

Thesis Show

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For the last six years or so, Eric Wesley has been engaged in a raucous, performative, and often very funny kind of institutional critique that is part sculpture and part prank. His work most often takes the form of complex groupings of sculptures and drawings that document or map complicated and doggedly anti-heroic interventions into institutional or urban economies that the artist finds worthy of subversion. Sometimes as light and instant as a visual pun, sometimes as serious as a science experiment, Wesley's projects are at once ambitious, whimsical, visually engaging, and weirdly handmade.



Wesley likes hovering between the playful ambiguity of a seriously heady consideration and a joke. Verbal clichés that become visual puns or sculptural riffs: this is where the artist is comfortable. What Wesley does not want to do is be conclusive. This catalogue—the artist's first—reads like a photography book, but Wesley is not a photographer. The snapshot quality of the pictures, their haphazard juxtapositions, their casualness bordering on studied informality in this part album, part club kid's photo journal cannot hide a personal

significance for the artist, in spite of the studied anonymity. All of the images circle around the idea of the thesis show. For the most part, they were made in the past year or during the course of preparing this exhibition. Inhabiting the role of amateur documentarian, Wesley shoots the project in the making. (In fact, Wesley is having a documentary made about the organization of this show.) With lens as close as Nan Goldin's, Wesley's light touch diffuses the archive of his recent art life as accompaniment to the project, what he refers to as his "thesis show." Like those in a university look book or community college brochure, the photographs are anonymous yet poignant.



The pictures offer clues. One oddly familiar image shows the artist taking a photo of himself in a bathroom mirror. The flash, of course, obliterates his face against the tiled walls behind him. We are reminded of Wolfgang Tillmans's off-kilter images or Rineke Dijkstra's candid photographs and video of the awkward vulnerability of club kids. Wesley's bathroom mirror image fits into a long history, from Brassai's lolling dance-hall girls frolicking near the artist's reflection to Lee Friedlander's searching conceptualism, which often found the photographer in empty hotel rooms pondering the meaning of solitude and the absurdity of its representation. Wesley likes the generic and redundant quality of the bathroom self-portrait and other snapshots in this book. He chuckles with us but remains elusive behind the camera's flash. The images are part of how the artist negotiates the world. Always with his digital camera, Wesley shoots photographs that are a dime a dozen. Take the photo out of an airplane window, for example. Is he serious? And yet, perhaps it documents the first trip shepherding his work to some far away place; maybe the awe inspired by the snowy peaks below is genuine. Then again, the image also resonates with the contemporary

discourse around speed, globalism, translation, and transculturalism. With this image Wesley pokes fun at the now-familiar genre of travel photography, lazy depictions of airport ennui, and the privilege of art tourism.



The image opposite the bathroom portrait is even more banal. It is like the throwaway shot of some disinterested inspector who missed vital information in the sterile medical office. Obliquely connected to this is the fact that Wesley is somewhat fixated, with mixed emotions, by the lawyer mom and doctor dad from *The Cosby Show*, who were the model of the rising black middle-class couple in the 1980s. These professionals—with their colorful sweaters and precocious children—represented the pinnacle of happiness and success. The tiled bathroom in the photograph represents, in some distant and abstract way, the cold white of a medical building and is juxtaposed forever in the artist's mind with the warm brown of a lawyer's paneled office. Both familiar and slightly horrifying for Wesley, these spaces are loaded with the expectations imposed on the artist as a young man.



Fundamentally, Wesley is an artist who makes sculpture. He deplores the way his work is lauded for its touch and handmade quality, and yet he seems to love to render and tinker. His project at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), is, finally, a grouping of large objects meant to collide like elements in a riddle. The artist is interested in the branding of MOCA's three gallery spaces—Grand Avenue on Bunker Hill, The Geffen Contemporary in Little Tokyo, and the Pacific Design Center (PDC) in West Hollywood—as a campus of sorts. Each location functions differently in relationship to its surroundings, and the context of each is potentially everything in terms of the meaning of the work

shown. Wesley is amused by this, and it dovetails nicely with the notion of his MOCA Focus exhibition as a rendition of a thesis show (though a thesis show would typically include a group of artists); his first one-person museum exhibition becomes the culmination of the master's degree that he never got.



This work also riffs on the obsession in Los Angeles with youth and young artists as they emerge from graduate school. It is no secret that the international acclaim of Los Angeles as a hotbed of artistic talent is, in part, based on the social structure of the art school and its relationship to the economic structure of the gallery scene. Wesley is amused by this and wants to agitate the status quo as he sees it. Both part and product of this world, he also positions himself as an observer, making his way, as he is, without the conference of the golden thesis show.



It is worth mentioning Wesley's relationship to irony here. He is part of a generation of artists whose post-Pop sensibilities are sharp, honed on a diet of Marcel Duchamp and a genuine love of popular culture. For example, for the MOCA exhibition he has enshrined photographs of choice selections from his considerable collection of record albums in the same cheap acrylic boxes that also encase discarded onion rings and french fries. One might be tempted to suggest the same for the artist's impressive collection of T-shirts, which functions as a veritable archive of black music and political culture of the 1970s to the present. Wesley tracks popular culture voraciously, and his obsession is one of a genuine fan even as he adopts the role of critic in his work.



