HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Crafting Community, Caressing Form: An Interview with Lisi Raskin

By David Marcus on June 22, 2014

Lisi Raskin, "Command & Control" (2008), paper, foam, wood, latex and acrylic paint, 2000 square feet (all images courtesy of the artist and Churner and Churner)

For more than a decade artist Lisi Raskin has been making works that investigate sites of foreign and domestic conflict, particularly those associated with the Cold War. Her projects have included handmade reimaginings of military structures and paraphernalia, an itinerant exploration of America's atomic laboratories and missile silos, and a photojournalistic inquiry into the elaborate underground bunker of former Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito. In 2013 Raskin received a Creative Time Global Residency to research war memorials in Afghanistan and Vietnam. This spring she had two simultaneous exhibitions: *Recuperative Tactics,* which transformed Art in General into a space for collaborative creation and discussion, and *Mutual Immanence,* an exhibition of abstract wood assemblages at Churner and Churner. After attending "Actionable Items," a forum held at Art in General on the topic of invisible labor in the art world, I met with Raskin to discuss her current artistic involvements. The following exchange, which took place over email, elaborates on the topics of that discussion.

David Markus: *Given that your installation at Art in General grew out of a targeted research project one might have expected work that more overtly references the topics of that research. Instead you've created a space that is largely geared toward fostering dialogue around the conditions of artmaking itself. How have your recent experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere shifted your practice? In what ways does the new work reflect the original objectives of your*

trip?

Lisi Raskin: In earlier installations I was engaged with remaking things like Nazi-issue pistols and weapon control panels. Then Jens Ullrich, an artist I met in Berlin in 2010, told me that his parents, who were anti-nuclear activists in the 1980′s, had a recurring disagreement: his father argued that if the goal was to abolish nuclear weapons, it made no sense to continue making representations of them for protest signs. His story made me start to think about the images and objects I was producing, in terms of their relationship to my own politics and ethics. It became clear that remaking objects I wished didn't exist wasn't going to bring me closer to seeing what I wanted in the world.

In 2012, though, when Laura Raicovich approached me about the Creative Time Global Residency, my 'career' opportunities were still riding on the fumes of the momentum I started in 2001 when I moved to New York. I regularly received invitations to go to post-conflict sites to reimagine devastation. I told Laura that I wanted to stop reenacting that model of research; I believed repeating those patterns would lead to the same results. Secretly, I was making paintings by tenderly reassembling fragments from previous installations whose themes were all based on nuclear war and annihilation. I was thinking about the failures of my installations to communicate my feelings about war and conflict, and wondering whether I could use materiality and form to shape new intentions. Most of the objects that I showed at Churner and Churner this past spring in *Mutual Immanence* originated during that time.

Going to Afghanistan, I knew that I had no fucking idea what I would learn. I was aware of my ignorance, yet I was repeatedly humbled by it. I wanted to embrace that, though–I wanted to embrace the fact that I was afraid for the wrong reasons, that we had been deliberately misled by neoliberal propaganda. So, to answer your question directly, *Recuperative*

Tactics takes up the original aims of my trip to Afghanistan in that I used the form of the installation the same way I used the form of the research trip: to envision new moves through the lens of my ignorance and unearned privilege. I want to especially acknowledge that these changes in my artistic practice and thinking have been hugely supported by a continued dialogue with [Raskin's partner and fellow artist] Kim Charles Kay, whose perspective challenges me to do better and think harder.

Foreground: Participants gather to talk and make during a Saturday session of Crafter Hours. Background: Art works made

during Saturday sessions displayed on the palette wall. This series of events is part of Lisi Raskin's Recuperative Tactics, Art in General, April 26, 2014 (photograph by Steven Probert)

DM: *Recuperation, in this sense, would seem to involve wresting uncertainty from an institutional structure geared toward reproducing models of "successful" projects, ones that contribute to the individual culture maker's brand, even when the work engages broader social issues. In the past, you've problematized authorial intent through fictional personas that you place in conversation with "Lisi Raskin." With Recuperative Tactics you've taken things further, not only by handing over a portion of the space to Kim to curate, or to "warm," as she says, but also by inviting people into the space—as you did with "Crafter Hours"—to contribute to the installation as you're creating it. How would you describe your current relationship to the problem of authorship?*

LR: Over the course of inviting people into the space to contribute to the installation, I came to see the problem of authorship as specific to our field. I learned this in conversation with Emily Coppell, who organized the Girls Write Now exhibition that I helped facilitate as part of *Recuperative Tactics*. Before I met with her, I was terrified that the brand of "Lisi Raskin" would swoop in and subsume authorship of this incredible event. The conclusion that I reached through my series of conversations with Emily, though, was that people who do direct service could give a fuck about singular authorship; their concern is with collective action. It's more important that the thing they are working on gets accomplished. Collaborating with Girls Write Now taught me that the way normative capitalist forces attempt to shape competition for singular authorship — by putting pressure on makers to conform to that model — can be averted; you just have to think it through.

