

Roaring Spring®
Compositions

Name Zachary Cahill
School Snow-Blind Homer:
Grade Notes on Utopia | aiPotu

9 1/2 in. x 7 1/2 in. 100 Leaves

COLLEGE RULED

Roaring Spring, PA 16673



0 70972 77264 9

Snow-Blind Homer: Notes on Utopia | aiPotu

It's raining here in Bergen and I have missed the train...I wandered through the city for hours not knowing where I was going, looking for a store to buy a souvenir...the colored houses look grey from the drizzle and my shoes are soaking wet...I stop in for coffee, *Amore Italy* was the name...the street was Kong Oscars Gate...I think it's a coffee shop...I can't read Norwegian and there are no pictures...I slosh in...there's a fire going...I order a cup of coffee...the cup is porcelain...I sit down to read and write...what was that I was reading? I can't remember...was it Robbe-Grillet? Pessoa? Borges?...no, I can't remember...the book seems closed to me as I try to remember it.

But the book I was writing in, though, is very vivid...I can see it clearly...it was a composition book like the ones I used in grade school, with a kind of black and white, almost camouflaged, cover...as if ink were hiding from itself...as if the text had grown into a jungle...a Rorschach test...formalized...gridded...but a blotchy mess...what I was meant to write is coming back to me as well...I was asked to write a review of the exhibition *Leila* at the Hordaland Kunstsenter for *Art in America*...I think it was *Art in America*...that part is not so clear to me...Anyways, I was asked to write a catalog essay...no, no...that's not right...it's a review...it was definitely a review of an exhibition...it was supposed to be short...concise...less than a thousand words...I think...Okay, so there I am writing at the table; I am nervous...It's raining here in Bergen...I have been drinking coffee and it always makes me nervous...I was asked to write something specifically on utopia...the nature of Utopia...and how it figured into the exhibition...is that right? Or do I have that backwards?

Leila was a special exhibition...It was special because it was the third time the artists from aiPotu had exhibited in Bergen, but different...it was supposed to be

different...that much I remember...So there I was in the *Amore Italy* cafe writing...there was no music playing and for that I was thankful...I find it hard to write and impossible to read when there's music playing...it has always baffled me...the coffee house prowlers that can read with music playing...I never understood how they could steady their minds while some pop siren filled the room with her song...But I wanted to think about utopia and islands...it was a special exhibition...No, it wasn't special exactly...it was different...different from what I thought I was supposed to write about...There were two artists...I was supposed to meet them at the museum...but I showed up late...the second time in less than twenty four hours...late for them and now late for myself...My train was gone and now I was in Bergen with a book of Borges' writings...his *Ficciones*...

There I was, writing something about Derrida and the future and how things become possible...that utopia isn't utopia like people talk about...it's just no-place...and that the art that I was dealing with wasn't utopic...but something different...I couldn't put my finger on it...there were too many allusions to things I didn't quite understand...there was a sculpture that was an island and an island that was turned into a sculpture...a special sculpture, meant only for those that could see it...as Ad Reinhardt said about sculpture: it's what you bump into when you back up to look at a painting...the island that I remember that had become a sculpture, was what backed up into me when I was looking at it as if it was a picture...

It looked like a Victor Hugo ink painting...like the kind he made when he was in exile on the island of Guernsey and he used to talk to the Ocean...*The Toilers of the Sea*...that was the book I was reading...the book I was reading in the café...it was Hugo, not Borges...It was much more romantic and more brutal...Borges was dizzying, but I don't remember him being brutal...Hugo was brutal...the character Gilliat was brutal...the devil-fish was brutal...and the sea was brutal...and unremitting...the sea and the ship...there was a voyage and I was sailing from place to place...That was the sense the exhibition gave me: that I was a ship...a

ship at night...and I wrote, **“what is more abstract than the sea at night, on a cloudy night, in a storm, in the rain...the sea in the rain...in the darkness where it becomes hard to tell the configuration of the painting.”** It was strange that the exhibition suggested an abstract painting, but that is what it did for me...even though it was undoubtedly a sculpture...a sculpture with people, but not a sculpture that sculpted people...I looked up from writing at the café...outside I noticed that the rain had turned to snow with large flakes...everything outside became...more muted...it didn't seem to bother me...and I returned to writing in my notebook...Perhaps I became more muted...the fire was still going...my feet were still a little damp...but the dampness had warmed a little now...and I was less nervous...there I was at the café writing my review...I had a deadline to make and I didn't want to be late...as that never seems to help things.

