

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

INCONVERSATION

ISHMAEL RANDALL-WEEKS with Alex Bacon

by Alex Bacon

Alex Bacon recently sat down with Ishmael Randall-Weeks to discuss the artist's thoughts on utopia, audience, community, futurity, and the possibilities of an ethics of openness in the context of Randall-Weeks's itinerant, global identity and practice. The artist's work is on view in New York at Eleven Rivington (Quoin, January 10 – February 10, 2013) and the Drawing Center (Cuts, Burns, Punctures, January 17 – March 13, 2013).

Alex Bacon (Rail): For me your work as a whole brings up the question of utopia which, while it lay dormant for many years, seems to have recently been reignited in light of our present political, social, and cultural situation.

Randall-Weeks: I think utopia is a term that's been thrown around a lot in the last 10 or 20 years, and it has reached a point that I don't quite understand what to do with it. I think the questions I'm arguing are organizational concepts towards space and time for a future generation. What is it that we are building, and who are we building it for?

Rail: So for you it's concrete? In the sense that utopia, as you envision it, and as opposed to the work you are making, doesn't imagine a future outside of its own narrow terms, and maybe for you working with this "future generation" in mind is a way to make the references of the work concrete?

Randall-Weeks: Or to question it. I don't know if I'm producing something utopian, but I am questioning it and saying "what am I doing with my life and how is that going to affect the way I live, and the way I hope my community lives, and the way I interact as a community member with other people?" And I think that's maybe the real question behind utopia.

Rail: You were telling me yesterday that your process is very much not only site-specific, but also context-specific—you know that you are going to get a show at this time, in this space, and then you produce work explicitly for that context. So, in a sense, you are making work around an event.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bul.

Randall-Weeks: In a sense, yes, and in a sense, no; I guess I take that back a little bit because I think with specific projects it's more like the way an architect would take on a job. I think you take on this job by looking at a space, doing the drawings, thinking about it, and hopefully, what comes through is also your identity, or your own thought process. And I think that has a lot to do with the concept of community, and of utopia too, as in how do you separate out time, what does time mean?

For example, we built, as part of the AFUERA project a museum in a geodesic dome next to a large open-faced mine, a massive hole now eating up the Peruvian town of Cerro de Pasco at 14,200 feet above sea level. We built the "Museo del Relave" (*relave* are the mine tailings), so it's a mine tailing museum. We went and did a lot of films and recuperated objects. I had a couple of people working with me, including my girlfriend, and we suited up in masks, got the whole gear on, because the *relave* is quite toxic, and collected all these artifacts that are half-molded and half-destroyed because the actual chemicals in the mine tails eat up plastic. We made the museum of these archeological artifacts, contemporary archeological artifacts that look as if you could analyze contemporary culture, if you were coming from the future to the present. It's a way of thinking about archeology, and sci-fi, to understand how those two things come together in our thinking.

"Things need to break apart to come back together again."

It also brings into question, what is this thing we are making, who is it that we are making it for? Are we making art for the masses, or inbetween parentheses, or are we making it for a small group of friends? Are we making it for the art world, or for a potential change? And who has access to that? By making these small museums, I'm actually allowing a kind of facet of art, archeology, and life to all take on some roles in my life. The next one I intend on doing will be in this town called Iberia, which is a former rubber boom town. Iberia in its peak used to have embassies from around the world because of the rubber boom in the jungle; it was a massive field. So I want to do a mini-museum around a lot of these artifacts and objects that are being produced because it's not just rubber for tires; they were also making dildos, squares, rain jackets, boots, different latex pieces, and there are these houses that have these things left over from that time in them, in this town. The machinery is still left over, and the architecture of the town is spectacular because it's left over from that time.

Rail: It is interesting because I think it brings us to another aspect of the question of audience and of community, which is the sense in which you have these different kinds of work, which seem, in an overtly geopolitical sense, destined for very different audiences. While the museums are aimed at a local, Peruvian audience, you simultaneously produce these quieter, introspective objects, which are then exhibited at a major New York City gallery.

Randall-Weeks: I also work with a gallery in Lima, as well as ones in Rome and Mexico, and I do see a distinction between a gallery show and projects outside. When you make a show for a commercial gallery, you can be radical about how that commercial environment works, but it's still a commercial show. I think there's something very different and distinct about transforming a space in the middle of the Andes, Amazon, or the Sahara—you could go anywhere with it—and producing work within a certain budget, which can either be reflected in the gallery, or not brought up at all. That's the question I'm working through right now.

Rail: Your work has a certain referential content, and you're very aware of it, for example the photographs of particular buildings that you use. In this exhibition there seems to be a continuation of that idea in these very interesting tabletop sculptures—collectively titled "Quoin" (2012)—that reference, in a very general sense, some sort of ancient, Incan ruin, but not in a direct, specific way. What remains of the reference, while mostly severed in the finished work, is the general aura that a reference of some sort exists, even if it is largely withheld. You know that the works are made of paper pulp, and then you see isolated words here and there, and so you know that it is made from newspaper. You have that much information, but you don't know which newspaper, what issue, you don't know what was in that newspaper, etc. But I think the work retains the strength of reference in general, abstracted out to this point and drained of most of its specificity, or that specificity made obscure, at least.



