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MAKE/WORK at LAVC
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Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Painter)*, 2009 + Studio view of Jeff Koons, *Hulk Elvis Modern*, 2007–2013 (in progress), photographer unknown. Collage by the author.

In 1784, John Webber rendered *The Death of Captain Cook*, Jacques-Louis David churned out Roman neoclassicism for the French court, and James Watt patented the double-acting steam engine. In 1945, Ben Shahn painted *Death on the Beach*, Jackson Pollock edged away from ab-ex and toward drip painting, and the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. Both years marked the apogee of new forms of power, where, for the first time, humans had an impact on a geologic scale, depositing globe-wide a thin layer of coal dust, a thin layer of radioactive waste. This at the very moments when, according to a common narrative, humankind made great technological progress; but, writes the philosopher Timothy Morton, these same strides poisoned that same progress by ushering in the age of true global catastrophe. As Morton puts it, the world ended in 1784. In 1945, it ended again. This makes it hard—understandably, sublimely hard—to think about the future.

But this is exactly what MAKE/WORK, as a show of instruction-based art, attempts to do. The show began with five sets of written instructions devised by five artists. It was a matter for LAVC's students and volunteers to interpret these instructions into five sets of wall works. The plans say only, for example, "the ratio of the sections is important, placement and direction is to be determined by the installers." Robert Yoder's piece uses the logo of clothing brand DKNY as raw material, with instructions that read, "letters can be any style or font," "letters can be altered or abstracted," as if returning the logo to its constituents. The letters can be written backwards. They should be written "excessively." In the mural designed by Renee Petropoulos, red and yellow painted tiles clattered into the corner of a canted orange rectangle in a way that the artist couldn't have predicted. But then the rectangle was painted over and the tiles lightly redrawn in graphite. You can't ask questions of instructions. You can only keep working, filling in the blanks as you go.

The process of remote realization behind MAKE/WORK is a bare-bones version of what usually happens in artmaking, no matter how many or how few parties take part: the ideal changes as

it turns real. An artwork isn't a blueprint, it's a recipe. Miss one ingredient or exceed one measurement and the dish could still be fine; or, it could be a disaster. But art's best recipes are never complete. The scientists in *Jurassic Park*, 1993, where recovered dinosaur DNA is incomplete, substitute frog. And art too has an aspect of risk. The artist proceeds—not knowing quite what they've made or done—toward a future too vast and too complex to see.

To install is to instruct—to bring into or give structure. *In*struction is the mental corollary to *con*struction: a structure realized in the transmission of knowledge. During installation, each artist's instructions were taped to the wall near their mural, then annotated, crossed off, revised as they were followed. The raw steps written by each artist already prefigure a written description, just as writing about art is a kind of transcription. Errors (mutations) inevitably occur—some viable, some not. Adam D. Miller provided a work in the form of a layered digital image, to be transferred onto the wall color by color, back to front. Miller's is maybe the most rigid set of instructions, but also possibly (and as a consequence) the piece that landed farthest from its plan; the specification that the right of the image meet the left of a doorway, coupled with the positions of the gallery's fixed walls, meant that the projection could only be so big—smaller, it must be said, than the artist imagined. On the other hand, Dahlia Elsayed set up a simple program: three people install the work by encoding their height, sternum, and navel (or mouth) as white circles inside filled triangles. The idealism of geometry ruptures to fit the more chaotic plan of a grown body.

Thus the experiment of MAKE/WORK models something about the nature of progress. In the execution of the artists' instructions is a version of the essential randomness of art-historical innovation, which piles style on style, accident on accident, until art has gotten… somewhere. If this new place is more or less appropriate to our era, it is hard to say. This is, for example, the way Darwin described the evolution of living things (a category to which we may as well add art). Organisms adapt, but it's a fallacy to attribute any intentionality, any end goal, to this adaptation, which is only an accumulation of changes.

It's a rough value judgment to hold one style of art "higher" than another—and a rough exercise, as imprecise and subjective as biological or geological periodizations. The closing credits of Pixar's *Wall-E*, 2013, take its robotic main characters through the whole historical avant-garde, from cave paintings to pointillism. Their journey skips over abstraction, however, and lands in 8-bit computer animation. Naturally: a studio that makes narrative cartoons has little use for abstraction, and cubism and the harsher avant-gardes don't suit their purposes either. Instead, Pixar and digital animators in general have taken up the opposite path, tending toward greater and greater surfeits of detail. *Monsters, Inc.*, 2001, pioneered the modeling of characters not simply wrapped in a furry-looking texture but

covered with thousands of individually rendered hairs, a method that prefigures the swaying cubes of garbage and fields of space junk covering the Earth in *Wall-E*, or the intricate rain of shattered glass as monsters destroy Tokyo in *Pacific Rim 2*, 2018. “Cover the entire 80” by 70” with small vermillion dots in rows,” writes Roy Dowell. “Allow for inaccuracy.” His instructions should result in a trio of wall works of uniform dimensions that, of the five projects here, most resembles “regular” paintings or assemblages on “regular” canvases. One of them is covered in hundreds of short, individual red brush strokes, no two alike.

As Morton reminds us, we have no choice but to ditch the ideal state—in other words, to “realize” it. This means also giving up our grip on abstraction. It is easier for us to imagine infinity than to picture an unfathomably large number. And yet, from the knowable unknowables, we turn to the unknowable knowables—from a capsule abstractness to a sublime, enumerated specificity. Sol LeWitt may instruct the installers of *Wall Drawing 51*, 1970, to “connect all architectural points with straight lines,” and a straight line or two may reach from his seminal work to the art of
MAKE/WORK. But we can’t say which direction, if any, the arrows go. Art history isn’t a sequence of general styles and radical movements; nor is it progressive; it is, in fact, hairy millions upon millions of enmeshed, specific works. The MAKE/WORK experiment is indeed instructive: we have no choice but to realize art in a way that is as strange to its author as it is to us.

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