

Opposite:
Louise Lawler
H/WAC
1996
Photograph
121x157 cm

Below:
Kerry James Marshall
Could This Be Love
1992
Acrylic and collage on
canvas
216x234 cm

abstract in ways that evoked Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois' rubric of the formless. These works frequently possessed a kind of lyrical beauty, even as they worked with banal materials such as gum, rope or wood. The other half of the works were largely dependent on the linguistic turn of Conceptual art and the return of narrative and the figure largely made possible by video. These works tended to read as 'political' – inasmuch as they often contained images of an explicitly political nature, depicting the seemingly bottomless mendacity of the people in power and the horror they create for others. Buergel and Noack installed the exhibition in such a way that one volleyed back and forth between these two types of work repeatedly, as the curators did not give artists discrete spaces but rather interspersed their works throughout the four venues. Within the logic of 'compare and contrast' – formal/political – we were to 'understand' that the formal works are also 'political'; by operating as 'formless' they are challenges to Modernist notions of wholeness, purity and contemplation. So too, the 'political' works were offered as having been born of aesthetic choices that remove them from the world of documentary and place them firmly within the province of art.

At first it was interesting to encounter the work of the same artist – Juan Davila, Kerry James Marshall, John McCracken or Gerwald Rockenschau, for instance – in different juxtapositions, but ultimately the repetition of this curatorial gesture became ruthless and far overshadowed any sense of play between individual works of art. Furthermore, this game was played out in archly designed spaces. The curators ordered the walls to be painted green and salmon, had the floors carpeted and, in room after darkened room, melodramatically spot-lit objects, all in an attempt (one presumes) to outrun the logic of the white cube (too bad for all the artists who actually use the white cube as a ground from which to work their own resistance). What context, following Lawler, are we to imagine the salmon wall provides? Is not the white cube – and, importantly, the critique of it – useful precisely because it functions simultaneously as the shared and contested ground for both artists and viewers?

For Bois and Krauss the formless is an operation that produces a rupture in Modernism's taxonomies; it is a move toward the visceral and the low, it is de-sublimation in the name of a down and dirty attack on Enlightenment reason. It is intensely heterogeneous and as such defies binary logic and (false) dualities. At first I felt that perhaps what Buergel and Noack intended was to have their curatorial work act in the name of the formless, that their refusal of white walls, explanatory texts and even a minimal gesture towards public knowledge (much less consensus) around the checklist was to perform the

operation of the formless on the exhibition itself. But this is emphatically not the end-result. Indeed, I came to see the organizing principle of the exhibition as somewhat sinister. For I found myself asking what model of the social was being put forward by Buergel and Noack? If interpretations of art works can be said to smuggle in models of subjectivity (an altogether common argument in recent art history), then can we see these large-scale global exhibitions as suggesting models of the social, or even ethical, dimensions of life? (They are, or are not, organized hierarchically, to tell a homogeneous or heterogeneous story, to put forward narratives of nation states or global capital – or both.)

In bringing together a diverse team of curators to help organize documenta 11, Okwui Enwezor suggested implicitly and explicitly that the logic of the single author was not tenable. This team subsequently scheduled several 'platforms' around the world for discussion and debate, not only offering a democratic model of exhibition making but creating a wildly heterogeneous exhibition – filled with internal contradictions – that was a model for democracy itself. Documenta 11 believed in the mad proliferation of dialogue,

the promulgation of discursivity and, in doing so, it attempted to make the form and function of the big exhibition as transparent as humanly possible. If the show offered a model of the social, it did so by suggesting that democracy should be viewed as a site of continual contestation and dissent rather than communality and consensus.

Documenta 12 offered us the insular logic of the couple, secretive and withdrawn from the pressures of transparency, talking in code with one another as opposed to generating the more open speech necessary for public dialogue. In essence, Buergel and Noack forsook the public dimension of the exercise and ultimately produced a profoundly undemocratic exhibition. Their refusal to share information resulted in an audience trapped within the hubris of their experiment in pure experience, an experience the terms of which were reached through neither debate nor consensus. The egotism of this grand gesture feels all too commensurate with the arrogance of our current political moment. I am reminded that here in the US, at least, the language of pure experience has always been the province of those who believe in faith-based initiatives.