Lisbett Rodriguez introduces her project at Girls Write Now, WRITE / CODE / SPEAK, Interactive Media Showcase hosted by Lisi Raskin and Art in General as part of Recuperative Tactics, May 3, 2014 (photograph by Elene Damenia)

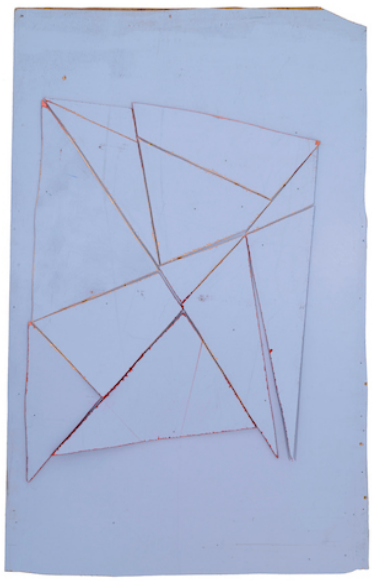
I think that my current relationship to the problem of authorship is the same as my relationship to a lot

of problems that are byproducts of liberal white privilege: I view them as red herrings, distractions from the real value of the work, which for me has always been in the doing, whether it is a studio practice or a large-scale installation with programming and performances.

DM: *It's interesting that your recent experiences have taken you toward abstraction, which, in the American context at least, is often associated with the type of artist mythology you're working to undermine. Perhaps this irony points to the saturation of certain types of representational art that attempt to deal with global realities. I'm curious about the ways you see your non-representational work resisting the reinstatement of hierarchies conventionally associated with the commercial art world. We spoke, for example, about the diminutive scale of some of the works, their dedicational titles, and your reliance on "strategic ineptitude."*

LR: In thinking about these shows, I am most concerned with the hierarchies that subjugate our social world and the way those trickle down to affect relationships and interactions in the art world. I talk about whiteness, unearned privilege, gender, labor, and class to interrupt a pattern of collusion with systems of hegemonic power. This is a response to the call from feminists of color for white feminists to look closely at our own behavior. To do that, I have to

think about the nature of the viewing systems that are a part of that oppression, and then I have to carefully select the information that I push through whatever viewing system I choose to implement.



Lisi Raskin, "Diamond and Nails" (2013), acrylic paint, nails, and wood, 52 1/2 x 34 inches

Models of abstraction that interest me are present in the practices of artists like Jessica Dickinson, Stanley Whitney, Blinky Palermo, Emma Kunz, and Hilma af Klimt. They use abstraction to communicate palpable intention, whether that takes the form of temporal, contemplative, formal,

invitational, spiritual, or healing investigation.

Abstraction also helps me move into spaces that are open to different kinds of viewing / seeing / making / reading / thinking. bell hooks has spoken of the need for widespread critical literacy to consume pop cultural images. We can't assume images are neutral, and we have to be aware that the forces of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy are at work in our viewing systems. Taking up hooks's call, I have to take responsibility for the fact that I have been trained in normative, subjugating modes of image making. No matter what images I choose to portray, I am guilty of producing the same colonizing images. Using abstract wooden constructions in my work offers a more open-ended system of viewing—one that may be loaded with various white male signifiers, but one I believe is more subversive than representational image production.

DM: *What sort of resonances do you find with what David Getsy and Jennifer Doyle have recently referred to as "queer formalism"—that is, a type of work that, although nonfigurative, nevertheless provokes considerations of corporeality, sexuality, and gender in ways that defy normativity? Maybe you could also say something about how the title of your show, Mutual Immanence, relates to these concerns.*

LR: *My paintings are a translation of the ways my body interacts with its surroundings, both queer and normative. It's hard for me to make work "about" my gender and sexuality without thinking or theorizing too much – theorizing gender and sexuality is very different from performing or experiencing them somatically – but when I assemble paintings in a pre- reflective space, that space is probably closest to my experience of the way my actual body interacts with the normative and non-normative worlds. I can track the micro-moments of that tension and use them to make artwork. So I can relate to what Getsy and Doyle are talking about, and for me queering formalism has been about dropping the seedlings of my own constellation, an ever-changing constellation, into this form called abstraction, which has been used to conceal and reveal all kinds of things. In abstraction, I have ways of seeing, thinking, and making that resist systematization. For me, abstraction is a queer language that I speak a little differently each time I use it.*

Lisi Raskin, "Untitled [painting for AS]" (2013), acrylic paint, oil paint, latex paint, paper, archival glue, screws, nails, and wood, 36 1/2 x 44 inches

