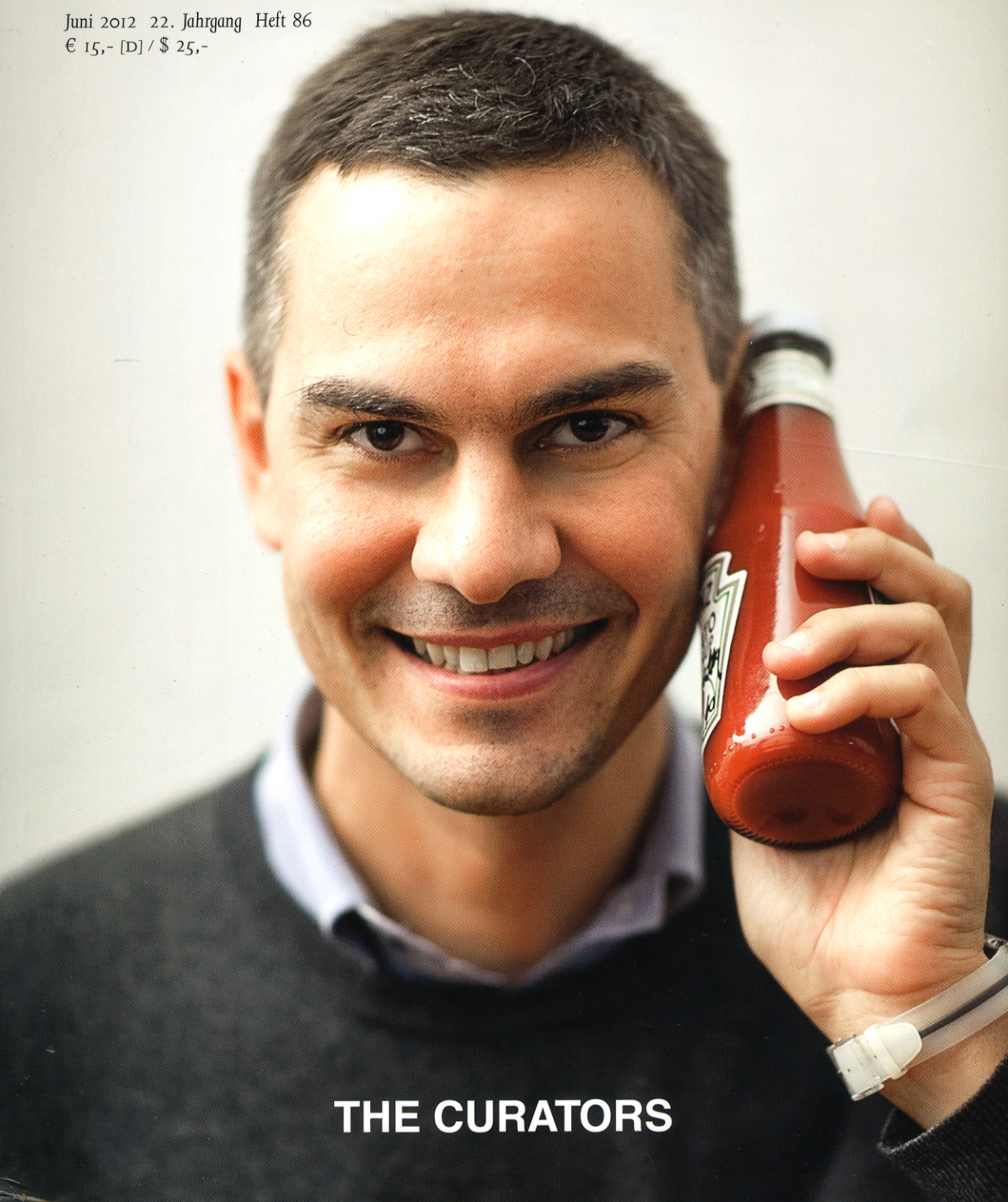


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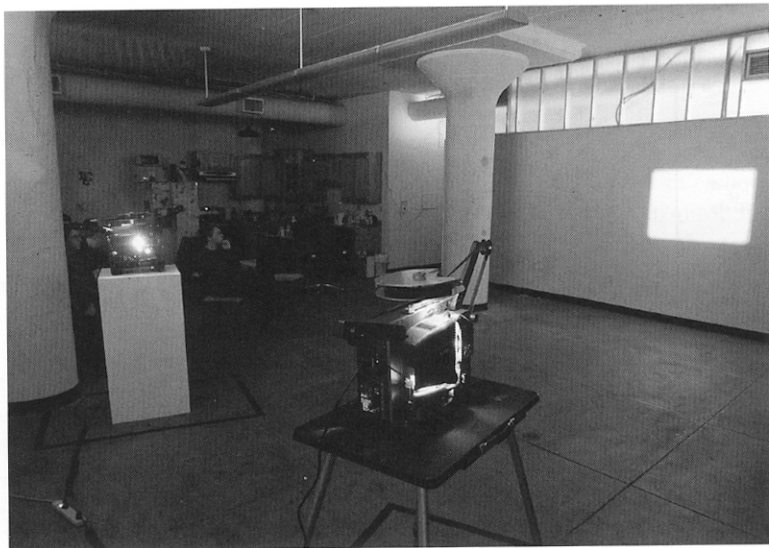
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THE CURATORS

