

precarious



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The Necessary Intersections of Art

Edward J. Sullivan

The academic study of art history often involves long periods of silent contemplation – whether it be reading historical or theoretical texts, researching in archives or contemplating works of art in museum galleries. As is the case with all intellectual pursuits, however, the evolution of pedagogical practices and the ever-more acute need for interaction and cooperative learning has transformed the modes of absorbing knowledge and, in the case of art historical pursuits, has created a necessity for ever-greater and more productive intersections between the creators of works of art and those who use them as tools for research or explication. The need for dialogue and mutual project-construction on the part of artists and art historians becomes an integral part of the creative process on the part of practitioners of both forms of creativity.

The Curatorial Collective is a model of such cooperative innovation and mutually beneficial partnering. This student-driven initiative on the part of artists from the Steinhardt Department of Art and Arts Professions and art history MA and PhD candidates from the Institute of Fine Arts forms a model of interdisciplinary teamwork. The work of the artists is parsed, analyzed and placed into context by the art historians who benefit greatly from the conversations and exchanges of views and methods of working with the artists. Both groups profit from this interchange and intellectual give-and-take. Exhibitions and methods of display – and, by extension – modes of teaching and learning are mutually explored during the processes of artistic creation, selection of work to be exhibited, installation and juxtapositions of pieces in order to create an environment of productive visual dialogue for the viewers – who come from the ranks of NYU students,

faculty as well as the general public. These multivalent group activities help to prepare both the artists and the art historians for future projects in their respective fields.

The current exhibitions are both thought provoking in their contents and timely in the issues they explore. While diversity of themes and approaches form a hallmark of the collaborative, there are certain connecting threads that run throughout the products of each of the artists chosen for the paired or collective shows. Each of the exhibitions and all of the works in their aggregate display an inevitable preoccupation with the intense aura of anxiety that pervades our society at a time of powerful challenges to received notions of propriety, collective harmony, civility and democracy. We all receive daily assaults to our idealistic notions of what the renowned literary semiologist Roland Barthes termed “how to live together” (the title of his famous series of lectures given at the Colalège de France in 1976-77). Harmonious coexistence seems to be a thing of the past and the works of the artists represented here analyze and unpack the roots of our collective anxiety. The members of the Curatorial Collective have mined these themes to great advantage in their formation of the exhibitions that, in a communal and shared sense, serve as something of a road map to the traumas of daily life as the end of the century’s second decade approaches. The ominous clouds of societal darkness reveal shadows of doubt and fear, yet the presence of such strong demarcations of artistic creativity inform us of the way to discover paths that may not lead to the zones of comfort but will at least guide us to a collective understanding of how we may productively approach the phantoms that haunt our conscious and unconscious fears.

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ADVERTENCIA

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Las cuerdas y cadenas pueden enroscarse alrededor del cuello de un niño y ESTRANGULARLO.

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-Mantenga siempre las cadenas y cuerdas fuera del alcance de los niños.
-Mueva los muebles lejos de las cuerdas y cadenas. Los niños pueden subir a los muebles para llegar a las cuerdas.

The precarious is defined as that which is not securely held, likely to collapse, and generally uncertain. *Precarious* showcases works of art by artists Jay S. Yoon, Shinan Wang, Maya Pollack, Bambou Gili and Audrey Gascho, that examine variants of its namesake be they political, traumatic, or uncomfortable. The show's core text is Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, in which she states, "I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions." Our very existence is perilous because we function within a frail construction of our own making. Divided into three sections: *precarious: systems*, *precarious: humanism*, and *precarious: intimacy*, this exhibition features works that



Audrey Gascho, *without dismissal*, 2017, Wooden pegboard, white paint, latex balloons, 47 x 26 inches

invite viewers to ruminate on perspectives that are too often occluded in a majoritarian society, inspiring them to construct new meanings of their own.

The preliminary section, *precarious: systems*, addresses the unstable, oppressive and even violent nature of specific institutions within the social world. Gascho examines trauma both in relation to her own experience of assault and as an erosive historical constant. Her monotype prints, *the extraordinary jubilee of mercy* (2017), *when in Rome* (2017), and *Untitled (basilica)* (2017), delve into the fragility of Catholicism. Gascho's interest in fragility continues in her video piece *il ratto*



Bambou Gili, *Squirt*, 2016, Oil on Canvas, 18 X 24 inches

di proserpina (2018), as a reference to Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture *The Rape of Proserpina* (1621-22). In her modification of Bernini's sculpture, Gascho eliminates the figure of Pluto, silencing the rapist in favor of emphasizing the experience of the victim. By recontextualizing the sculpture, Gascho criticizes how viewers disregard the trauma of rape central to Bernini's work, focusing instead on its formal mastery. In *Admissions* (2017), Gascho redacts the content of a college admission letter in three different iterations, questioning recent controversies at universities regarding rape cases and violations of federal laws.

