



From left: View of *Printemps de Septembre*, Musée les Abbatoirs, Toulouse. Walls, from left: Josh Smith, *Untitled (Toulouse I)*, 2011; Pablo Picasso, *La Dépouille du Minotaure en costume d'arlequin (The Remains of the Minotaur in Harlequin Costume)*, 1936; Josh Smith, *Untitled (Toulouse II)*, 2011. Floor: Ei Arakawa, *See Weeds*, 2011. View of Haegue Yang's untitled installation, *La Chapelle des Carmélites*, Toulouse, 2011. From front: *Site Cube #5*, 2011; *Site Cube #2*, 2010–11; *Site Cube #4*, 2011; *Site Cube #3*, 2011. View of Jim Drain's untitled installation, *Fondation Espace Écureuil pour l'Art Contemporain Caisse d'Épargne*, Toulouse, 2011. Foreground: *Shard Wall*, 2011. Background: *Leopard Cage Sweater*, 2011.



## Printemps de Septembre

VARIOUS VENUES, TOULOUSE, FRANCE

Daniel Marcus

CURATOR ANNE PONTEGNIE could not have known that her title for this year's *Printemps de Septembre*, "*D'un Autre Monde*" (From Another World), would resonate so well with the autumnal protests that swept the United States, for which another world is very much at issue—though she might have guessed that, at least for some viewers, the combination of these words and this contemporary arts festival's titular "springtime" would call to mind last year's spate of uprisings in the Arab world. But Toulouse is not Cairo, and this was not that kind of springtime. Far from it: Toulouse is a medieval city on the cusp of the Basque Country, and once yearly it is invaded by a small legion of artists whose works occupy two dozen galleries, churches, cinemas, and exhibition spaces. Under the banner of "another world," Pontegnie hoped to signal a shift in contemporary art away from traditional institutions and discourses and toward an expanded field of process and gesture. Following Alfred North Whitehead, whom she cites in her brief introduction to the festival, each work is to be conceived of as evidence of an ongoing process of research that manifests itself in actions, traces, and "totems" but has no de facto end point. According to the curator, this attempt to reimagine what art can be and do implies a direct rejection of the modernist imaginary in favor of "more abstract and more elementary forms of . . . expression."

For my part, however, I found it difficult to believe that "*D'un Autre Monde*" was about anything *other* than

modernism. The festival's largest exhibition space, the Musée les Abbatoirs, was largely given over to contemporary abstract painting, whose practitioners derive their notion of process more from post-Minimalism than from Whitehead. Here, works by New York-based painters Christopher Wool, Josh Smith, Alex Hubbard, and Joe Bradley set the tone, purveying the helter-skelter anarchy of gesture and texture that has become the gold standard of recent abstraction. Among the brave few who took abstraction outside this comfort zone were Karla Black, represented by a low rectangular mound of powdery pink plaster and a gauzy tangle of stretched polythene, and Isa Genzken, whose Duchampian mash-ups of photography, painting, and sculpture were a welcome relief from the iconophobic work of many of her (mostly male) peers.

"Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," Fredric Jameson wrote in 2003. The expression has become something of a commonplace. The necessity of another world has never been clearer, but glimpses of a better future are hard to come by. I had these stakes in mind as I tackled the rest of the festival, an itinerary that included many of the city's architectural gems but provided little of the hard substance out of which new social realities are made. In its best moments, the festival wove together elements of the art-historical and cultural past, eschewing grand gestures in favor of a poetics of site, memory, and embodiment. In the seventeenth-century *Chapelle des Carmélites*, an ornate building decorated with an array of canvases and frescoes, artist Haegue Yang had filled four illuminated, perforated metal cubes with extinguished white candles, an oblique nod to Eva Hesse's own perforated cube, *Accession II*, 1967. The installation was brought to life by an audio recording: A girl told the story of a tiger and bear trapped in a cavern of sand; the bear would undergo a process of transubstantiation, becoming the birth mother of the Korean nation. Simple but effective, the piece transformed the painted chapel into a cave of (national) dreams.

Elsewhere, too, the subterranean was a key topos; in cooperation with several other local arts organizations, the *Printemps* occupied the nearby Niaux cave for a night of

performances and projections. But for me, the real underground was Jim Drain's installation in the cellar of the *Fondation Espace Écureuil pour l'Art Contemporain Caisse d'Épargne*: Populated by mannequins wearing gaudy pullovers hand-knit with fluorescent yarn, and illuminated by a rotating trio of LED-lit CD towers, the installation seemed a shrine to a bygone rave-kitsch 1990s. According to the wall text, Drain had set out to address Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* by way of the Arab Spring, imagining the present-day "Libyan cave" as a site of purgatorial stasis. Things seem to have taken a different turn, though, toward visions of late-capitalist entertainment at once quickening and appalling, but familiar through and through—not "another world" at all.

Pontegnie's claim about the shift in contemporary art toward open-ended process rings true and was best illustrated by the handful of artists at Toulouse who practice a kind of para-epistemology characterized by improvisatory fact-gathering and aesthetically informed research. Take, for instance, Luke Fowler's film project *A Grammar for Listening Part 1*, 2009, which aims to rediscover the English countryside in terms of its sonic textures, or Edith Dekyndt's installation *L'Ennemi du peintre (The Painter's Enemy)*, 2011, a pseudoscientific analysis of the musicality of orchids. These artists plumb the world as a fathomless source of knowledge, but with the caveat that nothing can be known for certain or in relation to any totality. The information collected remains as so many homeless fragments, from which the work derives its aesthetic appeal. Liberated from any overarching framework of interpretation, data becomes ornament. What one thinks of this strategy will depend on one's sense of the epistemological status of the world: *Can* anything really be known, and from what perspective? Who has the privilege of imagining the world anew, and who, on the other hand, is condemned to dealing with things as they are? I had hoped that the festival might force a confrontation with some of these questions, pushing viewers in the direction of a truly *new* world; in the end, though, they remained unasked, kept at the level of the unconscious—in the cellar, as it were. □

DANIEL MARCUS IS A WRITER BASED IN PHILADELPHIA.