

Modem & Contemporary

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As a curator I can candidly say I feel some pressure to pretend I first came across Juanli Carrión's work through methodical research, but in fact, it was just from rather random Internet browsing. In 2010 MoMA PS1 launched the registry "Studio Visit". A kind of digital residency: a web presence for yourself under the prestigious banner of MoMA PS1. It also helps lazy curators in New York; I suppose I trust the institution enough to let it filter the vastness of the Internet for me.

In early 2011 I casually clicked on Juanli's thumbnail on "Studio Visit", I came across a detail of *Intermision - Mysterious Incident in Lake Desmet* (2010). It is a photograph of a folding chair and a card table in the desert at night, ominously floodlit from an unknown source, possibly a vehicle. Having then recently seen Patricio Guzmán's documentary *Nostalgia for the Light*, it brought to mind the accounts of Chilean leftists murdered during Pinochet's regime, their bodies disposed of in the Atacama desert. I imagined the chair and table were a place of respite for a soldier taking a break from digging a mass grave in the sand—work best done at night to avoid the blazing sun. The empty chair meant his break time was over.

While I was struck by the piece, I failed to make note of Juanli's name, and as quickly as I stumbled upon his body of work, it was gone.

In April I came across the *Intermision - Mysterious Incident in Lake Desmet* installation at the aptly named *Pretty Vacant, A Group Exhibition in A Modern Ruin*. The photograph I saw months before was in this gallery-warehouse, mounted on top of a wooden structure resembling a bladeless guillotine. Stepping on its base, the viewer was able to put on a pair of headphones, listening to a sound track made of a collage of voices taken from western movies, reading a sentence from the plaque of the actual site of the Mysterious Incident in Lake Desmet in Wyoming. I looked from side to side amid hundreds of people, trying to spot the work's creator. It didn't take long for the audio piping through the headphones to become the silent thoughts of the faces around me. The artist never emerged, but I remained haunted by the experience.

Two months later I was in Madrid. In one week I found no fewer than three exhibitions presenting the work of Soviet modernist movements: *Building the Revolution: Art and Architecture in Russia, 1915-1935* at the Caixa Forum, *Russian Avant-Gardes* at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, and *A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926-1939* at the Museo Reina Sofía. Madrileños were clearly obsessed with the modernist art forms of the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath, though with good reason. The Suprematist paintings of Malevich and Lissitzky brought architectural complexity into composition that would typify the move towards industry and technology in art. Their utilitarian and rational expressions engaged with the increasing presence of mechanization and urbanization, pioneering geometric abstraction.

After returning from Spain I found my thoughts returning not just to the visual vocabulary forged by the Suprematists and Constructivists, but to their historical context. The October Revolution marked the disappearance of the existing Tsarist order, successfully ushered in an era of societal transformation. Artists offered their skills in the service of the revolution, furthering a concrete social role for art in life. This cultural renaissance in visual arts and architecture would influence the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements, as well as Universal Constructivism in South America.

In July I met Juanli for the first time at the closing of his exhibition *10.21-23 The Plague of Darkness* at Y Gallery, with no idea that I knew his work. There he was exhibiting Duratrans prints over light boxes, depicting “star constellations” of Google maps’ locations across the United States belonging to particular multinational corporations like Exxon, Wal-mart, or Pfizer. We spoke about a work he was planning: *Building the Neverending Ruin of the World* based around Victor Burgin’s philosophy on photography as an instant ruin or an archive-monument, capturing a previous state of the world.

By that time I was organizing the show *Parts and Labor* at the Abrons Arts Center in New York, and saw his project adding a discourse of contemporary technology. The telecom technology and the Google algorithm, the focus on process as a component of the work, the bureaucratic imagery of the installation, the quasi-photomontage products: they all fashion a uniquely modernist expression in a 21st-century context. Placing his installation among works with flat planes of color, geometric shapes, and nonobjective representation, I would trace his use of industrial motifs and social purpose to the Russian avant-garde.

The project capitalizes on the transparency, the sense of public engagement that comes from making work *within* and *during* an exhibition rather than *before* it. Similar to “Studio Visit”, the use of Skype in *Neverending Ruin* facilitates a digital residency, though transmitting the artist’s actions in real time and substituting the drafting table for a computer desktop. Juanli’s terminals in New York and Vitoria-Gasteiz exist as micro-models of the Shukov Tower, the Soviet radio tower and Constructivist architectural marvel. They transmit signals across a latticework of fiber optic cable, but, more importantly, they construct a new crossroads of between disparate points in time and space.

Visiting Juanli’s website after that meeting, I was confronted with his work with which I was already familiar—*Intermission*—and I remarked to myself at the porous boundaries between Internet and real life, between virtual, imagined, and actual experience.

As I write this essay, protestors in the tens of thousands are occupying Wall Street in New York City, where dubious business practices catalyzed the current global recession. The protest has been inspired by the successful demonstrations of the Arab Spring, which also served as inspiration for los indignados in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol and Barcelona’s Plaça de Catalunya, among other locations in Spain. Not only organized through the Internet, these movements also use the Internet to disseminate a rhetoric opposed to government policies that privilege the wealthy as the middle and working classes find opportunity slipping through their fingers.

I don’t believe that another Socialist revolution is upon us, but our entry into the 21st century is clearly calling for new orders, both locally and globally. An Internet-based society should see options expanding, not contracting. The proliferation of voices in the media may require filters, but not those set by corporate interests. I think it’s an excellent time to examine the visual culture established a century ago, showing its continuing potency as it arrives in an era of instantaneous transmission of image, of thought, and of artistic expression.