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Inside and Outside: Cady Noland and the Violence of the Everyday

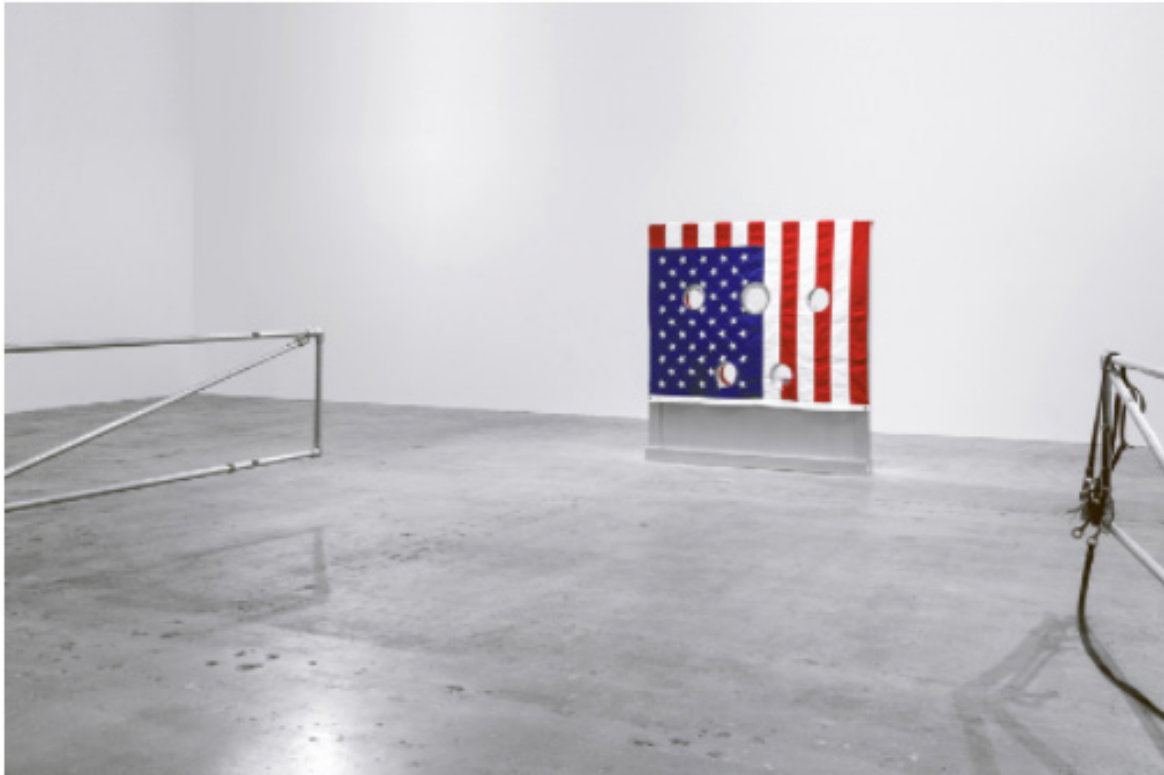
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I hear it everywhere I go

FRANKLIN STREET WORKS | NOVEMBER 11, 2017 – JANUARY 7, 2018

Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN | NOVEMBER 7 – DECEMBER 22, 2017



Cady Noland, *Gibbet*, 1993-1994, aluminum, wood, fabric, stocks: 60 1/4 x 56 1/4 x 8 in (153 x 142.9 x 20.3 cm), stool: 21 x 21 x 11 1/2 in (53.3 x 53.3 x 29.2 cm), © 2017 Cady Noland. Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York.

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There is nothing intentionally beautiful or sooth in the gallery space, just an anticipation of the kinetics of violence in the air.

