



The Stagehand's Unseen
Kelly Kaczynski

Preview: September 9th, 2010, 7-10pm
Live music by Bill MacKay and Conrad Freiburg
Opening Reception: September 10th, 2010, 6pm
Artist Talk: September 30th, 2010, 6pm

Kelly Kaczynski: Staging the Un-Scene

by Annika Marie

Allow me to begin with this disclosure: Kelly Kaczynski and I are friends. We are the most unlikely of friends, however, and professionally, in the realm of contemporary art discourse, we surely must represent each other's pestilential adversary. In our cartoon versions, she feels things, I think things; she smiles a sunny, touchy-feely ditsy-poetics and I frown a frigid, joy-eviscerating over-intellectualism. Indeed, one of our most agonizing shared experiences was an ill-fated, but well-intentioned venture at a Third Critique reading group. Kaczynski's approach had something to do with collecting Kant's references to flora and fauna and pointing out the oddities of eighteenth century



Untitled (Found Mountain, Second Beach), 2007

natural science, I concentrated on the sorts of things that could be cross-referenced with the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy. These sessions (of which there were blessedly only two) effectuated this sole judgment: Kant Schmant. For if ever Kaczynski and I have seen eye to eye, it has been thanks not to a universal faculty of Aesthetic Reason, but to our mutual capacity for quantities of alcohol. So why then, as Kaczynski's

nightmare interlocutor, did the artist ask me to write for this exhibition? Certainly this was not a safe choice, and it may well end up having been a mistake. For all that, it is no accident; it fits the artist's formal logic. If Kaczynski's recurring thematic is stages and staging, what she stages are dualisms—strong, clean, oppositional. That she has scripted even this backstage scene on the lines of a fierce antithesis between artist-maker and writer-critic and cast the roles as such, is a matter of principled consistency.

One need not look particularly hard or deep to abstract this pattern from Kaczynski's oeuvre. There are mountains and holes, piling and digging, up above and down below, crushing together and pulling apart, two dimensions and three, formidable monumentality and sparrow-like delicacy, whimsical poetry and solid craftsmanship, the actor on the stage and spectator in the audience. For the last two manifestations of Kaczynski's on-going conceptual play *Olympus Manger* there has been the literal doubling of the physical stage-constructions themselves. Taken further, but less concretely, the notion of "stages" itself breaks down dually, into the stage as synchronic, static and delimited space and the stage as diachronic, successive shift and development. If one were to marry this to Kaczynski's penchant for nature metaphors it might translate into the difference between the stage as still life arrangement (nature mort, akin to the work shown here, *The Stagehand's Unseen*) and stages like progressive positions achieved through a landscape (hiking on a trail, akin to *A [long] Freedom [with Scott Tiede, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2002]*). To my mind, this is what is outstanding in Kaczynski: she is a severe formalist, a dispassionate structuralist.

But this is a reading quite contrary to Kaczynski's typical reception. What is more common is philo-poetic fluff-fluff: that her stages welcome viewers to participate in something, with that something doubtless involving reinvigorating viewers' access to the ontological, epistemological, phenomenological, and so on, and with apparent commendation given to the artist for the bounty of poetic ambiguity and generous semantic easing.



Olympus Manger, 2006

These were certainly the sorts of handles used for the “stage” prior to *The Stagehand’s Unseen*. “Olympus Manger,” Scene II (2008) at the Hyde Park Art Center consisted of two heroic-scale wooden stages, each with its own Vladimir Tatlin Monument to the Third International-inspired tower. The two stages were initially set at twenty feet apart but connected through a system of ropes and pulleys. Visitors could mount the stages and pull on the ropes, and the cumulative action of all these individual tugs was the gradual closing in of these tower-like mountains on each other, eventually resulting in their collision. (The non-actor option was to sit on the bleachers.) The participatory rhetoric was that visitors were presented with the opportunity to ascend the stage, and through their own precious-individual-agency-cum-mighty-collective-action were creating this spectacular event, were the motor behind this monumental work, could indeed move mountains.



produced a Spartacus. And what all of this collective effort is towards is a single predetermined outcome—to crush, to collapse, to bring down the very symbol that has stood for the power and possibility of people’s agency. It is no Hegelian *aufhebung*, but primitive tug-of-war. People working with each other (collectivity) in order to work against each other (opposition) in order to work against themselves (alienation). For me, none of this was a problem in the work; indeed, what I valued was what I took to be its Manichean starkness, its formal absoluteness, its staging of agency in such stingy—one might even say structurally cruel—terms.

