

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Unfinished Business* by Eric Baudelaire
May 6 to June 5, 2010

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Firing upon the clocks: observations on the work of Eric Baudelaire

Tim Saltarelli in conversation with Eric Baudelaire

I

When considering some of the larger thematics at play in Eric Baudelaire's recent practice, one might do well to think of his piece *The Makes*. In the film, Philippe Azoury, a real critic playing the role of "the Critic," delves into Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's "Japanese period." Flipping through a series of still images of a Japanese actress, he speaks of a film about a woman who fears the possibility of existing only in the present, without a future, in "a series of todays with no tomorrows." Azoury quotes from Antonioni: "And so she's learned to regard her own fragility as the only reality in the world." And he concludes: "The rest of it may be real or it may not" – a line that also applies to the entirety of Antonioni's "Japanese period," and could very well be a preface for what follows in both the film and the exhibition *Unfinished Business* at Gallery TPW.

II

Or one may consider this anecdote from Walter Benjamin:

*The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness[...]. In the July revolution [of 1830] an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris. An eye-witness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows: "Who would have believed it! We are told that new Joshuas at the foot of every tower, as though irritated with time itself, fired at the dials in order to stop the day."*¹

III

Another key to the exhibition *Unfinished Business* resides in the dialogue between two new works that each approach difference and repetition in distinct ways. Exploring the space created by the combination of these works, Baudelaire collates and conflates the opposition of these two ideas.

Not yet titled is a series of forty odd books, stacked in a column. Though each book contains an entirely unique

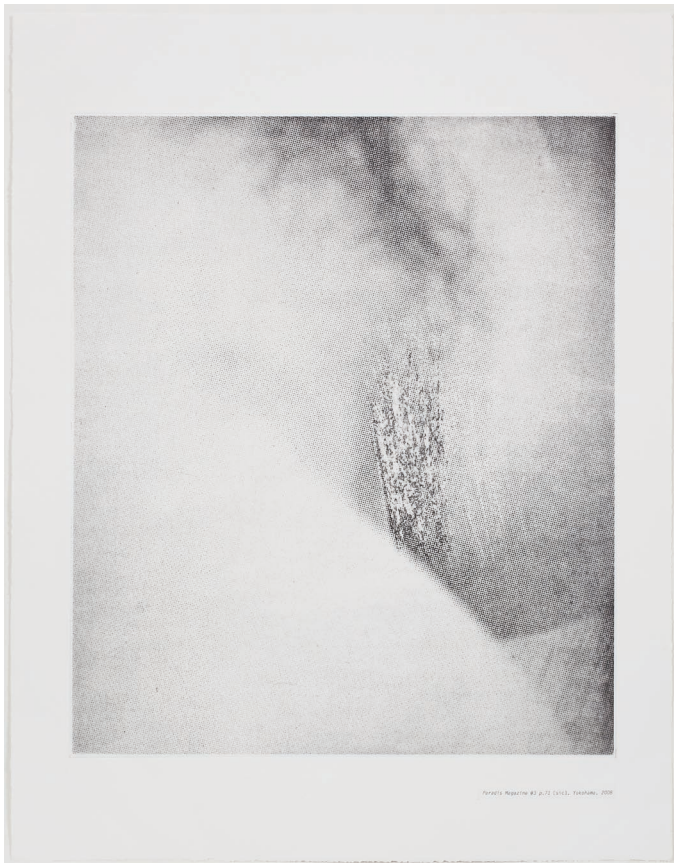


Not Yet Titled, 2010

narrative, they are all identical in title, one that they also share with this exhibition. The forty different iterations, each with its own author, and attesting to the particular ways in which 'Unfinished Business' can be resolved, are also accompanied by an audio recording of the last sentence of each of these books that then resonates through the space. Another new work, titled *Two Times*, combines two found film stills into a single frame. The vintage photographs are the



Two Times, 2010



Paradis Magazine #3 p.71 [sic], Yokohama, 2008, 2009

same, but they cannot be said to be identical, having aged in different ways. Two iterations of the same, having originated from an identical point, traversing time and accumulating histories in their own distinct ways, were purchased by the artist on different occasions and from different vendors, only to find themselves together again in the same place.

