

*Muscle Memory, Future Comedy* (2014)

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Originally published in *Being One and Then Sum*. Oslo: Standard, 2014.

When Robert Smithson announced “a new consciousness of the vapid and dull” within the vanguard art of the sixties and seventies, he was pointing to aspects of the postwar American landscape that might serve as a viable counter-model to the existentially charged drama of Abstract Expressionism, which continued to derive a large part of its charge from the by then already old opposition of city and country. (1) One could say that the fraught borderlines of urban development, those zones of confrontation between the organically grown “first nature” of mountains, fields and streams and the industrially manufactured “second nature,” had been the locus of choice for the development of modernist abstraction from at least Manet to Pollock. Here we are still contending with a dialectic that the artist felt obliged to synthesize, the mandate of modern art being to somehow familiarize us with the new world, to render it livable by recourse to the old one. Smithson, however, was suggesting that we had basically outgrown this need, and he pointed to the all-too familiar architectures of “the slurbs, urban sprawl, and the infinite number of housing developments of the postwar boom...” as proof. (2) In the banal, repetitive forms that now dominated what once was conceived as a volatile and infinitely suggestible space, the *terrain vague*, cosmopolitanism and provincialism could no longer be so readily told apart. From here on in, it would become increasingly difficult to believe in historical progressions of any sort. Whatever change could still be registered in our grand designs for life was now perhaps merely a side-effect of entropy, the faintly alien aspect of a world devolving more and more into sameness.

Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art are all marked by the incursions of this homogeneous vernacular of planned communities, supermarkets, diners, parking lots, freeways and roadside signage, the drive-by culture of the auto-scape where “the shock of the new” is a matter of degree rather than kind. Andy Warhol drove the point home with his first solo exhibition at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, which featured a series of near-identical paintings covering the full menu of Campbell’s soups, all displayed on narrow shop-style shelves, leaning against the wall as though for the taking, while simultaneously insinuating the coerced redundancy of consumer choice. The systemic permutations of Donald Judd’s, Robert Morris’, Dan Flavin’s and Sol Lewitt’s serial-modular sculptures likewise served to highlight the narrowing space of incremental differentiation within which identity would henceforth take shape. Ed Ruscha, in one of the foundational works of Conceptualism, simply photographed the gasoline stations he passed while traveling between his hometown of Oklahoma City and Los Angeles. Nothing new was made of what was witnessed; the generic layout of the resulting book *26 Gasoline Stations* suggested that any desire for new-ness had itself become old-hat at this point. He explained it in an interview as an act of reportage, subjective input kept to a minimum, just the facts: “...I felt there was so much wasteland between L.A. and Oklahoma City that somebody had to bring in the news to the city. It was just a simple, straightforward way of getting the news and bringing it back. ... It’s nothing more than a training manual for people who want to know about things like that.” (3) “Things like that”—it would seem that they require no aesthetic elaboration, or perhaps more to the point, they actively reject it. To Ruscha, this “wasteland” might have still seemed exotic, a peculiar choice of subject matter, but it is rapidly encroaching on everything else; it is already the future. “To make is to choose and only to

choose,” Marcel Duchamp famously declared, so what happens when the act of choosing is set on default, the choice of no choice? (4) In the “vapid and dull” environment that Smithson describes, no particular object stands out for attention, as all are now rapidly moving toward entropic de-differentiation. In this emerging space of sheer equivalence, that is, what is left for the choosing?

