

## Touchy Feely at Human Resources – Peter Harkawik curates

Posted on [September 16, 2011](#), by [admin](#)



Fawn Krieger, 2006, Planes of Development 1, 9.75 x 11.75" acrylic paint on inkjet print

Architect and critic Kenneth Frampton's 1983 essay [Towards a Critical Regionalism](#) provided the starting point for artist Peter Harkawik's curatorial debut in Los Angeles. Harkawik's statement makes this clear. [Link to Frampton's essay](#). [Link to Harkawik's statement](#). [All Frampton quotes are from the essay linked. The nice

people at Human Resources (Devin McNulty and Eric Kim) emailed to me content from their announcement, I have pasted Harkawik's statement and the announcement images at the close of this post.]

I understand Frampton to be making a case for an architecture that builds from the site, rather than upon it. I got the sense that in the author's mind Western or 'Universal' architecture fails due to the West's faith that ours is the correct and ultimate future of all cultures. It could be said that Modern architecture has colonized space – only partly addressing the needs of its inhabitants because its other agenda is to enforce a rationalist or 'cleansed' manner of living. Frampton writes eloquently of the dangers of Populism:

“In contradistinction to Critical Regionalism, the primary vehicle of Populism is the *communicative* or *instrumental* sign. (Italics in the original.) Such a sign seeks to evoke not a critical perception of reality, but rather the sublimation of a desire for direct experience through the provision of information. Its tactic is to attain, as economically as possible, a preconceived level of gratification in behavioristic terms. In this respect, the strong affinity of Populism for the rhetorical techniques and imagery of advertising is hardly accidental. Unless one guards against such a convergence, one will confuse the resistant capacity of a critical practice with the demagogic tendencies of Populism.”

Frampton closes his essay with a plea for the tactile in a built environment:

“In this way (by including tactile and other sensory perceptions), Critical Regionalism seeks to complement our normative visual experience by readdressing the tactile range of human perception. In so doing, it endeavors to balance the priority accorded to the image and to counter the Western tendency to interpret the environment as exclusively perspectival terms. According to its etymology, perspective means rationalized sight or clear seeing, and as such it presupposes a conscious suppression of the senses of smell, hearing and taste, and a consequent distancing from a more direct experience of the environment.”

Harkawik, in his curatorial statement, takes issue with the notion of a “**Master Builder,**” or new professional, who can “**honor the human propensity to experience space via a melange of sensory perceptions.**”

Let me state unequivocally that Harkawik's exhibition is subtle and deft, and that the works he has chosen to explore his problematizing of Frampton's 1983 thesis are beautiful and challenging. That the exhibition closed two weeks ago breaks my heart, because I only got to visit the show twice near the closing date, and unless you happened by Human Resources you will not now have a chance to see work that will not return to this city soon, if at all.

With that said, I want to make clear my sense that the curator reads the classical phrase for architect: 'master builder' in terms appropriate to art, which is subjective in nature, rather than to architecture, which – while it may have an 'artistic' quality - is essentially science and engineering. It does take a trained elite to design a building.



Nathan Azhderian, 2011, Pavillion, DV, Polyethelyne, steel, fan, acrylic, rope, cables, found objects, Vitrine #1 30.5" x 36" x 18" Vitrine #2 32" x 12.25" x 12.25" Vitrine #3 48" x 36.25" x 18" Vitrine #4 41" x 12.25" x 12.25"

It is lucky for us, of course, that artists and architects co-mingle. Young practitioners are designing built environments which are sensitive to, and presuppose the sensory needs of people who will occupy their spaces; and they draw on the local environment for design cues and materials. Nathan Azhderian's *Pavillion* offers an artist's take on this contemporary trope. Made of white plastic sheeting suspended from the gallery ceiling, it houses several vitrines each of which contain examples of curious found objects collected by the artist's father. While not entirely locally derived, Azhderian's materials are either found or taken from already existing stock in local stores.