Through a gestural style of painting on unstretched canvases, Bambou Gili ridicules the oversexualized representations of women in Medieval imagery and recontextualizes them to fit humorously, or horrifically, in our contemporary moment. *Squirt* (2016) is a response to a recent headline in the *Daily Mail* that read, "Furious mother 'squirted her boob' at a woman who told

her to move while she was breastfeeding because it was distracting her husband." The work highlights how women perpetuate our patriarchal system by categorizing other women by the Madonna or whore dialectic. Gili uses the same representational techniques in *Untitled, Market* (2016) and *Untitled* (2016). The juxtaposition of Gascho's severe interrogations with Gili's humorous exploitation of systemic instability creates an interesting contrast.

Pollack, a multimedia artist, explores how we perceive the "self" in the context of the "other." In her silkscreen print *Straight* (2015), a woman in a back-brace stands starkly upright over a grid-like background, almost resembling a medical document due to the contraction on her fluorescent body, the mathematical grid resembling an x-ray. Yoon, who is interested in using sculpture to examine the relationship between technology and humans, questions our dependence



Maya Pollack, *Straight*, 2015, Silkscreen on Paper, 40 X 20 inches



Jay S. Yoon, *ПРОЕКТ НЕО-ХЕРУБИМ* ("Project Neo-Cherubim"), 2017, Galvanized steel, aluminium, titanium, ABS and PVC plastics, thermal coating, titanium chrome coating, wood, wire, metal rods, carbon plastic styrofoam, hardboard, couplers, turings, pipes, PVC tubes, and metal filters

upon the pharmaceutical industry through *Happy Birthday* (2017). In this sculpture, injection needles emerge out of Saizen® or somatropin, a growth hormone with possible lethal side effects used on children. In "*Subject and Power*" Michel Foucault explains, "the medical profession is not criticized primarily because it is a profit-making concern but because it exercises an uncontrolled power over people's bodies." Both Pollack and Yoon challenge spectators to question this dependence upon the medical industry, as a system that dominates over life and death.

Perplexingly, our relationship with social systems is insecure despite the fact that humans construct these systems. How should we perceive our role in the natural world; a "system" not of our creation, but one that we are born within? *Precarious: humanism* aims to mediate this question.

In *Untitled (Projection)* (2017), Pollack accentuates our morbid curiosities, particularly about species we do not tend to empathize with. The installation invites spectators to enter an uncanny space where they are surrounded, through the use of mirror reflection, by a video projection of a squirming carp that is captured and photographed from a fishing trip. Through this installation, Pollack conjures feelings of empathy and alienation, emphasizing the slippery state of flux between these emotions. This sense of detachment from nature has been augmented in today's rapidly modernizing world. Yoon's *ПРОЕКТ НЕО-ХЕРУБИМ* (*Project Neo-Cherubim*) (2017) is a totem of technological process: a robot figure accompanied by the music, "Hymn of Cherubim" standing beside amidst soil and plants. Inside it, a hydraulic system filters contaminated water for safe use. The sculpture exemplifies the conundrum that we desire technological progress, yet possess a fear of its unknowability. The soil and plants remind the viewer of the natural world, while the robot's imposing figure, calling to mind neoclassical statues, represents the monumentality of technology. Through this visual dialectic, Yoon queries for a compromise between these poles.

Yoon also emphasizes our anxieties in *Robophobia* (2017), in which a robotic arm personifying a puppeteer seeks to manipulate the actions of a red doll, imitating our own vulnerability in the face of the possible prowess of the technology we create.

While Yoon's work questions the future, Wang's embraces tradition through her ceramic sculptures. *Natural Beauty* (2017) features a series of polished feminine busts

wearing scarred antlers, criticizing how modern capitalism removes creatures from their natural environments to violently become objects of consumption.

Horror and Discourse: Gun Violence in America (2017) is a direct response to the recent shootings in downtown Manhattan. A fox carcass is suspended from the ceiling captured in the instant it was shot. Wang mobilizes the work's shock value to confront her viewers and showcase how we become accustomed to violence.