IV

Other works in **Unfinished Business** belong to different chapters in Baudelaire's practice, brought together here for the first time in the context of an exhibition that fluctuates and evolves over the course of time. While the video projections alternate, so too does the exhibition's lighting. As such, while the exhibition's images and documents coexist simultaneously, our ability to properly view them is conditioned by shifting lighting phases that illuminate some works and obscure others. The effect of this design is that one's experience of the exhibition is always incomplete, soliciting a constant desire based on alternating frustration and seduction.

V

An image in a state of being effaced (rendered *unfinished*) is a consistent motif in Baudelaire's work. The series of gravures, *Of Signs & Senses*, are variations on the theme of a Japanese practice called *bokashi*, a form of censorship practiced by Japanese importers to remove explicit representations of genitalia from the foreign publications they distribute. Using a razor blade, importers scratch away the offending areas. Japan is by no means a puritan culture and its constitution explicitly bans censorship. Yet the penal code, in an apparent contradiction, forbids the publication of 'obscurity,' defined by the courts in a wonderfully ambiguous phrase: that which "unnecessarily excites or stimulates sexual desire."

Employing a traditional western etching technique, the heliogravures appropriate, enlarge and reproduce the *bokashi* found in the pages of western art magazines purchased by the artist in Kyoto. They function as an archive of negative spaces onto which different meanings can be projected. In these found images Baudelaire not only maps the figurative relationship between desire and form as an image travels across cultural contexts, but he also extends the journey from art to pornography back to art as a readymade form or sign.

VI

While customers in the video *[SIC]* browse various publications in a store in Kyoto, a young woman sits down with a book of Nobuyoshi Araki photographs and begins a process of carefully scratching those areas of the body that may *unnecessarily excite sexual desire* from the page. The process extends to a series of books by other Japanese artists whose work is in turn subjected to the *bokashi* process. But in a twist recurrent in many of Baudelaire's videos, what appears at first to be documentary observation takes a turn towards the absurd or the fantastical: the scalpel is no longer applied to regions of desire, but to other points of identification that make the images specific to a particular time, place or political ideology and context.

The scratcher's attention turns to a book of Hiroshi Sugimoto's seascapes, a series of images produced by exposures that often lasted hours and that thus allowed time to accumulate in ways that are inconsistent with the idea that still photographs represent a single decisive moment. These images are followed by reproductions of On Kawara's date paintings. Given that each painting identifies the day during which it was made, we see the scratcher methodically work her way backwards through time.

VII

In the space of a few weeks in September 2008, Paul Verlaine's poem *Chanson d'automne* appeared in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Embedded in a series of articles reporting the near collapse of the global economic system, the verses echo a previous occurrence in which this poem was transmitted in coded fashion by the BBC to alert the French resistance to the impending Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. Who put the poem in the *Wall Street Journal*



video still from *[SIC]*, 2009

is difficult to determine, yet it resides in these newspaper clippings, highlighted by the artist in red grease pencil as a productive gesture, the culmination of an archeological act. So while capitalism has the uncanny ability to incorporate and appropriate any critique, the alternative narrative – that Baudelaire *found* the poem hidden in its shadows – necessarily poses questions about what forms of resistance are still called for, or remain viable today.

VIII

In Lyon, visiting the Biennale in 2006, Baudelaire came across a piece of graffiti that read “I HATE GRND ZERO.” Immediately evident to him that this tag referred to his own ambiguous feelings about a particular event witnessed in New York a few years earlier, he put his own claim on the tag and appropriated it for a series of works entitled *Blind Walls*. In so doing, Baudelaire commissioned a graffiti artist to spray paint variations of the phrase on the Plexiglas protecting his photographs of 19th-century Parisian *murs aveugles* (blind walls), walls without windows.