As I entered the *Pavillion* I had the sense of moving from an open but not entirely bright gallery space into an

enclosure that somehow is more light-filled. The *Pavillion* felt made of light. There was a fan blowing, and the enclosed space was humid from our bodies. Azhderian and his father collaborated on the vitrines and on the display of objects within. These included twisted, wave-smoothed vines found on a beach, shells, electrical cable knotted and distressed, a scrap of Vulcanized rubber, etc. (There used to be a wonderful design shop on Rowena in Silverlake, Larry Blagg ran this shop and would stock his shelves with, oh, two dozen or fewer such objects – exquisitely selected and displayed and priced accordingly. Visiting Blagg’s shop was an education in looking.) A second sense memory that I had while in the *Pavillion* was of visiting the small, tall studio room of Frank Lloyd Wright’s *La Miniatura* in Pasadena. Azhderian’s space had a similar feeling of secular holiness to it.

Backing up a bit, when I first walked through the doorway into the gallery space I was struck by the confident use of space by each of the exhibition artists. Azhderian’s sculpture, large as it was, didn’t dominate the room but served as a foil for other, equally spatial works.



Constance Armellino, 2011, *Siamese Twins* (Large), Approx. 16' x 12' x 4' Concrete, half-slot steel channel, hydrocal, plaster, conduit, cable, lightbulbs

Constance Armellino's sculpture, *Siamese Twins*, stood near the entry – I could see its feet and torso (?) through the doorway. It was beguiling, very human, powerful and sweet. Two contemporary artists from another generation came to my mind: B. Wurtz and Tony Feher. Equal parts honest use of materials, quixotic representation of human frailties and mastery of circumstance, *Siamese Twins* had several hundred pounds of (really difficult to move) concrete in the base, the height of the steel channel was pushed to its maximum material yield strength in supporting panels made of hydrocal, the panels themselves must have been made in

place and contained the least reinforcing possible. The entire structure had a tenuous quality that belied its industrial roots. As a sculpture, it married engineering and art and made both seem heroic.



Sam Anderson, 2011, Snowflake (detail), Fishtank, snowflake eel, PVC pipe, ziplock bag, peppermint candies, rock, sand, steel frame, paint, acrylic paint, ratchet straps, cardboard angles, water pump, miniatures, speakers, freeze dried krill, audio recording (2m3s) 40" x 61.5 x 48"



Sam Anderson, 2011, *Snowflake (detail)*, Fishtank, snowflake eel, PVC pipe, ziplock bag, peppermint candies, rock, sand, steel frame, paint, acrylic paint, ratchet straps, cardboard angles, water pump, miniatures, speakers, freeze dried krill, audio recording (2m3s) 40" x 61.5 x 48"

Sam Anderson's *Snowflake* included a fish tank housing a snowflake eel, a recorded oral reminiscence of a former California women's prison inmate, and a tiny tableau representing a prison yard visiting center. I think it must have mattered to the artist that during the reception, and continuing throughout the run of the exhibition the prison visiting yard received many kicks and stomps from unsuspecting gallery visitors – the story recited by an actress detailed the mindless, bureaucratic nature of prison officials' brutality and this casual carelessness of art enthusiasts resonated with me. Yes, the eel came out to play, yes it (he or she remains unknown to me) was cute and yes, Anderson is cognizant that her use of live creatures presents a problem. I think she left the problem in my lap, or rather in any viewers lap, as she did not offer any explanation. Nicely done.



Diana Al-Hadid 2011 Untitled Charcoal, watercolor, Conte and pastel on vellum 35" x 24"

Darren Bader presented a piece that manages to disgust conceptually. Disturbing without ever being seen, the description is enough: A counter-top mounded with Kate Bush's dandruff and Marlon Wayan's dandruff and Melanie Rios' dandruff and Martin van Buren's dandruff. Somehow this is grosser when spoken. Try it – tell a friend, see how they react!



