



Hotel Bars

Situated in a street level suite of the Bonaventure Hotel, *Interval* contains a two-channel film work set in Siberia and the Yukon, with an original score by Mitchell Akiyama, and seven photographs taken in the field and laminated as decals on the interior-facing storefront. A final element on the checklist would be the building itself. For theorist Frederic Jameson the Bonaventure Hotel “is emblematic of the emergence of the third stage of capitalism, the postmodern or the multinational.” And yet, if Hartt’s project carries an assumption of these conditions—which are the immediate conditions on the ground in Los Angeles—it immediately underscores just how bygone Jameson’s theory of emergence now seems. A different idea of the multinational surfaces in Hartt’s work.

Suite 201 is a former flower shop overlooking the hotel atrium. Jameson famously described this atrium as a populist *gesamtkunstwerk*, a playground for the advanced consumer complete with a vertical promenade serviced by the high-speed elevators that connect the revolving cocktail lounge above to the subterranean lake and bar at the reception below. The interior dimensions reflect a short-lived 1970s aesthetic freed of the utopian aspiration of modernists—Le Corbusier for Jameson, but Gropius, Breuer and many others could be added. By comparison, Bonaventure architect John Portman sought an ideal with fewer constraints. He blended public and commercial enclosure to elucidate what Jameson called hybrid or postmodern space. In his reading, this architecture represents the migration of social trends to a new market ideology.

Buildings of this type introduced a new language into reigning international styles. To borrow from Jameson, they “no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign-system of the surrounding city, but rather, on the contrary, [they] seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax.” Instead of visionary geometry, we have the reified reworked pragmatism of shopping-mall space multiplied in a cement matrix. Yet the porousness of personal, public and “commercial sign-systems,” notoriously evident in Los Angeles, has universal consequences as Jameson sees it. And the effects on the individual are delirious: “this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment ... can stand as the symbol and analog of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communication network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.”

Surely, many embrace this commercial sign-system and communication network three decades later with a zeal Jameson would likely see as reinforcing his critique. Whether we agree or not that our collective environs are more advanced than our social minds, Jameson’s point is well-taken. How do we map or mark our place in the ‘multinational communication network’ that places us everywhere and nowhere on the globe, simultaneously? Hartt finds in this “dilemma” optimism about the potential for “caught individual subjects” to assert forms of being and existence in light of an imposing and “decentered communication network.” In the early-eighties Jameson casts this new modern era as built on an “alarming disjunction” suggesting nearly incontrovertible power relations for the average person. Conversely, Hartt evidences his optimism when he writes that, “My choice in subjects and sites is reflective of an attempt to represent a full spectrum of ideological potentials.” Hartt perceives these potentials as in constant flux, moving rapidly between the objects and the people that shape his chosen sites.

According to Hartt, while he “calls for a new form of artistic practice in cognitive mapping,” Jameson’s critique “fails to acknowledge the emergence of a third kind, beings whose hybrid ethnography is as deracinated as the spaces they inhabit.” Perhaps Jameson was wrong and most people moving through Portman’s promenades¹ have long been ahead of the dystopian curve of capitalism represented by his architecture. Instead of framing the Bonaventure as an antechamber of neoliberal ideology, and therefore a shadow of a former modernism, or a simulation of the future turned into one developer’s aborted artistic journey, Hartt sees it a starting point for creative inhabitation. It is architecture that reconfigures the body’s relation to the landscape of capital in comprehensive terms. To Hartt, “the site not only references the history of Southern California architecture and the post-Fordist landscape that Los Angeles embodies, this deliberate siting attempts to annex the possibilities of architecture in a potentially post-ideological time.”

This is where the artist differs from the theorist: by moving ideological thinking from the scholar’s periphery to the participant’s movements through the confines of an icon like the Bonaventure, a less totalizing formalism emerges. The installation designates a formal domain outside the white cube – specifically, the immediate surroundings of the famous lobby; a place where inanimate things

function as social beings. Amidst the decorum and kitsch that fills any hotel, Hartt inserts an interval or “spatial displacement” of international proportions. In the process, the artist aligns the ideological thinking he gleans from Jameson with his more microscopically attended politics.