These façades had originally anticipated neighboring buildings that were never constructed. While representing an interruption in the urban fabric on top of which the found graffiti is applied (albeit on a Plexiglas screen that acts as a substitute for the actual building itself), they become the place for the projection of unresolved feelings one might have towards the idea of the city in the wake of a particular event.

Or, consider the possibility that Baudelaire may have completely reassigned the graffiti with a different set of values than the somewhat pedestrian meaning its original author



Chanson d'Automne, 2008

intended; a fact that is entirely plausible when one considers that Lyon is also home to the music club GRRRND ZERO, and its possible detractors. In this sense, *Blind Walls* would function in much the same way as *The Makes*, participating in the designation of meaning to disparate forms that initially had no intended or causal relationship, brought to light here through a process of *rereading* the work and retroactively investigating the appropriation based on this new evidence.



Blind Walls (I Need), 2007



video still from *Sugar Water*, 2007

IX

The third new work in the exhibition is a 25 second video named *Unfinished Business*. Discovering an anonymously written line of French graffiti that translates as “let us refuse the world of those who...” Baudelaire again reveals an open-ended message embedded within the daily urban fabric. And not unlike the hidden message uncovered in *Chanson d’automne*, or the graffiti in *Blind Walls*, one is left to wonder who authored this message and to what ends. Are we to refuse all ideology or did the police simply arrive before the specific object of discontent could be identified?

X

Transpiring entirely inside the Parisian Porte d’Erewhon Métro station (named after the 1872 novel by Samuel Butler), *Sugar Water* is a film in which a bill-poster pastes a series of images in one of the spaces reserved for advertising. While he attends to his business, people filter into the station, trains arrive, and people get on and off and exit the Métro. Once completed, the bill-poster’s image depicts a number of cars parked on a Parisian street. But instead of moving on as one might expect, he begins anew instead, pasting a different image on top of the first, as if the needle on a record player has gotten stuck and skipped all the way back to the beginning of a song. Only this time the song isn’t quite the same.

This second image depicts a car exploding, a kind of perfectly vivid image rarely seen outside of a cinematic context (with the possible exception of 9/11). It thus transforms the blue screen on to which these images have been pasted into a theatrical rear screen projection. As the film progresses, the image being pasted moves from that of the exploding car, to one of the car as it smolders, and to another in which it is simply a charred wreck. While the images depict an event that might have taken mere seconds to elapse, they occur over an extended period, slowing down time in a way that is contrary to much of the action that simultaneously transpires in the film.

The events having been seemingly reset, familiar people again start streaming into the Métro. They continue arriving, waiting, departing, and exiting, almost exactly as before, as if on a loop, somehow unhinged or dislodged from time, all the while oblivious to the sign poster and the evolving content of the image. The reoccurrences and discrepancies, from the man who is asked the time to the people who get off the train only moments after they seem to have got on, suggest that the events are not transpiring in the space allotted to them in the

film. Instead, it becomes increasingly apparent that many of the reoccurring actions that we witness are happening over the course of many different periods of time, collapsed here into one cyclical series of repetitive movements.²

Upon completing his series of images, the bill-poster pastes monochromatic blue over the last image, returning the location to its original state and leaving the station as he found it, only to begin his Sisyphean task again.

XI

*Billy was working on his second letter when the first letter was published. The second letter started out like this: "The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadoreans can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. "When a Tralfamadorean sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadoreans say about dead people, which is 'So it goes.'"*³

XII

The vitrines that comprise one half of *The Makes*, are made up of found Japanese film stills and pages torn from Michelangelo Antonioni's "That Bowling Alley on the

Tiber," a book of ideas for films that Antonioni never made. The vitrines hijack photographs from their original context, transposing them to a new space, filling the void left by Antonioni's unrealized intent. What feels like a *remake*, is actually just a *make*. Or rather the traces of a make, since there is no actual film, just a ghost of a movie behind a document attesting to its possibility – a movie that exists only in the imagination of the viewer facing the finished piece.