Ishmael Randall Weeks, "Ibeam," 2012. Cut and carved books, wood shelf, metal. 103 x 7 x 6.5". Courtesy of the artist and Eleven Rivington.

Randall-Weeks: It's always a question when you make a work, how much is enough? How much is too much? When do you call it quits? And how much information do you have to give someone before it's too literal and direct and doesn't have the energy that you want it to have? I deliberated on writing dates on the tabletop sculptures, and I thought that would be an interesting clue, but then it's gimmicky, because then you're allowing someone a clue, but then also cutting them off. I said, well that's not really cool, because it's a Duchampian thing—you're telling them a big secret and you're telling them that they have to go further to discover the secret, and I don't want to tell people that. I want them to see what it is, and to get a sense from these pieces of time, of the works as blocks of time, or time capsules. This is cast into every object, the shapes of which are somewhat recognizable, but are repolished, cut down into these Incan, Aztec, Mayan artifacts that are abstract and you don't know quite how to place them. You also have this sense of stone with them, with the solidity, and that's what throws you off a little bit—or attracts you to them because they seem like travertine marble. They seem like objects that look very solid, yet within it is all this fragility of information, and I like those double connotations.

Rail: I think that's what I would characterize as the openness of your work, which is that, while it would not be outside the realm of possibility for the viewer to, say, go and read some of the books that are in the one hanging sculpture, "Ibeam" (2012) it's not necessary.

Randall-Weeks: It's a suggestive gesture towards information: if you want to go further, go ahead, the further is there. But where do I stop, as a visual artist, giving that to the viewer?

Rail: The film at ElevenRivington is titled 1963 but you were not born yet in 1963, so is it not so much a personal history as a background to the present situation?

Randall-Weeks: Yes. They often say that the third world is 30 years behind the first world, and I like that reference point. So in thinking of those things that were happening in 1963-'63 being a reference to the building of the World's Fair in New York, and also to the two or three years in the Andes leading up to land reform and big civil action—I was also thinking about what was happening in 1993 or 2003. You know, as in you're given a reference point through the two source films that I used, which talk about a 30 year or 40 year difference in ideological thinking or mentality or construction. I don't believe in it, because I think they're very different and I think that concept comes from a very Western perspective on the third world.



Ishmael Randall Weeks, "Cutout perspective 1," 2012. Photogravure print and cut paper, archival adhesive. 31 x 22 1/4". Courtesy of the artist and Eleven Rivington.

Randall-Weeks: I think it's a complex relation and one that confuses me nonstop. I think there are as many positive connotations and attributes to that history of migration and movement as there are negative. Place and time have been a massive influence in my work for sure, and I look forward to further investigating this weaving or molding. However, I think it makes it really hard—at least it did when I was younger—to fit in anywhere.

Rail: I believe that we're in a moment where we're stepping back in terms of both aesthetics and politics, where we're realizing that many forces that have been building over the past 20 or 30 years are radically changing the way we interact with people, and the way we understand ourselves in the world, all these kinds of large, philosophical questions. I think that we see this concern in contemporary art, including your own, and speaking with you I get the sense of someone who is invested in a lot of political issues and has a certain leftist view on things, and, say 20 years ago, would have made a very different kind of art. Someone with those same beliefs in the '80s or the '90s would likely have made overtly political work, where your work—as you yourself characterize it—is quiet and introspective, and there's something about that quiet, introspective approach which seems relevant to a point in time, our point in time, where maybe we're trying to rethink what the political even is.

Randall-Weeks: Yes, I think that is true. I feel that a lot of artists are in tune with that and are in that same boat. I think there is a lot of desire to be active politically and I think there is a lot of frustration with the systems that are out there. I think we keep being tested as to how much we can do to change a situation and what the word "change" or "revolution" really means, with Occupy Wall Street as one example. We have to question how that approach is carried out in this day and age, of technology and of a system that has learned how to control it. And with regards to art, what is really political? Is a big massive spray paint on a wall really that political, inside a gallery? Or is a small cut? Those are the questions I ask myself.

Rail: In a way that position frees you from the angst that even a slightly older generation would have had about the political question, because you realize that the very act of making the art is itself an exploration of the possibilities of the political.

Randall-Weeks: Yes, exactly. It's an exploration of those possibilities.

Rail: You made a lot of these small works—the black-and-white architectural images incised with linear, architectonic cuts—and that seems to be the place where your relationship to an open investigation of the political is most clear. I don't want to read that work too literally, but I am thinking here of the way in which most of these images picture a building or site in the process of being built. They're also not canonical buildings, or by well-known architects, as was true of some of your work in the past.

