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Artist, Occupied: Jason Lazarus by Legacy Russell

Artist Jason Lazarus has his hands full—with GIFs, pics, and sign-sticks.

Mar 20, 2012

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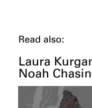

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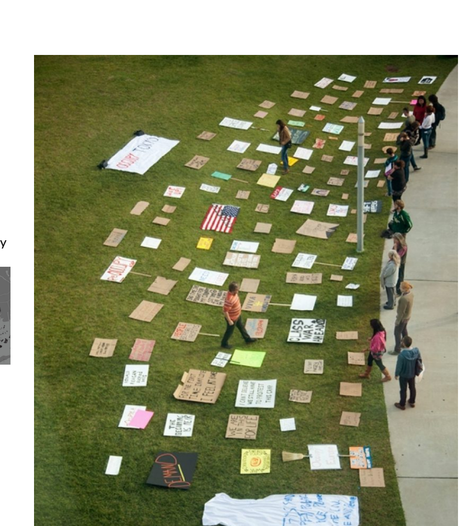


Jason Lazarus, Occupy University of South Florida at Tampa public display and occupation, 2011. All images courtesy of the artist.

I first had the pleasure of meeting artist Jason Lazarus on a cross-country road trip in the spring of 2011. We happened upon one another at an event I produced in Chicago and, over a few beers, got to talking. At the time, Lazarus was working on his archival project *Too Hard To Keep*. Though the project had him knee-deep in an ocean of materials cast away by their original owners—leaving Lazarus with the weighty task of deciding how to conserve them—I was struck by the artist's calm determination. It did not take long to realize that this is not uncommon for Lazarus—undertaking the seemingly impossible or generally monumental is *de rigueur* for him in his day-to-day, and, as a result, Lazarus has perfected the graceful juggling act required to merge the realms of *artist* and *cultural producer*. In this, Lazarus has proven himself to be a true model for the contemporary maker. Armed with a new project and fresh momentum, Jason Lazarus has got his hands full—yet he is ready for even more.

Legacy Russell

Let's talk about what's been most recently on your plate—a project that focuses on modes of archiving and the recent social phenomenon Occupy Wall Street. Can you touch on this?

Jason Lazarus

The archive is called *Phase I*, the title references conversations between Kalle Lasn and Micah White of AdBusters about broad steps for change, with *Phase I* being signs, meetings, camps, marches. This archive is a collection of recreated OWS signs used around the world. While a Kennedy Visiting Artist this past fall at the University of South Florida [(USF)] in Tampa, I started collecting .jpegs of signs from the Occupy movement and recreating them in my studio. This activity morphed to a weekly sign-making session where students from around the Department of Art and Art History were dropping in to make signs, talk about Occupy, eat pizza, and just blow off steam. This mode of production was significant as each sign has a message and a visual tactic used to create it … through the process of the students picking a hand-made sign to recreate, they not only connect with a message, but with the vernacular tactic used to get that message out quickly, loudly, artistically. We all couldn't help but learn together about the economy of protesting.

LR

That phrase—"the economy of protest"—it's phenomenal, but incredibly vast. Can you ground this a bit more?

JL

An economy of supplies and demands—how do you spend little if any money in production? What is the time spent on something relative to its visual impact? Does visual embellishment or skill shout louder? Does the typography embolden the message? When does the messaging, visually and in terms of message, become muddled? How can that be circumvented? How will all of these decisions impact an audience next to another sign? What about next to another one-hundred signs?

LR

The process of archiving and activism seem to be a ripe place to begin a body of work. In what ways does this project employ social resistance? Does it qualify as social practice?

JL

Terms like *social resistance* and *social practice* I'm hesitant to use; their elasticity seem to create more problems in trying to communicate my artistic goals than they're worth. I will say this: I think *Phase I* as an installation and a method for occupation/education/discussion is not specifically directed toward the hardcore Occupiers as much as they are toward the larger group of those who may have been following Occupy, and who can be activated as a viewer by encountering a repository of signage that have a variety of voices, materials, questions, demands. The signs are a sort of reverse-photograph—they are a way of manifesting image documentation back into real objects; this artistic strategy aims to un-insulate, slow down readings, encourage visual/intellectual review, scrutiny, new questions, to engage a physical opportunity for historicizing what has been flying by us, often digitally and at a distance …

LR

OK, so you're veering away from social resistance, and social practice. What about *open engagement*? Out of the hands of their holders, are these signs able to maintain their political punch?

JL

I think so, they breathe in a different way … they act as physical surrogates for their makers … we may lose our resistance against identifying with a particular person and instead feel solidarity with their message. We can read and engage the messages after their original appearance; it is another way to participate politically—think about everyone who has listened to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech without having been there—its potency hasn't been drained, in fact the opposite holds true.

Phase 1 studio installation, 2011.

LR

What are the connotations of bringing the language of protest away from the streets and placing them within an exhibition space? How does that suit or serve your goals for the project?

