

# ART LIES



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Urban Myths



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Dialogue: Boris Groys

Guy Debord and Asger Jorn: *Mémoires*

The Center for Land Use Interpretation

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# The Image of the City

Notes on Mark Bradford's *Help Us*  
and Liz Glynn's *24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project*



Mark Bradford, *Help Us*, 2008; installation view, Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles; photo by Steve Hart; courtesy Steve Turner Contemporary

A city is an unknowable thing. We can only know our cities: not "Houston" or "Los Angeles" or "New York" but, rather, our personal paths and roads and restaurants and bars, neighbors and galleries and corners and mailboxes—those things we experience and register directly.<sup>1</sup> Only that which is phenomenologically present is truly knowable. We flesh out this knowledge through abstractions, cobbled together through the reports of others. We circle around the social, political and economic fact of the totality of the city with statistics, maps and demographics assembled by political scientists, sociologists, urban planners and statisticians. We can gain some metonymical grasp of the interior life of our city through anecdotes in the *Metro Pages* and local news—data gathered and vetted by journalists and editors. We can even learn a bit about its temporal expansiveness through the subjective lenses of historians, archivists and urban planning committees. Yet the city—the thing itself—can only ever be an abstraction: a bricolage of 1% experience and 99% hearsay.

The radical discontinuity between our private experience of the city and the sociopolitical totality flagged by its proper name has long been recognized as the organizing drive of modern (and postmodern) alienation.<sup>2</sup> It is profoundly difficult to internalize or fully come to grips with the problems of our cities, because so much exists only insofar as it has been explained to us by intermediary authorities. But even their partitioned expertise necessarily promotes segmentation rather than structural or systemic analysis. Either we confront circumstances firsthand and are therefore invested in them, or we come to them piecemeal through often-unreliable mediation. In the best of times—those characterized by merely the routine inequities and breakdown of cities—this is a troubling state of affairs. The arrival of catastrophe exacerbates difficulties exponentially: we are either fucked firsthand or we are passively entertained by the sublimity of a disaster's unfolding.

More dangerous than simple apathy, though, is the paralysis that this urban dissonance introduces into the project of acting productively in the face of inequity, breakdown or catastrophe. The problem, it would seem, is just too big to fix. Cities are simply too complex—too vast—and too segmented to allow for direct, invested knowledge that would necessitate active public participation in mitigating their problems. Relief, then, is best left to managers, experts and bureaucracies, and who better than these "experts" to throw up their hands in red-taped frustration—or, more menacingly, to financially and/or politically capitalize on our confusion.<sup>3</sup>

The place of art in negotiating this condition, the stakes of which might suggest that it find other, better directions with which to busy itself,

can only be tentative. However, it is the view of this critic that art can be, at the very least, in the words of Claude Levi-Strauss, "good to think with," and I've found two recent projects by Los Angeles artists Mark Bradford and Liz Glynn to be very good indeed in their ability to diagnose the troubles sketched in the preceding paragraphs (Bradford), and to present an object lesson on the art-of-the-possible in their wake (Glynn).

Mark Bradford has gone to the extraordinary measure of displaying an object at Steve Turner Contemporary, in the Mid-Wilshire section of L.A., which cannot be experienced firsthand. Sensible genealogists might be tempted to look back into art history and Duchamp's 1916 *With Hidden Noise* for a way into the interpretive puzzle introduced here, but Bradford is clearly concerned with more than merely hiding what would otherwise demand to be looked at. And in this instance, he has no time for puzzles. The piece, *Help Us*, can in fact be seen but only from a considerable distance, or from two distances: that introduced by elevation (it can be seen from the sky) or introduced by technological mediation (it can also be seen on the Internet).

As Christopher Knight so astutely observed in his exceptional review of the project for the *Los Angeles Times*, the distance Bradford insinuates between his audience and his installation—the monumentally scaled words *HELP US* on black ground upon the roof of the gallery's building—has everything to do with the visual logic and paradox of communicating in an environment (the Ninth Ward of New Orleans in September 2005) of total urban devastation; communiqués visible only from the safe havens of skyborne vehicles and laptop computers.<sup>4</sup>



Liz Glynn, *24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project*, 2008; installation and performance: Machine Project, Los Angeles

1. & 2. Photos by Calvin Lee, 3. Betsy Hunt, 4. Ignacio Perez Meruane, 5. Liz Glynn

Bradford's project is profoundly elegiac—even mournful—for it is about the help that did not come (or came too slowly) to those desperate enough to demand it from the roofs of their devastated homes. But much more than that, it is also an acute analysis of the structural causes of that failure: these painted pleas were the function of a situation where direct, firsthand experiential knowledge of the situation was simply not possible for those in a position to act. Preemption, as we know, is a strategy fit only for those who were at a great enough remove from these pleas to see them were, by virtue of their advantage of distance, the least inclined to intervene. Bradford has granted us the undeserved privilege of removing this phenomenon from the context of its originary bloodbath, letting us look upon it in something like historical brackets: *we can now think on it*.

