

Stream: Chapter 4

South Windham, Vermont (Old Cheney Road near bridge)
Saturday, August 5th and Sunday, August 6th 12-5

Stories abound concerning the history of this site where the stream crosses Old Cheney Road continuing down over a falls along Kibby Camp Road. Some say that the adjoining field was at one time a millpond. Others have said that bricks were produced on this site and that those bricks were used in the construction of nearby houses. If “the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces”ⁱ we are at a disadvantage because the past we are addressing in this exhibition lacks a material foundation. No visible remnants of this social use remain though most of the original houses of the village of South Windham are still standing, preserving the outline of the community's early built environment. The accounts were compelling enough for us to imagine this stream and its environs from a wholly different perspective, as a productive site; yielding water power for a mill and bricks for colonial American homes. This exhibition transforms the site once again into a productive site; producing not bricks or energy but contemporary art reflecting back on this history.

Ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant of, and portal into, the past; its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. And yet by definition it survives, after a fashion: There must be a certain (and perhaps indeterminate) amount of a built structure still standing for us to refer to it as a ruin and not merely a heap of rubble. At the same time, the ruin casts us forward in time; it predicts a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity. The ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us. And the cultural gaze that we turn on ruins is a way of loosening ourselves from the grip of punctual chronologies, setting ourselves adrift in time. Ruins are part of the long history of the fragment, but the ruin is a fragment with a future; it will live on after us despite the fact that it reminds us too of a lost wholeness or perfection.ⁱⁱ

Harun Farocki's 2009 film *In Comparison* is a documentary without commentary comprised of scenes representing varied methods of brick making across cultures. Describing his intentions, Farocki writes:

I would like to propose a film that contributes to the concept of work. That compares the work of a traditional society, like in Africa, in an early industrial society such as India, and in a highly developed industrial society, in Europe or Japan. The object of comparison is to be the work in building houses. ⁱⁱⁱ

Farocki chose the production of bricks as the component element to consider the physical concept of work globally. Moving from intimate labor where bricks are formed by hand, nearly one at a time, to mechanized labor where the worker's hands rarely touch the bricks, Farocki's film outlines the organization of labor, that is, the varied means of production resulting in one

of the most basic building materials. This focus on brick making emphasizes the essential role of labor that is meant to disappear in subsequent production across cultures and economies. Farocki captures the scenes where work is primary and visible, *reconnected to* rather than *buried in* human relations:

Amid this polyphonic array, the image of the hand dominates, posing a wide-ranging idea of labour that is as rich with meaning as a building block.^{iv}

Andrea Fraser's *ACTIONS! Countdown* (2013) addresses labor by contrasting the amount of time it would take each member of the Museum of Modern Art board of Trustees to earn the yearly salary of an entry level MoMA staff member and PASTA union member (Professional and Administrative Staff Association). The quantification of production, implicit in Harocki's film, is made explicit in Fraser's piece, with value further abstracted from labor and accumulated at an extreme remove to such an outsized degree that it is impossible to justify these numbers as anything but a violation of human rights. Fraser writes:

The disparity in the concentration of wealth in our society has grown so enormous that it almost can't be represented visually any more. If you had a bar graph comparing the chief executive's compensation to that of the lowest paid worker, there wouldn't even be a line to represent the lowest-paid worker.^v

The works of Fraser and Harocki complement each other and together amplify what it means to labor under capitalism whether making bricks or supporting an art institution like MoMA.

In *The Naming of a River* (2012) Xin Hao Cheng documents geology, commerce, history and representative daily activities that take place along a river in his hometown Kunming in Yunnan province. Except for captions Cheng, like Farocki, withholds commentary.

Juxtaposing geological time with that of humans, by contrasting photographic images of a sedimentary outcropping along the river with portraits of people working or spending leisure time on the riverside, Cheng haunts the present with the threat that this human activity will inevitably be erased by nature or progress. This threat runs through Cheng's project, as nature overtakes a derelict cement factory in the foreground of a modern bridge and urbanization creeps closer.

Juneau Projects' sound work entitled *After Berwick* (2017) embodies the threat of near human extinction suggested by the existence of ruins:

A ruin is said to result from some man-made or natural disaster—an earthquake in Lisbon; Reformationist zeal in St. Andrews; a dioxin spill in an abandoned town in Ohio. So much human failure and misery from the recent past is tied up with ruins; postwar Hiroshima, post-meltdown Chernobyl, post-communist Eastern Bloc, Post-Katrina New Orleans. The remains of Berlin in 1945, or Detroit and Beirut today. Which exactly is the calamity that has determined contemporary artists interest in ruins?^{vi}

For Juneau Projects the event is “an imagined technological disaster” called ‘the Infocalypse’

prompting their exploration of “post-apocalyptic worlds and the potential usefulness of artists in these fictitious scenarios.”