Other Moderns

Hartt goes further afield than the Bonaventure to locate other breaks from modernism’s utopian strains of architecture. In *Interval*, he turns to the frontiers of Siberia



and Canada, conflating Siberia to Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) and Canada to Glenn Gould (1932-1982), each of whom influenced the artist’s choice of filming locations. Chekhov lived on Sakhalin island mid-1891 to perform a self-guided census that became an expository account of inhumane Siberian prison camps. *Sakhalin Island* is Chekhov’s only work of nonfiction. It is considered a masterpiece of investigative journalism by many today. Glenn Gould, an artist known best as a pianist, made “The Idea of North” as an experimental radio-play for the CBC in 1967. This first part of the “Solitude Trilogy” is a tapestry of testimonies by Northern Canadian workers. It recasts isolated employees as explorers in their own right. Travelers, whether laborers or academics, paint Canada’s arctic climes in the real yet magical terms of individuals who have endured extended periods away from civilization and are wiser because of it. The arctic literally and figuratively represents the ends of personal or political ambitions for these northern citizens.

“My interest,” writes Hartt, “in using these two locations has as much to do with Gould and Chekhov as it does with each site’s conceptual potential as a marginal geography with a singularly focused economy. Both figures, who were at the height of their respective careers, found it necessary to find subjects on the periphery of their individual societies in order to find the critical distance to comment on the center.”

Studied Weakness

Here, the mechanics of found art gives way to found places. Hartt, you might say, trades the mechanics of “found art” for one of “found places.” In this sense, the Bonaventure is also treated as a found relic. Even in the film, it is evident that Hartt’s chosen sites are often interstitial. As such, another notion might be useful: Boris Groys’ “weak universalism” suggests an art mirroring a world without icons or even iconoclasts, where “weak signs” have

triumphed against, “strong signs of authority, tradition, and power, but also strong signs of revolt, desire, heroism, or shock.” Against, say, the nineteenth century, colonialist appropriations of discovered nations and communities and lands, Hartt’s “found places” conform to this sort of “weak universalism.” The Bonaventure, in this sense, has become a weak sign—a selfsame city within itself. Few buildings would seem a better example. As we can see in his chosen subjects, Hartt, like Groys, accepts this weakened state as central to the demands of capitalism. Attenuated signs are the result of expedience and a certain refusal of collective memory that an ever-increasing rate

margins without the least trace of foreboding. On these frontiers the fact that there are more and more of what Groys calls “weak signs” to come—cultures whose art and fashions are more mutable with each generation. As Groys describes visual culture today: “We almost automatically see everything that exists and everything that merges from the perspective of its impending decline and disappearance.” *Interval* channels an awareness of how things stick around after they have “disappeared.”

Up close in these occasionally unremarkable seeming sites, we are confronted by inhabitants with none of the diminished or advanced symptoms of economic progression that Groys describes. *Interval*, in this sense, celebrates an anti-humanist sentiment: its images suggest that art long ago abandoned its eternal pretense and academically bracketed enclosures. As a kind of Realism, the nonetheless optimistic reflection offered by *Interval* looks for the changeability residing in these so-called weak signs. It’s through this changeability – more precisely, amidst those living in the neighborhoods and structures he pictures, in the people who play host to the anti-human symbols Groys reads as weak signs – that Hartt finds an extant power.

Part of what this changeability could mean in practice came up in a conversation Hartt conducted with Darby English in 2013. Hartt placed his work, here, within the wayward canon of drifters who found their subjects on the margins of society, where modernism was perhaps, at its best, because an incomplete utopia had become a hybrid sociality. This is something he compared to the Situationist *dérive* and lifted for his own twenty-first-century plot. Hartt calls upon these drifters as originators of artistic inquiry. The artist reveals that the urbanist practices of the Situationists “came from a very different place than my own, but they allowed me to think of a practice as a form of inquiry within a broader cultural situation. I find this hugely important. I’m similarly prompted to develop a practice from a sense of being overwhelmed by history. There is a need not to tear down but to reinvent or remap one’s own experience onto an existing infrastructure.”

One Situationist that Hartt occasionally mentions is the painter turned visionary architect, Constant Nieuwenhuys. Constant took from painting the modernist notion of grafting experience upon the canvas. Inspired by gypsies in need of moveable architectures in new sites, Constant dreamed of “a camp for nomads on a planetary scale,” unencumbered by modern administration or what he called a “utilitarian society.” Constant’s text “New Babylon” envisions the future of architecture and design as preexisting infrastructure facilitating an endless *dérive*. Abandonment and production are indistinguishable counterparts for Constant. Freedom from the rule of the time clock is his first key to achieving this changeability. Human ingenuity will proceed at the expense of bureaucratic utility. As Constant writes of New Babylon, his ludic society, “With productive work disappearing, collective timekeeping has no more *raison d’être*, the masses will, on the other hand, have a considerable amount of *free time*.” Hartt replaces Constant’s use of the canvas with what he calls infrastructure, of which there is a great deal on view in *Interval*.

