Jeff Derksen on Holly Ward's *Persistence of Vision*

Holly Ward, *Persistence of Vision* (installation detail), 2011. Photo: Blaine Campbell

FOR NOW

Yellow, blue, green, gold, silver, orange, and pink silk-screened signs carrying appropriated slogans from utopian thinker Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1938-1947) spill out of Artspeak's space, accentuating the division of inside and outside, of common and enclosed spaces. These signs disperse onto Carrall Street, a newly demarcated border in Vancouver's urban geography. For several years, Artspeak's programming has gone onto the streets as well, initiating acts of artistic publicness against the embourgeoisment of this block by the *big window gentrification* of restaurants that extend their *inside* onto the street. In this city, where acts of publicness make the heads of the town, and the top of the cops, nervous to the point of seeing ghostly images, past and present, of "anarchists" at every moment, it is culture, activism, and affect that generate rare chances to assert non-administered publicness.[1]

Holly Ward's *Persistence of Vision* takes a semiotic spatial act of publicness to draw contour lines between the gallery space, utopian urban visions, and the recent explosion toward social transformation, sparked in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, that has spread across the Arab world. "From Tunisia to Egypt to Libya, to Yemen…to Morocco and to Bahrain, and, yes, even now to Syria, the young and brave have told the world they want freedom. And freedom, over the coming weeks and months, they will undoubtedly obtain,"[2] the reporter Robert Fisk wrote in March. Yet history has not been as hopeful as Fisk and the spontaneous uprisings. This great hope appears stalled and unfolding in a more predictable manner than it began. These calls for transformation, which are national in scale, began at the urban level and have hit difficulties as they jumped from city to city—particularly in Libya, where cities have become fronts in a civil war, or in Syria where the cities are sites of intensified repression.

Bahrain, from which Ward draws the central imagery for this show, is another story: calls for freedom and democracy have been oppressed by that nation's security forces as well as troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council—"military riff-raff" crossing the bridge from Saudi Arabia, as Fisk calls them.[3] In Bahrain, Pearl Square became the focal point of the protests, the space that countered the dictatorial governmental space. Its name is derived from a 100 metre monument that commemorated the main industry of the Gulf region before oil brought wealth into petro-plutocracies: the six curved spires that held the "pearl" at the apex represented the six nations whose troops were now brought in as a show of force.[4] The monument reflected this particular history of the region, yet its aesthetics balance the grand symbolism of public monuments with a universal monumentalizing of prosperity, pride, and futurity.[5] The protestors appropriated the monument's symbolism, shifting from economic development to political futurity, as a result the state pulled it down. Ward has rescaled and reproduced this monument with a futuristic twist; the pearl is now a transparent globe, a light-reflecting orb held high. Altered in this way, the monument could be placed into fictional utopian urban spaces such as the city in Ursula K. LeGuin's utopian-dystopian classic, *The Dispossessed* (1974), or Kim Stanley Robinson's anti-capitalist epic *Red Mars* (1992). Appropriately, the plinth that holds the sculpture is set on a diagrammatic floor design referring to utopian city designs. This crucial detail illustrates the centrality of cities to the utopian tendencies that Ward, via Ernst Bloch, brings to the project.

Bloch argues against a denigration of utopias by proposing that utopias intensify tendencies to come that already exist in our present, but which are unformed. Therefore utopias project tendencies into the future via a "concrete utopia" (Bloch's term) that both anticipates and affects the future. As Ruth Levitas writes, "Concrete utopia, on the other hand, is anticipatory rather than compensatory. It reaches forward to a real possible future, and it involves not merely wishful thinking…"[6] This contrasts an "abstract utopia" that is compensatory wishful thinking not backed by willful action.

Looked at from Bloch's perspective and from the historical view of utopia, two utopian tendencies emerge from this exhibition—the spatial and the temporal. The spatial tendency of utopia has historically begun with a negation; that utopia, as the Greek root of the word points to, is "no place". But *Persistence of Vision*, in its linking of the urban sites of the Arab Spring and the streets of Vancouver where Bloch's words resonate on the posters, poses a question regarding the *where* of utopia. Do we in the global north continually look elsewhere, and compulsively to the global south, for the possibility of utopia? From the shifts in forms of democracy in Latin America and now to the Arab Spring, it seems *elsewhere* holds the hope of what has become culturally and socially unimaginable in North America. This touches off a larger cultural and artistic question for us: How did we arrive at a moment when utopia can only be compensatory (or "abstract" in Bloch's terms) and hope reduced to electioneering?

Yet, in its articulations, *Persistence of Vision* points to a tendency within our present that gestures to the where of a concrete utopia. Margit Mayer has recently written that, "…we can say that, while the neoliberalisation of the city has in many ways created a more hostile environment for progressive urban movements, it has also allowed for a more global articulation of urban protest: and it has brought about a renewed convergence of some of these strands under the umbrella of the Right to the City slogan" [7]. But the Arab Spring has shown that this "Right to the City" is not just a slogan that Henri Lefebvre concocted, but that its scale and outcomes are much more dynamic and unpredictable. From city squares such as Pearl Square, to entire urban territories and up to a national imagination of social transformation across "the Arab world", cities have become the scale where the utopian tendencies that Bloch helped illuminate have accelerated. Ward's contour lines, an aesthetic articulation of signs and sites within an imagination toward a future that does not willfully ignore the present, move from city squares to these questions: Are utopian tendencies now also urban tendencies?; and what, actually, can utopia mean in the present other than the possibility of change?

NOTES

[1] Some urban critics point to Vancouver's lack of a public square as a reason why the city does not have a "natural" gathering point, but this design question seeks to spatialize rather than politicize publicness.

[2] Robert Fisk, "Right across the Arab world, freedom is now a prospect," *The Independent*, last modified March 22, 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-right-across-the-arab-world-freedom-is-now-a-prospect-2248975.html.

[3] Fisk, Ibid.

[4] Ethan Bonner, "Bahrain Tears Down Monument as Protesters Seethe," *The New York Times*, last modified March 18, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19bahrain.html. Thanks to Holly for pointing out this article.

[5] In this way, the monument has a resemblance to Soviet-era symbols of futurity and prosperity *in the present*: I'm thinking particularly of the 1980 Olympics emblem for the boycotted Moscow Games: sweeping spires holding aloft a star.

[6] "Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia. " *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*. Eds. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), 67.

[7] Margit Mayer, "Social Movements in the (Post-) Neoliberal City", *Civic City Cahier 1* (London, Bedford Press, 2010) 29.

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