Since the time of Smithson’s writing a great deal has changed—in our national and geopolitical situation, in the forms and functions of our civic institutions, in the state of our economy, in our social relations, in our systems of communication, in our cultural life—and yet the environment that he described continues to hold. Aaron Garber-Maikovska contends with the same environment in his work, one that has only become more and more the same. In the interim, we have witnessed the implementation of the Reagan Doctrine in Afghanistan, Angola and Nicaragua, followed by the Gulf War, Iraq and 9/11; the privatization of government, along with the inevitable downsizing and outsourcing of its operations; financial deregulation, risk-managed speculation and the rise of the 1%; the reversal of “white flight” and the subsequent thematic reconstruction of the big cities on the suburban model; the ongoing attrition of what was once termed the public sphere and its relocation to the shopping mall and internet; the convulsions of a popular culture that simultaneously grows more fractured and monolithic as it subdivides into categories of production and opportunities for discernment so minute they become essentially indistinguishable. These, and many more sweeping changes besides, conspire to render our experience of everyday life increasingly unstable and precarious, and yet the states of radical disparity that result have gradually lost their critical sting; outlasting the memory of any alternative, they become the implacable norm. This dismal trajectory forms the backdrop, or backstory, of Garber-Maikovska’s work, which deals with a once alarming range of late-capitalist, post-democratic, neo-liberal “facts on the ground” in their most common, prosaic iterations, and does so precisely from the perspective of forgetting. But forgetfulness, when it is announced as such and insisted upon, as it is here, cannot be aligned with complacency—to the contrary.

In a recent video, *Target Tree*, 2014, we observe Garber-Maikovska moving about in a massive, largely deserted parking lot, the Target name and logo just visible in the background. This, like most of his moving-image work, can be described as documentation of a live performance, one that unfolds in full public view, but in the absence of any audience other than ourselves, who will encounter it later and in another context. The temporal and spatial shift is significant precisely because it could so easily pass unnoticed. What we are given to watch happened before, and yet the space in which it happened actively discourages any sort of historical thinking: It could be anytime, anywhere. This is a space filled to the brim with what Smithson termed the “new monuments,” constructions that no longer bear a mnemonic relation to the past, as the old monuments did, and now work to eradicate any sense of the future. (5) Here, the monument in question is, just as the title indicates, a tree planted behind a big-box chain-store, a so-called “tree-island” edged in a thick square frame of concrete that is vertically offset against a regular grid of car space striping. The camera is fixed on its tripod and focused on this utterly unremarkable example of urban landscaping with an insistence that is vaguely absurd. We know that it comprises just one part, one section of a scene that extends beyond it in all directions without changing. Outside the limits of the frame, the same elements recur, multiplied into the distance, and so, when the artist enters the shot, one might well ask why he elected to interact with these particular elements? There is no reason other than the one he proceeds to improvise on the spot, and this

straightaway announces a skewed take on the found object, which is generally something known before it is chosen. Here instead something so nearly invisible it tends to elude notice altogether is plumbed for unknown resources.

The suggestion that this thing was not found so much as stumbled across—it got in the way—is literally demonstrated by Garber-Maikovska, who repeatedly trips over the raised edges of the tree's planting bed. This slapstick movement is the central theme of the performance, and it undergoes a series of spontaneously improvised variations, executed forward and in reverse, drawn out, slowed down and occasionally stopped, frozen, midway. There is a great deal of comedic bravura in this, and it can be, and for the most part is, enjoyed as sheer meaningless fun. At the same time, however, one gets the distinct impression that this fun is also quite serious. The look of determined, sometimes even pained, concentration that he wears on his face is our first clue to the possibility that all this physical effort may actually be directed toward a meaningful end. Even, or especially, if no intelligible idea is ever delivered, it is nevertheless something we come to anticipate with mounting conviction as the work draws on.

The attempt to put down in words just what it is that Garber-Maikovska is getting at is of course somewhat self-defeating, since this sort of language is just what he has so pointedly renounced. In place of any consensual system of signification, he develops a highly idiosyncratic mode of fully embodied expression. The object in question, the tree-island, is never associated with a preexisting concept, and in this sense is never explained. Rather, it is felt out, brushed by, skimmed over and pushed up against; its tolerances are tested, and its surfaces probed for points of stress, weakness, openings. This process unfolds in the here and now framework of a spontaneous encounter, the artist's every movement taking shape in direct response to the material properties of this thing that has monopolized his attention. It ends as abruptly as it began, and in between evinces no sense of guided development or progression. Throughout the running time of the video, we are suspended within the kind of eternalized now-time that Nietzsche, in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," reserved, enviously, for the cows in the field: "Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today..." (6) Here as well one could say that the environment is approached on an animal level—it is passed through the body, physically assimilated—and yet the purpose of these exertions is obviously not just one of self-sustenance and perpetuation, but communication. However paradoxically this may strike us, Garber-Maikovska's brand of atavism is in fact painstakingly structured as a means of inquiry and analysis, and ultimately a highly specialized form of knowledge, perhaps counter-knowledge, about this world we all share.

