

JESSE SUGARMANN

We Build Excitement

APRIL 4 – MAY 3, 2014

OPENING RECEPTION:

Friday, April 4, 2014, 7:00 – 9:00 PM

PROJECT ON VIEW:

April 4 – May 3, 2014

OFF-SITE PROJECT:

Sunday, May 4, 2014, 2:00 PM

Fremont, CA

GALLERY HOURS:

Tuesday – Saturday

12:00 – 6:00 PM

JESSE SUGARMANN

WE BUILD EXCITEMENT

April 4 – May 3, 2014

Southern Exposure presents the premiere of Jesse Sugarmann's *We Build Excitement*. This ambitious ongoing project by the Central Valley-based artist is a series of performances and videos examining the evolution of the American auto industry as an index of shifting American identity.

2 | San Francisco is an ideal site for Sugarmann's project, given the Bay Area's symbolic role in a post-Fordist economy. What was once the Fremont GM/Toyota NUMMI plant is now Tesla's center for electric car production. This local car plant epitomizes a move within the national economy from large-scale production to speculation and information-based technologies, while also providing further evidence of the changing economic, demographic and cultural landscape of San Francisco.

Starting two years ago, Sugarmann opened (and plans to continue opening) unsanctioned Pontiac dealerships in former Pontiac dealership locations across the United States. He activates these dealerships as sites of celebration, honoring both the American autoworker and our fraught, intimate relationships to cars themselves. Assembling temporary modernist monuments with Pontiac cars, Sugarmann gives form to the precarious nature of the auto industry. And in video works, he documents laid-off assembly line workers and car accident victims recreating the movements of their former jobs and crashes, respectively. Their deadpan choreography forms a moving homage to the mundane and the traumatic moments in both the birth and death of the automobile.

At Southern Exposure, Sugarmann shows video installations of these parallel gestures alongside footage from an unsanctioned Pontiac dealership in Pontiac, Michigan. *We Build Excitement* will also feature an off-site event in Fremont on Sunday, May 4, 2014.

ARTWORK IN THE EXHIBITION

Clockwise from front entrance:

We Build Excitement (assembly dance), 2013

Digital video, 22:00

We Build Excitement (pontiac monuments), 2013

Digital video, 43:30

We Build Excitement (pontiac), 2014

Neon logo box, cables, transformer box.

We Build Excitement (accident dance), 2013

Digital video, 12:15

We Build Excitement (pontiac pontiac), 2014

Neon channel letters, cable, transformer boxes.

Monuments to Creative Destruction

CHRISTIAN NAGLER

It's only the last turn that tightens the bolt, all that comes before is just movement.

—Taiichi Ohno, originator of the Toyota production system

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It's a psychoanalytic question: where does the infant's movement go—the exploratory squirms of untrained limbs and digits? Where are they entombed in the armored adult? And then, crucially, when and why do they sometimes refuse to stay buried, spasming up to interrupt the patterns of motor-discipline?

Likewise, where do adult movement-schemas go after they've been exchanged for livelihoods? To what heaven or purgatory of muscle memory, to what psycho-economic liminal space of obsolescence? What history cares to remember the minutiae of labor?

The ex-workers, accident victims and automobiles in Jesse Sugarmann's *We Build Excitement* are, in the poet Marianne Moore's words, *real toads in imaginary gardens*. Deadpan Chaplins at large in the age of *Transformers 3D* and *X-Box Live*. Absolutely precise kinaesthetes planted in a land that capital forgot; irreducibly, vulnerably corporeal in the phantom grids of a superannuated business model; their mimologics trace the invisible contours of what economist Robert Reich calls the *not so golden age*, a time when jobs were stable, union-negotiated wages were adequate and centralized corporations were still comfortable on their national thrones, looking after their familiars like strict, distant fathers.

In the new (also mythic) economy of clouds, ether and cognition, the fact of physical mass is a sort of original sin. The weight of the human head, its G-factor at the top of the spine, as well as the weight that holds a large, complex product together, the intrinsic torque of material, are uncalculated expenditures. And we are told, by a voice issuing back from somewhere in the late twentieth century: we must not waste time; must not waste energy; must not waste space; must not,

if we can, waste anything. A sound principle—permacultural, really—and (we might say, spasmodically) a frickin’ un-American one.