Darren Bader, 2011, DV, Kate Bush's dandruff and Marlon Wayan's dandruff and Melanie Rios' dandruff and Martin van Buren's dandruff—temporarily on a countertop (detail) (too much detail)



Darren Bader, 2011, DV, Kate Bush's dandruff and Marlon Wayan's dandruff and Melanie Rios' dandruff and Martin van Buren's dandruff—temporarily on a countertop



Miles Huston, 2011, Natural Machine, DV, Dustin Hoffman's tennis ball machine, tennis balls, plywood H, plastic sheeting, ice, caulk



Jacques Vidal, 2011, Just Long Enough, approx 6' x 7' 3" Plywood, chalkboard paint, microphone stand, E-Z tube, TV, video



Lisa Lapinski, 2007, Untitled, C-print, 51.5" x 45" framed

Lisa Lapinski, in her untitled photograph and sculpture found her locale early: Lapinski showed a version of that photograph, although in sculptural form, at China Art Objects some time ago. She built an open-work concrete block wall on which another artist installed paintings. At the time she talked about the humor in the work – as a child Lapinski would become attached to objects and places in her neighborhood and her home, in this case a common cmu wall. As I recall it she would conflate her misunderstanding of adult conversations and these probably made up words and phrases became attached to her favored spaces. The photo in this show, a cmu wall with an oddball art installation in the center and a fly sculpture perched on the white frame brings these personal reflections to mind – anybody who grew up in LA, in the great and weirdly fecund morass of middle class life, has seen such homestyle art work in their own neighborhood.



Erik Frydenborg 2011 Codec 3 & Codec 4 Select pine, wood stain, wax, MDF, linen, polyurethane plastic, pigments,



Fawn Krieger 2011 FAULT 1 3 minutes 50 seconds, looped Digitally converted Super 8 film

*Touchy Feely* included work by ten artists, two Los Angeles based and eight from New York.

Diana Al-Hadid, Sam Anderson, Constance Armellino, Nathan Azhderian, Darren Bader, Erik Frydenborg, Miles Huston, Fawn Krieger, Lisa Lapinski, and Jacques Vidal.

Harkawik posed these artists (and by extension, viewers of the exhibition) a statement and a prompt:

“Neither a show about Los Angeles, nor a thematic on the local, this exhibition borrows from the regionalism debate the notion of an apologetic interlocutor who intervenes in the proliferation of placeless spaces.”

And:

“As progenitor of authentic culture, can the regionalist artist (as “minor builder”) readily engage in a-tectonics, or is this simply an anthropology of the nearly available?”

Given Frampton’s take on tectonics:

“It is obvious that [this] discourse of the load borne (the beam) and the load-bearing (the column) cannot be brought into being where the structure is masked or otherwise concealed.”

And later:

“The tectonic remains to us today as a potential means fo rdistilling play between material, craftwork and

