

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Hannes Schmidt, *How Long is Long?*, 2008.

ARTSEEN

## *Fresh Kills* + Josh Azzarella

by Josh Morgenthau

**Fresh Kills Dumbo Arts Center March 15 – May 4, 2008**  
**Josh Azzarella DCKT Contemporary March 21 – May 17, 2008**

How can we find meaning in historical memories—Iwo Jima, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., 9/11—when our only apprehension of these events is the superficial photography and video, which reproduce them in numbing proliferation? The group show, *Fresh Kills*, at the Dumbo Arts Center and Josh Azzarella's solo exhibition at DCKT Contemporary find different approaches to the problem of historical memory in a post-9/11 era. Curator David Kennedy Cutler, in an essay he wrote for *Fresh Kills*, offers a testimonial from a worker on

Staten Island's defunct Fresh Kills landfill, converted after 9/11 into a dumping and sorting station for the demolished rubble of the World Trade Center. The worker describes sifting through tons and tons of concrete dust for traces of humanity —wallets, keys, body parts, bones, teeth, and fingers. The worker's search for meaning in the remains of a broken monument parallels the viewer's. As this collection of anti-monuments passes before his eyes, their significance alternately fragments, submerges and becomes abstract.

The first piece in Fresh Kills is Jan Bünnig's "Fall 6 (Sculpture with a little fossil included)," a cocoon-like mass of clay sheets slapped together. A grayness and cold, alien weight are the dominant characteristics. Still velvet-moist, its surface is riven by deep cracks, revealing glimpses of a wooden skeleton beneath and calling to mind Robert Smithson or the cracked mud of a dried-out prehistoric lakebed. But being fresh clay, and not desert lakebed, the primordial is presented here as something new and foreign. "Padlocks" and "nylon tie-downs" are listed as ingredients. These unseen tools have been fossilized by the piece, functionally inert but historically active. Typical of the work in "Fresh Kills," Bünnig's awkward and banal blob holds an embedded history, but it requires the audience to work for it, to figuratively excavate below the object's cracked surface. Not so with Josh Azzarella. The excavation has already been done. He surgically extracts what is most malignant from the photographs and videos that have become engraved in our minds. Gone is the line of Communist government tanks halted by a single anonymous rebel in the famous Tiananmen Square photograph. Instead, the rebel stands alone, looking lost and confused in the great open road, an eerie void which dominates the image, perhaps suggesting that history is a far too multifarious and fleeting subject to be held in a single frame.

A similar exploration of the potential and limitations of media is presented by Hannes Schmidt at Fresh Kills. This time, however, the content is more abstract and less political. Schmidt presents a series of neutral, ostensibly meaningless objects—a sheet of plywood, a roll of paper leaning against the wall, a strip of flexible foam and a cord lying on the floor— arranged in a static configuration. But in six Xeroxed photographs hanging on a nearby wall, the objects are re-presented as suspended, bent, balanced or twisted in mid-air, as if they had been thrown upward and captured in a rare moment of flux.

Schmidt's piece subtly documents the way mediation necessarily affects our perception of an object or event, whether it is 9/11 or a roll of toilet paper. On one hand, Schmidt calls the possibility of faithful representation into question. On the other, his whimsical, low-fi Xeroxes exploit the magical potential of media to imbue inert material with poetic life. The artist has characterized his work as "things falling apart into place."

Azzarella's work, however (even when it is presenting similar ideas about the duplicity of media representation) is more conducive to conspiracy theorizing than to philosophical rumination. By completely rebuilding the

gaps in his photographs, he creates seamless forgeries. He removes the dead bodies of women and children from the iconic Life magazine photograph of the My Lai massacre; the hilltop at Iwo Jima is presented as a cloudy and empty landscape, and in his video, American Airlines Flight 11 glides seamlessly past the World Trade Center. Because the majority of his sources are already closely associated with government cover-ups and propaganda, the political read is obvious. This has the unfortunate affect of cheapening any deeper point Azzarella is trying to make.

Still, these works can achieve an uncanny beauty, as the familiar is revisited in a strange, new way. In his version of John Filo's famous Kent State photograph, both Mary Vecchio and the body of the slain student she will forever be known as weeping over are nowhere to be found. But he has left in place the bystanders, whose role as witnesses is here evocatively transformed. Absent the Vietnam-era Pieta of Vecchio and the dead student; they look merely distracted, as if out for a Sunday stroll. What Azzarella exposes in his erasure is the violence of the passive bystander, and he implicates us too as we, inured to the safe surface of images, bear witness to current crimes and do nothing.

Absence is a defining factor in several pieces in Fresh Kills. Dan Colen's "bird-shit" paintings use oil-paint mimicry to elevate a substance that has plagued monumental outdoor sculpture for centuries. The paintings' mottled and encrusted surfaces emit a glowing, sickly light, striking a balance between the repulsive and the divine, deleting the monumental in favor of the anti-monumental.

The show's only video piece, "On the Shelf," by Sarah Greenberger Rafferty, projects the artist sitting with her laptop on a shelf above our heads, her eyes on the computer screen. Periodically she laughs and glances up, but ultimately, nothing is revealed. We expect media to be ultimately inclusive, but by denying us knowledge of what she is doing, Rafferty's piece creates a void where meaning would traditionally lie. An empty space is carved out for the viewer's projections and the piece elliptically makes its point.

And in a photo-work by Daniel Gordon, a pregnant nude, collaged out of bodily textures from the Internet, sits at a desk in a cushy domestic interior while a blurred, foreshortened arm thrusts from the bottom edge toward the woman's graphic, hairy vagina. In this case, the absence of character and motive elicits only humor. This abject piece sublimates and abstracts the violence inherent in its subject matter, but with campy overstatement.

So with much of the work in Fresh Kills, as opposed to Azzarella's, strange and unrecognizable things serve as vessels for our memories and feelings. Azzarella instead employs a form of defamiliarization so literal that it becomes difficult to ever escape the original. Certain of his works present something truly transformative and alchemic. The rest just leave us wondering why Azzarella hadn't simply written his concepts on the wall.

There is, however, an unseen poetry to Azzarella's process. The amount of work needed to carefully rebuild backgrounds and settings from scratch lifts the work above a flippancy to an act of devotion. Like a veteran suddenly thrown back into combat mode decades later, we relive the shock of the My Lai massacre or the Kent State shootings through a few viscerally powerful images that have been broadcast or published again and again. And Azzarella, by piecing the peaceful setting back together, ends our pathology of repetition at the same time as he reveals it to us.

The question lingering over both shows is: does art embrace the paradigm of technological media, or does it counter it? Jonathan Lethem, in his essay "The Ecstasy of Influence," posits a role for art in this time of numbing, all-encompassing familiarity:

It's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious art is going about trying to make the familiar strange. In so doing, in reimagining what human life might truly be like over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago, and appearance, artists are paradoxically trying to restore what's taken for "real" to three whole dimensions.

The most powerful piece in Azzarella's show is a video, set in the back of the gallery, depicting a dark and out-of-focus blob on a light blue background. Like an amoeba, the mesmerizing form shifts shape slowly and smoothly. It took me some time to realize where I'd seen it before—it was the magnified and slowed-down footage of a human in free-fall, jumping to certain death from one of the burning WTC towers. In the moment before recognition, I had let down the bulwarks that safeguard my senses from daily bombardment. The shock and uncanny chill of having glimpsed below the surface at something painfully real felt comparable to finding a body part in the rubble of the Fresh Kills landfill.