If the reception of Kaczynski’s work has been a little wanting, I would say that probably comes from her stages not fitting into the scene, the

art scene here in Chicago—but no doubt elsewhere as well. Kaczynski as an art practitioner educated in the late twentieth century well knows the narrative of modern and contemporary sculpture—it moved off its autonomizing, aggrandizing, museumifying pedestal and through notions like that of Beuysian social sculpture got its feet somewhat nearer the ground. Updating this a bit further, and taking into account revolutions in communications technology,



Olympus Manger, Scene II, 2008

namely the Internet and its impact of the distribution of information and the formation of social networks, the more current term for marking the scene of creative activity is the “platform”; Chicago apparently is a city that abounds in these. Platforms bring people and resources together, they are about sharing and distributing ideas and materials. Platforms are open, their content is the combinatorial multifariousness of its actors, who appear to act without script or director. In other words, platforms host. Tatlin’s tower—had it been realized in its intended form as a communications hub for the distribution of information and for its intended communist society—would have been a platform. “Olympus Manger,” Scene II becomes a scene of not a

little psychoanalytic perversity: Kaczynski has carefully, even elegantly, staged the destruction of the mother of all platforms.

The Stagehand's Unseen makes for an interesting following scene. Lingering just one second more on the analyst's couch, Olympus Manger raised a lot of issues—for having achieved that symbolic killing of the father, Kaczynski was still left with nagging questions of authority. I would argue that The Stagehand's Unseen is the staging of the dilemma of audience agency and artistic authority, of the tension between the pedestal and the platform, of what happens when the stage can no longer support the drama of the “stagehand's” conflicted identity. (Is the stagehand the anonymous worker? the laborers hired to install? the creative peers enlisted to dig holes? the witting or unwitting viewer-participants? Or is the stagehand the ultimate designer, an Absolute God?) And that the posing of all of this is done formally through the elements of size and scale. For one, the dual stages of the ThreeWalls installation can only ever “improperly” inhabit these galleries; in order to fit physically they have to be tilted or stacked, which of course does something to their status functionally. Equally, their scale to the viewer is awkward, ungainly. Though described as models for stages whose actual dimensions would be twenty-four feet high, four feet wide and forty-eight feet long, they are too big to be mere models; but also they are too small to be the thing itself. In short, the actors will not fit on the stage and the audience is not sure what it is looking at. All of this raises the very good question: to whom or what are these scaled? My guess: they are scaled to the artist herself and in her quandary over what part to play next—whether she will accept the role of hostess or insist on the role of maker?

Annika Marie is Assistant Professor of Art History in the Art + Design Department at Columbia College Chicago. She has served as a visiting critic, contributed essays for exhibition catalogues, written art criticism for publications like Art issues and X-tra, and curated exhibitions, the most recent being the College Art Association selected and sponsored exhibition “Picturing the Studio,” at the Sullivan Galleries of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (December 2009-February 2010). In 2010, her essay “Action Painting Fourfold: Harold Rosenberg and an Arena in Which to Act” was published in *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists* (University of Chicago Press). In addition, she holds the position of historian and archivist for The Poor Farm, an alternative arts space and residency program in Manawa, Wisconsin. In July 2010, she organized a “Performance Festschrift” for Moira Roth in honor of her 77th birthday at the Poor Farm. That event included contributions from, among others, Linda Nochlin, Pauline Oliveros, Dinh Q. Le, Lucy Lippard, Martha Rosler, and Faith Ringgold.

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Movers

Chris Hammes
David Moré
Rusty Shackelford
Maxwell Wilson

Diggers

Clare Britt
Billy Conner
Brendan Crich
Audrey Hynes
Leonardo Kaplan
Jacob Kart
Davida Newman (not pictured)
Gabriel Noel
Laura Pawson (not pictured)
Daniel Shea

Colin Matthes (video)

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