

Pelican

"To make this show, Levi Easterbrooks and I met in the gallery fairly regularly, guessing that something exhibitable would arise out of our occupation. This was mostly a nighttime activity. We began photographing our attempts at an exhibition, like artworks I thought could be shown or a few minutes where I unnoticed something on the wall. These photos were made in dim conditions which revealed, through the camera, scenes beyond the thresholds of our vision."¹

Jason Hirata and I produced *Pelican*, his solo exhibition at Svetlana, in the nighttime. Our work happened in the day as well, of course, but the night was instrumental in the construction of the artworks on display. Our nights, and the artworks they enabled, were experienced through the physical effects and social materials that encompassed our work and its settings. This was not romantic disordered darkness, though it may become erotic. It all depends on how much is disclosed.

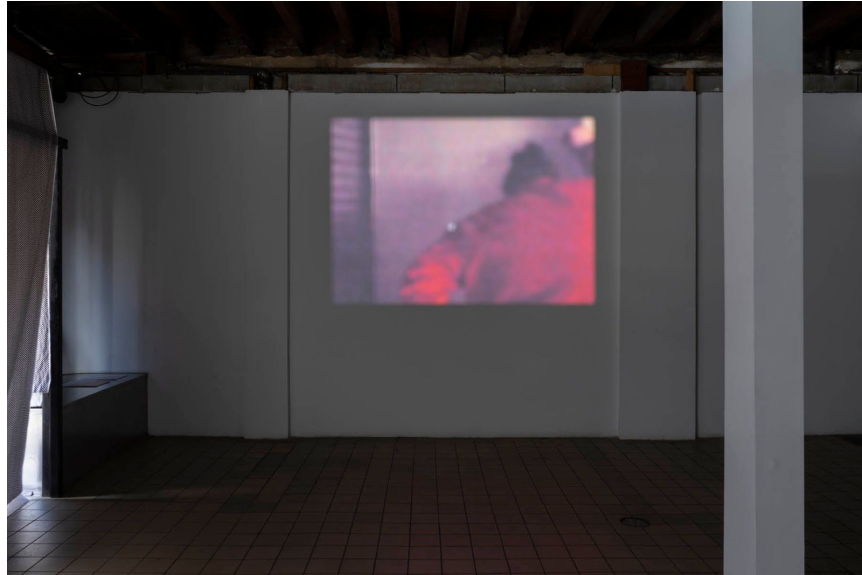
During the nights prior to the opening of the exhibition, Hirata and I made a number of photographs. They were taken inside of the gallery with its metal gates lowered to cover the street-facing windows and doors. This produced an interior darkness laden with the effects of the gallery's operational closure: a rigid protection of property and non-disclosure during production. Small imperfections in the gates did allow slim threads of street light to cut through and prick the walls. Hirata's past artworks have overexposed rooms with artificial lighting, invoking the history of illumination as a tool of state security and labor management. Under the cold throw of these ancillary police eyes, categories of space, property, and people have been codified in light.² The street lamps outside exposed images that we tried to apprehend from shadows.

Hirata divulges a sliver of what passed opaquely inside the black box of our production through his press release. "We began photographing our attempts at an exhibition, like artworks I thought could be shown or a few minutes where I unnoticed something on the wall."³ There was more. A reproduction of those social and material processes is bastardized, made thin and opaque, and forcefully unfocused by the work *IIII* (2019), a blurred slideshow containing these photographs. There are seven stills, each lasting about thirty seconds while digitally projected on a wall. A blue-green picture. An interior picture with red and white spheres. An architectural picture. An interior picture with green, blue, orange, and pink. A picture of a rectangle with holes. An orange picture. And the picture below:

¹ Jason Hirata, *Pelican*, 2019, <http://svetlanagallery.com/2019/jason-hirata/2019-hirata-pr.pdf>.

² Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "The Street," in *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Angela Davies (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: The University of California Press, 1988), 79-134. Hirata's *Les Misérables* (2016-2018) is especially relevant here. For the work, four Hyperikon LED corn bulbs are mounted on custom aluminum light fixtures bearing traces of candle wax, and hardwired into the circuitry of an exhibition space. It is difficult to look at directly without burning a cloudy afterimage into one's retinas.

³ Jason Hirata, *Pelican*.



The majority of these are night pictures and necessarily court indecipherability as images of darkened subjects “beyond the thresholds of our vision.”⁴ Low light even strains the eyes of photographic mechanisms and introduces noise, a parasite on clarity, into the making of pictures. A grain on the surface of our images was produced by this straining mechanical sight. It is a haze frustrating to desires for explicative exactitude in photographs. Through a fog, approximation is delivered instead.