A simpler way to describe “weak signs” would be to say that the signs and symbols informing culture work differently in a post-labor society. The objects and environs in the film are representative of a general condition in society of time unmoored, of life happening in a specific place without specific function. This is, a world in which the distinction of work and leisure has been lost. In the act of simultaneously viewing Los Angeles, Sakhalin and Whitehorse, *Interval* suggests a confluence of ideological flows or “weak signs” found there, a positive degradation of world culture, moving towards the type of post-mercantilism Constant dreamed of in the 1960s.

Drifting North

What might be the scale of this society that Constant dreamed of? Working on the fringe of western development, *Interval* follows artwork that addressed a wilderness so large, that they are nearly planetary in scale. Returning to Chekhov and Gould, *Interval* is set against the backdrop of two artists’ work that influenced Hartt because they saw “it necessary to find subjects on the periphery of their individual societies in order to find the critical distance to comment on the center.” In both Chekhov and Gould, we are taken to places so remote that time seems uprooted or inhuman. Individuals and characters introduced by Gould and Chekhov traveled to Sakhalin or Whitehorse found their lives uprooted. But in being deracinated they also found an exceptional clarity about the society they had left behind. In Siberia and the Canadian north, a bureaucratic administration paralleled a kind of mongrelism that flourishes on the periphery. Hartt contrasts the center and the periphery, then, not only in retracing this distance but with comparisons between the current era to an earlier modernism – between the moment of Jameson’s Postmodernity, quaint as it seems today, and our ongoing posterity which has followed in the twenty-first century. Earlier modernisms, found in Chekhov and Gould, explain how workers prepared these vast reaches for generations to come. In following their dynamic appreciation of alternate histories, Hartt makes it apparent in a contemporary way that countries of this

scale are still worked and manipulated differently on their boundaries. The frontier still functions as a kind of mirror or hindsight where the truth about a place can be seen as though in advance. Time bends and bureaucratic administration does with it. New practices emerge that irrevocably change how the artist thinks of their respective countries.

In this sense, watching the video, we are set in alternate Wests. Images in *Interval* follow a flow laid before the wanderer. Frames composing the montage are not signifiers in the usual sense; they are identifiers. You may think of them functioning like a compass. Objects and architectures are governed by the north of their own peculiar magnetism in a specific location. Each scene has cardinal features, as would a forest or a coastline unique to its situated climate. Added to nature are also the attributes of production that create the built environment, whether it is a parking lot, a shopping center, an alleyway, a skate park or a dancehall. Each composite environment appears in a varying stage of disrepair. All point back to the empires to which they belong. *Interval*, shows the cultural residue and social production of space eclipsing the societies they are intended to privilege.

This dynamic between rapidly integrating worlds and cultures comes up occasionally in contemporary visual art. It is what curator Okwui Enwezor earlier in his career called the “Mirror’s Edge.” This remapping of visual art that Enwezor helped spur was revisited in a statement of purpose introducing his 56th Venice Biennale: “The ruptures that surround and abound around every corner of the global landscape today recall the evanescent debris of previous catastrophes piled at the feet of the angel of history in [Paul Klee’s] *Angelus Novus*.” Again, an invocation of a “global landscape” starts with a work central to modern art, famously theorized by Walter Benjamin. Conversely, in *Interval*, wasteland conditions of internal colonization separate its aims from the canonical retreats synonymous with contemporary art. While approaching similar sentiments, it is not the galactic fallout Klee anticipated in 1920. Rather it is the work of two modernists who defied their art at borderlines that announce the future. And if a global consciousness may still be sought by engaged artists, for Hartt, these general notions of rupture alluded to by Enwezor are refined by a specificity of place.

Interval also has its own ethnographic character as well. Hartt brings us to the frontiers of both Canada and Russia to face, however obliquely, the changing shape of modern ideologies. Like Gould and Chekhov, Hartt finds a poetry in the wayward if ongoing plans of the colonizers. However faceless or nameless the present authors of Empire or globalization may be, the images in *Interval* capture design features that continue to shape the landscape seemingly everywhere from without—while also clearly being made use of by locals. These imperial divinations ensure a Sakhalin or a Whitehorse is not an expression of its insularity or arctic propinquity alone. Thinking of the north, peripherality comes down to how this subarctic town in Canada incorporates nordicity and, conversely, how the Pacific island on the Sea of Okhotsk defies a slice of Siberia as separate from its own reaches. *Interval* is an artwork about remoteness everywhere, in short. It is a container of worldviews informed by the ulterior course taken by the artist at margins first introduced to him by other artists—frontiers that became familiar coasts and trail ways. Naturally, this affinity includes wayward journeys taken by Hartt’s chosen subjects, paths of found objects that began long before him, and before even Chekhov and Gould.