A related passion is his newly formed art school, founded with his friend and colleague Piero Golia, a conceptual artist from Naples, Italy, currently based in

Los Angeles. The Mountain School of the Arts, so named for The Mountain bar in Chinatown that serves as its primary site, is actually a program of lectures, studio crits, and semi-public gatherings for the young and restless. Wesley makes it clear that this is not part of his art practice, explaining that the school is real, whereas his art is not. This declaration by negation is typical of Wesley. As soon as meaning appears to stick, it is set into motion again. So, OK, the project is not located in the performative but rather in a genuine sentiment about what an art education should look like. Operating between something like a fabulous museum education program and a twenty-first-century salon, the Mountain School's ambitions are relatively nomadic. Wesley spends a huge amount of his time working out things like accommodations and studio space for students and coordinating visiting lecturers. Not unlike his Los Angeles colleague Andrea Zittel and her A-Z West outpost in Joshua Tree, 130 miles east of Los Angeles, Wesley is actually trying to create a new public space for discourse and, more broadly, to inscribe his own practice.



For Wesley and the generation of artists who emerged from the University of California at Los Angeles's undergraduate and graduate art programs at around the same time—Chris Beas, Liz Craft, Pentti Monkkonen, Ruby Neri, and others—a hybridized notion of community has come to stand in for the graduating class. In what might loosely be thought of as a permutation of post-studio practice, these artists construct a discourse that is simultaneously empowering and self-effacing, intellectually bold yet intentionally de-centered, and theoretically informed yet decidedly slackerish in its application. Like the miniature masses who people Wesley's junk sculpture aptly titled *Mall* (2001), these artists inhabit a landscape dotted with Michel Foucault, cigarette butts, oil paint, and

beer cans. Wesley and his friends are children of the mall—as at home in its architectural blandness as in any studio. Los Angeles is home of the mini-mall as multi-cultural agglomeration, famous for offerings ranging from art galleries and deluxe sushi bars to neighborhood dental offices and walk-in synagogues. Here new genres of contemporary art can only aspire to the moveable feast of attention-defying offerings generically doled out, block by block, in the urban/suburban sprawl of L.A. Like a riff on Donald Judd's eternal dictum for sculpture—"One thing after another"—Wesley is fond of saying "We're all just moving from one place to another."



Wesley selected MOCA's PDC space for his exhibition, attracted to it as the Westside, and newest, branch of the museum's three buildings. In the vaulted space of the PDC gallery, the artist has constructed a false floor designed out of plywood and built with the same elementary technology as that of a temporary gallery wall. Viewers are invited to walk on the platform, where they encounter two spinning discs embedded in the floor, a crashed motor scooter whose engine revs though it is anchored in place (much like Chris Burden's *The Big Wheel* [1979]), a translucent gas tank, and other seemingly disjunctive sculptural elements. If the scooter has a sculptural presence, much like the still hulk of Charles Ray's crashed car in *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997), the gas tank is Wesley's homage to painting. The tank is as thin as it can be, allowing for maximum translucency and for the beauty of the toxic liquid to shimmer as beautifully as any abstract painting. Wesley wants the smell of gas to permeate the experience of the installation.



As retrospectives often are, this "thesis show" is a constellation of both personal and collegial references. The scooter, run over by an ex-girlfriend in a fit of

rage but subsequently cleaned—its crashed state maintained meticulously by the artist like some monument to memory itself—runs periodically during the exhibition. Spinning sections of the floor reference the various pressures and expectations on artists as they enter a profession whose measures of success are elusive at best. Conceived to be a bit mystifying, this arrangement of objects and spatial experiences is typical of Wesley's sly parasitic universe of objects.



In previous works, Wesley has similarly toyed with ambition and failure. While he doesn't like to overemphasize the handmade quality of his work and resolutely states that this is a consequence of economics and nothing else, there is no question that each of his pseudo-heroic sculptural events is laden with the kind of formal and material expectation of someone who loves to tinker. The means justify the ends for Wesley and, just as his elaborate plans and drawings for projects often supersede the objects themselves, so there is a poignant obstinacy to his attempts to create whole parasitic ecosystems within the institutions he backs into. Previous projects have included, for example, a body of work exhibited as *Camper* (1999), the central element of which was a partially fictionalized trip to Alaska the artist made in a homemade camper. Occupying the gallery like a relic of the artist's own body, the sweetly lurking object was a combination living unit and prosthesis for an elaborate performative trip. Whether or not the trip was successfully completed was, in the end, beside the point. As of this writing, the artist plans to lovingly restore the motor scooter for a final ride from his studio to the museum. Again recalling Zittel's A-Z Living Units, which are also both functional and wildly impractical, Wesley's sculptural events embody the optimism of the readymade.