

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Wha Happened?* by Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins
January 10 to February 9, 2008

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

And Now for the Music and Dancing

By Jess Atwood Gibson

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.

Walter Benjamin.

Wha Happened? is a question. Like the question in a comic book after something has been blown to smithereens, it implies a recent disaster.

In Daniel Borins and Jennifer Marman's exhibit, something does indeed seem to have been fragmented and imploded, causing a mass-collision,

crossing wires and jarring layers of meaning. *Wha Happened?* throws down a gauntlet of aliens, pop stars, explosions, typefaces, terrorists, Renaissance and Baroque re-phrasings, propaganda, sex-toys, modernism, and apes. When considered in the context of Marman and Borins's post-minimal, interactive large-scale sculptural work, this exhibit initially appears cacophonous. Yet ultimately *Wha Happened?* functions not as a collection of independent utterances, but rather as a total installation within which each work is a link, or a clue.

So, what has happened?

The exhibit title echoes a fictitious television show within Christopher Guest's 2003 film *A Mighty Wind* — a fake documentary about fake folk music — that revolves around the phrase "Wha Happened," thus giving us a subtle nudge: perhaps a hint that we are not to wait for a world of stable facts or absolute truth and falsehood. Here, half-fiction nests within fiction like a Russian doll within a doll.

The first thing that has happened in the exhibit's title piece is that the painting has fallen off the wall. The fallen painting — of a mid-century abstract variety — has slid off its canvas support and lies in a Dalí-esque skin against the floor, looking vandalized. This is one of Marman and Borins's numerous polemical tugs at the history of art: the exploding modernist house from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* is another, as are the Helvetica typeface; the play on Michelangelo's *Pieta* in *PiETa*; and the echoes of Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Cornaro Chapel* in *Untitled* (the Munich terrorist). In this omnivorous digestion of cultural material, the icons of art history are equal to iconic political moments, pop albums, and consumer commodities: all are considered as material now

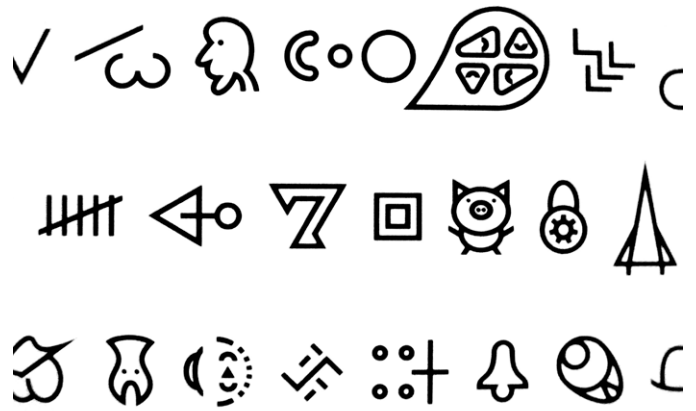


Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, installation view of *Wha Happened?*, 2007

strung into new chains.

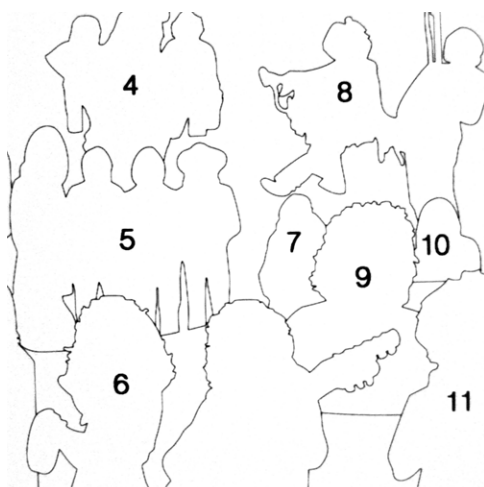
Wha Happened? (the fallen painting) also sets up Borins and Marman's signature absurdity: a humour that glorifies the inane while daring us to laugh in the face of a cultural and political world that is, despite the guffaws, pessimistic, confused and sinister. While the artists doggedly embrace the absurd and the chaotic, at the basis of their project is a deeply serious engagement with cultural meaning and media images. Scrambling but also laying bare the ideological power of the source material they choose, Marman and Borins reset propaganda, politics, and pop culture as elements within a mutable language. This structural approach to the image is proclaimed in the several works in this show that allude to the making of languages: the photograph *Alien Rosetta Stone* presents itself as an undeciphered Rosetta stone for the age of graffiti tags and emoticons. Actual symbols, arranged in an Interfaith circle, appear as the backdrop to the *PiETa*. Systems of decoding, image-reading, and cataloguing, meanwhile, are seen in the schematic diagrams of *Hairy Rockers and Hairy Minimalists*, in which the hirsute musicians and artists are labeled in miniature outline for easy identification. In the *Crawl Space* and *Death Trap* images, which are based on American media diagrams of Saddam Hussein's hiding place and terrorist caves, the source graphics are stripped of the identifying text that would decode them and are rendered as formal studies — an abstraction of propaganda.