Some of us have likewise tripped in a parking lot, but thereafter we tend to be on the lookout for those egregious elements that may impede, and by extension direct, our passage. For his part, Garber-Maikovska trips over his tree-island repeatedly, and does so without ever falling. In his kinesthetic exploration of this normally unfortunate act, which is worked through a vast permutational range of iterations, it comes to assume a more salutary character. It becomes an opportunity to heuristically learn something about the built landscape and our place within it that might exceed, and even oppose, the cautionary lessons that have been designed into its forms. The most ostensibly generous function of a tree-island is to provide aesthetic relief in a monotonous space that might otherwise be experienced as brutally indifferent and inhospitable to human life.

On a more pragmatic level, it gives shade and generally serves to cool an area where vast stretches of black asphalt absorb and intensify the heat of the sun to an occasionally intolerable degree. To this artist, however, it constitutes an obstruction first and foremost. It is an instance of the organic “first nature” wholly subsumed to the logic of the “second,” instrumentalized as a barrier, a means of spatial division as well as social engineering. This comes as no great revelation, of course, but the point of this work is not to critically expose an underlying motive, but rather to bend it to a new set of rules—the rules of a game. Garber-Maikovska trips over the tree-island on purpose and in the process thwarts the hard lessons of the parking lot, turning potential disaster into absurdist pantomime and inspired ballet at once. It is a thrill to behold, and our pleasure is only increased when we imagine how a representative of the store might view the same footage. In this way, the artist tests the limits of a freedom beset on all sides by the agents of surveillance, law enforcement and litigation, and gains the upper hand.

The tree-island is just one part of a whole system of objects that extends far beyond it, taking in the whole parking lot, the Target store behind it, the network of highways and streets that connect it to the surrounding communities, the gas stations, convenience stores and restaurants that line the way, and so on. It is simply one thing among many others, no more or less emblematic of the totality than anything else that comprises it. Normally it would simply fade into the experiential wash of our brand-cluttered junk-space, and yet in the course of Garber-Maikovska’s interaction it is endowed with a vivid, astonishing presence. There are a number of other such things that he subjects to this sort of treatment, things that likewise tend to fall beneath the threshold of our attention: a newly installed kitchen at a friend’s house (*Kitchen*, 2012), a glass storefront at the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles (*Staples*, 2012), a table at the Red Lobster (*Red Lobster*, 2013) or Red Robin (*Red Robin*, 2013) restaurant, a moveable metal guardrail at the Cabazon discount outlets in the California desert (*Cabazon*, 2013). All are connected as constituent parts of an increasingly integrated circuit of production and consumption, and yet each one prompts a markedly different response.

The first, the kitchen, is the most outwardly anodyne of the lot. A representative instance of the “crate and barrel look,” in the artist’s own words, it exudes a quality of zero-degree normalcy. However, in the video, he approaches it cautiously, as if for the first time. How might an alien being make sense of this kitchen, one wonders while watching. All of its once self-evident functions, so efficiently programmed into its forms, dissolve into a perplexing blur as Garber-Maikovska works his way through the space. He passes his hands over the stovetop, the cabinetry, the counters, taking their measurements relative to his own, attempting to physically familiarize himself with their layout, but without ever quite succeeding. Surfaces are caressed, tapped and punched in the aim of releasing information, a submerged content that is drawn up through his fingers and passed out of his mouth without any pause for intellectual processing. And, as though too quickly consumed and digested, whatever meaning is to be found there undergoes the sort violent, dyspeptic expression that is appropriately termed glossolalia or logorrhea—an excremental outpour of sense. The kitchen is sounded, as it were, wildly, the artist emitting a constantly variegated succession of non-verbal vocalizations that correspond as much to the quality of his touch as the object in question. But however unintelligible the outcome, it still communicates something of the strenuous effort to understand in the absence of any predetermined knowledge. One senses as well the alarming strangeness of things encountered in this way, as wholly specific, enclosed and unyielding. The

kitchen resists, and the artist's frustration is at times palpable as he stubbornly resumes his questioning process, repeating the same moves with mounting insistence, and then again pulling back, readjusting.