...I remember that I wrote, **“while it [Leila] certainly isn't a painting, the sculpture was painterly, or rather, it transformed the architecture into a painterly abstraction; and each precise work within the overall composition could be held in your hand like a rock with a kind of rust-colored iron deposit on it.”** It was the iron that made me think of Richard Serra and his love of large ships, the curves of his ellipses were so labyrinth-like...an association Serra himself denied...His ellipses were a grandiose sea-faring kind of sculpture...where the steel resembled ships...and the ships resembled the waves...one formed to another...as a hand formed around a small stone...But I want to return to the review: **“This work has nothing of the machismo of, say, Richard Serra's late Baroque period nor the mechanical verb list. Instead, a work such as the *Medina* translates lived experience into a messy *informe* that mirrors lived experience. But whose experience exactly?”**

I knew I wanted to score some points at this moment in the essay and try to draw out some of the latent political content of the work...I wanted to point out how the island, or the island that was a sculpture, was a reverse panopticon...**“which is to say, if Foucault described Bentham's invention as ultimately a form of self-**

surveillance induced by a paranoia derived from an invisible guard at the center, then aiPotu created an island that can't be seen, but is visible; a real mirage."

That's what I was writing at the café when...a female patron walked into the café and broke my concentration as she dusted the snow off her jacket...Frustrated at being interrupted and having my writerly spell broken...I went up to the bar and politely asked if they might watch my books while I strolled outside to find a souvenir for my nephews and nieces...I had never been to Norway before, but it was how I always imagined it...only more so...I made my way through the streets in the snow, which was falling heavily now...and a few streets away from the café I found a nice tourist shop with small model boats and assorted items, t-shirts, bumper stickers, etc...I browsed around and struggled with what to get them...I didn't want to get one of the children something that might make the others jealous...so I decided I'd just buy postcards from Bergen with images of the fjords and fishing boats on them. Two cards...that was all I needed...I paid the cashier, who was very pleasant...the kind of pleasantness in which you are surprised by your own surprise at them being pleasant...I think it has something to do with the alienation that one feels when one can't read or speak the language...it's isolating and actually a bit menacing, but of course there is no real menace...not here...not now.

The deadline! I hurried back to the café but I couldn't remember how to get there...or, I couldn't remember how to get back at the time...I thought, "just go up," the café was near the museum, which was almost alone on the hill, so I started to try to head up...the snow was a few inches deep now...my wet shoes had dried at the café, but they really weren't made for snowy weather...Anders and Andreas (the artists in the show who had invited me to write this essay) told me to pack for snow...

It was nice, though...I wasn't that worried...the sun had set and the snow was whirling in the street lights...I was just happy to be in Norway...and I knew I'd find my way back to the café where I had left my notebook...I kept thinking about the

cover of my notebook and I tried to imagine that I was walking through its covers into the text...as I moved through the streets...into white pages and black ink...and each step was kind of a different page...and then I thought, critique should be like walking...this isn't really all that original...I am sure spatial theorists like Michel de Certeau...or maybe Henri Lefebvre would tell us that the way we walk is a form of political speech or that speech patterns are a political itinerary...but I was just out for a walk in a town where I couldn't read or speak the language...in a sense I was blind...after about forty-five minutes...I had reached the café which now had become something of a bar...I asked if I could have my books back and they very graciously retrieved them for me...the fire was still going and I sat down with a small glass of whiskey to keep on writing the review.

I wanted to get to the heart of the matter...which seemed to me to have to do with the idea of the mirror and reversibility...things seen, but not seen, and other things that were not seen, yet clearly understood...I was concerned to not write something too "meta"...I wanted something concrete and brutal, like Hugo exiled on a rocky, wind-blown island...what did Hugo do to warrant his exile...he said that Napoleon had betrayed the revolution?...

