

David Hartt *Negative Space / the Last Poet*

February 28 – May 19, 2018

Opening Reception
& Artists Talk
March 8, 6:30 – 8:30PM

PHILADELPHIA
PHOTO
ARTS CENTER





Artifact
2017
Aluminum, polycarbonate,
steel chains
29.5 X 14.5 x 9.5 inches

David Hartt

— Biography

David Hartt creates work that unpacks the social, cultural, and economic complexities of his various subjects. He explores how historic ideas and ideals persist or transform over time.

Born in Montréal in 1967, he lives and works in Philadelphia where he is an Assistant Professor, in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. He has an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA from the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Ottawa.

His recent solo exhibitions include *in the forest* at the Graham Foundation in Chicago and *Negative Space* at Galerie Thomas Schulte in Berlin. His work has been included in several recent group exhibitions including *Ocean of Images: New Photography* 2015 at The Museum of Modern Art, *America Is Hard to See* at the Whitney Museum of American Art and *Shine a light/Surgir de l'ombre: Canadian Biennial* at the National Gallery of Canada

His work is in the public collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, The Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa and The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Hartt is the recipient of a 2015 Foundation for Contemporary Art Grant, in 2012 he was named a United States Artists Cruz Fellow and in 2011 he received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award.

He is represented by Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, David Nolan Gallery, New York City and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin.



Frank
2017
Archival pigment print mounted
to Dibond and framed
Print size 30 x 45 inches



Negative Space II
2017
Archival pigment print mounted
to Dibond and framed
Print size 30 x 45 inches

Deriving Through an American Megalopolis: — David Hartt's *Negative Space/ The Last Poet*

By Meg Onli

During a road trip from New York to his beach home on Captiva Island off the coast of Florida, Robert Rauschenberg began taking a series of photographs documenting the changing American landscape. Shot in 1980, but not completed until 1991, Rauschenberg's *Photem Series* captures an America made up of unmarked buildings, eccentric state attractions, and idiosyncratic signage.

These totemic assemblages represent a collage of the eastern seaboard, blurring any geographical boundaries. In this series place is no place in particular. In *Photem Series #1* (1981), Rauschenberg vertically stacks three photographs, all depicting handmade advertisements. The assemblage is comical, with the base made up of a photograph of a pet store fitfully called "The Mut Hut," complete with cardboard cutouts of a Rough Collie, a German Shorthair Pointer, and an Airedale Terrier. This image is juxtaposed with a stenciled advertisement for bed pins boasting, "Make a bed in 15 sec." Between the two, a cropped photograph that reads "Bob's Hand" depicts a God-like hand pointing to the right. The critic Mark Johnstone commented of the series, "There is attention to surfaces, evidence of many ethnic ghettos, signs of widely differing lifestyles, ironic and humorous visual juxtapositions—in short, all the characteristics producing an ephemeral sense of moving through the landscape."^[1]

The landscapes Rauschenberg was moving through were those of an America at the tail end of the Cold War and on the brink of a decade shaped by the policies of Ronald Reagan's presidency.

In the summer of 2016, the Philadelphia-based artist David Hartt (b. 1967 Montréal) embarked on a residency hosted by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in Captiva and traveled a similar path from Boston to Atlanta. Hartt's new body of photographs, sculptures, and film, *Negative Space / the Last Poet*, is the culmination of that trip and captures a dramatically altered America thirty-six years after Rauschenberg's constructions. In *Negative Space / the Last Poet*, Hartt creates a psychogeographical portrait of America in the throes of "late-capitalism." It depicts a country marked by absurd economic disparities that have led to the shrinking of the middle class, the (metaphorical) flatlining of wages,^[2] a reversal of urban to suburban migration, the marginalization of industry due to automation and globalization, and the impending changes on the environment caused by a warming planet. In many ways, *Negative Space / the Last Poet* is a portrait that is largely unrecognizable from the one Rauschenberg captured. In direct contrast to Johnstone's remarks on the uniqueness of the American landscape, Hartt's project features a homogenous megalopolis shaped by corporate chains that can be found in just about any city no matter the size or demographic.