The fraught psychological tone of this work, which continually threatens to erupt into all-out mayhem, is surprising in the light of its object, so seemingly placid and amenable. And it is no less surprising that when the object is instead more aggressively oriented toward us, as in the case of the Cabazon guardrail, which openly declares its prohibitive purpose and demands our compliance, the artist opts for a subdued approach. The frenzied expressions elicited by the kitchen here give way to benign curiosity, Garber-Maikovska remaining for the most part beatifically silent. This thing is never confronted as a hostile, threatening force, but rather one that submits willingly to his touch like a musical instrument begging to be played, which is precisely what he goes on to do. Such responses might at first strike us as inappropriate, and this certainly accounts for much of the work's humor, but it would be reductive to put it all down to an enactment of a kind of failure. To see it this way is to assign to the kitchen or guardrail a decisive power, as if success were only attainable by way of agreement with its given terms, and in this sense there is perhaps a more strategic, seditious side to Garber-Maikovska's antics. He persists in getting it wrong, and in this persistence, also affirms that things could be otherwise.

As mentioned, all of these commonplace and ubiquitous things are approached by Garber-Maikovska as if for the first time—as things not yet named or whose names are forgotten—but of course he knows what they are, and probably all too well. The “as if” of not knowing is merely a pretext, or in the language of acting, a motivation, and however convincing his performance might be, we can never lose sight of the fact that this is actually an artist playing a part. In order to credibly inhabit his oblivious role, Garber-Maikovska must work to forget what he knows about any of these things, and this also is captured on video. It is this coupling of the same and the other that gives birth to the comic character as a kind of caricature of oneself, perhaps in this case a casualty of the memory-impairing effects of those “new monuments” pushed to the point of a crash, all data erased, software defunct, only the hardware left running with nothing left to compute but its endlessly recycled exhaust. However humorous its effects, this self-perplexing blur as Garber-Maikovska works his way through the space. He passes his hands over the stovetop, the cabinetry, the counters, taking their measurements relative to his own, attempting to physically familiarize himself with their layout, but without ever quite succeeding. Surfaces are caressed, tapped and punched in the aim of releasing information, a submerged content that is drawn up through his fingers and passed out of his mouth without any pause for intellectual processing. And, as though too quickly consumed and digested, whatever meaning is to be found there undergoes the sort violent, dyspeptic expression that is appropriately termed glossolalia or logorrhea—an excremental outpour of sense. The kitchen is sounded, as it were, wildly, the artist emitting a constantly variegated succession of non-verbal vocalizations that correspond as much to the quality of his touch as the object in question. But however unintelligible the outcome, it still communicates something of the strenuous effort to understand in the absence of any predetermined knowledge. One senses as well the alarming strangeness of things encountered in this way, as wholly specific, enclosed and unyielding. The kitchen resists, and the artist's frustration is at times palpable as he stubbornly resumes his questioning process, repeating the same moves with mounting insistence, and then again pulling back, readjusting.

The artist's videos are finished pieces in their own right and yet the performances they document remain perpetually unfinished. There are no first or last moments, as mentioned; we always find ourselves in the middle of an action, negotiating its degrees of repetition and difference. From one work to the next, we observe the artist resume the same moves and produce the same sounds, but always modulating these to suit the changing context, rearranging their order, testing out alternate groupings and combinations, and periodically introducing something new to the mix. He impulsively acts out his relation to some particular object or situation—this is the work's manifest content—while simultaneously demonstrating the rigorous assembly of his own formal repertoire. All of the various actions, movements, poses, gestures, expressions and soundings that comprise it are derived from his interface with the outlying world, but they build upon themselves, and here a latent content begins to appear. Overall, the project would seem to be driven by the goal of understanding more deeply what has already been made, but this continually gives way to the urge to originate, to conceive of a new language from scratch.