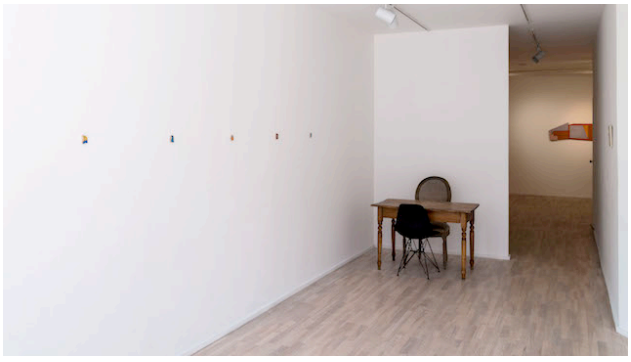
I chose the title *Mutual Immanence* not just as an argument against binary thinking, but also to call attention to how systems of power and resistance—and the ways they influence our interactions with individuals and objects—are all working simultaneously. I mean for the title to signal that this new work does not exist outside of its context. Kant would have us believe that it is possible to separate a work of art from its context, but I disagree. Craig Wilkins writes beautifully about this. The diminutive scale of some of the works, their dedicational nature, and my own desire to resist the systematized making of my own work (what I've termed strategic ineptitude, or the practice of making a series of intuitive decisions that may have a disharmonious relationship with one another)—these elements also exist simultaneously.

Many of these tensions with maintaining the status quo are relevant in your work, David. I don't think of myself as the expert in this exchange. I know your own thinking straddles the worlds of literature, art, politics, and aesthetics. Can you talk about how current trends in academia put pressure on you to define your research, and what the ramifications of that have been for you?

DM: *In this age of "austerity," in which tenure is a dwindling prospect and humanities departments are being shuttered, there is a strong push toward "professionalization," which too often means homogenization. I consider myself fortunate to have had mentors who have encouraged me to pursue work that doesn't readily conform to prescribed discourses. But there are those who would consider such encouragement irresponsible.*

The hardships endured by many adjunct lecturers, who now make up the majority of faculty members nationwide, is another effect of universities modeling themselves on corporations, and this state of affairs is mirrored in exaggerated ways by the reprehensible labor practices that we have seen adopted by American institutions abroad. These issues obviously intersect with those addressed during the "Actionable Items" discussion. Could you say more about the place that labor relations has assumed in your thought and work?

LR: What you say about "irresponsible" pursuits resonates with me; part of my interest in exploring labor relations stems from the fact that I, too, am aware of having had the privilege to follow unconventional or risky career advice.



Installation shot of Lisi Raskin's "Untitled (for DN)" 1-5 (2014), acrylic paint, paper, and wood, dimensions variable

Making my installations has always required assistance, but only after two extreme experiences of observing the labor conditions created by installing my work in biennales in Singapore and Istanbul did I begin examining the situation at home. I don't mean that I began to compare the plight of the guest worker in Singapore to that of the underpaid art handler or unpaid intern in the US, so much as that I began to understand that labor relations are all fraught with inequity. I'm at the beginning of formulating my thinking about this but I am working to acknowledge my place in the puzzle and to make the ethics of my projects as transparent as possible. But it's hard. That's part of why I needed to create the community programming: I have a lot to learn, and I need community. The programs were a way of focusing my thinking and building my own network to support doing that work. Since you were there at the "Actionable Items" public program, and you were vocal, I'm curious: what was your take on it?

DM: *It definitely affirmed how hard it is to think through, let alone to manifest, a genuinely critical artistic practice. This was positive, in my view, since the art community can sometimes become mired in a sort of self-congratulatory liberal consensus that obscures underlying problems. I think a discussion about ethics in the context of art has to in some way reflect on the contradictions we face as participants in a cultural sector that, for all its political fervency, remains inextricable from an exploitative economic system. In however incipient a way, "Actionable Items" managed this. I guess the question to ask now is, what's the next stage for you in this new beginning?*

LR: Moving forward, it will be important for me to continue to work toward making the internal ethics of my projects as congruent as possible with the ideas we have discussed in this interview. A large part of this requires that I honestly confront my own biases so that I can shift them. From this vantage point, I can see a forward path that includes continuing to build community around these ideas. I am also excited to have conversations with the makers I

admire about the politics of abstraction and how to rewrite the discourse around painting, phenomenology, and ontology so that it relies less on an essentialist language that falsely "universalizes" everything in its path. I am also looking forward to reading Paul Chan's recent book, as I've been carrying it around for weeks now. What about you?

DM: *My big project, the one I'm trying to get a degree for, centers on the traditionally conflicted relationship between art and love—or "creation" and "relation," as Adrienne Rich would have it. After this conversation one thing I'd like to do is start looking at more abstract art again.*

LR: Actually, after this conversation, I think I'm going to read some more Adrienne Rich. I'm going to read "Dream of a Common Language."