JL

Now backing up for a moment, I've had a growing interest in protest/picket signs since 2008 when I saw a Hirschhorn exhibit in Vienna, Austria … he had an armful of oversized blank ones (if I remember correctly) sitting in a corner of an epic solo installation. During the Arab Spring I started to consider recreating protest signs from the imagery floating through the media stream but it didn't feel right, I couldn't decipher a number of the signs and felt I was missing a connection. Occupy is such an amorphous phenomenon that recreating handmade protest signs not only satisfied my inclination to work with protest signage, but working with the cacophony of messages embedded in the signage helped organize the variety of paradigms and concerns that are still jockeying for attention and establishing the broad field of what Occupy is. Working on this archive for me is a way of slowing down a newly forming history and sorting it out on my own terms. Additionally, by recreating documented signage, I can conflate time and space and in one installation curate ideas, geographies, micro-narratives/chronologies, etc. For example, when a protester is pepper-sprayed in Oakland I can make sure that the aftermath of that moment, or the reaction to it, is represented in a sign next to another sign that begs Occupy Europe, and another that references Bloomberg, and on and on.

As the sign-making progressed, it seemed necessary to get the signs out into the public as an artistic intervention and gesture of solidarity with Occupy Tampa and Occupy USF. Near the end of my tenure as a visiting artist, when we had squeezed out as many signs as possible, we mounted a campus Occupation in front of the USF student center for a day with over one-hundred recreated signs from the project—onlookers could take in the variety of messages and handmade sign materials in a physical form that had been recently used worldwide; they could sit with a sign and Occupy with us, and the sign they picked could be one bearing a message they felt a connection to. So by literally Occupying with these recreated sign-sculptures (which I think is a better term as it reveals the labor put into artfully tearing, bending, distressing the signage to reflect its state when initially documented), the signs not only got dirtier, they were conceptually dirtied too. They lose the sterility of the studio and become secondly or thirdly activated. Each of these layers complicates the materials, messages, slows down readings, encourages visual and critical scrutiny I—we—might miss as history is happening.

Phase I connects to another project I initiated in 2009, *Orion over Baghdad* textual archive of titles given by U.S. soldiers to their Flickr images of the conflict in Iraq. Both projects and the rest of my practice is concerned with the intersection of private and public political, cultural, and historical arcs that beg for further and slower readings …

LR

You have a background in the study of marketing, is that correct? In the building out of these OWS-style signs, do you feel any influences hailing from the advertising or marketing world? From the realms of marketing and propaganda?

JL

You've done your research Legacy! Yes, in 1998 I received an undergraduate degree in marketing from DePaul University in Chicago, where I was not only influenced by the Honors Marketing Program I was enrolled in, but my best friends studying Sociology, Philosophy, and Literature. Afterward, I was the Associate Marketing Director at Court Theatre in Chicago, whose focus is on contemporary adaptations of classic theatre. The wonderfully brainy context of Court Theatre—at the University of Chicago—means these adaptations are rigorously researched, creatively imagined … I realized later that that was my first exposure to creative conceptual thinking. Over time, as inspiring as their programming is, I realized I wanted to be a cultural producer rather than a trumpet—

LR

(*laughter*) —to play and participate, rather than be played! Absolutely!

JL

In general, the more time I spent in the marketing world (in my early twenties) the more resistant I grew toward corporatized messaging, the ubiquity of these messages, and in general the crowding-out of the individual in contemporary culture. I think that grounds *Phase I* (the archive of collaboratively produced recreations of global OWS signage) as an embrace of the individual voice over polished, overwrought mass messages. I'm infatuated with everything about the signs: the economy of materials, the imperfections, the varying amplifications (in scale, text, brightness, height) … they parse out an immense volume of information about the collective weight and despair individuals have been feeling in the past few decades with increased corporate influence, media homogeneity, and environmental degradation … one example and watershed moment that grounds some of this weight is the the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

LR

Can you talk a bit more about the Telecommunications Act, and why that is specifically essential to highlight within this context?

JL

In short, the deregulations involved in the Act led to bigger media companies taking over smaller ones, resulting in a more difficult environment for local, independent, and alternative producers to sustain production. It's a parable for the many kind of divides swelling within the United States: economic, technological, political … all of which bend toward the disempowerment of the individual.

Michael Jackson Memorial Procession, June 25th, 2010 (Gary, IN to Chicago).

LR

You've made use of the aesthetics of memorial and of duplication or replication in your previous work—I am thinking of here your *Michael Jackson Memorial Procession*, or of your Heinecken project wherein you produced photographic images layering the ashes of Robert Heinecken throughout the process of exposure and development … is this recent project somewhat a memorialization of Occupy Wall Street? Of the individual?