BACK TO BASICS

On Madison Brookshire and Tashi Wada at the wulf., Los Angeles



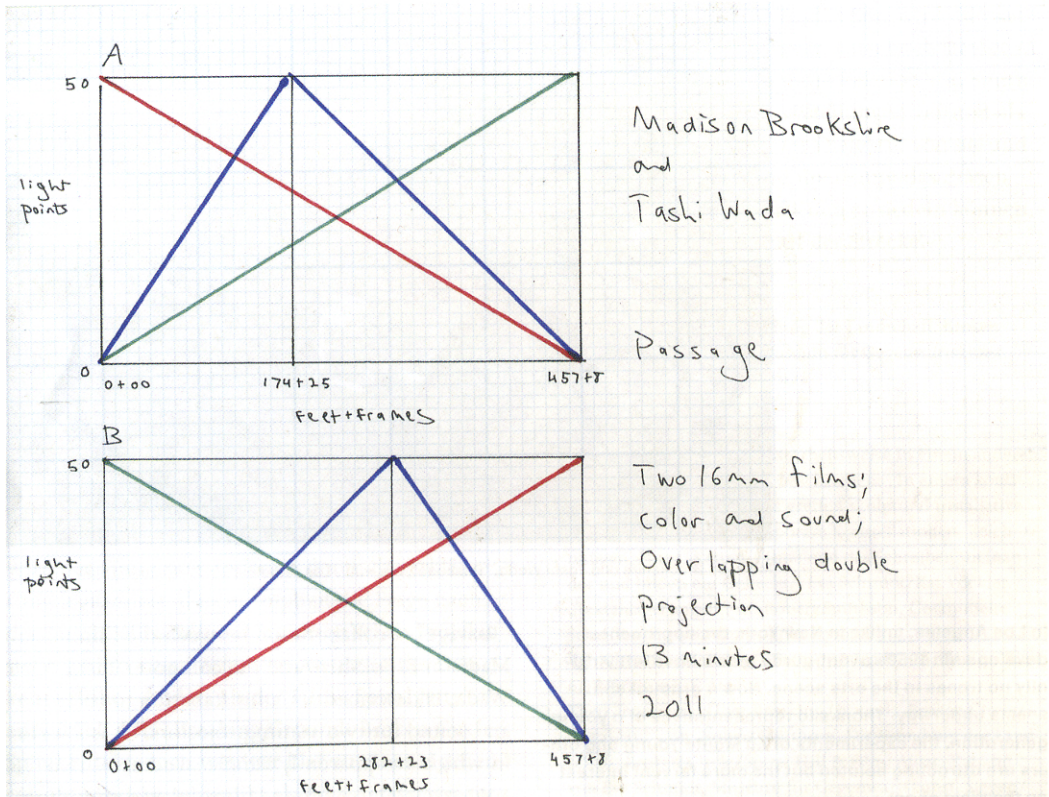
Madison Brookshire and Tashi Wada, "Passage", the wulf., Los Angeles, 2012, exhibition view

In Los Angeles, unlike in New York, the approaches developed in 1960s avant-garde music have left virtually no traces in the arts scene. Now a gradual shift seems underway. Thanks to representatives of a young generation, the experiments of La Monte Young and others are attracting belated but the more fervent interest on the West coast.

That, at least, is the impression one gets from the programming at the non-commercial exhibition space the wulf., where Madison Brookshire and Tashi Wada recently presented an installation in which the central issues of minimal music were brought up for renewed debate: the dissolution of beholder and space, of structure and work.

"Passage", a collaboration between the filmmaker Madison Brookshire and the composer Tashi Wada, is described as "an installation in color and sound for two 16mm projectors." It is a work in which an apparently simple structure – two approximately 13-minute films, played continuously – creates a series of complex effects. And, like much of the more interesting work being done recently by younger artists, it represents a complex re-engagement with certain legacies of the 1960s – abstract or materialist film, minimal music, and modes of durational performance that emerged from experimental music around 1960.

The shared touchstone for many of these projects is an experiential mode of perception that occurs slowly, over time. What are the stakes of this re-engagement, and why is it happening now? And why is it happening in Los Angeles, a city that doesn't have a strong historical tradition



Madison Brookshire and Tashi Wada, "Passage Drawing", 2011

of this type of work? While there's a deep history of experimental music on the West coast, somehow it never crossed into the visual art world the way it did in New York.

"Passage" came out of a series of collaborations between the two artists, mostly involving Wada playing music with one of Brookshire's earlier "Color Series" films.¹ But unlike these earlier screenings/performances, "Passage" was designed as an ongoing piece – allowing viewers to enter at

any point – and as a fused structure. At the wulf, a nonprofit performance space in downtown L.A., the event went on for more than five hours, with many viewers staying for a good part of that. Modest in scale and technology, the work invites an intimate viewing; it's a form and an experience that has developed organically over several years' work. Wada and Brookshire are among a group of younger composers and artists loosely affiliated with the wulf; most graduated from Cal Arts

several years ago, having worked with teachers like James Benning, Michael Pisaro, and the late James Tenney. While indebted to what composer Robert Ashley described as the “non-timeline music” of La Monte Young and others, their work could be seen as exploring an experience of time that is derived more from a process of perception than an apparent stasis.

