

You Belong to the Night

International Pastimes
is Boško Blagojević and S.C. Squibb

Colored lights, lasers, a discoball: these are today's crudest, most base signifiers in the rhetoric of nightlife design. We relate to them as bodies in a space where these technologies work in concert with music, architecture and the socially coded consumption of intoxicants to produce a special kind of place, not dissimilar from what Mikhail Bakhtin describes in terms of the carnivalesque. This is a space of catharsis, an eventually affirmative space where temporary transgression and a social remixing guides the way through the end of night to the return of reason which the dawn always seems to promise, as hangover, a commute, brunch.

The interior design and architecture of the spaces we inhabit when we circulate in this nightlife economy is a place intended to facilitate motion—ritual has always been about this. Music here is one of the organizing centers around which this development is built. It is one of the day's muscular limbs when it comes to the making of interior spaces, spaces for experience. The traffic and collision of bodies thus facilitated becomes a kind of social architecture on its own terms, but in turn an infrastructural element in a larger plan. The making of nightlife, more than just circuits along which bodies travel, is about the interiorizing of the night. It invites darkness inside, sets it in play with architecture and moving bodies, turning place into experience. The night invited however is not the night opposite the working world, when business ceases and capital goes to sleep, while its agents retire to the warmth of family, of dinner, of the bed. This is rather the night of the forest, animated with activity and the sounds of life, of death, of hunting, of fucking.

Juanli Carrion's temporary *Kei-Seki* installation stalks these grounds.

The elements selected by the artist used to ornament an abandoned public infrastructure project construct a certain kind of domesticity under the otherwise indifferent sky, fictionalizing *night* where there might otherwise only be *a night*, one barely distinct in a endless succession of others. There is something uncanny about this play of opposites. For though the night is open, it is not incomplete, and it is never public, at least not in the way that infrastructure or a public road may be. The night is something altogether else, but perhaps there is a complexity being introduced here, debuted, even. A second idea of the public, of publicity, comes of age and—now ready, at long last—makes its appearance.

I mean, we can feel it, can't we? Stepping out at night, the public rushes up to meet us, breaking over us and washing everyone together. In the past, we mourned the retreat of public spaces as the evaporation of rationality, the loss of something sacred and essential. What were missed were the old men, gathering together in the morning or in the afternoon to perform the ancient ceremonies of point and counter-point, of yay and of nay. In coffeehouses, great halls, and chambers of all kinds, in newspaper columns, they gathered, holding forth on the issues of the day. They have been crowded out, these elders, and we are left only with their reanimated corpses, jawing at us from on high. We have been re-privatized, each of us set upon a personal mission of authenticity, at least until the sun sets.

Kei-Seki dramatizes the evening of the public sphere. As night falls on an incomplete project of modernity the signs and symbols of another, counter-public take the stage. No less performative, this new *us* no longer pantomime a rational disinterest; rather, a bestial constellation of desire is our feint. Once we left the house at dawn clothed in all our best ideas; now we work inside all day only to emerge at night, like animals, ready dressed. Our language is all light and color, when it's not strictly sex, and we'd avoid it altogether if we could. Communication no longer takes the form of action; instead we present a constellation, a set of symbols turning back on one another – a narrative of a kind. People don't want to be told at night, so much as they want to see.

It's the end of something, isn't it? To light it up like that. To domesticate the false start, the dead-end, precisely as a destination freezes the moment of abandonment and elevates it, placing it at the center of our vision. Look here! We're told. Marvel at the consistency of our collective incapacity. To commemorate the incomplete is also to preserve potentiality in its fullest sense, undiluted by the inevitable disappointment of its inscription within material. There is an odd sort of melancholy at work here, as we hold fast to what might have been as a way of possessing what never was. I mean, what possible use of (Carrion's site) could ever be preferable to his ornamenting of it in the dancing lights of a waning age, still in the full bloom of its possibility?