Process fetishism and the pretense of transparency still loom despite this murk. Recollections of our night work may be instructive insofar as they elaborate the conditions that determined the exhibition’s visual form. However, an unclouded transmission of those determining factors (in other words: *process*) would be anti-materialist in its proximity to the documentary forms of empiricism.⁵ This work looks skeptically towards its making, materially questioning the composition and delivery of its primitive traces. There are few empirical truths to be gleaned from the images of our time together. The photographs that constitute *////* are given a secondary blur by their projector. Held somewhere between a divulgence of process and the dissolution of its images, these pictures softly float with edges bleeding. Discernable content toggles in and out of clarity. Only uncertainties are disclosed.

“Declarations of content and intention become declarations of appearance, as revealing as they are misleading. An image emerges between black and white, the left channel and the right, taking over until we are unaware of anything but interstitial greys.”⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Peter Gidal, “Fetishism of Process,” in *Materialist Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), 33-35.

⁶ Terre Thaemlitz, “Interstices,” in *Nuisance* (Vienna: Zaglossus, 2016), 85. Thaemlitz’s work was a methodological reference during the development of *Pelican*. Her video productions and writings on issues of non-essentialist transgenderism and queerness, identity politics, the analytical deployment of social materialism in the field of commercial media production, and the structural anti-leftism of art were influential.

A range of greys, its non-essentializing span between polarities, is necessarily difficult in relation to solidified identity or total absence. It is interstitial and infrathin. The images projected in *////* torque searching eyes in the blur between content and its lack. Anecdotally, they have induced light nausea in a few friends during the run of the exhibition. Still, there are recognizable certainties that persist through the work's deliberate unfocusing.

Running at irregular intervals between the series of seven still images, a short video featuring the interior of multiple clock faces plays. Roman numerals, reversed but still identifiable, cut through the fuzz like declarative text. X, V, IIII... These provide the only coherent symbols in an otherwise boggy field of representation. The clarity they grant is familiar and simple. They provide an organizing principle. One that our written emphasis on night work has already suggested by other means. The darkness of night, like the waged days that often preceded them during our preparation for the exhibition, is managed through its calculability in time and often exposure to light. In spite of the expository drive that produces the dominant usage of our clocks and cameras, the diffusion of unwaged night work and innumerable activities under the sign of "reproduction" often exceed their calculative efforts.

In *Mural of a Cockroaches Eye* (2019), Hirata has painted a different sort of processing machine for *Pelican*. Certainly one more fine-tuned to a host of sighted operations that exceed our particular visual abilities at night. Applied directly onto white walls in black acrylic are five depictions of an American cockroach eye at varying scales.

Even in extreme low light, the photoreceptors in a compound roach eye are capable of processing light stimuli at a level that our vision could never approach without prosthetic tools. This is due to their capacity for photon reception which remains exceptionally high in what might seem like the non-existence of light.⁷ For the roach, undifferentiated pools of black can pulse with light data. Photography might not be the appropriate analogue for their perceptual analyses. We were likely clocked through their lenses, sized up and then avoided or approached during our nights. While Hirata and I stalked each other with a masturbatory fixation on the secretions of our shuttered work, our contours were certainly measured for reasons unknown to us. Roach eyes made different sorts of nocturnes.

During the show's opening hours, light modulation is necessary to provide adequate conditions for the slide projection and its sampled nocturnal effects. *Corner* (2019), a foldable foam core wall, softens the blow of reflected sun through the front windows to these ends. Like a set of eyelids, the artwork regulates gallery light intake. Excessive illumination would be damaging or indecipherable to the gallery eye.

⁷ Anna Honkanen et al. "Cockroach optomotor responses below single photon level," *Journal of Experimental Biology* 217 (2014): 4262-4268; doi: 10.1242/jeb.112425.

The disarticulated body parts of the exhibition are gathered together again in the artwork *Standoff* (2015). It is a doll of a popular sitcom character affixed to the wall.⁸ Little ribbons choke it at the shins, ribs, and throat. Its head is covered by a tight plastic mesh. The scaled-down human figure remains trussed and bound in its original packaging with tissue paper fluttering in front of its face, blinkering its hand-painted eyes. Instead of clear reproductions or other normative progeny, Hirata offers this *Pelican* child. For an exhibition and body of artworks that face so inwardly, *Standoff* provides a possible detour outwards by introducing a third character with unknown social ties. Its obligations are uncertain, but any escapes it may offer are subject to the bonds that remain fixed to gallery walls.

“I used to play a game with myself where I’d find something that was just barely noticeable, then look at it until it disappeared. Later, in some kind of a reversal, I learned how to make photographs. My interest in undertaking these activities has declined over time—I almost never do either unless asked.”⁹

Jason Hirata asked me to curate this exhibition for him. Half or more of the ideas in the show are his. I assisted where I could, but he is the artist and this is his solo show. *Pelican* leaves that relation between us to hover across the surfaces of Svetlana, somewhere between its reproduction through photography and its disappearance into night.

Levi Easterbrooks

⁸ The sitcom character is Sheldon Cooper of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019). Neither Hirata nor I have watched the show.

⁹ Jason Hirata, *Pelican*.