David Hartt's practice, which has recently examined Moshe Safdie's unfinished 1968 project Habitat Puerto Rico (*in the forest*, 2017); Joseph P. Overton's conservative think tank, The Mackinac Center for Public Policy (*Belvedere*, 2014); and remote locations from the northern Canadian town of Whitehorse to the island of Sakhalin, which sits within both the Japanese archipelago and Russia (*Interval*, 2015), investigates the particularities of place and the communities that shape and are shaped by these locations. In many ways, he is interested in a type of vernacular utopia "where the ideal has been forced to morph and adjust to the reality of the surrounding imperfect world."^[3]

The film *the Last Poet* anchors this exhibition. Shot via a drone—a technology developed by the military that has been repackaged as a hobbyist's toy—the film begins with a quote from Samuel Delaney's landmark post-apocalyptic book, *Dhalgren* (1975):

There are times, as I wander in this abysmal mist, when these streets seem to underpin all the capitals of the world. At others, I confess, the whole place seems a pointless and ugly mistake, with no relation to what I know as civilization, better obliterated than abandoned.^[4]

Set in the city of Bellona, a fictional American city that has been isolated from the rest of the country due to an unknown catastrophe, *Dhalgren* follows the Kid, an amnesiac poet making his way through the city's spatial and temporal labyrinth. One could argue that Bellona itself is the central character, taking on a sentient quality throughout the book. *Dhalgren* is a complex novel whose summary far exceeds this essay's scope, but it is an important reference to understanding the Last Poet. With a setting of the "not-so-distant" future, the book was a response to the social and political turmoil of the 1960s—some believe Detroit to be the model for Bellona—while also being an example of a science fiction novel that shunned technology-centric tropes. Instead, *Dhalgren* utilizes Bellona's urban wasteland to look at how communities exist once a society has collapsed. Hartt's quotation of *Dhalgren* at the start of *the Last Poet* provides a stark entrance into his portrait of our current political moment. I couldn't help but think back to President Trump's inaugural speech, in which he spoke of an era of "American Carnage."^[5]

The "American Carnage" Trump speaks of is one of white supremacist fantasies. In contrast, *the Last Poet* is soberly narrated by the political scientist Francis Fukuyama. (Hartt's interview with Fukuyama was conducted leading up to the 2016 election.) Fukuyama is best known for his book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which cited liberal capitalist democracies as the future of global powers. This theory has since been proven wrong. As we encounter ports, bridges, and cityscapes in the film, Fukuyama explains his research on liberal democracies (seen primarily in the U.S. and European Union) and their disorder since 2008's global economic downturn. Unlike the globally-minded politician he first theorized in the 90s, we are now met with states-people who favor populism and a renewed interest in state sovereignty, recently exemplified by Brexit. As Fukuyama laments, "democracy does not always produce the best leaders" nor is it the best tool for fixing the world's problems.

Fukuyama's original pronouncement for "the end of history" is rather poetic. Hartt keenly draws this out with a bookending quote from the South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile's "Towards a Walk in the Sun." The poem, which provided the name for the seminal group of black nationalist poets and musicians The Last Poets, tells Kgositsile's imagining of being the final poet in history. I am intrigued by Hartt's marrying of Delany, Kgositsile, and Fukuyama in order to tell the story of our current political age. In my own imagining, this narrative could be read as an apocalyptic tale triggered by the failures of liberal democracy. Our protagonist, a former political scientist, has been recast as society's last poetic voice.

But that is not the narrative that unfolds. Although central to the film, Fukuyama, like the Kid, is not the protagonist of the Last Poet. Instead, the central character is the Eastern seaboard. All of Hartt's projects have been able to animate built environments, and these cityscapes, with their gridded developments and manicured nature—a product, as Fukuyama points out, of Modernism—are seemingly endless. I am particularly interested in how the viewer is directed through this sprawling landscape. This is accomplished with a wonderful score by the New York City-based composer Daniel Givens and through the eerie movements of the camera. After several viewings I began focusing on the mechanical gestures of the drone—at various times hovering over residential cul-de-sacs, slowly rising over construction sites, and moving with short bursts of acceleration as if tracking a target. Hartt's camerawork disturbingly highlights our constant surveillance, be it the tracking done via cellphone towers or the recordings made by security cameras. Rather than being a paranoid fantasy of science fiction, being tracked at all times has become the norm. In his previous body of work, *Stray Light* (2011), which explored the Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago, Hartt positioned his filming and editing methods within the tradition of the Situationist practice of a *dérive*. Guy Debord defined a *dérive* in *Internationale Situationniste* #1 as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. The term also designates a specific uninterrupted period of *dériving*."^[6] Moving throughout an urban space, one's path is directed solely by the structures themselves. The *dérive* of *the Last Poet* is made through the viewers' psychological impressions of the architectural structures.

When viewing the Last Poet, I cannot help but think of the growing muddiness of borders, even at a time when politicians seek to reinforce them. In the Last Poet, it is as if one is *dériving* through a spatial labyrinth where everything looks vaguely familiar and unfamiliar at once. I found myself often trying to find exact locations by way of freeway signage or Googling city skylines for comparison, questioning: is this Hartford, CT or Spartanburg, SC? Oddly enough, the chain restaurant Denny's became the most constant landmark that I could find, indicative of the road trip nature of this project. This disorientation and homogeneity is exactly the point. This is no longer the time of "widely differing lifestyles and ironic and humorous visual juxtapositions," but instead one of designed ubiquity. So, what can be recouped?

