A

Robert Fulton

*Reality’s Invisible*, 1971

16 mm film on HD video, color, sound, 53 min.
Courtesy of the Robert E. Fulton III Film Collection and Archive

Robert E. Fulton III served on the faculty of the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts. He was a prolific photographer and aerial cinematographer active in the Boston area, producing his pioneering 16 mm film *Reality’s Invisible* in 1971. Fulton edited the sounds and images of his film to meld together what he termed “tones,” which echo an almost psychedelic immersive experience. Fulton propels his viewers through persistently rotating shots that fold into one another in vivid yet brief transitions that vibrate with immediacy. Colorful flashes of light and sound collide amid figures that blend into the built environment of the Carpenter Center. The soundscape features interpolations of voices of students and faculty engaged in debate and creative endeavors revealed in clipped glimpses throughout the film. At various intervals, the deep, unmistakable reverberation of “pink noise” (a lower pitch of white noise, like that of an airplane cabin) hums in the background so richly that it makes its aural presence immersive, as if Fulton has taken the viewer mid-flight through the Carpenter Center in his plane.

Moreover, Fulton juxtaposes his ever-shifting but never repetitive images with a vibrant, up-tempo jazz composition by Anthony Williams, whose notes heighten the pulsing energy as the film reaches its cruising altitude midway. This choice underscores Fulton’s avowed embrace of music and the expressive potential in the randomly assembled methods of jazz compositions as applied to the visual arts. As other makers before him, Fulton drew upon jazz to arrange his films with a striking improvisational verve. The sonic landscape of his film is just as critical as the images his frames present. Notably, at many screenings, Fulton would foreground his creative expression as a jazz saxophonist through live performances to lend more immediacy to the auditory experience of his films. Fulton thus experimented with the capacity of the body to boldly interface with the surface of the film as he wielded two instruments, camera and saxophone, to bring his creative endeavors to fruition.

While aerial cinematographers typically rely on a pilot to navigate the plane as they wield their camera, Fulton engineered a new method attaching a camera to the wing of his plane, which enabled him to operate it within the cockpit while piloting himself. Thus, the image-making and the persistent motion and aural environment of the airplane’s cabin fused together in one sensory experience, and it is evident that
Fulton mimics this process for viewers of Reality’s Invisible. Indeed, the film’s surreal visual and auditory impression of flight makes for a disorienting contrast with the almost claustrophobic close-up shots of faces, bodies, and artworks populating the dense and static concrete spaces of the Carpenter Center.

Fulton chose to engage directly with students’ expressive potential through interviews interpolated with the display of their artworks and expansive views of the Carpenter Center’s structures. The words of these community members are spliced and reconstituted in such a way that it is not always possible to consistently discern their originally intended meaning. Some sentiments ring through fascinatingly, as in this playful exchange Fulton has with a smiling young woman captured in a wobbly close-up. He observes:

“I don’t see you around here too much these days.”
“No, well uh, I’m not around here too much these days,” she replies.
“How do you account for that?”
“I can’t stand this fucking place any longer, that’s why!” she states, exasperated.

Without elaborating, she immediately asks, “What is that machine?” as something just out of frame distracts her. But just like that, Fulton abruptly cuts away to a quickening beat pulsing beneath number-like symbols and chalk-like scribblings flashing across the screen. Fulton does not let the audience discern whether the student was sharing her feelings about the “place” of the Carpenter Center, or a general fatigue with the university at large. Elsewhere, Fulton allows a narrative ambiguity to float through the air, giving his audience license to interpret the individual expressions through their own subjective lens and thus engage more conversationally with the film and its interactive figures.

Reality’s Invisible investigates the unexpected ways in which the built environment of the Carpenter Center modulated and inspired the many spontaneous, organic interactions between students and instructors of the period by collating the intellectual reverberations of the sociopolitical, educational, and creative dialogues echoing within the building’s dynamic spaces. The film is a response to the potential of Le Corbusier’s architecture to conjure and choreograph interpersonal communications and self-expression in a creative and academic environment. Notably, Fulton’s father, Robert E. Fulton Jr., was a prolific inventor and aviator who studied architecture at Harvard and later the Bauhaus school at the University of Vienna. His son, Robert Fulton III, died tragically in an accident while piloting a private plane in 2002, whereupon The Film Study Center at Harvard University established a fellowship in nonfiction filmmaking in his honor.