—Sandra Antelo-Suarez, 2017

When a United Airlines passenger was forcibly removed from a plane last April, near universal condemnation was quick, but as Matt Bruenig writes in Jacobin, the outrage was “unclear.” Bruenig rightfully says that the action was not an “extraordinary aberration from our civilized capitalist order. Rather, it is an example of the everyday violence (and threatened violence) that keeps that capitalist order running.”¹ Sublimated violence threads itself through American society—structurally fostered by classist, racist, misogynistic, anti-queer, nationalist, capitalist, and imperialist impulses (interwoven of course)—and imbues civic and state-to-citizen relations with such imperatives. Cady Noland skillfully engages this condition in her 1989 text, “Towards a Metalanguage of Evil,” in which she documents the specific forms this violence takes in popular culture and in interpersonal relationships, and critiques what she terms “the game.”² Comparing prevalent social tendencies guided by self-interestedness to “psychopathic” impulses, Noland brings our attention to the quotidian, but no less cruel, violence of the everyday maintained by ingrained patriarchal and militaristic tendencies. Though she began to “exit” from the art system as a producer of work in the late ‘90s, her (now rarely) exhibited sculptural practice continues to expose this proclivity for violence by phenomenologically and allegorically recreating the prevalent structures of punishment and control.

Noland has specialized in assembling spare, highly symbolic objects of mass consumption, such as beer cans, American flags, and other (often nationalist) products into large indexical sculptures/installations that formally share much with post-minimalist practices that have become more common in the decades since. However, her highly calculated appraisals of the semiotic values traceable between commodities and physical forms of control (such as fences, police barricades, and stockades) continue to demonstrate a fierce critique of American violence. Among the more rigorous traits of Noland’s work is the rejection of the implied spectacularity and commodification applied to

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violence (and to a resistance of that violence), and to the persona of the contemporary artist herself. In 2011, for example, Noland rejected the authorship of a former work—*Cowboys Milking* (1990)—while on auction at Sotheby’s. Following her decision, the auction house promptly withdrew the (no-longer) artwork and returned the now “value-less” object to the collector.

The impulse to exit or refuse the Western market/academic art system has a long and well-known history beginning at least as early as Duchamp. In the late ‘60s, many artists attempted to perform their critique “outside” of the art system, employing a variety of strategies—from Lee Lozano’s *Untitled (General Strike Piece)* (1969) to *Smithson’s Non-Sites* to Boris Lurie and his *No!art* movement slightly earlier, and so on.³ However, clearly the presence of an inside/outside dialectic in the context of market capitalism has been “broken,” as it were, from the outset. Andrea Fraser famously rejected the very existence of an “outside” for art practitioners, remarking that the institution is “inside of us,” and that every attempt to evade it only expands its frame.⁴ She later followed this point in multiple texts with her defense of exhibiting/performing critique in the physical institution, arguing for a strategy of “critically reflexive site-specificity.” However, Noland—who comes from the same generation as Fraser, and concurrently showed her work at Colin de Land’s experimental gallery *American Fine Arts* in the ‘80s—addresses the problems of critical art differently.

The strength of her “refusal” was corroborated again this past summer when the following headline appeared on Artsy: “Cady Noland Sues Seeking Destruction of Artwork ‘Copy’ She Disavowed.” When *Log Cabin* (1990) was “conserved”—in this case completely rebuilt without Noland’s permission—and subsequently sold for over a million dollars, she rejected authorship, demanded its destruction, and contacted the buyer, writing: “This is not an artwork.” The last point, if read art historically, becomes both an inverse and continuation of Rauschenberg’s famed Duchampian telegram in which he writes: “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so” (1961). In this and other similar examples, Noland reenters the art system, but in a different role: a gesture independent curator Sandra Antelo-Suarez aptly describes as an “acute observation and corrective to the art world.”⁵

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I am hesitant to position Noland's principled exit under the polemics of "non-work," or as displaced institutional critique in disguise. For this reason, the above historicizing might seem to signify a misunderstanding of Noland's refusal. It is here that the difficulty of writing on her presents itself: how to document a now-abandoned practice that has become even more consequential given continuous democratic disintegration, while also acknowledging her meta-gesture of "exiting" without absorbing and co-opting it? Nonetheless, a chance to navigate this problem was recently provided by two exhibitions that involve Noland to varying degrees, either physically exhibiting past work with her involvement, or by using her writing as a foundation for conceptualizing a group show. My



Installation view of *Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland*, curated by Sandra Antelo-Suarez, *Venus Over Manhattan*, 2017. Artworks © 2017, the artists. Courtesy *Venus Over Manhattan*, New York.