There I was, again at it: **"the work has a mirror form...the perceptual situation is structured like that of a mirror."** It brings participants **"into contact with themselves. People have to confront each other and in essence take up the voice of another."** This was an odd point to make...what did I mean exactly? Take up the voice of another? How can one assume the voice of another? Except through ventriloquism or some kind of parlor trick?...But what was I writing now? How could this be construed as a review? I am not sure...maybe this is more of an essay...it's maybe high time I admitted as much...

The work is important and I want to do it justice...let me bump into it as Ad Reinhardt says...let me knock my scone against it..."Go easy...Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adaiphane. If you can put your fingers through it,

it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.” Shut your eyes and see. James Joyce’s great command regarding the modalities of the visible, which any critic needs to consider when writing on art...But I never saw the work...the work was in the museum and the museum was closed...I was late for the second time in less than twenty four hours...and I am not a critic...

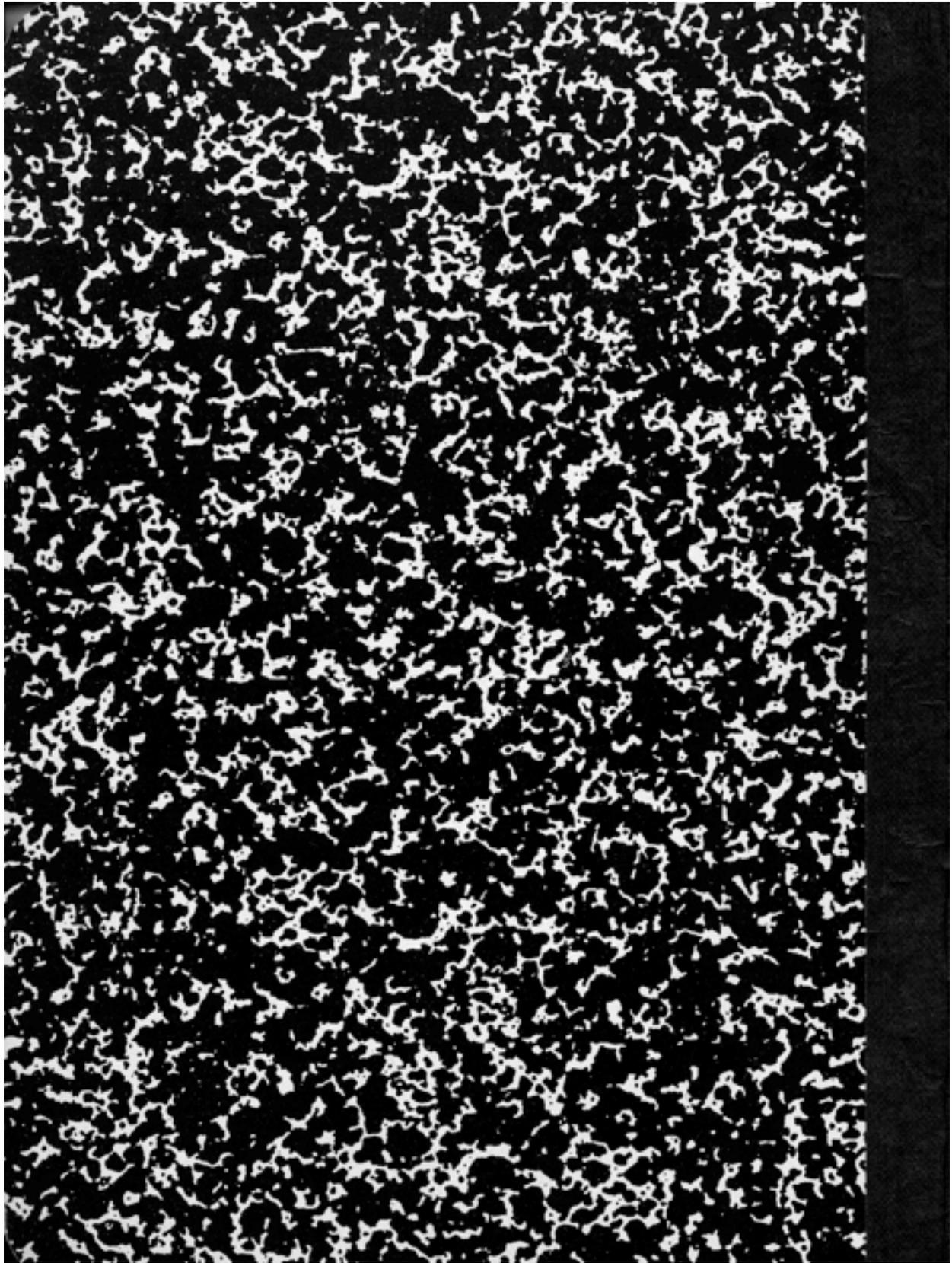
Back to the review: **“The nature of the collaboration is operant in the work on a very fundamental level, which is to say, the synergy of the two artists’ interactions becomes manifest not as dialogical stratagem, but more as a conversation that spreads from individual to action.”** This is a huge assumption on my part. I hadn’t spoken to the artists about their generative process. I just intuited this based on a lecture I saw them give in Canada. The talk, I had supposed, had been scripted in advance, but this was not the case...the two artists traded voices back and forth, completing each other’s sentences and finishing each other’s thoughts...and what is more, they were speaking in English, which doubled the whole program once over(I assume that the conversation in one way or another was originally in Norwegian); language as mirror.