While Wang's work explores the physicality of violence, Gascho exposes the psychological impact of human violence. *Yellow* (2018) is a physical installation of monotype prints, words on wood panels, and small sculptures that the artist has been working on and collecting for months. The installation is an account of Gascho's personal trauma. Through dissociation, her assemblage creates a harrowing display of objects and images that were directly linked to the location of her assault. The title of this installation relates to Coldplay's song "Yellow," which played while the incident took place. *Yellow* reveals the scars latent within her subconscious, conveying the unreliability of painful memories.

Related to our understanding of human nature and the environment we reside in, is the community we choose to join. We assume that all communities and relationships are formed to promote good, but what if they are not? *Precarious: intimacy* explores such notions.

Gascho explores this motif by revealing the limitations of a community in *without dismissal* (2017). She underlines a community's fallibility by utilizing a pegboard and recreational party balloons to question the validity of the support system. As the balloons deflate over time, it exposes the compromised state of this defective system.

Pollack further articulates this tension in *Untitled (Blinds)* (2016) as boundaries are never clearly defined. Window blinds permit humans to decide whether to expose or conceal themselves to those around them. Pollack's sculpture is intentionally unstable to emphasize the uncertainties still extant even after the construction of physical boundaries like blinds.

Wang's *The lover asks forgiveness because of his many moods* (2016) centers on the disquietude of relationships. Displayed as a pair, the inanimate objects are interpreted as 'Lovers'. Insecurely positioned on their pedestal's edge, the bottles cause the spectator to consider their fate. Wang's anxiety-provoking lovers mimic



Shinan Wang, *Natural Beauty*, 2017, Ceramic, 10 X 12 X 6 inches

our constant state of fragility in a relationship. We sacrifice our sense of emotional security for the joys of intimacy. Similarly, Gili illustrates relationships' anxiety in her painting *Blue Jungle* (2017). With two isolated figures surrounded by a dark and turbulent composition, so solitary that one can assume them to be the last two individuals on earth, Gili pokes fun at contemporary dating where people pair up due to their fears of being alone. The work exposes this societal detachment from real romance through a simultaneous sense of satire and real incoming danger.

The final section of the exhibition imparts an understanding of the instability of our most intimate moments. The *precarious* nature of our existence seems inconclusive in that it engenders more questions than answers. However, the artists exhibited use this inconclusivity productively by empowering the viewer to ask essential questions about life's uncertainties.

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The Commons

34 Stuyvesant Street
New York, NY 10003

Precairious is a group exhibition co-curated by three graduate students from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. It features artwork by five BFA Studio Art majors in the final year of their undergraduate studies at the New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development's Department of Art & Art Professions. The exhibition is conceived under the auspices of the student organized NYU Curatorial Collaborative Initiative.

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Kathleen Joyce & Haley Pierce -
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Tammy Lee Brown - Director, Planning and Communications
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Audrey Gascho, Hannah Murphy, Roxana De Leon, Kara Kendall -
Exhibition Assistants

Jenny Noguchi - Publication Designer
Maral Babai - Copy Editor
Emily Ruth Olsen, Briana Zimmerman - Publication Assistants
Jason Varone - Web & Electronic Media Manager
Benjamin Lozovsky - Photographer

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Audrey Gascho, *without dismissal*, 2017, Wooden pegboard, white paint, latex balloons, 47 x 26 inches

Inside Cover image:

Maya Pollack, *Untitled (Blinds)*, 2016

Back cover image:

Jay S. Yoon, *ПРОЕКТ НЕО-ХЕРУБИМ* ("Project Neo-Cherubim"), 2017, Galvanised steel, aluminium, titanium, ABS and PVC plastics, thermal coating, titanium chrome coating, wood, wire, metal rods, carbon plastic styrofoam, hardboard, couples, turings, pipes, PVC tubes, and metal filters

Advisors

Jesse Bransford, Clinical Associate Professor, Dept. Chair, Art & Art Professions, Steinhardt
Shadi Harouni, Visiting Assistant Professor, BFA Director, Art & Art Professions, Steinhardt
Edward Sullivan, Deputy Director, NYU Institute of Fine Arts and College of Arts and Sciences

Artists

Audrey Gascho
Bambou Gili
Maya Pollack
Shinan Wang
Jay S. Yoon

Curators

Chao Chi Chiu
Samantha H. Rowe
Emily Rose Shoyer

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