Randall-Weeks: Everything in the show is about generality, if you think about it. I didn't want that specific reference to a canonical architect or a canonical movement. But it's also about authorship and communal mentality—how do you talk about, or instigate thought about, community? Or, as we have been discussing, utopia—going back to utopian thought on community, and this idea of building this roof over our heads together, where does this take us? How does this affect us in the past, and how do we see it in the future?



Ishmael Randall Weeks, "Cutout perspective 2," 2012. Photogravure print with cut-out mounted on paper, 31 x 21.25". Courtesy of the artist and Eleven Rivington.

Rail: I think that two-part aspect of the work—its concern with community and authorship—roots you in the present moment. It's not just critique, but is about laying out the terms of something from the past, really investigating very seriously and complexly these events and these structures, so as to produce something in the present that is destined for a future moment. I like the idea that that's the way you envisioned your cuts; they're not simply undermining the image, but more so are re-articulating it. Again we see an openness in your work and in your approach to it. This term "openness" has been reoccurring a lot in our conversation, and also feels very of the moment. I think at this point that we've kind of exhausted critique for its own sake. Obviously critique is very important, but it has to be yoked to some sense of future relevance, we can't just endlessly undercut everything, but rather need to think about how we can look at things so as to find what's useful in them, regardless of personal questions of taste or quality.

Randall-Weeks: That's why I get tired, personally, of critique and cynicism and I see that a lot in work that I'm not that particularly interested in, because I feel like it doesn't do much—I want something that takes us somewhere, that takes me somewhere, that makes me feel like I want to continue participating in something, and in building something, whatever it is. You can look back, but you're moving forward as opposed to thinking that everything that we have right now is negative.



Ishmael Randall Weeks, "Quoin," 2012. Cast and sculpted individual days of newspaper, table. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Eleven Rivington.

Rail: This is an interesting way to view your turn to cutting, as a particular aesthetic act, because we usually think of cutting as a destructive gesture. But you seem to use the cut—and this is most clear to me in the slide work at the Drawing Center, *Cuts, Punctures, Burns* (2012)—to open onto something else. Similarly, the cuts in the film at Eleven Rivington, *1963* have a kind of mobility to them, they are not a destructive gesture. Instead it's a way in which you can manipulate the material to get somewhere else aesthetically by moving beyond the specificity of that material, such that for you cutting is a forward-looking gesture.

Randall-Weeks: I think it has a duality when the images work best, because they go back and forth between a past and a future, and the possibilities for rethinking the past and re-doing our concept of the future. Like when you have the film, the removal of spaces via cuts in the slides can be as much about a removal of information as a way to add something, or to transform it—you puncture, you burn something, but you're building at the same time that you're destroying. You have to let the material, the object, the line, the influences, the history, the politics be a part of your process.

Rail: I think that perhaps 20, 30, 50 years out, we're going to look back and see that we have in fact been leading up to certain things, both aesthetically and politically speaking, and there will be these significant gestures, and maybe they're about to happen, or maybe they're already happening somewhere, but we're not aware of them yet, or at least I'm not. But, regardless, I think that this general sense of stepping back and thinking about what our terms are and how we might open them up, and reformat them, the general drive to question that exists for many artists today, speaks to a desire to move into some new paradigm.

Randall-Weeks: I would agree with you on that. I know it's why I constantly bring up this concept of the cyclical, because I think of things as being in constant motion, but I also know that certain amounts of change, or of reaction, or exposure are imminent and necessary to challenge the status quo. There's always that struggle, when do you get to a place where you can actually say that you have transformed society?



Ishmael Randall Weeks, "Vigas (Nuevo Mundo S.)," 2012. Acrylic and photo transfer drawing with cut-out mounted on paper, 7 1/8 x 7 1/4". Courtesy of the artist and Eleven Rivington.

Rail: Exactly. It seems to me that we see something similar going on with OWS, which was also an attempt to

think about what the political is in our present moment. It was a very conscious decision not to create a system of demands and actions which would be coherent and unified and, for better or worse—and there's been a lot of debate, obviously, about OWS's efficacy. But nonetheless, for me, the most important fact is simply that something like OWS, which is to say that kind of open, questioning relation to the political, took off like wildfire, at least for a minute, and we'll definitely be seeing the ramifications of that experiment in the coming years.

The fact that so many people from all sorts of backgrounds could come together around thinking about what the political is, of what praxis is, shows again that we are in a moment, and we are in a culture where it is not just the artists or the academics who are engaging these kinds of questions, which is exciting. It seems to me that the kinds of questions that are being asked by something like OWS about the contemporary efficacy of concrete political gestures are actually the same kinds of questions artists are having today about art and its relationship to the political, or are at least the ones that they should be having.

Randall-Weeks: I'm very happy that OWS happened—and very much in support of it, I think that it's fantastic. I think there should be more situations like OWS, because I think people should be unhappy with the present situation. Look at the powers that be and look at what happened, look at the banks, look at Wall Street, look at poverty. Both politically and aesthetically speaking, you can answer in terms of energy. You have a constructive energy, or you have entropy; entropy is a force that naturally happens where things will break apart, to then come back together again. Things need to break apart to come back together again.