—Destiny Crowley
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Renée Green
Americas : Veritas, 2018
Digital film, color, sound, 7 min.
Courtesy of the artist, Free Agent Media, and Bortolami, New York
Soundtrack by Porter Ricks, Prismatic Error, 2017. From Anguilla Electronica [Tresor.295]
Courtesy of Tresor Records GmbH, Berlin
“Congealed Americas. Now. Being. Here.” reads a line from the scrolling intertitles of Renée Green’s Americas: Veritas. Set to a pulsating soundtrack, the seven-minute film features intertwined footage of Le Corbusier’s only two buildings realized in the Americas, built nearly a decade apart: Casa Curutchet (1953) in La Plata, Argentina, and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (1963) at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Shot by the artist using digital cameras and remote-controlled aerial drones, the perspective of Americas: Veritas roams through the interiors and exteriors of both structures: buildings that ushered in the era of beton brut, French for “raw concrete.” At times, figures are captured moving through these planes—stairwells, courtyards, columns, graffitied walls of concrete, glass. The 360° footage distorts the peripheral views that endlessly revolve and dissolve around the central focal point—a small, clear window into the observed world.

The vantage point of the 360° images produces a kind of disembodiment and alienation. At the same time, the pinpoint field of vision seems to indicate an unseen presence that exerts a gravitational force—one that emerges, roving from dreams, through space and time. As Americas: Veritas suggests, the specter of Le Corbusier and his ideology live on, yet Green indicates another consciousness with nuanced perceptions—evoked using combined technologies including those of surveillance—that transform, frame, and layer materially rigid modernist structures.

Conceived under the idealist regime of “full transparency,” the Carpenter Center and Casa Curutchet are buildings designed to visually connect their inhabitants, interior, and exterior at all times. Yet as critical discourses have noted, such utopian ideals also create surveilled environments, where one can gaze and be gazed upon, at all times. By turning new technological apparatuses like drone cameras onto such structural realities, Green further enacts the parallel slippages between modernism and technology’s blanket promises of progress. Here, the universalist, brutalist angles and hard edges of concrete dissolve into fluid, mercurial images.

Since both projects were made late in the architect’s life, Le Corbusier (1887–1965) never visited either completed building. His utopian dreams for the Americas started and ended with Casa Curutchet and the Carpenter Center, despite his ambitions to generate a “second machine age” through such sweeping architectural projects outside of Europe that would unite standardized industrial methods with a monumental new humanism, and its related Americanization.

In our current age of reckoning with monuments, modernity, coloniality, U.S. centrism, and other “universalizing” (hegemonic) forces, Green’s Americas: Veritas poignantly demonstrates how artists may reimagine our built environments as well as perceptions. The artist’s broader practice has also consistently brought together the disparate historical and institutional legacies of modernism, from architecture, cinema, visual art, poetry, music, and literature. Green has spent time inhabiting other Le Corbusier buildings, such as a semi-deserted apartment in the architect’s concrete housing block Unité d’habitation in Firminy, France, built in 1965. Designed in 1952 as a utopian proposal for collective living, Green encountered the iconic housing complex as a “modern ruin” when she was invited to participate in the 1993 group exhibition Project Unité, for which she produced Secret (1993), a sprawling installation documenting her stay at the Unité via black-and-white images, sound, video, and an essay, presented in 2018 at the Carpenter Center in Green’s exhibition Within Living Memory.

It was her prior experience with Le Corbusier’s buildings that led to Green’s invitation in 2016 to participate in the Carpenter Center’s two-year residency series “Institution (Building),” from which Americas: Veritas emerged. Conceived by former Carpenter Center director James Voorhies, the residency series brought in artists to work with materials found in Harvard’s libraries and archives in order to, as the program’s mission stated, “recover the history of this institution and situate it within broader contexts of contemporary art, culture, and the extraordinary legacy of the Le Corbusier building.”

