, to the acute level of confusion in Jean Dubuffet's 1964 gross misreading of Ivan Albright:

Swept away, in the marvelously proliferating universe, in the pullulating anarchy that Albright offers us, are all the criteria of order and the archetypes of our former ideas of beauty; nothing remains. For them is substituted a howling tumult, polycentric of many forms—a Gehenna of forms entirely delivered to delirium; to all beings a suddenly rendered liberty.

Or to Leon Golub’s Aufhebung of Dubuffet and his ilk in the 1950s ("Other painters are tearing man apart, but not me. I'm giving him a monumental image. I want man to survive"), or, perhaps even better, to his taunting sendup of Robert Smithson in 1967:

mangy dolt! give up your brushes and fissure your mind! scum, throw away your technology and rust your bones! sadist! release nature and the vile laws of culture! shrink your mental mud, man! and leak your brains! die dog! but we don't want your lousy bones giving anthropomorphic overtones to our graves! Entropic Demiurge! build an earth mound! piss on it! dry and wet, man! dry and wet!

Or we could turn to Theaster Gates’ place in the Black Arts tradition, or Laurie Jo Reynolds’ within social practice art, by reading the ethical messiness of their distinctive forms of direct engagement with political power against the Dubuffet-cum-Smithsonesque necromancy and sedimented sense of place in the work of Carrie Mae Weems, say, or Glenn Ligon, or
Tameka Norris, or against the airy naïveté of the sanguine futurism and cosmopolitan placelessness in that of Rirkrit Tiravanija or Sharon Hayes or Bruce High Quality Foundation.

The point of seeking out these differences would not be to deny influence or seed incongruity where there need be none, of course, but instead to look for the there there—for the living matter of history rather than the dead antimatter of past as place or future as placelessness—that Schjeldahl sketched thirty years ago. Along the way such an art history might provide the means to disentangle ourselves just a bit from fabulations not of our own making and see the art of our own world-city and its place in the global economy for what it is, what it has been, and what it might become.

In so doing we might envision Chicagoization beyond Schjeldahl to be less about our midwest maturescence and more about the international artworld’s surfacing from its smug financialized and consumerized provincialism with a dawning appreciation for our unique labor consciousness, our uncommonly diversified economy and grounded cost of living, our distinctively rich political history—that is, with something like the flash of insight that drove the original artworld moves to Montmartre, SoHo, or East Berlin. Indeed, if we were really bold we might even see our “darkly rooted worldview” itself as the seed—or, better, the fertilizer, the funk and filth, the there there—for what a new international capital of the artworld might become.