



Jason Lazarus



Featured in
Issue 162

C BY CARMEN WINANT IN REVIEWS | 13 MAR 14



Jason Lazarus *Phase 1/Live Archive* (detail), 2011–ongoing, installation view, mixed media, dimensions variable

Jason Lazarus is often described as an artist activist. But it would be more apt to say that he makes work about activism. In Lazarus's hands, art is a channel through which to consider failure and attempt, desperation and motivation, abandonment and cause. In this, his first museum exhibition, the Chicago-based artist, who trained as a photographer, worked across installation, sculpture and found objects. The result was ambitious but not overwrought; including 17 works, the show's cadence felt measured and nicely spare.

Lazarus's work draws heavily on the archive and the art of collection. Even his primary objects often depict, or remake, found material (usually on a much grander scale). For instance, in this exhibition there was a rejection letter to a Neil Armstrong fan scanned and re-fabricated at 1.5 x 1 m and a copy of the 1955 'Family of Man' exhibition catalogue (with a personal note inscribed on the first page) re-photographed by Lazarus and printed 1.5 x 2.3 m. Found objects were also on display, such as a board wrapped in a blanket secured by gaffer tape and an abandoned colour wheel painting, which the artist discovered in New Orleans and Tampa, respectively. More than a production strategy, this manner of generating work is a philosophy in line with the embedded content. By gathering his material from the world rather than constructing it entirely in a studio, Lazarus not only makes a political statement about the hierarchy of objects, he also reinforces his desire to make sense of other people's private experiences. Even his photographs of 'the real world' seem borrowed from exterior vantages, such as his image of the entrance to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, the school that, as the title of the piece informs us, twice denied the young Hitler a place. In other shows, Lazarus has pictured the upward-facing view from Freud's couch and the top of the tree gazed upon by Anne Frank during her period of hiding. As with collecting forgotten or discarded objects, these images are attempts – some more complicated than others – to see the world through other people's eyes.

This strategy was propagated in one of the two large installations, *Too Hard to Keep*. Begun in 2010, the ongoing project is made up of donated photographs deemed too painful to retain by their original owners. The pictures, now numbering over 3,000, are scattered throughout a small room formed by four temporary white walls. Select prints, which were gifted to Lazarus but still considered private by their anonymous donors, are turned to face the wall. The majority are viewable, however, and alarmingly normal: Polaroids of young women smiling, school photos, a boy sleeping, a man performing onstage, an exposed torso. Detached from their wounded owners but not destroyed, the images stand as metaphors for emotional release or purgatory – or maybe both.

If *Too Hard to Keep* is Lazarus's ultimate collection of primary images, *Phase I/Live Archive* (2011–ongoing), the other large installation in the show, takes a different, if more oblique, approach to the found object. For the project, Lazarus led workshops in which participants re-created protest signs from the Occupy movement. The makers were instructed to produce 'literal, three-dimensional cop[ies],’ duplicating the text as well as 'any creases, bends and tears'. Their resulting creations – now art objects – do not give themselves away as facsimiles.

This 1:1 object replication poses a new set of questions and internal conflicts, particularly when it comes to such loaded symbols. For instance, does Phase 1 pay tribute to the Occupy protesters by creating an original monument to the spirit of collective dissent, or does it deny specific people authorship over their messages (for example, 'I'm 84 and mad as hell' and 'Doctor Who cares for the 99%')? Does it sardonically point to the manner in which leftist activists often recycle their strategies, or celebrate the unique proliferation of the movement, which spread from New York's Zuccotti Park across the country and around the world? All of these interpretations hold, affording the work a complex and mutable power.

Two hand-carved, elongated 'dashes' made of granite sat on the gallery floor, each mounted on a low, narrow plinth. Both were inverted and proportionally enlarged duplicates of the line that connects the birth and death dates on a gravestone. In titling the works *George Richard Moscone (November 24, 1929–November 27, 1978)* (2013) and *Dr. Daniel Hale Williams (January 18, 1858 – August 4, 1931)* (2013), Lazarus pays tribute to the liberal former Mayor of San Francisco, assassinated along with Harvey Milk, as well as Dr. Williams, the inventor of open heart surgery. The twin sculptures are perfect exemplars of Lazarus's work, which seeks to gauge the meaning of lives lived through progressive action. As the so-called 'apathetic generation' comes of age, it's a rather hopeful proposition.



CARMEN WINANT

Carmen Winant is an artist, writer, Roy Lichtenstein Endowed Chair of Studio Art at Ohio State University, USA, and a 2019 Guggenheim Fellow in photography.