Preoccupied with how we make and read images, Borins and Marman also pull hard on the seams that stitch our symbolism together. Meaning-making is revealed as inherently unstable and capricious: there is no such thing as a stable icon. In *Double Negative*, for example, a sex-toy in the shape of the raised fist



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Alien Rosetta Stone*, lambda print, 2007

associated with civil rights activists — famously with Tommie Smith and John Carlos's Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics — is paired with the Helvetica font. The fist rises up out of a polished black shelf, perplexingly signaling both the fist of power and the fisting of sex. Its pair, a gleaming white shelf on which sits the monumental Helvetica typeface — the sans-serif font invented in 1957 that rapidly became omnipresent in official, bureaucratic applications because of its legible simplicity — characteristically both illuminates and complicates things further. Both the fist and the font are iconic symbols, in their ways, yet the former originates in an intentionally charged political context, while the latter comes from a design context overtly intending neutrality. Yet, in cultural practice, they've been flipped: since its inception, Helvetica has triumphed in its quiet practicality, ubiquitously spelling out corporate and governmental power. In contrast, the Black Power salute's political heft has slipped, the symbol now problematically commodified as a sex object. The paradox here is



- 6. Led Zeppelin
- 7. Ron Pigpen McKernan
- 8. The Who
- 9. Jerry Garcia
- 10. Brent Mydland



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail images of *Hairy Rockers and Hairy Minimalists*, diptych, lambda print, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *They Live*, lambda print, 2007

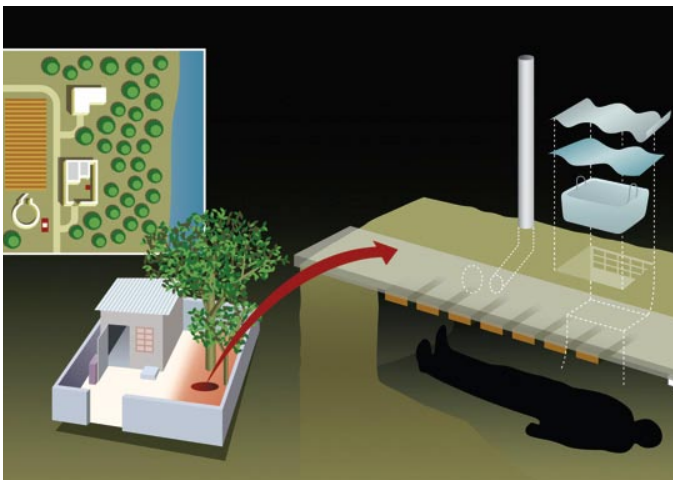
that *Double Negative* does not present an alternative to the shiny, high-polish display system: both shelves are meticulously fabricated, and thus both court and expose a commodity status that borders on fetish.

In the event that we had missed the cacophonous double-speak of media language or were under the impression that we weren't trapped within a closed system, the artists provide us with another clue in the form of *They Live*, a graphically recreated frame-grab from the eponymous 1988 cult movie. The movie, a critique of Thatcher and Regan-era neo-conservatives, proposes that aliens disguised as yuppies are controlling the impoverished populace through subliminal advertising messages visible only through special sunglasses. The image that Marman and Borins have recreated shows the subliminal control revealed, a cityscape rife with orders to consume, obey, conform.

They Live, although digitally redrawn, presents one of the least altered source-images in the exhibit:

along with *Zabriskie*, it is allowed to retain the thrust of its own point. In contrast, the photos *Momento Monkey* and *PiETa* stage elaborate photographic meetings between fictitious film characters, splitting them from their narratives to recast them in new contexts. Neither of these photographs is digitally created: the *PiETa* documents a 2007 sculptural installation, while *Momento Monkey* is a carefully staged tableau. In *Momento Monkey*, Marman and Borins have orchestrated a confrontation between the apes of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and those of *Planet of the Apes*. Both of these 1968 films raise questions about technology, progress and conflict. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, apes find a mysterious monolith and begin to use tools which are rapidly transformed into weapons. In *Planet of the Apes*, humans have destroyed their own civilization and have been replaced by a fiercely hierarchical culture of intelligent apes. In placing these two sets of film apes together, Borins and Marman are marshalling entire narratives, spin-offs, and the exegesis of fan fiction (as well as referring to their own *Palinode* video installation which features the *Space Odyssey* apes discovering the world Trade Center Towers in the place of the alien monolith). *PiETa* similarly functions as the sequel to an earlier narrative installation: the alien Pieta of ET and Yoda which appeared first in Marman and Borins's *Event Horizon* of 2007 has now been recreated as a pseudo-altarpiece in which ET cradles a prone Yoda, his glowing healing finger poised to resurrect.