Is it though? There are, we know, many Americas. There is the America of Thoreau, who claimed that walking a hundred miles was more efficient than taking a train if you accounted for all variables, including the collective time squandered thinking about trains. There is also the America of Pontiac (not the Ottawa leader) where plastic-clad, ribbed and spoiled monsters pitch off the factory floor into an ‘80s-gothic adolescent fantasy where we’re permanently excited, Knight-Rider-Everymans, huffing Exxon Supreme, Drakkar Noir and Camel menthols. Was that America ever actually real? Pontiac is gone (not with a bang but a whimper), mulched into the great cycle of bailout, and the few, still-functioning Fieros and Bonneville’s roam the countryside starved and wounded like zombie prom kings.

Forgive the alliteration, but the new-ish economy is populated with pious little Priuses. Small priests that accomplish their peoplemoving with a Taoist modicum of eco and with only occasional spontaneous accelerations. Yes, at the one pole of our auto-mythos is the Toyota Prius, and at the other is the Pontiac Aztek (Walter White’s vehicle on *Breaking Bad*) two cars whose butts are often said to resemble each others’, despite the fact that the former is the apex of “lean manufacturing” and the latter is the nadir of Yankee ingenuity.

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What is lean manufacturing? Well, it is a managerial ideology that enabled the techno-industrial commodity market to grow to a global scale over the latter half of the twentieth century. It did this on the basis of a few commonsense principles carried over from Toyota’s origins as industrial loom-maker into its automotive empire.¹ The pillars of the philosophy are the seven wastes (*mudas*), which specify how to hunt down and snuff out inefficiencies wherever they might be hiding—in extra material, in bottlenecked time, in unnecessary transportation, in over-processing, in idle inventory, in disorganized movement and in costly defects. It’s all about avoiding obstacles to achieve an optimum speed/quality ratio, and there is no limit to improving this ratio (*Kaizen*). Such wisdom, along with the idea of clustering assembly-line workers in cooperative decision-making teams (as opposed to Detroit’s manual-laboring isolates) and a few other elegant organizational ethics, add up to what’s known as “just-in-time” production. It is a system that attempts to keep the corporation nimble, adaptive and free of clutter, while smoothing over the sorts of class-war hostilities that bog down traditional, top-down manufacturing schemes.

Do these regimes—the old Americana, as well as the other post-Fordist techno-

1 For a thorough account of Toyota’s role in lean manufacturing ideologies see *The Machine that Changed the World* by James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones, and Daniel Roos; Simon and Schuster, 1990.

socius—exist autonomously? Or are they two sides of the same global capitalist coin? The story of the NUMMI plant in Fremont CA, attests to the idea that they are sorts of siblings, or combatant lovers, pretending to ignore each other for stretches, but paying veiled mutual attention, and sometimes falling into strange embrace.

General Motors first relocated its plant to Fremont from Oakland in 1962. For twenty years it assembled Chevys, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles and Buicks there. Then in the eighties it entered into an experimental partnership, proposed by Toyota; this was NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing Inc.) Theoretically, Toyota would gain a manufacturing foothold in North America from this plan, and the faltering GM might learn something about lean manufacturing and management-worker vertical integration. As the story goes, Toyota got what it came for, and GM didn't. Not because the notoriously dyspeptic GM workers didn't take to the new system—they did, beautifully—but because GM management felt like they were too big to care. The dudes in Detroit still had too much of that old Pontiac bravado, and they failed to implement lean manufacturing principles in any of their other plants. GM's bankruptcy in 2009 was the fourth largest in the history of the US. But we love spectacular failures, prodigal sons! In 2014 GM is back making profits again, having finally mustered the elegance to produce shrewd little numbers like the Chevy Volt—and having strategically unburdened itself of a few uncouth family members: Saturn, Hummer and Pontiac.