I'll chalk it up to an error of history (if not to her own substantial insightfulness) that Liz Glynn's remarkable *24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project*, staged on January 19, 2008, predated *Help Us* by some ten weeks, for I can think of no better response to the important challenge Bradford's project has set forth. The culmination of a year of research and planning, *Reconstruction* was, quite literally, a twenty-four-hour period during which the entire architectural history of ancient Rome was realized by dozens of volunteers under Glynn's careful direction, in miniature, on the floor of Mark Allen's innovative Machine Project gallery in Echo Park.

From the construction of the huts of Romulus and Remus on the Palatine and Aventine in 753 BCE (12:01 AM) to the founding of the Roman Republic in BCE 509 (5:02 AM) to the burning of the Temple of Vesta during the Gaul invasion in BCE 387 (7:30 AM); from the construction of the Ara Pacis Augustae in BCE 13 (2:15 PM) to the restoration of the Temple of Augustus in AD 138 (6:23 AM) and the removal of the Altar of Victory in Curia in AD 357 (10:53 PM) to the burning of the Basilica Aemilia during the ultimate sack of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in 412 AD (12:00 AM the following day), every significant event in the architectural history of the city was carefully reenacted, in compressed time, using only the most basic of summer-camp craft materials.

The ambition of Glynn's vision for *Reconstruction* exceeds the space available here for its description, and it should be known that besides the small army of volunteers that built, revised and ultimately destroyed Rome on that day, the project was punctuated by a host of interventions by, among many others, Pomona College art historian Judson Emerick and performance artists including My Barbarian and other local collectives such as Fallen Fruit, who provided the nectar. It could be said that a good deal of Los Angeles' creative breadth was itself on hand to enact Glynn's Roman flux. But in the context of the present discussion, what strikes me most is the enormous allegorical potential of *Reconstruction*; rather than reminding us of the causes and consequences of our radical alienation from the metropolitan totality, Glynn posits a corrective, hopeful scenario wherein the city can in fact *be known*, experientially—both synchronically and diachronically—even if only in play.



With cardboard and wood and glue sticks and paint, those present on January 19, 2008, actively constituted the otherwise numbing cultural, historical and spatial enormity of that great city and thereby actively inherited experiential knowledge. Those there that day would build and see destroyed the city center, perhaps even participate in its later redevelopment and its eventual, irreversible downfall. Intimate relationships were established between participants (citizens?) and structures across space and time. Unspeakable catastrophes were suffered. Great buildings fell. New buildings were built. The city cohered. Because in this Rome, we all had a stake. Humble construction materials effectively registered both the desirability of participatory engagement with the city (not its concept but its *being*), but just as importantly, they served to alert us to the essentially ephemeral, constantly transitional and indeed alterable condition of the urban landscape. The secret character of the city as process was made palpable; it could be beheld privately, individually and changed. The city, as a totality, even as a problem, can be attended to. The city, *Reconstruction* suggests, does not need to be translated into a concept and (mis)managed by experts and bureaucrats; we just need to get to *know* it.

All of this, of course, sounds quite utopian, and utopian thinking might well be our best bet under the circumstances. But while dozens participated in the constructive process of realizing this little Rome's many iterations, seemingly hundreds exalted in the catharsis of its final devastation. And it was at this moment that Glynn's project veered from the historical script. Much of the Rome of antiquity, as we know, still stands. The ecstasy we shared in its destruction had its own resonance. We were comfortable with this idea; it was familiar to us. We are pessimists, well schooled in the logic of Bradford's dire, if acute, assessment. Perhaps much of the present morass has a lot to do with this resistance to utopia. We have grown so good at diagnosing the ills of our society that we have little time or inclination left for optimism, for *construction*. And this, finally, seems to me the Janus-faced crucifix of *24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project*. The utopian impulse cannot last: better to relish in the orgy of its undoing.

1. The classic discussion of this idea remains Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).
2. See Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347-57. Jameson notes that in late capitalism the fractured, multinational constitution of even our immediate material surroundings compounds the alienated metropolitan condition diagnosed by Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzbylski, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 51-55.
3. For an insightful discussion of technocratic paralysis in the face of Katrina that considers the distinction between abstract knowledge and lived experience, see Timothy Gibson, "New Orleans and the Wisdom of Lived Space," *Space and Culture* 9.1 (2006): 45-47. Naomi Klein's discussion of the latter scenario can be found in her "Disaster Capitalism: The New Economy of Catastrophe," *Harper's*, October 2007.
4. Christopher Knight, "Mark Bradford Examines Life Viewed Through Today's Technology," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2008, <http://www.calendarlive.com/galleriesandmuseums/cl-et-bradford2apr02,0,1558273.story>, consulted April 9, 2008.