In a larger context, the narrative multitudes of *Momento Monkey* and *PiETa* raise questions of technology, 'civilization', religion and violence. Both images, moreover, complicate the initial legibility of



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Crawl Space*, lambda print, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Death Trap*, diptych, lambda print, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *piETa*, lambda print, 2007

pop-cultural figures such as ET by placing them in new, hyper-coded contexts. These premises prepare firm ground for the transition to *Wha Happened?*'s main sculptural groupings.

Borins and Marman's use of popular cultural icons is a polemical one. In *Untitled (Louis F. Polk)*, the artists have focused on the explosion at the end of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*, creating a diptych that combines several of the film's original explosion shots into a mirror image of almost abstract destruction, the picture plane split and peeled apart from itself. The diptych is accompanied by a found photo of *Zabriskie Point*, and by a shelf on which the viewer can play the separate elements of

the soundtrack: either the explosion, or Pink Floyd's film score. Accompanying the diptych is a video in which two airplanes spell out "Fuck You America" in the sky. According to popular legend, Antonioni had intended to include such a scene in his film, but was prevented from doing so by the director of MGM Studios, Louis F. Polk. Antonioni's film, with its anti-establishment critique of bourgeois capitalism, is a portrayal of idealistic radical politics; arguably a movement that, at the time of the film, was waning. Marman and Borins's *Untitled (Louis F. Polk)* reinserts the contentious excised scene as a counterpoint to the anarchy of the exploding modernist villa.

Now let's move on to the music and dancing.

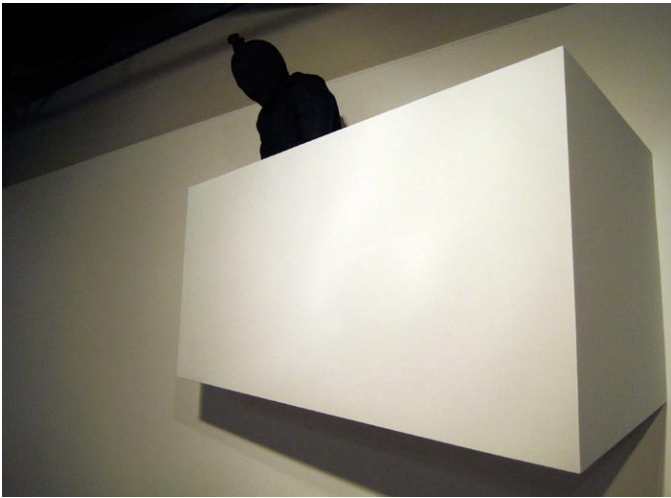
The *Michael Jackson Dance Floor* exhibits Marman and Borins's characteristic interest in interactivity. The floor, on which viewers are intended to stand, lights up and plays samples from Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean'. With the slightest nod to the ghost of Andy Warhol's *Dance Diagrams*, this dancing machine is controlled by the viewer, whose foot pressure activates the sound clips. It also, however, dictates the viewer's set of possible foot movements (not without a certain irony, as Michael Jackson was known for his fluid and ground-breaking dance moves). Sharing the red carpet is a vitrine housing artifacts stringing together associations between music, the body, and technology: a pair of LA Gear Michael Jackson running shoes; "The Man-Machine" 1978 Kraftwerk album whose record cover is modeled on Russian Constructivism yet was attacked for its fascist colour scheme; and the BeeGee's keyboard model used by Kraftwerk on their album tour. These objects seem to provide a historical and conceptual context for the *Dancefloor*, an exhibit of carefully loose clues.



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Momento Monkey*, lambda print, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Untitled (Louis F. Polk)*, mixed media, 2005–2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, *Untitled*, mixed media, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Double Negative*, mixed media, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, detail of *Double Negative*, mixed media, 2007

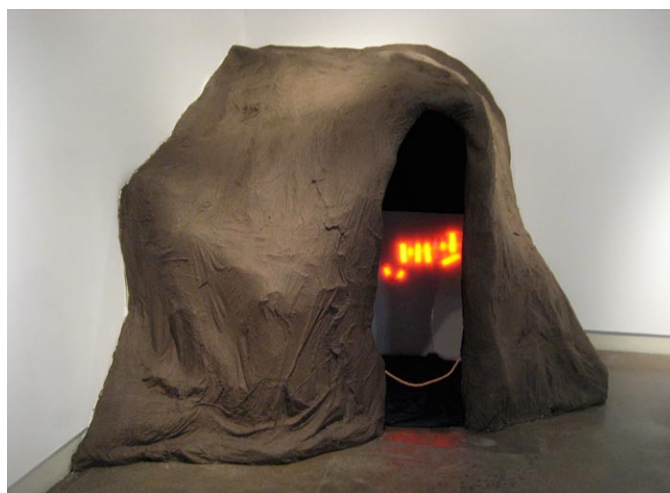
But then we take the next step: on a balcony overlooking the installation is a sculpture recreating a Black September terrorist at the Munich Olympics' 1972 hostage crisis. Facing the *PiEa*, with a view onto the *Dancefloor*, the sculpture returns the now iconic news photograph to three dimensions. The balcony, however, also conjures up one of the most famous sculptural groups of the Baroque period: Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Cornaro Chapel*. Bernini's sculpture is notable for expanding across the real space of the chapel by depicting the Cornaro family leaning out of their box seats to view the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*. Like the balcony in Bernini's chapel, the privileged viewing position of the terrorist on the balcony activates the space of the room, surveying, for example, the viewers dancing on the playful *Michael Jackson Dance Floor* in an ominous shadow of famous nightclub bombings.