But while GM and Toyota goad each other into careful gigantism, the Fremont plant (never one to rest on its 400 acres) moves ruthlessly into the future like the angel of history. In 2010 the plant was bought and rehabilitated with the help of substantial tax breaks, by Elon Musk, founding investor of PayPal, intrepid entrepreneur of private spacecraft and founder of Tesla motors. In contrast to GM and Toyota's more volatile transnational affair, Tesla lives in harmonious polyamory with Toyota and also with Daimler AG (owner of Mercedes and Smartcar) as principal investors and collaborators.

So, let's talk about the *Tesla Model S*. In 2013 around 20,000 of them were produced in Fremont, and most of those were sold to customers in the Bay Area. They cost between \$60,000 and \$110,000. You've probably seen them around—lunging down the freeways like panthers, viciously efficient islands of grace in the wastes of the dystopian commute. Their owners recline in whispering touch-screen cocoons, safe from the surrounding throng of coughing Cutlasses and bulbous Grand Ams.

From a production system standpoint, the Tesla might as well be in a separate dimension. It's designed and manufactured according to a "continuous deployment" system: instead of refinements and improvements unfolding each model-year, waterfall-style, they are updated to the car like software. The whole car is conceived as software, both on the assembly line and while it's on the

road. The car's suspension, brakes, handling, electrical and gear systems all communicate with Tesla headquarters over the cloud, issuing real time streams of data to algorithmic control centers that tune, repair and optimize the machine moment-to-moment. The car is still, in a sense, being built while it's on the road. It is a car as well as an information-gathering unit. The Tesla, with its promise of sorcerous efficiency (still coal-fed, yes, but let's not talk about that) is a sort of panoptic womb, prototype environment for the present, semi-unwitting, surveillance- and communication-powered workforce.

So we can see, can't we, how that square mile of land, just across the Dumbarton bridge from the Facebook fortress, has iterated each major labor paradigm, from Taylorist assembly-line control system, to Toyotized managerial acceleration, to the marshalling of the internal fibers of everyday life toward the accumulation of info-capital.

It is perhaps in the relief of this sort of story that Jesse Sugarmann's video-documented performances, *We Build Excitement*, take on weight. They take on an idea of the past, of what's left behind, of corporate narratives of affect-stimulation, of brand-identity that's outlasted its utility and also of many tons of steel, glass and plastic. The cars, however, don't seem so heavy. Propped, perched and tilted around the lot's weeded plane, their familiarity of shape begins to undercut their engineered complexity of form, and they take on the elemental simplicity of a symbolic language.

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The machines are propped just out of reach, like blemished divas, not quite for sale, and they balance precariously, yes, but we don't really care when they fall—are they toys? Better if they fall, really. More fun. Nobody wants them anyways. Nobody wants the ground to which they fall either. And they crash with a minimum of danger, with pathetic oafishness, as in a demolition derby that's been chastened by the sad constraints of reality—its everyday disappointments and inhibitions.

Though we do know that our bodies could be crushed by all that downward-bearing *excitement*. And we wonder if the former workers acting out their old assembly-line routines, and the wreckage survivors acting out their golden moments of trauma, are still being crushed by something. Or whether they're holding their own like impassive Atlases, keeping the anchor of *honest work*, of living durability, aloft in the air of memory, against the gravity of an economy that would consign their deeply-ingrained kinesthetic histories to the dustbin.

The discourse of avant-garde dance has long ago found the language of *the task* a useful tool to resist the stylized authority, the ahistorical aloofness, of balletic forms. But seldom has the task been in such direct relationship with the tasks that have fed families, fueled nations, constructed chassis and destroyed bodies, over many years, and instantly.

Southern Exposure (SoEx) is an artist-centered non-profit organization that is committed to supporting visual artists. Through our extensive and innovative programming, SoEx strives to experiment, collaborate and further educate while providing an extraordinary resource center and forum for Bay Area and national artists and youth in our Mission District space and off-site, in the public realm.

An active presence in the Bay Area since 1974, SoEx is continually evolving in response to the needs of artists and the community while engaging the public in artists' work. Central to our mission is to remain the most accessible space for visual artists to produce and present new work, learn and connect. SoEx provides visual artists with the tools and resources they need to experiment in an open and supportive environment. We also work to advocate to new, diverse audiences and build an ever-growing community of enthusiasts and supporters of the visual arts.

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We Build Excitement is a project of Creative Capital.

Creative Capital

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