“Passage” is produced using looping technology that allows the two 16mm films projected onto a single surface (a white wall, not a screen) to play continuously. Each film is a gradually changing color field, produced without a camera using film lab technology. Superimposed, the two projections produce a glowing rectangle, with more vividly colored borders at the edges where the two films don’t fully overlap. The soundtrack consists of both sides of Wada’s 2010 LP “Alignment” (presenting the direct and retrograde movements of an eight-violin canon on opposite sides of the record) played at the same time. Both sound and image consist of overlapping recto and verso versions of the same materials, but what happens when they intersect is of course very different. Perceptually, light is subtractive; the two colored films nearly cancel each other out, hollowing out the central field.² Sound is additive, creating density; the two soundtracks generate a swelling sonic arc that reverberates through the room. Based on the observer’s position, the sound “mix” and the image quality would change, and audience members were invited to move throughout the space to explore the subtle variations within the piece. Anyone passing in front of one of the projectors would leave a vividly colored shadow, since, by blocking one light source, the other would be more fully revealed. And since the two loops had slightly different lengths of leader,

they gradually fell slightly out of sync – an effect that would become more apparent in an exhibition setting, although the visual and sound tracks remain fused.

The work’s focused structure can be understood more clearly in comparison with an earlier evening of projected images and sound/music by the filmmaker Rick Bahto and composer Mark So, “Still Lives, Donuts, Twice Around, Palms” (2011).³ For more than four hours, Bahto used two 35mm slide projectors to cast two series of images – of Los Angeles area doughnut shops and cacti – onto walls, floors, and ceiling, in constantly varying rhythms and configurations, while So played a tape (“Twice Around”, comprising different field recordings) and performed his notebook, “a book of palms”, at the piano. With four tracks of (apparently unrelated) material being activated in different ways, the evening nonetheless created a compelling whole. Exemplifying different tendencies within this field, the Brookshire-Wada and Bahto-So collaborations manifest different pathways made available by post-Cagean compositional practice. While both components of “Passage” are, in effect, realizations of scores, generated in relation to a matrix, the components of the Bahto-So evening were generated from strictly unscored material contingencies. Yet the fact that all four artists are friends who have collaborated suggests that these approaches are hardly opposed or mutually exclusive.

While these projects come out of music, the types of experience they involve are essential for visual art as well. Whatever fault lines map our world, the crucial differentiations at play are not between so-called “time-based” forms and “object-based” media like painting and

sculpture. After all, "Passage" created an immersive, bodily experience that was also profoundly physical, even sculptural. And, as a painter friend remarked, describing the film frame, "It's up front, you can't really go there, but you naturally go into it – just like painting."

While certain kinds of durational and experimental tropes are fashionable in the art world of late, they are also fundamentally at odds with the market-driven and crowd-pleasing logics that animate both American museum and gallery contexts. Is it possible, in 2012, to continue to hold out hope for spheres of genuine artistic experimentation? Especially at a moment when performance, the ephemeral and the "noncommercial" are being codified as just another marketable novelty? It's hard not to feel cynical when "resistance" and "artistic integrity" are basically ad campaigns. But the inevitable garbage of our moment need not foreclose other more generative possibilities. It was lovely to see legendary choreographer Simone Forti watching "Passage", her continued activity and presence quietly suggesting radically different models of artistic production and historical periodicity – and implying that certain models from the 1960s might yet function as living legacies, propelling new and challenging work, and new and challenging forms of experience, rather than just fetishism or nostalgia.

So, why is this happening now? And why does it feel right? There is, of course, a gesture of refusal – of the market and its cavalcade of styles and products – which clears a lot of ground. But refusal alone is hardly what motivates compelling work, and these collaborations would have "felt right" 20 years ago, too. The fact that these events were happening while the Pacific Standard Time initiative was unfolding also bears noting.

The four-hour Bahto-So collaboration occurred the same night as the big Getty opening – and I was glad to be sitting on the floor in some weird downtown loft rather than sipping champagne on the terrace.

LIZ KOTZ

Madison Brookshire and Tashi Wada, "Passage", the wulf, Los Angeles, March 31, 2012.

Notes

- 1 "Passage" is derived from Brookshire's earlier "Color Series" (2010), a single 75-minute work consisting of six short 16mm films. The films are silent and imageless, consisting of fields of color that gradually change into other colors. Each segment is a cameraless "print" made using the lights and color correction mechanisms of commercial film lab developing. For each, the filmmaker would submit a simple diagram charting the settings for the levels of the blue, red, and green elements; based on relationships between Fibonacci numbers, each film is proportionally longer than the preceding one.
- 2 Technically, light rays are additive, but the perceptual effect is subtractive; magenta and cyan combined produce white.
- 3 Presented on October 2, 2011, at the wulf.