

Progress is the New Stasis

I.

“I believe the task of the artist is in part to resuscitate the just-past”
-Dan Grahamⁱ

“Take your time. Try not to forget”
-Minor Threatⁱⁱ

Ian Mackaye moved into the Dischord House in October of 1981 and has lived there ever since. A fair-sized, blue-gray shingled, mid-century (not Modernist, just mid-century) suburban box in Arlington, Virginia, the house is remarkable in its anonymity. Dischord House has thousands of nearly identical siblings on small unkempt plots of land, half-masked by overgrown shrubs, dotting the landscape of older, lower-middle class neighborhoods spanning from the Mid-Atlantic States to New England.

With the arrival of Mackaye and a rotating number of friends and band-mates, the house retained its primary context as a residence while gaining multiple new functions. The basement became a “non-stop practice room” for bands like Minor Threat, Youth Brigade, Government Issue, Iron Cross and Skewbald/Grand Unionⁱⁱⁱ. A small room off of the kitchen became the headquarters for Dischord records, which was started by Mackaye and Jeff Nelson in order to document these and other Washington, D.C. area hardcore bands (most often posthumously, as these groups tended to last only for a year or less). The house was the epicenter of the D.C. punk community. Bands from other cities crashed there. Kids who didn’t play in bands hung out there, made flyers, folded lyric sheets or just talked & watched TV.

The bands on Dischord initially used English punk from the late ’70s (Sex Pistols, Crass, Sham 69, Wire) as a jumping-off point and boiled it down. The music was minimal, furiously paced and more aggressive than anything that had come before it. Taking the lead from Minor Threat, many bands decried drugs, drinking, violence, and organized religion as tools of oppression. As time passed and new bands like Fugazi, Fire Party, Nation of Ulysses and Slant 6 formed, the music and the politics of the Dischord bands became more nuanced and complex, serving as a model for indie rock bands and record labels all over.

A black and white fish-eyed photograph from 1983 shows Mackaye and Nelson seated in the Dischord office, scowling punkily for the camera. They are surrounded by records, which expand out from their stacks into a carefully composed scatter across the two desks and over the cracked asbestos tile floor. Records creep up the wall and delineate the perimeter of the room where wall meets ceiling. Cassette tapes, flyers, newspaper clippings, a boom box, a telephone with a mismatched base and receiver, a Budweiser box, ‘zines, a Big Gulp cup, an “Action Now” sticker, a “Thrasher” sticker, and graffiti fill in the spots the records miss. One can imagine the scatter spreading out of the office and covering the entire interior of the house like a membrane.

II.

“I want out (x 1000)”
-Fugazi^{iv}

The Dischord House unintentionally de-familiarizes suburban space in a manner akin to Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Splitting: 4 Corners* of 1974. Perhaps his most widely known piece, *Splitting* consists of a suburban home, not unlike Dischord House in Englewood, New Jersey which the artist bisected by making a cut from top to bottom through the center of the house. Jacks supported one side of the house’s foundation, which when lowered opened up the cut into a wedge shape that was wider at the roof and closed in as it reached the foundation. Describing his practice, Matta-Clark stated:

“There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking an otherwise completely normal, conventional (albeit anonymous) situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present...By undoing a building, [I open] a state of enclosure which had been preconditioned not only by physical necessity but by the industry that proliferates suburban and urban boxes as a pretext for insuring a passive, isolated consumer.”^v

In the case of *Splitting*, the undoing of the building is achieved through a process of removal and formalization. With the Dischord House, the “state of enclosure” is revealed through a process of accretion: of people of stuff, of functions. Dischord House acknowledges its context and history by its urgent disavowal – not architecturally but socially – of its context and history.

III.

“Ahistorical – you think this shit just dropped right out of the sky”
- Fugazi^{vi}

While *Splitting* was destroyed shortly after it was executed, Dischord House still stands. The record label has outgrown the room off of the kitchen and moved across the street into a commercial space as ugly and ordinary as the house. The punks, except for MacKaye, have moved on as well. Dischord still puts out new music as well as releasing unheard material from older D.C. bands.

From the very beginning Dischord has looked back. The first band to bear the label’s imprint was the Teen Idles, who broke up months before their first 7” was released. The legendary *Salad Days* EP by Minor Threat was released in April 1985, nearly two years after the band dissolved. The impulse to revisit or reexamine the (recent) past must be understood as something other than nostalgia. Far from being a straight-edge stroll down memory lane, this kind of looking back is in fact oppositional to nostalgia and the superficialities of “retro” trends. It is a thoughtful digging, an “anti-aphrodisiac” to a commodity culture/power structure bent on seduction and pacification through notions of “progress” and “the new” (novelty).^{vii}

With both Dischord/MacKaye and Matta-Clark, this look into the recent past is not antithetical to artistic development or innovation. Rather, it is the spark that starts the engine. This is similar to Greenbergian notion that a painting or sculpture can contain the entire history of the medium and move forward at the same time.^{viii} A crucial difference, though, is that whereas a High Modernist would look back only within the specific confines of a medium, MacKaye and Matta-Clark address social histories outside of music or sculpture. What is important is that innovation, when informed through historical memory, has a strong oppositional relationship to conservative culture (and art) that masquerades as vanguard culture (and art).^{ix} The SAT analogy would be: historical memory is to innovation as nostalgia/retro is to novelty/"progress".

IV.