With heralded modernist buildings as sustained subjects of her work, Green has transformed these iconic architectures into “sites of ongoing becoming,” acknowledging their limitations and questioning the notions of unlimited progress and productivity they purportedly upheld. Failure and its aesthetics, as well as a vision for the anti-monumental, become pivotal to proposing ways that we might move beyond these limiting ideologies. In Americas: Veritas, even concrete itself is unstable. For those of us who work in and with this building, we know especially well how water trickles through its pores and grains, how the steps of many feet have indented its flat planes, and that its sharp angles are punctured by cracks and subject to the inevitability of decay. If Veritas (Latin for “truth”) is Harvard’s motto displayed centrally on its seal (a shield sketched in 1641 and formally adopted by the institution in 1843), then in Americas: Veritas, unknowability, precarity, and the limits of knowledge are also a kind of truth.

—Danni Shen
in Hydrocal and attached to what looked at once like a popsicle stick and the handle of a hatchet or sledgehammer. A sound work played on two small boomboxes placed on the floor next to the table: Music for an Autistic Modernism (2008–9) featured a slowed-down Max Roach drum solo that, as Pope.L described, “[sounded] more like god-muttering or thunder” if not “the stamping of elephants underwater.”

Across the room from this ensemble, another stage in the shape of a triangular prism was thrown into relief under floodlights. More like a “Whac-A-Mole” than a prosenium stage, this hollow, wooden structure was held up by a beam resting on the ends of the lobby’s L-shaped leather-and-concrete seating. On its largest, slanted side, Pope.L painted looping, biomorphic, dripping brushstrokes—a mashed-up mass of facial organs: several eyes, a few noses, an ear, a pair of lips, and lots of skin folds. The surface of the platform was pierced, in two rows, by twelve holes through which the performers poked their heads. On the opening of the exhibition’s opening, a group of Harvard students, dressed in black and wearing nitrile gloves, appeared anonymized, donning vinyl, chubby-cheeked pink baby masks and round-framed glasses recalling Corbu’s iconic eyewear. Their Dada-inspired routine involved a chorus of grunts and groans occasionally disrupted by the perturbing comprehensibility of racial epithets.

Throughout the run of the exhibition, the hollow-eyed masks were hung behind the empty stage, where visitors could watch video footage from rehearsals on a monitor. This work, Modernism and Masculinity a.k.a. Modernism, Race, and Mr. C (2009), came equipped with intertitles narrating the formation of the project and referenced art historical debates about modernism’s indebtedness to African visual culture and framed works display a quivering line of doodled phrases, including “modernism” here and “democracy” there, that nonetheless remain difficult to follow due to the many ellipses that sit between the words or the margins they cut into.

The art of Pope.L betrays the senses of abjection, eroticism, or infantility that an aesthetic norm keeps buried under its veneer of social conventionality. His signature investigations address the institutionalized values of modern art, and their main protagonist is often the figure of a Black man, subjected as much to reductive presumptions as unwarranted projections. Reflecting major themes in the artist’s practice, including his scrutiny of signs, their efficacy and exchange value, Corbu Pops presents a political aesthetics of race and gender via critical engagements with the legacies of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

On the institutional runway-cum-table, the artist was serving modernism—toke-nized, streamlined, ready-made. The installation, a deserted mise-en-scène, evoked a jammed-up assembly line of sorts. The academy, after all, can be where the curious, carfree sweetness of childhood meets the trimming, hammering, and molding of the senses. Furthermore, against the backdrop of modernist experiments with art education, Pope.L foregrounded the tension of a gendered and racialized appetite for cultural consumption as a condition for highly staged possibilities to converse with the canon. If the architect’s nickname “Corbu” likened him to a raven (corbeau in French), then Pope.L made it “pop” with a sense of the ravenous. Perhaps in response to the modernist conception of domestic architecture as a machine à habiter (“machine for living in”), where forms were to remain yoked to their clear-cut functions, Pope.L discussed the building as a “confusing machine,” one that “manufactures disorientation in the form of a dark, viscous liquid. Unlike a washing machine, this machine creates opacity.” One can only wonder if the artist also meant this as a metaphor for the organizational spirit or air of operations that has permeated the building throughout its life. Can this machine ever create transparency?