In the companion film *The Makes*, Philippe Azoury, the movie critic, reads from Antonioni's notes and offers entirely serious critiques of these unmade films, all the while flipping through the film stills that reside inside the vitrines. Towards the end of the film, he gives a synopsis of a film from Antonioni's "Japanese period" called *The Silence*. While examining a photograph of the Japanese likeness of Alain Delon and Monica Vitti, he describes how the characters met at the Tokyo stock market before wandering through the streets of the newly developed urban landscape. To those who may be familiar with Antonioni's work, a feeling of familiarity descends upon this description as if one had already seen this film, though it is somehow different. A gap opens up between our memory and our experience. Didn't Alain Delon and Monica Vitti meet not in Tokyo, but in Rome? Or was that another film? After approximately 20 minutes of Azoury's compelling critique of an invisible cinema, we get to a point where our eyes are seeing two Japanese people standing under a tree, and our ears are hearing about two western actors, Vitti and Delon, and the worlds of *The Silence* and *The Eclipse* have effectively merged.

The slight of hand is very much in the spirit of the maestro's visible cinema, with films like *l'Avventura* where he constructs a narrative around a protagonist who disappears within the



video still from *The Makes*, 2009



The Makes (Out of Desperation), 2009

first third of the film, yet whose absence continues to inhabit the scenario as if she were still visible on the screen.

XIII

A morning and an evening

*Let's try thinking of a film that tells the story of two days in a man's life. The day he's born and the day he dies. A life whose prelude seems to start on one road and whose epilogue shows that he's taken a route quite different, even geographically speaking, from where he started. Let's try thinking of a film with a morning and a night, but not the interim anxieties.*⁴

XIV

"It's possible that Anna in *L'Avventura* fell into a rift between two rocks," proposes Azoury in *The Makes*. He later likens this fissure to the hole that, in *A morning and an evening*, Antonioni opened between two critical moments in one man's life, subverting cinema's traditional narrative role in the process. However, through this act of erasure, he both created a negative space for the projection of new narratives

and also opened up a hole that Azoury contends is, in fact, time.

In **Unfinished Business**, Baudelaire himself revisits the ways stories and histories unfold by creating false documents or recycling historical documents in order to manufacture new presents. In so doing, he also asks how one might articulate one's frustration with (or skepticism towards) the continuity of history and cycles of time. Consider again Walter Benjamin's anecdote regarding those on the barricades during the Revolution of 1830 and the celebratory impulse involved in the desire to stop time at a particular moment when one feels as if they are making history. While this exhibition is not so much about stopping time, or wanting to mark a particular moment in time, it does take note of the fact that an image, seen at a particular moment, is like a clock that has been shot. **Unfinished Business** presents itself as an unbound book in homage to the revolutionary desires that lead to the serendipitous coincidence of a handful of men simultaneously taking aim at the clock towers in Paris in July 1830.

End Notes:

¹ Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books), p.261-2.

² See: Lin, Tan, "Eric Baudelaire's Sugar Water, the Deleuzian Event, and the Dispersion of Spectatorial Labour," *Reading Room*, Issue 02.08, p. 8-27.

³ Vonnegut, Kurt, *Slaughterhouse Five* (New York: RosettaBooks), p. 26-27. The Tralfamadorians are an alien race mentioned in several of Vonnegut's novels.

⁴ Antonioni, Michelangelo, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber: Tales of a Director* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 197.

All images courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York.

Eric Baudelaire, born in Salt Lake City in 1973, lives and works in Paris. He has had solo exhibitions at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, Galeria Juana de Aizpuru, Madrid, and in Belgium at the Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels, and the Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi. His work is present in several public collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Centre Pompidou, the Fond National d'Art Contemporain, and the FRAC Auvergne.

Tim Saltarelli is an artist and curator living and working in New York, where he is a Director at Elizabeth Dee Gallery. He was one of the organizers of the exhibition *In May (After October)* in 2009 and is currently working on a group exhibition for Elizabeth Dee for summer 2010.

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

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