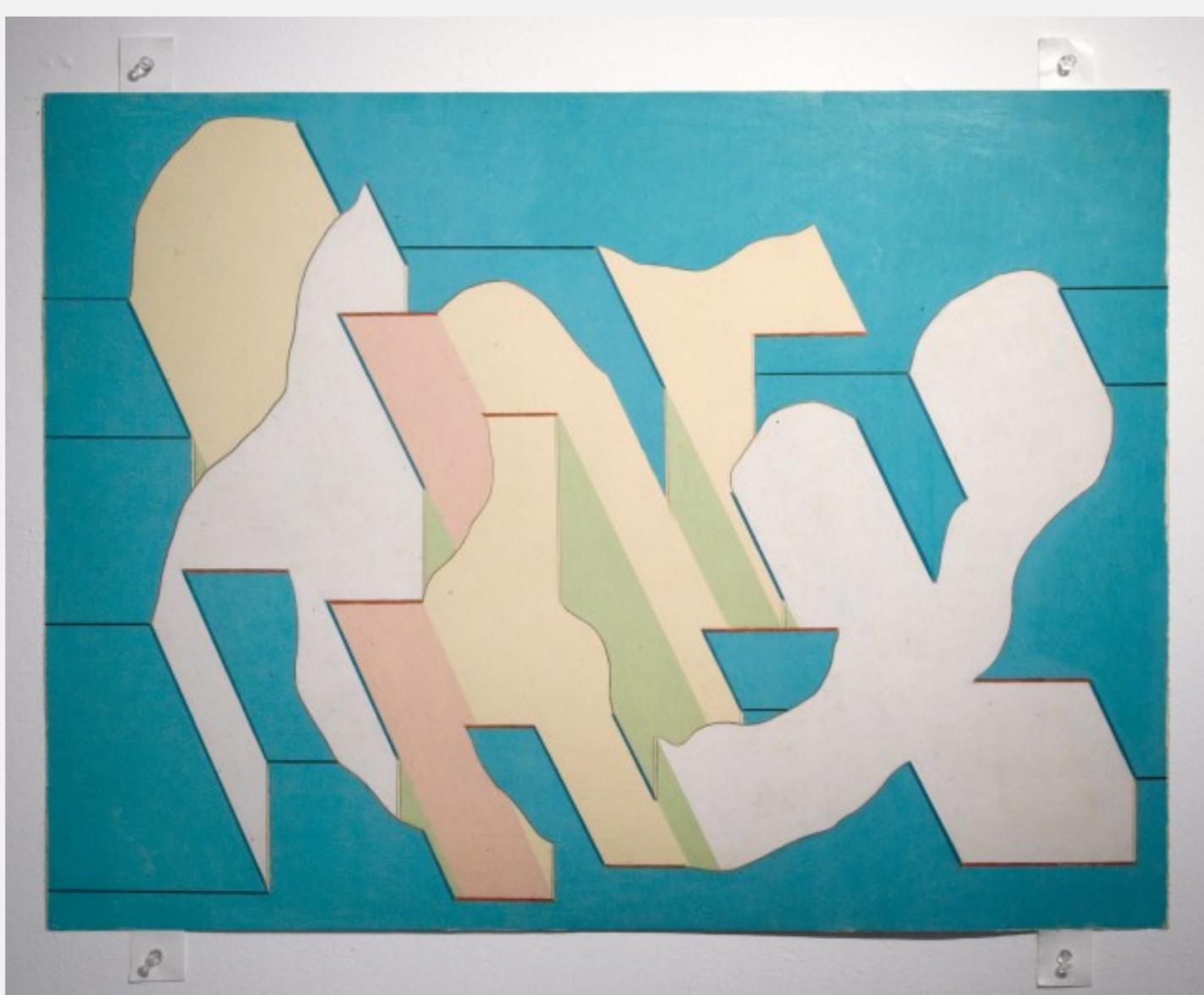
gravity, so as to yield a component which is in fact a condensation of the entire structure. We may speak here of the presentation of a structural poetic rather than the re-presentation of a facade.”

I’d say to our friend the curator:

“Well yes Peter Harkawik, the work that you present in *Touchy Feely* does exhibit the possibility of an a-tectonic engagement with space, and a facility at exploiting to the full “the available.”

“I think that you are correct to distance your project from the notion of geography or location based culture. The artists in this exhibition seemed to bring with them their own genius loci that stands for LA and CA in each artist’s mind, for example: Sam Anderson chose to focus on a women’s prison in a state where private prisons are among the largest industries – and in doing this she employed a ‘Hollywood’ actress to read her inmate’s tale. Nicely done Anderson – you manage to force this equal presence in my mind. There is a metaphor or an allegory waiting in that relationship. Constance Armellino’s *Siamese Twins* makes me think of Cal Trans and earthquakes and building and when you mentioned to me Armellino’s interest in public water projects my mind went directly to William Mulholland and his gravity and siphon driven California Aqueduct, the reservoirs and dams that he designed all over SoCal and the eery, majestic beauty of the Cascades at the north end of the Valley. Each of his projects have a lovely design ethic which is informed by the style of the day as by the sensibility of economic engineering. Not a thing that is not needed is present – design qualities exist, but they are part of the whole, rather than added.”

“This strategy of yours, to throw the interpretation of site and of locale back in the hands of the perceiver, of the one whose senses are engaged, reminds me that as a viewer I, too make choices in my experience of region and cultural milieu. I am moving away from thinking of regional life and art as being – what I grew up with, the land, the city, the people, etc., and toward an awareness of my agency in (and responsibility for) creating the region I inhabit.”