Every one of Garber-Maikovska's performances is an enactment of its own process of conception and composition, and thereby a kind of notation delivered to video, which remains behind as its score. Bypassing any conventional system of signification, something is nevertheless being written, all the time, and often atop something else. The paintings that he has been making since 2011, and which must be seen as integral to his physical practice, render this implied aspect of writing somewhat more overt, as they are comprised of letter-like forms, graphemes. In their fluid abstraction, these resemble Chinese calligraphy, but then, due to their vague but insistent anthropomorphism, also Egyptian hieroglyphs, rebuses or pictograms. They are characters in both senses of the term, bearing an equal relation to symbolic signs and iconic ones, and this lends them the appearance of a language contorted into bodily shape, or vice versa. Of course, writing and drawing share the same substance inasmuch as they are both made of lines, and these can be configured to any number of communicative ends. However, here again, one quickly senses that nothing in particular is being communicated, at least nothing other than the line's capacity to slip effortlessly between these registers. One wants to read and see things in these paintings, and no doubt this is how they are meant to operate on us, but they are also meant to thwart our expectations. Composed from small doodles that the artist regularly commits to acetate, which are then projected and traced onto larger panels, they are entirely the product of a mindless automatism. And yet, precisely because this is a writing released of any obligation to signify, it can encode information about the body from which it flows. Its lines trace the actual movements of this body across the painting's surface, but also a wide range of virtual, remembered and imagined movements that are carried over as much from prior works as the world outside their borders. Static complements to Garber-Maikovska's performative actions, his paintings accumulate into an embodied alphabet, a vocabulary, and at the same time an index of possible ways to negotiate space. Like any writing, that is, their lines do record something and make it available for posterity. Writing is inherently a memory storage technology; according to Vilém Flusser, it "made historical consciousness possible in the first place." (7) Historical consciousness, as Flusser understands it, follows the directional structure of words on a page, but this particular writing does not proceed along a straight line. It turns back on itself to record and continually re-record its own course.

Curiously, then, via the wasteland of Smithson's forgotten future, we work our way back to the Action Painters who likewise sought to bypass the bottleneck of the signifier in order to directly

communicate the process of communicating itself. Yet such attempts to dissolve language into gestural line are not so readily equated with thoughts about authentic or primal being anymore. Today, the “endless tangle” of Pollock-style écriture must be threaded through a world that not only no longer recognizes much opposition between city and country, but where cities themselves begin to lose their distinctions, smoothed out like river stones by the suburban backwash. Garber-Maikovska’s own gestures attend to all of these developments, and to the way that they have transformed our communications at present. His lines are guided as much by the archaic imperatives of the uncultured body as the most up-to-date command functions of the laptop or cellphone touch-screen. And they remind us as well of the stylized graphics of the tagger, which are also a kind of overwriting and underwriting at once, a signature of the self executed above and beneath those of others. That these paintings take shape on surfaces typically used for commercial signage is significant because, although they are of course discrete objects, they retain a functional link to the world of marketing and promotion outside their borders. Like his performances, that is, they are made in, on, and against that world, and it is partly effaced in the process.

As Nietzsche cautions in his essay on historical thinking, “He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past ... will never know what happiness is—worse, he will never do anything to make others happy.” (8) Forgetting is an essential component of any positive action, and yet such action may have tragic consequences if nothing at all is remembered. To forget tragically condemns one to repeat always the same thing to the point of self-obliteration, but to forget comically, that is to say willfully, gains one the leeway to repeat always differently, to compose repetition into an assertion of character. This is the comic character that this artist plays, the one who wins in the end because he counters the command to forget with his own choice to do so. He dismisses from memory all the names of the “vapid and dull” things he encounters in order to memorize something else about them, a knowledge that is accessed by the body and then stored there as well, in muscle memory, for the sake of future comedy.

1. Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 13
2. Ibid.
3. Ed Ruscha to David Bourdon, “Ruscha as Publisher (or All Booked Up),” *Ed Ruscha: Leave any Information at the Signal*, ed. Alexandra Schwarz (Cambridge, MA / London: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 41
4. Marcel Duchamp, from a 1961 interview with Georges Charbonnier, cited in Thierry De Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism,” in *The Duchamp Effect*, eds. Martha Buskirk & Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA / London: An October Book, The MIT Press, 1996), p. 104
5. Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” p. 11
6. “...they (the cattle) leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored.” Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 60
7. Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 7
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” p. 62