The *Dance Floor* is not in Los Angeles anymore, Toto. Rather, it is at least partially in the contemporary Middle East, as signaled by the *Jihad Cave*, the *Afghan War Rug* and the *Crawl Space* and *Death Trap* prints. The *War Rug* is another of Marman and Borins's curated artifacts: Afghani weavers began incorporating war motifs into rugs in the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion, and have continued to chronicle military violence, including the 2002 American-led attack. This war rug is not such a simple object, however, for it has looped back upon itself and appears to commemorate and glorify the invasion, aiming itself at a US audience.

American military bravado and depictions of the 'enemy' are the models for *Crawl Space* and *Death Trap*. Both images re-draw propagandistic media diagrams: *Crawl Space* presents an almost architectural rendering of Saddam Hussein's hiding-place complete with a bird's-eye view, topiary for added verisimilitude, and Hussein as a featureless blank mannequin. *Death Trap* shows a cross-section of a supposed terrorist cave inhabited by equally faceless figures reclining like Odalisques under a triumphant constellation of American missiles. Without the text that would name the weapons and describe the arsenals in comic-book stat-obsessed detail, the blunt, monosyllabic point of these pictures falls with a dumb thud: anonymous bad-guys, big bombs, hidey-holes ("Smoke 'Em Out" and "Bring It On"). There is another essential point, however: these pictures are stripped bare of narrative in order to be presented for their formal qualities, as seen especially in *Death*

Trap's abstract companion piece. This formal attention is anything but neutral. Like *Double Negative*, in which the Helvetica font's ubiquity is politicized, *Death Trap* and *Crawl Space* insist on a type of formal finish inextricably linked to capital, power, aggression.

Once we've begun to gather the clues we can suddenly see that Marman and Borins are hammering their point home with a vengeance. Framed by *Crawl Space* and *Death Trap* and recalling a museum diorama, the *Jihad Cave* is delicately partitioned with a glitzy gold cord. The cave contains a glowing proclamation of its supposed use: 'Jihad' scripted in red neon-lit letters on a white ground. The word Jihad, however, is presented in the same font and layout as Michael Jackson's *Bad* album, conveniently displayed nearby. A riff, initially, on the multiple meanings of the word 'Bad,' the layout's equation also functions as an acerbic send-up of the Bush Administration's infamous attempts to frame America's current war within simplistic, wild-west moral terms as a battle between 'Good Guys' and 'Bad Guys.' Part of the challenge *Jihad Cave* proffers is the total refusal to treat pop music and propaganda as separate spheres. We laugh, perhaps because we're made uncomfortable, as we are by dancing under the scrutiny of the Black September Terrorist. But, in their affront to 'earnestness' the artists are deadly serious.



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, *Jihad Cave*, mixed media, 2007



Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, *Michael Jackson Bad*, found object

About the Artists

Toronto based Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins have had a collaborative sculpture, installation and media art practice since 2000. They have exhibited internationally, including exhibitions at Art Santa Fe, in Sao Paulo, at the University of Toronto, the Toronto International Art Fair and the Toronto Sculpture Garden. Most recently, they presented work in Toronto's 2007 Nuit Blanche and at the National Gallery of Canada. Upcoming projects include a public sculpture commission for Downsview subway station and in the fall of 2008 they will participate in a group exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada and present a solo show at Diaz Contemporary in Toronto.

About the Writer

Jess Atwood Gibson is currently finishing her PhD in Art History at Yale University on Zero, a post-Second World War European artists' group.

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

56 Ossington Avenue, Toronto ON M6J 2Y7
T 416.645.1066 **F** 416.645.1681 **E** info@gallerytpw.ca
 Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm

THE ONTARIO
 TRILLIUM
 FOUNDATION

LA FONDATION
 TRILLIUM
 DE L'ONTARIO

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
 CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO



Canada Council
 for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
 du Canada

torontodartscouncil
 An arm's length body of the City of Toronto