It was now getting late, but I was wide-awake from the jet lag. They said the café/bar didn’t close for a few hours, but I worried that the owners would have to drive home in the snow. They reassured me that they lived just around the corner. I was relieved. The whiskey had gone to my head a little, but I continued to write: **“What does it mean to be relational now? In 2010? Or 2011? Or 2012?”** How do we relate to our time? The question is not clear, and I hardly have the competence to try to tackle any notions as broad and as intractable as TIME...especially for a review...**“What does relational aesthetics mean today? Is it something that needs to be theorized anymore? Or is it simply part of artistic practice...less a movement and more a methodology?”** The whiskey had now made me cocky...I thought I could answer my own rhetorical questions...**“If it is simply a method and we can now assume that in one way or another nearly all artists have some part of their practice that is relational, although they might not**

name it as such, then what is the situation of the method? It is hard to imagine any artist who is able to create work without relating to others. So, having identified a mode, the mode then becomes a method. A tool for thinking through relational aesthetics *mutatis mutandis* makes aesthetics relational...we have a sense that is relational...A sense like touch, taste, or hearing...our sixth sense *is* relational..." I worked hard to make this point...trying to say that this sense is one that we are just starting to discover, but has its origins in a very deep past that we share, the sense that schools of fish use when they swim in unison...in schools...What would it mean to create work primarily with that sense?...the same sense that allows the chimney swifts to fly so gracefully at sundown? It's not a dance but it's not exactly not a dance either. But what if it is all a dance?

Terpsichore! The muse of dance! I start writing about the muses and the museum and Terpsichore..."**The artist here set form dancing. Partnering the unseen and the seen together in a kind of frenetic twist. So it is not so much painting or sculpture that the artists are dealing with, but dancing form. All the muses may be said to occupy the exhibition, but it is Terpsichore that animates the form on view at the Hordaland Kunstsenter.**"

Will the readers get the reference to Terpsichore, I wonder? I have a broken ankle and my dancing days are done. Still, form is hard to pin down; it moves and shifts and changes as we try to possess it. The essay for the catalog is almost complete, I think to myself as the fire in the *Amore Italy* café starts to die. I settle up with the barkeep and thank them very much for their hospitality. The night has turned bitter cold and the snow is nearly a foot deep...there are no sounds, no cars on the streets...just snow...it seems like early evening because of the soft pink light given off by the snow, although it's well past one o'clock in the morning. Clutching my notebook, I think to myself, "somewhere somebody is writing for themselves, for someone they know." I pause to wonder what that means. I laugh lightly to myself and make my way back to my room to sleep.



