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ARTSEEN

## *HiJack!*

by Noah Dillon



Tyler Rowland, "The Floor Scrapers," 2006-2012, ongoing. Painted floorboards, red oak, and gold paint. 83 x 69 x 51". Courtesy of Tyler Rowland and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Although Occupy Wall Street continues vestigially, it didn't last long as a visible media spectacle. Nonetheless, the rapid turnaround rate of New York's art industry has quickly capitalized on the revolt, accounting for it in collections, projects, and exhibitions at a number of museums and galleries. *HiJack!* at Jack Shainman Gallery shared in the popular spirit of seizing space as a critique of social inequities, but like other programs piggybacking on the thrust of the OWS protests, one is given to question the long-term effectiveness and overall value of such seemingly disruptive acts.

As conceits go, *HiJack!* had a fun one, and it was executed in great, theatrical detail. The premise was a "soft takeover" by the gallery's art-handlers: Luke Turner, Victor de

Matha, and Daniel Finch. These three curated work by artists who have not shown at the gallery and rarely-displayed-works by those who do. (Though the exhibition celebrated the trio's own struggles as art-handlers trying to break through as paid artists, they humbly refrained from displaying any of their own work.) The show's press release was formatted as an e-mail to Mr. Shainman delivered on May Day, 2012. It notified the gallerist that his space would be "occupied" and the caste of "art-handler" would be temporarily abolished. The PR dutifully conveyed relevant exhibition information (the participating artists and its duration, etc.), but one perceived the revolt's simultaneous sincerity and superficiality in its assurances that the cadre would be genial towards its boss while performatively upsetting the balance of power at work.

The critical rubric undergirding the show seemed to largely negate the art-handlers' intentions. Their accompanying essay was a confusing mash of polemics and logistics. Presented as all-in-one price list, recommended reading list, jargonny theoretical context-provider, conceptual manifesto, and Wi-Fi password, the text was too bloated with information to be very helpful—though it was mildly entertaining. This general lack of focus carried over into the project itself, which felt wedged uncertainly between being a pretty, potentially saleable art show and an act of defiance aimed at opening a conversational space critical of the gallery system. The same great and theatrical detail of the exhibition's essay led almost immediately into what became, for me, the central quandary of *HiJack!* Specifically, did merely playing at insurrection actually inhibit it from being good? Keep in mind everything else the show had going for it: intelligent artworks, a smart display, the organizers' desire to make something consequential and resistant to the conventions of how art is shown, sold, and consumed.

With few exceptions, the artworks in *HiJack!* were generous and politically rich. In the vestibule, a primer of radical films by Dziga Vertov, Chris Marker, Akira Kurosawa, among others, played against one wall. Viewers could sit at a table, handcrafted by Turner et al., and watch the videos or read books from a donated library of radical, theory-deep literature about the arts and labor, arranged on a shelf mounted just above the table. I didn't tarry there long, but the books' authors are well-regarded contemporary radical art writers: Jacques Rancière, Hakim Bey, T.J. Clark, and so on.

Perhaps the most vital work in the show was a site-specific drawing by Esperanza Mayobre, “Everybody Knows That Cities Are Built To Be Destroyed” (2012). Its thin gray lines, spidering geometrically across a wall, depict collapsing heaps of stretcher bars and planks. A box of erasers staged nearby encouraged visitors to erase the drawing, bit by bit, though faint traces remained stubbornly there despite the labored scrubbing some people had given it. Rauschenberg’s “Erased de Kooning Drawing,” (1953), came immediately to mind, but the heart of the work was closer to certain events put on by Joseph Beuys or Allan Kaprow’s Happenings, wherein the audience for a work of art was inducted into the work’s very invention as labor and as conversation. Even more, Mayobre’s work alludes to the contingencies of space and time—of duration—that press on all artworks and make her drawing especially dynamic.

A similar feat was found in Tyler Rowland’s “The Floor Scrapers” (2006 – 2012, ongoing). This billboard-like assemblage was made with two sets of floorboards that were excised from the artist’s Boston studio, mounted upright, back-to-back, and given an armature of two legs and a flat rectangular base. The face of one set is painted almost monochromatically blue and the front half of the base is stained with gold. On the verso, the oak supports are plain and unvarnished, the other set of stripped and mounted floorboards pitted and stained from wear. The dimensions of the work’s twin surfaces (69 by 51 inches) are meant to correspond to those of Caillebotte’s “The Floor Scrapers” (1875). One can’t help but be mesmerized by the translation of substance and toil into a sculpture that announces its very frank materiality. The demystification of artwork from a record of inspiration into a demonstration of labor remains a powerful gesture even if it may not be conventionally radical. The work points reverently back at a beautiful painting and asks about the continuing circumstances of such labor: who built your studio? Who mined the pigments in your paint? Who fabricated the sheetrock walls and those big, sleek windows at the front of the gallery? Material production remains the base for the creative economy but is often taken for granted.

Unfortunately, for all the cheerful optimism about social change the trio used to frame the show, the contradictions in *HiJack!* too often collapse in upon themselves or at least

raise suspicions that the whole thing is simply a kind of gimmick, and one wonders if real reconsiderations of the distribution of power in the art world can arise from such a conversation. An example: for the duration of the show, Jack Shainman's office was opened (to voyeuristically invade the gallery's bureaucracy?). The office's door was precariously leaned against a wall in the foyer, looking as though it had been ripped from its hinges and ditched by a proletarian mob. During the exhibition's run, however, Mr. Shainman was mostly on vacation, leaving only an empty managerial space. That cheeky stagecraft doesn't come off as humorous-but-earnest. Instead, the act reads as stylized posturing that could be executed risk-free in an attempt to lend the show a subversive air. Though, to be fair, who knows? Maybe the only way Shainman would agree to a radicalized staff show was if its outward burlesque veiled its inner zeal. This is not an art-handlers strike, as at Sotheby's, and it's not Occupy—which the show winks at without explicitly acknowledging. So we should ask: does the image of solidarity count as an act of solidarity per se?

What halts me in this line of criticism is the recognition that part of the success of any political cause is a certain level of visibility and vocality. Calling attention to issues of art and labor is, seemingly, an inherent *good*, no matter how righteously melodramatic or pedantic it may appear, right? So if the will is good but the results seem fundamentally flawed, then is it only my dissatisfaction with the actual fruit of political discourse that is getting in the way? Those art-handlers actually made *something*. And the heroicism of artists working at their own craft and laboring against the inertia of art-world powerbrokers is a true virtue.

I'm unable to say with certainty that the temporary, spectacular nature of this show was a failure. But in the absence of any resolution to my own circle of complicated feelings, my mind wanders to the next immediate question: If this isn't what I'm looking for, what is? I.e. what would a more revolutionary exhibition look like? Any ideas? Suggestions? Perhaps we can have a conversation about it—we have to start somewhere.

[HiJack!](#)

Jack Shainman  
513 W. 20<sup>th</sup> St, New York  
October 2–September 1, 2012