"Mr. Present, go away. Come back and fuck with us some other day."
- Minor Threat^x

Dan Graham suggested in 1987 that the recent past is a potentially fruitful and radical area for the artist to mine. I would like to salvage his idea, as it seems like a dropped thread ready to be picked up. It also seems like painting (some of it anyway) is uniquely able, as a living historical thing, to follow this thread to exciting places.

An interesting side effect of new/digital/multi media and increasingly spectacular, boundary-blurring gallery installations is that paintings, even huge slick ones, seem not so heroic these days. While the most straightforward photograph has viewers searching for signs of digital manipulation, painting declares itself openly and honestly. It doesn't disguise the elements of its making. Even at its most sensational, painting is grounded, humbled through its material facts: pigment on canvas or panel or wall. In other words, we know essentially what the thing we are looking at is. And because it has survived so many death sentences, because everyone (especially itself) is aware of its uneasy history, painting has found itself transformed from the authoritarian father into the favorite aunt.

This newly emerged forthrightness of painting makes it naturally resistant to the anesthetic effect of "eternal newness". Its surface is a shield able to deflect "gaudy baubles" disguised as new ideas^{xi}. As Tom Lawson suggested in "Spies and Watchmen", painting's elder status – its matter of fact-ness – makes it an unlikely infiltrator^{xii}. Coupled with the anti-aphrodisiac of historical memory, painting has the ability to develop critically and oppositionally to an art that obfuscates through the stasis of an eternal new.

Richard Wright's wall paintings are a good example of this. They have a twofold relationship to recent history: their careful placement focuses attention inward to the structure of the exhibition space, while the motifs used refer outward to culture (and sub-culture). Bringing to mind club flyer design – which in turn evolved its aesthetics through the appropriation and abstraction of graffiti, typography, tattoo art, modernism, and staid sub-cultural signifiers like skulls and flames – Wright's delicate gouaches find themselves in unlikely places: running in a band along the ceiling, squished into a corner,

bridging the gap between an exit sign and a door frame, or banished to a hallway or stairwell outside of the gallery. Matta-Clark exposed a history through the aggressive undoing of a building. Wright works in a similar vein, but with a gentler touch. Instead of revealing what is hidden, Wright's paintings reveal what is visible, what has always been there, but overlooked. They refute the gallery's claim of neutrality, of white cube-ness, insisting instead that the history and design of the space is as complex and idiosyncratic as the paintings pointing it out. While this happens, the spaces that the paintings are scrunched into return the favor; making it known that certain (negative) associations we have with abstract painting (i.e. that it is decorative, ornamental, "designed") are themselves bound up in a complex social history. As the paintings position and echo the architectural details of the room they occupy, so do they refer outside the gallery to ignored or forgotten visual information that piles up on street lamp posts, gets pasted to the temporary walls of construction sites or blows past the doors of galleries and museums.

Obviously, not all painting does this. To the contrary, much of the work being made today is concerned and content with being hot, dumb, and fucked-up, ingratiating itself to the culture industry while kidding itself that it is somehow subversive. Fashion is confused with new ideas. Retro name checking is taken for historical understanding. Like a guy outside of a Fugazi show proclaiming that punk is "about partying. It's about not giving a fuck", this work is sadly ignorant of its historical and social position, and will never bring anything to the table but spectacle^{xiii}.

Potential is there, though, and it's right behind us. Return, return, return.

ⁱ Dan Graham, "Legacies of Critical Practice," *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Hal Foster, ed., Bay Press, Seattle, 1987.

ⁱⁱ Minor Threat, "Minor Threat," *Minor Threat 7"* EP, Dischord no. 3, June 1981.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ian MacKaye, "History of Dischord Records", 1999, www.dischord.com.

^{iv} Fugazi, "Full Disclosure", *The Argument*, Dischord no. 130, 2001.

^v Gordon Matta-Clark, *Avalanche*, December 1974, quoted in Graham.

^{vi} Fugazi, "*Bulldog Front*", 7 Songs EP, Dischord no.30, 1988

^{vii} Graham, p.88.

^{viii} For a more in-depth analysis on how Greenberg's ideas remain important to current art practices, see Lane Relyea, "All Over and At Once", *X-Tra*, Volume six, Number one, Fall 2003.

^{ix} Graham, p.89. Walter Benjamin's theory of historical materialism is Graham's main influence in this essay: "Benjamin wished to demonstrate that for his generation slightly out-of-date—just-past-objects of mass culture possessed a latent revolutionary power, a notion he developed from surrealism...He wanted his arcades writings to serve as a dialectal 'fairy tale': 'to reverse the myth of the late 19th century created by constant newness and induced amnesia of the recent past, which undermined the historical

meaning of the past in favor of the present and fantasized future of the commodity dream (progress).” See also: Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed., Schocken Books, 1969.

^x Minor Threat, “*Look Back and Laugh*”, Out of Step EP, Dischord no.10, 1983

^{xi} Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Artforum* vol. 5, no. 10, June 1967: “New materials are one of the great afflictions of contemporary art. Some artists confuse new materials with new ideas. There is nothing worse than seeing art that wallows in gaudy baubles...the danger is, I think, in making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work (another kind of expressionism).”

^{xii} Lawson, “Spies and Watchmen”, *Blasted Allegories*, Brian Wallis, ed., MIT Press, 1987.

^{xiii} Jem Cohen/Fugazi, *Instrument*, Dischord no. 80, 1999