

Flash: Dana DeGiulio

May 31–August 9, 2014

The video opens on an empty whiteboard reflecting fluorescent lights in a neat grid. The shadow of a figure is registered almost imperceptibly as the artist reaches for a dry-erase marker and begins to draw a simple graph. Viewers are set to receive information in the form of a neatly delivered lesson. But instead the robotic voice of a computer software program lectures: “Jouhandeau writes of someone whom another got a hold of by the hair and who, not wishing to give out that appearance, pretends he is being caressed. By this, he does not capitulate, but engages the head as an instrument of rebellion. An incessant organ, caught and held...” The artist piles rubble into the graph. A collage flashes into view, a detail of Edouard Manet’s *The Dead Christ With Angels* (1864) with the drawn façade of a classical building over the figure’s belly and groin.

“Expect from me no word of my own,” we are cautioned. And indeed this work takes the form of a video montage crowded with echoes and quotations:

of images, borrowed from historical and contemporary art; of words (the admonition itself may be borrowed from the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus);¹ of snippets of news footage, advertisements, and Internet clip art; and from popular songs. Each will be subject to irreverent re-contextualization and reinvention. The columns of the classical façade are redrawn as statuesque women, who now balance the lintel of this structure atop their heads. They support the institution even as it bears down on them.

What follows this introduction is a proposal for a fictional museum. A crumpled sketch appears on screen as if the proposal has already been discarded. Commissioned for San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s *Open Space* blog on the occasion of the museum’s current closure and expansion, Dana DeGiulio’s *Proposal for a Future Museum* incorporates layered references to artists including Marcel Broodthaers, Andy Warhol, Nancy Spero, and Andrea Fraser. It takes the form of a tour. We



video still *Proposal for a Future Museum*, 2013, 9 minutes
Courtesy of the artist; originally commissioned for SFMOMA’s *Open Space*

are guided by the (male) auto-generated computer voice through architectural arteries and halls, atrium and corridors. In this reimagined museum we find the Hall of Broken Things (Greek sculpture and amateur bondage pornography); Corridors of Obsolescent Technologies (books) and Obsolescent Recording Devices (cassettes); and in “the Museum’s esophagus,” the Corridor of Arms and Armor and Defunct Protest Signs. We are invited to the second floor via Grand Staircase—or, “by ladder,” or, “you could fly.” Rueful humor is peppered throughout the tour. We encounter the “Agnes Martin Lap Pool,” a reference to the abstract painter. “Because this is an endless resistance pool,” explains our guide, “visitors are prohibited from reaching the Southeast Artery which houses works by women of color, and dance. Just imagine.” Continually throughout the tour we find ourselves at dead ends, glass walls, and “black windows,” and are forced repeatedly to circle back to the museum’s hall of emptiness, the Atrium. “Let’s go back,” our guide intones.

Within the syntax of this montage, we discover interjections of live-action footage, filmed by the artist, a painter, among the recognizable collections of the Art Institute of Chicago. Through the artist’s lens, we spy on visitor tours and test out the museum’s “interactive features”: restrooms, a touch screen, a water fountain. Shot guerilla-style during regular hours of operation, we find the artist moving through the galleries of the Art Institute dressed in the sheet of the Halloween ghost. The ghost pauses on a couch next to other patrons, and strikes poses in Gallery 211 before Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán’s disconcerting *Saint Romanus of Antioch and Saint Barulas* (1638). The painting depicts the Palestinian martyr Romanus, tortured and executed by the Roman emperor Galerius. (The irony of the emperor’s name, so close to “gallery,” should not be lost on us.) This institution of art may be, like the artist, “of Chicago.” But DeGiulio will be registered in its collections only as a ghost, or, like Saint Romanus, will arrive only in mutilated form, rendered speechless. “Expect from me no word of my own.”

How, exactly, should we relate to museums today? These spaces—ostensibly “for us,” the public (which public, we should remember, includes artists)—are cast in the video as alienating mazes, full of turnarounds and transparent barriers through which we are asked to look, to desire—to love. We are asked, the video asserts, to crave the affirmation of the very institution that controls, frustrates,

and abuses us. This, after all, is the import of the parable that begins DeGiulio’s video: “Caught by the hair” by our persecutor, the museum, we pretend instead we are “being caressed.”² A “baffled truce” is how DeGiulio phrases it. Bewildering as this condition may be, the spirit of the video is different; bewilderment is where we begin, but not where we conclude. The narrator evinces instead that the proposal’s “ethos is one of ardent participation.” Its aim is, despite all of the above, to challenge us to imagine the museum differently, and to ask why, given the vast amounts of treasure and thought museums embody, such a radically reimagined institution cannot exist. Resolving with the chorus from a rock anthem by the band Queen—a song that embodied defiant perseverance even as the singer Freddie Mercury was dying of complications related to AIDS—the video makes clear that “the show,” and the struggle for a different, more imaginative and more equal museum, “must go on.”³

—*grupa o.k.* (Julian Myers and Joanna Szupinska)

Notes

1. Karl Kraus, “In these great times,” ed. Harry Zohn, *In These Great Times: A Karl Kraus Reader*, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1976, page 70.
2. Marcel Jouhandeau, *De l’abjection* (1939), as quoted in David Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2007, page 71.
3. Queen, “The Show Must Go On,” the last song on the band’s final album *Innuendo*, 1991.

Dana DeGiulio (born 1978 in Chicago Heights, IL) is a painter currently based in Chicago. Alongside painting, DeGiulio’s body of work consists of drawing, installation, video, performance, and other forms. The artist’s work has been featured in solo exhibitions at The Suburban, Iceberg Projects, and Julius Caesar in Chicago; and has been included in group exhibitions in Chicago, Detroit, Berlin, and Düsseldorf, and as part of the Thessaloniki Biennial in Greece. Since 2008, DeGiulio is co-founder and co-director (with Diego Leclery, Colby Shaft, Hans Peter Sundquist, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung) of the artist-run space Julius Caesar. In 2007, DeGiulio earned an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where the artist currently teaches as Adjunct Assistant Professor of Painting and Drawing. This summer the artist will participate in the Fire Island Artist Residency in New York. *Flash!* is the first museum presentation of DeGiulio’s work.

Flash! contemporary art series is organized by CMP Curator of Exhibitions Joanna Szupinska-Myers at the California Museum of Photography, part of UCR ARTSblock. *Flash: Dana DeGiulio* is the fifth project in the series.