In contrast Frank Chang’s *Scenic (Re)production* (2017) prompts a re-imagining of the past and will consist of several stations installed along the stream where visitors will be able to improvise and reenact the dynamics of power production (water, steam) that shaped the economic and natural history of the site. Participants will be invited to photograph the landscape during these reenactments using the vantage points provided at each station, echoing the obligatory scenic overlooks dotted along highways and national parks as well as historical tableaux fashionable in the 19th century establishing the ruin as a romantic concept.

Allie Dercoli’s installation *For I am an engine and I’m rolling on* (2017) functions as a monument to her Italian immigrant ancestor ‘Handlebar Pete’ who built parts of the Central Vermont and B&O railroads in the 19th century. Pete lived, as an unwelcomed outsider in abandoned boxcars working the rails to extend the reach of America’s empire. Home remained a distant and abstract idea primarily experienced through correspondence with his father Geo, a brick mason in Italy. Dercoli’s work interweaves personal histories with the fortunes of a nation now in decline—once active railroads abandoned over time in favor of the automobile. The capstone of Dercoli’s installation is an etched glass reproduction of a vibrational drawing she made when she hopped on a railway car outside of Portland, Oregon.

Time travel, calamity and anecdote are all bundled together in Manuela Ribadeneira’s *Breadcrumb or God's Particle* (2012, 2017 version for Vermont). The work consists of a meticulously produced enlargement, in bronze, of the breadcrumb, presumably from a baguette, dropped by a pigeon into an air vent on the surface above the accelerator ring of the Large Hadron Collider. This widely reported incident resulted in the overheating and temporary shut down of the largest machine in the world. In this 2017 version in Vermont the *Breadcrumb* will be accompanied by an interlocutor who will provide a brief account of the 2009 incident.

No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made or designed by an individual or a group of individuals at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time it points forward to all its future recipients who will activate and reactivate it as a meaningful event. The work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting.vii

Wallis Couverte’s minimal neon *Either/Or=Versus (Brown, Green)* (2017) references energy; specifically water-power vs. carbon-based sources.

A cotton manufacturer of early nineteenth century Lancashire who decided to forgo his old water wheel and invest in a steam engine, erect a chimney and order coal from a nearby pit did not, in all likelihood, entertain the possibility that this act could have any kind of relationship to the extent of Arctic sea ice, the salinity of Nile Delta soil, the altitude of the Maldives, the frequency of droughts on the Horn of Africa, the diversity

of amphibian species in Central American rain forests, the availability of water in Asian rivers or, for that matter, the risk of flooding along the Thames and the English coastline.^{viii}

Juxtaposing green neon in a diagram that describes the continuous circular flow of water with a diagram in brownish neon that comes to an abrupt stop signaled by two lines we know to signify pause encapsulates both the past and the future of our energy woes. Powered by solar it endorses renewable energy as the only path forward.

Mathew Sawyer and Adele Travisano directly address the notion of ruins in their respective projects. Adele Travisano's small contemplative series of paintings entitled *Provincetown Sea Bricks* (2013-2016) foreshadow the inevitable future of the building materials the viewer has witnessed being produced in Farocki's film. The paintings of worn bricks found along the coastline in Provincetown exhibited alongside the bricks themselves document actual remnants of our past and act as reminders that the ocean is a passive depository of this past returning it to us in bits and pieces. The act of painting memorializes this building detail rendering it a memento of civilization and its decay.

Finally, Mathew Sawyer's work aptly titled *FUCK YOU to the future (without me)* (2014) is intended to end up as an actual ruin. The phrase 'Fuck You' consisting of letters cast in cement is buried with the idea they will return to the surface someday. Its aggressively pessimistic message is not without hope if we think of the suggested alternative—is there a way to work towards a future where our collective actions subvert Sawyer's message. The prospect of our future global ruin is cataclysmic. In light of the current dismal outlook for our planet, the time for collective action has passed and is now.

ⁱ Susan Stewart, 'Separation and Restoration' *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art* edited by Brian Dillon 36. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Brian Dillon, 'Introduction//A Short History of Decay' *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art* edited by Brian Dillon 11. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harun Farocki, <http://www.german-documentaries.de/films/28132>

^{iv} <http://www.german-documentaries.de/films/28132>

^v Andrea Fraser, <http://www.palmbeachdailynews.com/entertainment/arts--theater/residents-figure-andrea-fraser-art-world-critique-whitespace/oqrf3Jv7zrsDCzPDJaDgRP/>

^{vi} Gilda Williams, 'It Was What It Was' 2010, *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art* edited by Brian Dillon 97. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

^{vii} Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* 9. New York: Zone, 2010.

^{viii} Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* 2. London: Verso, 2016.