In the original installation, a glass of water sat, rather inconspicuously, on a small shelf—a counterpoint to the maximalist outpourings in the foreground. With a proto-conceptualist aura, Well (2009) not only made a silent expression of a range of exclamations having seemingly canceled each other out but also stood as a tongue-in-cheek statement on the delimitation of standing reserves, untapped potentials, and the elements of resourcefulness. A clear reflection of the exhibition’s critical tinkering with the legacies of Dada, Arte Povera, and institutional critique, this work recalls a sentiment pivotal to Pope.L’s practice, which remains well captured in his unforgettable aphorism—preceding and carried forward into Corbu Pops—that Blackness is “a lack worth having.”

—Mahan Moalemi
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All works by Pope.L are courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

D
Pope.L
Modernism and Masculinity a.k.a. Modernism, Race, and Mr. C, 2009/2023
Digitized video
26:19 min.

E
Pope.L
Performance Stage a.k.a. Modernist Performance Stage with Corbu Masks and Mallets, 2009/2023
Acrylic, charcoal, graphite, and ink on six panels with cut-outs, two Corbu Masks, and three Performance Mallets

Pope.L
Corbu Mask #7, 2009/2023
Latex with plastic glasses

Pope.L
Corbu Mask #8, 2009/2023
Latex

Pope.L
Performance Mallet #1–3, 2009
Acrylic on wood

F
Pope.L
18 drawings in artist's frames

G
Pope.L
Corbu Pop, 2009–10
Cast plaster, paint, and ink with wood handle

H
Pope.L
Corbu Mask #1, 2009/2023
Latex with plastic glasses

I
Pope.L
Corbu Masks #2, 2009/2023
Latex

J
Pope.L
Corbu Pop, 2009–10
Cast plaster, paint, and ink with wood handle

K
Pope.L
Corbu Pop, 2009–10
Cast plaster, paint, and ink

L
Pope.L
Corbu Pop, 2009–10
Cast plaster with wood handle

M
Pope.L
Corbu Pop, 2009–10
Cast plaster with wood handle

N
Pope.L
Corbu Pop, 2009–10
Cast plaster with wood handle

CORRIDOR GALLERY
Pope.L
Corbu Mask #3, 2009/2023
Latex with plastic glasses

Pope.L
Corbu Masks #4, 2009/2023
Latex

Pope.L
Corbu Mask #5, 2009/2023
Latex with plastic glasses

Pope.L
Corbu Masks #6, 2009/2023
Latex

I
Pope.L
Corbu Commemorative Lamp #1 a.k.a. Commemorative Lamp, 2009/2023 Lamp, photocopy, correction fluid, ink, and wood

J
Pope.L
Corbu Commemorative Lamp #2 a.k.a. Commemorative Lamp, 2009/2023 Lamp, photocopy, correction fluid, ink, and wood

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CENTER GALLERY

K-M
Pierre Huyghe
This is Not a Time for Dreaming, 2004

Pierre Huyghe wrote the following text about his work This is Not a Time for Dreaming in the catalogue for his 2014 traveling survey exhibition:

Harvard University felt the need for a visual arts department that would serve its aesthetic and intellectual ideals. Le Corbusier was commissioned. The long negotiation with the administration around the creative process gave birth to a book by Edouard Sekler. In 2004, Pierre Huyghe was invited by the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard to do a work in relation to the building, and the conflicts the architect encountered resonated with his own difficulty meeting their expectations.

Sekler’s 1978 book, Le Corbusier at Work, then contributed to the writing of a puppet musical, placing the two situations in parallel. It takes the form of an analogy on the conditions of production and the formation of an idea in a given situation. To shelter the presentation, a temporary structure covered by vegetation was built in collaboration with the architect Michael Meredith in an area of the building containing a construction error. This architectural tumor is an excrescence of this modernism dream, a monstrous vision.

This is Not a Time for Dreaming is an addition to the building’s function, a space and a course presented in the form of a puppet show. The prologue was written by Liam Gillick. “When you are invited to make something in a given context, the question is not so much to achieve the expectations of those involved in that invitation . . . ”

The title “This is Not a Time for Dreaming” comes from a sentence spoken by a member of the institution to discourage the artist from discussing the process of production. The event is filmed.