Towards the end of the Last Poet, Fukuyama acknowledges that America is greatly shaped by a frontier mentality— an ideology that is not only outdated but also hazardous to the environment and ourselves. This is seen in Americans' disinterest in living with the ruins of previous generations. Fukuyama states: "We haven't gotten to a place in the United States where we have a deep historical sense of ourselves where even the broken things are preserved for their own sake. I think that Americans still want to start all over again." In response, Hartt has created several sculptures of telephone booths—two of which appear in the Philadelphia Photo Arts Center's staging—that position the booths as artifacts that should be preserved. *Artifact I, II, and III* (all constructed in 2017 and at varying scales) are modeled after the BN300A design for public telephones. Despite cellular technology, the BN300A is an artifact that we currently live with while often overlooking its presence. In many ways, it actively bridges a past lived untethered by the computers in our pockets to our current reality. With this gesture, Hartt's *Negative Space / the Last Poet* signals an era not defined by "carnage," but by reevaluation and recuperation.

[1] "Rauschenberg: Art and Life." *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, by Mary Lynn. Kotz, Abrams, 2004, p. 232.

[2] For more information on wage stagnation see the Economic Policy Institute: Mishel, Lawrence. "Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts." Economic Policy Institute, 6 Jan. 2016, www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/.

[3] Hartt, David, and Markus Miessen. *David Hartt: Belvedere*. Los Angeles: Dominica, 2014. Print.

[4] Delany, Samuel R. *Dhalgren*. Gollancz, 2010, p. 354.

[5] Trump, Donald J. "The Inaugural Address." *The White House*, The United States Government, 20 Jan. 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/.

[6] Debord, Guy. "Internationale Situationniste #1 (June 1958)." Situationist International Online. N.p., n.d. Web. Originally published in June, 1958

Meg Onli Biography

Meg Onli is the Assistant Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. Her recent exhibition *Speech/Acts* explores experimental black poetry and how the social and cultural constructs of language have shaped black American experiences. Prior to joining Institute of Contemporary Art she was the Program Coordinator at the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. While at the Graham Foundation she worked on the exhibitions *Architecture of Independence: African Modernism and Barbara Kasten: Stages*. In 2010 she created the website *Black Visual Archive* for which she was awarded a 2012 Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. In 2014 she was the recipient of a research grant from the Graham Foundation for the collaborative project *Remaking the Black Metropolis: Contemporary Art, Urbanity, and Blackness in America* with curator Jamilee Polson Lacy. Onli holds a Master's degree in art history from the Courtauld Institute of Art. Her writing has appeared in *Art21*, *Daily Serving*, and *Art Papers*.



Daniel
2017
Archival pigment print mounted
to Dibond and framed
Print size 30 x 45 inches



Negative Space I
2017
Archival pigment print mounted
to Dibond and framed
Print size 30 x 45 inches



Negative Space III
2017
Archival pigment print mounted
to Dibond and framed
Print size 30 x 45 inches



Artifact (Installation shot
inside Galerie Thomas Schulte)
2017
Aluminum, polycarbonate, spray paint
59 x 29 x 19 inches

Production still from
the film *The Last Poet*
2017
HD Video file - Duration 22:20
Score by Daniel Givens
Narration by Francis Fukuyama



Production still from
the film *The Last Poet*
2017
HD Video file - Duration 22:20
Score by Daniel Givens
Narration by Francis Fukuyama





Production stills from
the film *The Last Poet*
2017
HD Video file - Duration 22:20
Score by Daniel Givens
Narration by Francis Fukuyama



David Hartt: Negative Space / The Last Poet Panel Discussion & Reception

Wednesday, February 28
6 – 7:30PM

Philadelphia Photo Arts Center
1400 N American Street

Panelists

David Hartt

Peter Barberie, Brodsky Curator of Photographs, Alfred Stieglitz Center,
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Meg Onli, Assistant Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

The genesis of Hartt's film and photographic series are photographs by Robert Rauschenberg documenting his journey along the East Coast of the United States. Hartt repeated Rauschenberg's journey using a drone camera. The landscape shows an extreme concentration and stratification of wealth and power on the one hand and the marginalization and displacement of industry and the emergent precarity of environmental catastrophe on the other.

This exhibition is made possible with the generous support
of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Pennsylvania
Council on the Arts, and Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Production still from
the film *The Last Poet*
2017
HD Video file - Duration 22:20
Score by Daniel Givens
Narration by Francis Fukuyama



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