Miles Huston 2011 Johnny Depp is in my Basement 30" x 22" Colored pencil on rag paper



Miles Huston, 2011, I'm Homeless But I Got a Home (Vegan Funk) 30" x 22" Colored pencil on rag paper



Nathan Azhderian 2010 Personal Trainer #13 12" x 16" Oil and acrylic on serigraph polyblend



Nathan Azhderian 2010 Personal Trainer #1 12" x 16" Oil and acrylic on serigraph polyblend



Nathan Azhderian 2010 Personal Trainer #7 12" x 16" Oil and acrylic on serigraph polyblend

At this point, my friends, I turn you over to the good people at Human Resources Los Angeles.

I would remind you that on Saturday, September 17 HRLA have another exhibition opening. If you missed Touchy Feely then here's a chance to redeem yourself (and, I modestly put forth better yourself) by attending the opening of Benjamin Lord's curated exhibition *Eros and Civilization*.

# HIRLA



Image: Miles Huston

## **Touchy Feely**

In the early 1980s a debate was gaining steam within architectural circles. At its center was a series of essays by critic Kenneth Frampton, outlining an approach he termed “critical regionalism,” in which the architect attempts to synthesize the vernacular of a particular region or culture, delivering back to the local person an experience of place that was both in tune with theirs, and yet decidedly unhindered by regressive scenographics. In his formulation, Frampton proposed that the critical regionalist counter the hegemonic force of visuality by a return to the “whole range of complimentary sensory perceptions which are registered by the labile body: the intensity of light, darkness, heat and cold; the feeling of humidity; the aroma of material; the almost palpable presence of masonry as the body senses its own confinement; the momentum of an induced gait and the relative inertia of the body as it traverses the floor; the echoing resonance of our own footfall.”

Exactly how the so-inclined architect (as “master builder”) was to honor the human propensity to experience space via a melange of sensory perceptions was bound in the tenets of a new professionalism: the heroic

destruction of universalist junkspace hiding beneath an “individuated” armature. If “anarchitectonics” would purport to classify all activities, structures, and interactions in the developed world as irrational, regionalism then set out to tackle the collusive forces of postmodernity via stratagems which today retain an oddly elegiac currency. Natural light falling on a sculpture trumps its commodification. Geographic features are augmented, not flattened. Structural elements organically form interior spaces. Flora is the only acceptable facade. Air-conditioning is out. Locally abundant materials are preferred. These techniques would result in a spatial poetics utterly at odds with today’s proliferation of Green Building stemming from the programmatic application of codes, ratios, and use-scenarios. One imagines, perversely, Dupont’s “Corian” as regionalism’s totemic apotheosis.

Neither a show about Los Angeles, nor a thematic on the local, this exhibition borrows from the regionalism debate the notion of an apologetic interlocutor who intervenes in the proliferation of placeless spaces. As progenitor of authentic culture, can the regionalist artist (as “minor builder”) readily engage in a-tectonics, or is this simply an anthropology of the nearly available? 10 artists have created works in response to this prompt: Diana Al-Hadid, Sam Anderson, Constance Armellino, Nathan Azhderian, Darren Bader, Erik Frydenborg, Miles Huston, Fawn Krieger, Lisa Lapinski, and Jacques Vidal.

“Touchy Feely” opens Aug 13 at Human Resources Los Angeles and is curated by Peter Harkawik.

Human Resources is an art/performance space currently located at 410 Cottage Home St in Chinatown, 90012. Human Resources is a team of creative individuals which seeks to broaden engagement with contemporary and conceptual art, with an emphasis on performative and underexposed modes of expression.

Human Resources is entirely volunteer run and seeks to foster widespread public appreciation of the performative arts by encouraging maximum community access. Human Resources also serves as a point of convergence for diverse and disparate art communities to engage in conversation and idea-sharing promoting the sustainability of non-traditional art forms.

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