

Breaking the law: interpretations of law in visual art for the VLA's Art & Law Residency Program exhibition

By Caryn Coleman, Curator

Notice of Public Hearing is a call to recognize the pervading influence law has on contemporary cultural production and reception. Stemming from the dialogue initiated by artists, curators, writers, and lawyers during the 2011 Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts 'Art & Law' Residency Program, this exhibition is a visualization of the influential ties that bind the seemingly oppositional stances of static law and fluid creativity. It's a breaking away from the stereotypical view of law as existing wholly separate from contemporary art (except in the case of litigation) and exposes the thriving reciprocity between the two.

It is a poignant moment to be revealing and digesting the powerful impact law has on society. From the revolutions during "Arab Spring" and demonstrations throughout Europe to the "Occupy" movement in the United States, the upcoming presidential elections, and the global economic crisis, we are culturally immersed in the power, failure, and transference of the law. While this is an over simplification of our current unstable and shifting political climate, these occurrences are indicative of how the many factions of the law can be addressed, dissected, discussed, and re-configured. The artists in *Notice of Public Hearing* inverse the law's omniscient presence by producing a diverse range of works that tackle legal issues involving property, land use, intellectual property, commodities, language, national security, risk, privacy, and criminality. This "turning inward then outward" conflates art and law through a philosophical consideration that manifests into visual representation. These works are an explosion of thought, a breaking apart and then reassembling of the law, intended to provoke our own considerations on justice, politics, and history.

* * * * *

**Lián Amaris, Michael Cataldi, Blane De St. Croix, Molly Dilworth, Carolyn Lambert,
Graham Parker, Risa Puno, Woody Sullender, and Alex Villar.**

Michael Cataldi and Carolyn Lambert address commodity, economic, and value structures in relation to objecthood. Michael Cataldi's *\$250.00 USD (April 21, 2011)* and *\$250.00 USD (December 5, 2011)* are physical representations of the fluctuating market value placed on commodities such as bronze and steel. The price of these "scraps" on the date of purchase and their volume weight remain the same while the metal market adjusts this value on a daily basis. When the function of these metals is re-assigned as an art object, another vague layer of perceived value is added. Cataldi further reconfigures commodifiable surface area by drafting a sublease agreement with the SculptureCenter for their un-built air rights. Imagining this area as an invisible sculpture, the (non)presence of *Quiet Enjoyment* functions as a reminder of an object's potential, hidden, and inherent value.

Carolyn Lambert's dual-projection video *Raw Material Value* features a non-linear narrative of a woman carrying an MDF board throughout New York City. Placed alongside images of the usable and the non-commodifiable, the video takes shape as a sequence of ambiguous acts and intimate observations with no evolution or destination. However, the rhythm between the two channels establishes a discourse between images, enhancing notions of surface, space, and value. Nearby, Lambert engages in a different dialogue with her homage to Robert Morris' *Untitled* (1967) by reconfiguring his felt sculpture in a gesture of playful collaboration.

Lián Amaris deals with a different sort of value system by commenting on the perpetual recycling of iconic female celebrity images in her photographic work *Has Anyone Ever Told You: Pseudo-Self Portraits*. Here she has sourced actor's glamour shots from the Internet whom she has been repeatedly told she resembles and has re-created each image as a "self portrait". These twelve images are recontextualized and situated in a dialogue with each other, highlighting commonalities and suggesting that celebrity identity is mutable in its infinitely reproducibility.

The dual meaning in Alex Villar's video *Breaking into Business* - the beginning of a person's professional career and/or the trespassing on a business' property - indicates a motivation of opportunity and implies a search for success. Represented in the form of a "vertical reach" and using the everyday urban tool of scaffolding, the performer's actions retain a sense of ambivalence in terms of legal status. There is no material value gained here and, therefore, no incriminating evidence. The characterization of the subject is therefore suspended and it's in this terrain of "performative displacement" where Villar sees possibilities to reconfigure a new plausible horizon.

Land use, property, and human rights lay at the heart of new sculptures by Blane De St Croix and paintings by Molly Dilworth. Blane De St Croix reframes our consideration of the landscape as socio/geo-political iconography. His extensive 2400-mile research trip, site visits, and first-hand photographic documentation has manifested *Two Ends*, a monumental miniaturized landscape sculpture depicting the literal two ends of the United States/Mexico border. The sculptures reflect the conflicting openness of one geographical border ending into a Texas saltwater estuary, emptying into the Gulf of Mexico, while the other border ends with the fence line descending straight into the Pacific Ocean from Tijuana.

Culling from visual references to slavery, particularly the adoption of quilt patterns as communication tools in the Underground Railroad, Molly Dilworth's paintings in *36°30'* display abstracted icons from modern companies and states who employ unethical labor practices. Indicating that slavery has not ended but has been simply transformed into new forms of outsourced labor, these paintings on military surplus blankets hang high from the ceiling like banners to emphasize the distance between consumers and the goods we collectively consume.

Woody Sullender and Graham Parker deal with the convergence of technology and the law. Sullender's *Soft Ordnance*, an audio piece designed for an ultrasonic speaker, adopts technology developed by the LRAD Corporation for sonic weaponry. Focused on ways of hearing the socio-political aspects of radio, *Soft Ordnance* challenges the control involved in the transmission, reception, and marketing of messages. His multi-channel *Whispering Spectres* (playing sporadically throughout the exhibition), consisting of filtered FM radio stations released back into the spectrum as a micro-radio broadcast, is a reclaiming of acoustic space and a détournement of existing FM radio.

Graham Parker's video *The Flitter* features a monologue by writer Carl Hancock Rux that consists of manipulated textual sources such as spam emails, news headlines, 19th century novels, and an essay from Parker's book *Fair Use (notes from spam)* by software filters. As with the text in spam itself, whose plea for legitimacy depends simultaneously on human gullibility and the juridical function of software filters, *The Flitter* consists of language that is both for us and not for us. Similarly the language in Parker's *Untitled*, a receipt from a hacked ATM that reads "and everything you stand for", is an ambiguous yet universal message targeted individually to each reader.

Systematic structures are also at play in Risa Puno's interactive sculpture based on the classic game of Labyrinth, *Good Faith & Fair Dealing*. Similar to the structure of law, the main challenge within this game is to successfully navigate the pre-determined system in order to achieve a joint goal. Though designed so two players will work together to avoid the balls going into the holes (i.e. losing), human nature will usually dictate that one person will triumph over the other. Puno conflates elements of gaming, visual art, and the law in creating a participatory experience where pleasure or displeasure is based on negotiation.

* * * * *

Culminating from the 2011 Art & Law Residency Program, *Notice of Public Hearing* was, in a sense, curated from the very beginning. The artists entered into the Residency with an interest in law and political systems and, throughout the course of the eight-month period ideas have been contested and shaped, ultimately coming together in an exhibition format. It's a rigorous process, one not guaranteed for success, but *Notice of Public Hearing* manages to mesh together the disparate commentaries on how the law has historically shaped, and presently shapes, our collective world. That SculptureCenter is hosting *Notice of Public Hearing* is also significant in that these artworks address the law in a sculptural language. Through objects and spatiality, they fuse together the myriad of issues in the legal system and contemporary art in a critical dialogue about how we can consider both in relation to each other.