JL

Yes! Yes! We must slow down, read harder, scrutinize more closely, connect the dots—those of our own, those of our culture, the places where they intersect—it is this ethos that I think underscores a lot of my practice. In the case of the *Michael Jackson Memorial Procession*, the compulsion was to celebrate, remember, harness, and re-imagine the spontaneous occupation of sonic space that occurred with the default blasting of Jackson's music as a mourning ritual. In the case of the *Heinecken Studies*, the task was to do something artistic that would force me to use the darkroom as a point of creation, to force a trekking back and forth in and out of the darkroom as Heinecken had, which in a sense is a homage-performance which the photograms become documents of (further layering the documentation of Heinecken beyond the cremated ash indices the exposures created). So—yes—one thing I'm interested in doing with *Phase I* is saying, "Hey! This happened, all over the world, it's dense, and important, and you should slow down and live with these signs, they can *teach* us things!" … by recreating the signs, I can curate them as I see fit, I'm not restricted to scrambling around collecting ephemera as many institutions have been.

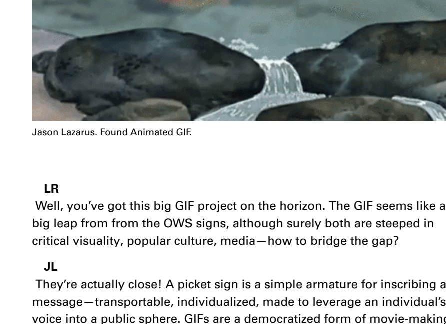
LR

What about role-playing? Does it have a place in this conversation? What modes of performativity have you put into action as you've built out your various projects?

JL

Ah, I always struggle how to best answer this question. I think as a younger artist, I was a bit more flippant or adversarial, and assumed my role was to take on the role of a cynic. As I've gotten older, I've realized people are smart, they don't need artists to point out things are fucked up, or ridiculous. But, I do think my role is to produce via the rules of my own creation (in my case, *Too Hard to Keep, Phase I, Orion Over Baghadad, Heinecken*). An old friend of mind said so succinctly to me years ago that—to paraphrase—what artists do to create meaning is create their own rule systems. So I approach cultural, historical, and political trajectories via my own strategies and rule-systems; I sort, create, and imagine in support of that search, and in the end I hope to add meaning to real and imagined histories, to do so in a way slows the viewer down, connect those personal and collective dots, and to do all of that imperfectly as a single human rather than a corporate engine.

I'll add one more thing. There's a vignette I sometimes imagine, which is someone witnessing something profound happening—a solar eclipse, a shuttle launch, a climactic moment in a vocalist's performance, whatever, and I imagine the viewer taking it in awe and, if you were to pan down, you'd see gum stuck to their shoe. We're all running around as fleshy, watery sacks doing/witnessing amazing, mundane, and/or destructive things—and the gum is the imperfection, the failure, the unsteady growth. Maybe what I'm trying to say is that my role can be to find that gum and to ask what additional meaning does that give the eclipse? This is humanist rather than nihilistic or even cynical, and humanism, when done right, is the best kind of criticality!



Jason Lazarus. Found Animated GIF.

LR

Well, you've got this big GIF project on the horizon. The GIF seems like a big leap from from the OWS signs, although surely both are steeped in critical visuality, popular culture, media—how to bridge the gap?

JL

They're actually close! A picket sign is a simple armature for inscribing a message—transportable, individualized, made to leverage an individual's voice into a public sphere. GIFs are a democratized form of movie-making that hold the same basic values. The project, *twohundredfiftysixcolors*, is an animated GIF archive to be sequenced, edited, and transferred to 16mm film and screened as a cinematic event. My collaborator, Eric Fleischauer, along with our assistant, Theo Darst, have been collecting GIFs from a public-call-for-entries (from late 2011) in addition to our own strategic web-surfing. My interest started from a view of the GIF as an artistic micro-gesture (whether low-brow or high), whereas Eric felt compelled by GIFs as a phenomenon that spoke to his artistic practice of working within film and video. Our collaboration has been a sort of cross-training from our original perspectives to a larger, more complex meditation on all of the implications embedded in these files. The film's format will engender a new anthropological seat for the viewer, and we hope to tease out these concerns in an orchestral manner, rather than didactically. It continues to be a demanding project to edit, but the editing process also involves moments of ecstasy as we discover more opportunities for how the film can add meaning and texture to its component parts. In my view, these small moments of profundity are really the high points of all big working projects.

LR

Who are some of your contributors?

JL

It's too early to name contributors! It's a huge team, filled with some of the usual suspects and, most important, the disparate mass of the people!

LR

What do you hope to see as the ultimate realization of this project? And, after taking the world by storm with your GIF-extravaganza, what could possibly be next?

JL

The ultimate realization of the project is that it travels as a 16mm film around the world, where it can be seen in the context of a cinema screening, its ideal format. Hopefully, we get to follow the film as much as possible as the discussions created after screenings will be a large part of the project for us. Additionally, we will have an online version (a digital documentation of the analog piece) further in the future, so that access to viewing the film will be more democratized. What's next?

Bigger stuff!

Untitled, 2011.

Legacy Russell is BOMBlog's Art Editor. She is an independent curator, artist, writer and cultural producer.