Reading through Chekhov’s letters and the descriptions found in *Sakhalin Island*, his research leading up to the ethnography follows the arc of reform. He will take path of exiled prisoners—of those sent to the Zabaikal Region. This land beyond, between Lake Baikal and the Chinese border, served as an ideological hinge in Russia. Reaching this Archimedean point, in many regards, defines Chekhov’s artistic purposes.

Though incomparable to contemporary economic conditions or exiles, Hartt is looking at these past artists’ chosen sites in order to highlight today’s unsustainable system. But, again, this unsustainability includes new potential within it. Hartt returns to these frontiers to capture the images that exist only in Sakhalin, even if they seem unremarkable or replaceable. They do so living under the reign of a market system as populations supposedly liberated by a free-market ethos, those who live under the (weak) signs of post-Communist Russia. Given the reach and imperfections of this economy, and its link to global capitalism, *Interval* allows for a reflection upon what sort of hinge this mythical place remains and what of the old Zabaikal remains in the reformed.

Just as Jameson made a talisman out of the Bonaventure and the sociality of Los Angeles, the fragments of Sakhalin society seen in *Interval* carry their own unsuspecting weight. The idea that “commodities, like persons, have social lives,” according to Arjun Appadurai, comes to life in each frame. When Hartt relates that only through traveling to the margins can the center be critiqued, the insight echoes Chekhov’s journey to Sakhalin: it isolates a land where an empire abandoned humane pretenses, where the instrumentalization of prisoners made anthropocentrism obsolete. It was a place where

subjugating the land for the good of the empire came before the necessity of human beings to express the semblance of a worldview beyond exile. That ideology, as we know, would be cast increasingly to service the material conditions of empire.

With this as an influence, *Interval* confirms that, “meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is through analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things,” to return to Appadurai’s estimation of so-called late-capitalism. In short, if the margin best

the center. Perhaps that is why images in this installation seem poised, as though they are channeling voices yet to be heard, searching for actions untaken, where new colonies emerge and perish every moment. Hartt’s “hybrid beings” bide their time in unremarkable things and capitalist mega-images like the Bonaventure stand as totems outliving their singular prehistories.

Matthew Schum



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Score

Composed by Mitchell Akiyama

Drums, Percussion: Joe Sorbara

Piano: Tania Gill

Contra-Basso Clairinet: Peter Lutet

Upright Bass: Scott Peterson

Recorded at Sackville Studios, Toronto

Studio engineer: Leon Taheny

Sakhalin Crew

Alexandra Sasha Don, Sergei Zimin, Yulia Grankova, Vitaly Dzyin,

Oleg Betsman, Victoria Savenkova, Vyacheslav Frolov, Ivan Rybanyan

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¹A dominant set of recurrent motivations held collectively by a social group sharing features over time. Because ideology has been such a contested term and because it has been reduced to jargon in art writing from time to time, it seems necessary to outline a simple definition, especially because it is a key to understanding Hartt’s formal aspirations in my estimation. Based on commonly accepted abstractions, ideology has the capacity to anticipate or explain artistic trends, political eras and economic movements that renew class struggle or ensure harmony.

²Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 1983-1998 (New York: Verso, 1998), 21.

³Ibid., 25.

⁴Hartt’s unpublished artist statement for *Interval*.

⁵For a recent account see “Chekhov’s Beautiful Nonfiction” by Akhil Sharma published online by *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2015 at <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/chekhovs-beautiful-nonfiction> (accessed March, 2015).

⁶Boris Groys, *Going Public*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 107.

⁷Ibid., 108.

⁸Like Groys, Hartt’s work suggests that regenerations of society be approached through distanciation, as though places and objects were born of their own ingenuity, in terms that can seem incommensurate with humanity. Each in place as though announcing their own singularity and future.

⁹Ibid., 108-109.

¹⁰Darby English, “The Windmill is not the Giant: David Hartt in Conversation with Darby English,” in *Sriny Light*, (Chicago: Columbia College Chicago Press, 2013), 61-62.

¹¹For more see Constant, *For an Architecture of Situation*, (Haag: Gemeentemuseum, 1974).

¹²In 2000 Enwezor curated a show of 30 international artists at the tip of the northern hemisphere at the Bildmuseet, Umea, Sweden; see *Frisee* (Issue 51, March-April 2000), 71.

¹³Okwui Enwezor, *All the World’s Future: Statements of Curator of the 56th International Art Exhibition*, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/exhibition/enwezor/> (retrieved March, 2015).

¹⁴Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), 392.

¹⁵Arjun Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

¹⁶Ibid., 5.

¹⁷English, 75-76.