But what of the historical circumstances—it's a freeway of some sort we're talking about here, and not some kind of great national library or cultural center. In its cynicism, the artist's operation on the chosen site seems to invite projection from the earnest cultural critic, eager to turn every piece of folded development into a signal event, every piece of abandoned architecture into a mythic ruin. Not so much a mythic ruin, as capturing a ruined mythos. Disenchanted, yes, but also discontinued, somehow, left off. It can't be *kitsch*, for if *kitsch* signals anything it is 'completeness' that of being finished somehow, closed and impenetrable. Not all *kitsch* is made of plastic, of course, but it persists on earth like plastic, neon and insensible.

To formally define the persistent stuff then, this *kitsch*, let's fix the word to some shapeless but discrete material form and set it next to the abstract partners that animate its category—we might call them image, idea and attitude. See it now, out of focus and against some indifferent or neutral sky. The *kitsch* object or product in the Greenbergian sense is an affirmation, confirming the rightness of the world as it is, carrying with it a coded spirit borne twice over in its manufacture and its dissemination. And yet the thing remains a thing: it is *kitsch* as much for its lightness as for its populist appeal or affirmative content. But how now to differentiate the weightless stuff of mass culture from any other image, when the latter approaches a similarly anemic weightlessness?

As pictures move fluidly between page, screen and architecture, scaling to each new support with fortified elasticity, circulation itself becomes power. So it was always with the *kitsch* object or image. A monument in its scale and singularity could never be *kitsch*—despite whatever vulgar form or chauvinistic spirit animated that will of its creator. *Kitsch*, rather, always arrives in a multiplicity. And always, furthermore, in motion.

How, then, to set about making images which might show us something new about this power signaling its transition into obsolescence? Perhaps ideally by showing us how to perform its opposite, through an enacted and firm powerlessness performed within an image. Whereas many artists today push harder into the sphere of circulation, seeking out folds in tried and tested modes of production and distribution to complicate the images in which they traffick, Carrion seems to be working here in the opposite direction. Taking the agave (or pitera) plant, native (but not indigenous) to the Spanish region of Valencia, he has a scale replica fabricated in concrete. The Gorgonic artifact then sets course for two destinies, in sequence. The first will be a return to the "natural" site of the original *Kei-Seki* intervention, where the new plant will inhabit an old landscape alongside its organic progenitor, hiding in the day's dust and (in its discreetness) turning landscape into image. The second destiny will be a natural placement in an unnatural environment built to accommodate even the most recalcitrant forms into its ongoing narratives of cultural and political history.

This sign, then—this unstable stone plant in all of its threatening protrusion—can only ever be an image. The concrete thing realizes itself thus by a firm insistence on being the opposite—in turn, it is the product of the terminal visual gesture of our new age: a removal from circulation, the end of weightlessness.

Carrion thus seeks to push the image as far as it will go, to demarcate as much as possible how heavy it really is, or can be. He seeks the borders of its persistence. What will last longer – the plant cast in concrete? Or its picture on the wall, in a book, on the Internet? Where does the image take place—in its physical solidity, its migration to and fro, alone in the desert or before all of us, together? The image is our enemy, right? *Kitsch* squared? False consciousness incarnate? Then why are all of us here again, together?

Perhaps we would rather be concrete plants lying by the highway in the sun.

We are removed, it's true. Our fate is always to be coming home to a place we're barely from, our edges sharp and hard in the new style, *cemented*. We speak so many different languages and the night sky looks different, they tell us, halfway across the world. For some, this is enough. For others - us, perhaps - it has become clear that the great cult of experience must be opposed; that its tyranny has accomplished nothing. Maybe another way of saying this is that a social relationship mediated by images is still a social relationship. The thing about Tin Pan Alley songs was that everyone knew the words. And you can't see Carrion's lights by day. It's as though they were never there.

NEW YORK CITY, SUMMER 2010