REVIEW

Bergen

aiPotu

Hordaland Kunstsenter

Klosterat 17

December 3rd-December 22nd

What is more abstract than the sea at night? On a cloudy night, during a storm, in the rain, in the darkness, where it becomes hard to tell the configuration of up from down or left from right? The rain pelts you from all directions. The night sea journey shares much in common with abstract painting, in so much as abstraction comes at you from every angle and the orientation of the picture plane is deliberately called into question, just as one's balance is significantly challenged when on the deck of a ship, as it travels through a storm at night. It is no doubt incongruous to begin a review of the exhibition *Leila* by the artist duo aiPotu, now on view at the Hordaland Kunstsenter in Bergen, with a meditation on the nature of abstract painting. After all, there is no painting there in the traditional sense of the word, nor is there "painting in the expanded field," which has gained considerable currency, anywhere to be found either. In fact, the exhibition is more correctly described as an installation, or a situational-performance-sculpture, if one could hazard such an unwieldy term.

Still, while it is certainly true that the work isn't a painting, the work as sculpture is painterly, or: it transforms the architecture of the museum into a painterly abstraction, with the multi-colored tarps draped over the facade of the museum. Beneath the tarps and within the museum, viewers encounter something similar to a Moroccan Medina or marketplace, with five different sculptural interventions. Each work within the overall plan could in a way be held metaphorically in one's hand, or taken on its own terms. At times the work seems to hearken back to an earlier art-historical moment like Richard Serra's *Hand Catching Lead*. It should be said that while this is true there is none of the machismo of Serra's later Baroque period to be found, or the seemingly dispassionate Verb list. Instead, the artists translate lived experience into a messy informe that mirrors actual lived experience. But whose experience exactly?

One conceit of the exhibition plays on the dialectic of the visible and the invisible, as maybe suggested by the exhibition's title, *Leila*, an island off the coast of Morocco, its sovereignty in heated dispute. The contested island inhabits a strange place in the regime of visibility. It is at once invisible—visitors cannot travel there, nor can they see it from afar without proper authorization—yet it is in plain sight from the Moroccan coast. The island appears to be unremarkable enough, save for its peculiar status as an island in exile. The island is, in a sense, a reverse panopticon. It is this quality of visibility to which the exhibition alludes, which may be thought of as hiding in plain sight.

It is through this allusion that one might think of the over-arching structure of the work as similar to that of a mirror. This works with the way audience participants are asked to

think about “the other” that is, in some sense, a reflection of themselves. How do we see ourselves in *Leila*? What are the limits of our own sovereignty? This investigation is no doubt informed by the artists’ own relationship, and indeed the ideas of collaboration are operant throughout the exhibition in a very fundamental way. Which is to say, the synergy created from the artists’ interactions becomes manifest, not as a dialogical stratagem, but more as a conversation that spreads from individual to action.

Let me then proleptically address the specter of Relational Aesthetics. What does it mean to be Relational now in 2010? Or, in 2011? Or, in 2012? Is it something that can sustain theorization, or is it simply a methodology? Can we now assume that in one way or another nearly all artists have some aspect of their practice that is relational, although they may not name it as such? It is hard to imagine any artist today who is able to create work without relating to another human being. So, having identified a mode of working, as Nicolas Bourriaud did back in the nineties, we inherit a method. A tool for thinking through relational aesthetics mutatis mutandis now we might conceive of something like an aesthetics relational: a new sense, a sense that is relational. A sense, moreover, which is comparable to our sense of touch, taste, smell, etc. Our sixth sense is relational. So if we can posit that the work by aiPotu is relational, that it composes with the “relational sense” in away that is analogous to how a music composer creates with the sense of hearing, then might it follow logically enough that the work by aiPotu is directly in conversation with Terpsichore, the muse of the Dance, the muse who sets bodies in motion?

In the case of *Leila* the artists have set form dancing. Partnering the seen and the unseen in a sensorium with a frenetic twisting of associations that takes place both within and without the exhibition. So if I might risk contradicting my earlier assertion that the work is a painterly abstract sculpture, I would offer that *Leila* is a dance with form across various zones of time and space. What philosopher Jacques Rancière might term *intempestive* form. All the muses may be said to be taking up residence in the exhibition, but it is Terpsichore that animates the form on display at the Hordaland Kunstsenter.

-Zachary Cahill