The 1956 Report of the Committee on the Visual Arts at Harvard University laid out the university’s new plan for teaching the visual arts at Harvard, including the call for a new arts center that would eventually become the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The report described the tensions, complications, and opportunities of a visual arts education—and the place of the artist—within a large research university organized around the study of art rather than its creation. Artist Ben Shahn, a consultant for the report, highlighted the following critical passage in his 1956–57 Norton Lectures at Harvard:

It is a curious paradox that, highly as the university esteems the work of art, it tends to take a dim view of the artist as an intellectual . . . one encounters the curious view that the artist does not know what he is doing.

In 2004, an administrator at the Fogg Art Museum (now part of the Harvard Art Museums) wrote to curator Linda Norden in an email that she was not to bring Pierre Huyghe to an all-hands meeting about his project—which had ballooned in ambition and budget—for this urgent moment of project wrangling was “not a time for dreaming!” Thus, this poetic, fraught pas de deux between artist and commissioning institution (with curators in the middle) received its poignant title.

How might an institution dream?

An institution’s dreams are often outsourced to the artists they commission to create new artworks. With a lineage in land art and conceptualism of the 1960s and ’70s, and institutional critique of the 1980s and ’90s, by the mid 1990s, a reciprocal relationship between museums, biennials, and artists had produced a flourishing of “site-specificity,” founded in an ethical belief in art’s contingency, its responsibility to context (a site’s history, its architecture and environment, its neighborhood, the surrounding community), and a rejection of an art object’s supposed autonomy and ability to produce the same meanings and experiences no matter where it is exhibited (and to whom).

“[Artists] show up almost empty handed in Venice, Chicago, or Beacon, NY, and conjure bits of site-specific fabulousness, using whatever they find in front of them, socially, architecturally, historically, and artistically,” wrote New York Times critic Roberta Smith in a review of Huyghe’s project alongside other Boston-area exhibitions that expressed this tendency.

This is Not a Time for Dreaming exemplifies both Pierre Huyghe’s interest in the social meta-narratives of art, culture, and institutions—not to mention his penchant for the surreal, uncanny, and unexpected protagonists, locations, and formats—and an ambivalence about the conventions of the site-specific commission and the expectations placed on the artist (concerns pointedly expressed by the video’s prologue, written by peer artist Liam Gillick).

These institutional expectations are exposed through Huyghe’s choice of puppets to play out his story. Immediately, puppets call to mind questions of agency and instrumentalization: puppet governments and propaganda referred to as puppet shows. Yet puppet shows are also theater to teach and enchant children across cultures and time periods, analog experiences of willing suspension of disbelief featuring otherwise inert objects skillfully animated by the movements of their human puppeteers. Huyghe found a form perfectly suited to synthesize critique and wonder.

In its mostly nonverbal narrative, This is Not a Time for Dreaming plays with the gaps between expectations and reality: between what Le Corbusier imagined and what was built (he desired wild, lush rooftop gardens, seeded by birds—the weather, Harvard’s conservative landscaping, and the necessity for handrails foiled this vision); between the museum’s expectations of the
artist (a fresh expression of the institution’s normative and advertised ideals, a creative process that can live within an inflexible budget and schedule) and the artist’s desire to respond more naturally; between the curator’s expectation for the artwork’s ability to change their institution and the labor entailed in its production. And finally, a stakeholder suggested by the brief scene of the puppet show’s audience: the viewer, for whom the video offers perhaps the least fraught gap, a space and time for dreaming.

—Dan Byers
John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

All works by Pierre Huyghe are courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

K
Pierre Huyghe
Libretto

L
Pierre Huyghe
Poster

M
Pierre Huyghe
This is Not a Time for Dreaming, 2004
Super 16 mm film, transferred to DigiBeta, color, sound, 24 min.

This Machine Creates Opacities: Robert Fulton, Renée Green, Pierre Huyghe, and Pope.L is made possible by Teiger Foundation. Generous support for Carpenter Center programming is provided by the Friends of the Carpenter Center.