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apprehensions aside, both exhibitions allow us to see a demystified portrayal of Noland and her work.

Venus over Manhattan

The first show that allows us to reopen a discussion of Noland is Antelo-Suarez's Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland. In a theoretically powerful gesture of curatorial economy, the exhibition includes just four works: two each by Calder and Noland. The arrangement can be lauded for many accomplishments: for re-politicizing a thoroughly de-politicized Calder; for employing the sterility of the white cube to the advantage of both artists' implicit or explicit evocations of violence; and for breaking apart that same sterility by physically applying a violent act in the space: the cutting of a large hole into the ceiling, exposing plumbing and insulation, to fit the moving element of a large, outdoor Calder work.

Noland's committed participation is a welcome surprise when we recall, for example, that when Noland contributed a new work for a group exhibition in 2001, she instructed the gallery to destroy the work upon closing and to dispose of the pieces in different public bins. 6 Antelo-Suarez collaborated with Noland to select, contextualize, and twice re-position two important sculptures within larger discourses on the aesthetics (and ethics) of violence. Two decades since, as far-right-wing wave discourse pushes to construct walls, violently deport and exploit vulnerable workers, extend mass incarceration in communities of color, reject healthcare to those that need it, and so on, Noland's sculptures remain tragically topical if not monumentally acute. She contributes Corral Gates (1989), tubular metal gates for livestock invoking structures of control, sparsely covered with bullets and a saddle, and Gibbet (1993-1994), an aluminum stockade draped with an American flag pierced by five holes with accompanying seat. As James Rondeau wrote to accompany Noland's 1996 Wadsworth MATRIX exhibition, she considers the stockade "to be the first public sculptures in colonial America."⁷

Upon entry, Calder's Rhombus (1972), a massive, painted, steel sculpture, exhibited indoors for

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the first time, quite literally exacts a violent act in the space. A red parallelogram-shaped propeller, attached to the steel structure, moves easily when pushed. Its height required that a hole—with rough edges—be cut into the ceiling, leaving bare the cause and effect, as it were, of a violent action activated by applied kinetic energy. (Another remnant of violence not visible in the space, is that the propeller was sunburnt and covered in bird excrement after many years outdoors. Painted over, the violence becomes invisible, but still present underneath). Calder's politics were often omitted from scholarship to fit his work into formalist, Modern art history—much of the recent Whitney exhibition *Calder: Hypermobility* is a prime example. Also omitted is the crucial contribution of his wife Louisa Calder, who collaboratively penned open letters and placed advertisements in major newspapers to protest the Vietnam War and call for Nixon's impeachment. By presenting this darling of modernist formalism via his own politics (and in conversation with Noland), Antelo-Suarez defiantly resurrects his attention to geo-political hegemony (predominantly the dominant American variety), and redefines his gestures to expose an active, albeit concealed, political project.

Noland's famous attention to minute details of spatiality and materiality were corroborated to me by Antelo-Suarez, who described their intensely productive discussions about re-positioning her work in the space. It is no accident that one has the feeling of being corralled when traversing the gallery. After passing Rhombus and approaching Calder's small *Constellation* (1943) at the end of the first room, the spectator turns around to see the open gates to the next room. After entering, the stockade awaits—there, the aluminum structure is an insidiously pre-modern torture apparatus updated for the times. Following Antelo-Suarez, while Calder “evoked the pathology of international fascism,” and Noland confronted the “psychopathology of the repressed American oligarchy,” such political mechanisms and apparatuses have only become more insidiously pronounced in today's United States.

Franklin Street Works

I hear it everywhere I go omits any works by Noland, and instead takes her writing as a discursive

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Installation View: *I hear it everywhere I go*, Courtesy of Franklin Street Works. Photo by Object Studies.

framework. As director and curator Terri C. Smith, puts it *I hear it everywhere I go* is an invitation to “expand on and add to Noland’s observations about American life.” The space is divided into two floors. At the entrance level, Smith arranged a thoroughly object-oriented analysis of the failures of the “American dream,” with works that address broad societal pathologies. Just to the right of the entrance is Adam McEwan’s *Untitled (Bret)* (2011), a large obituary for Bret Easton Ellis—part of a series of fictive eulogies for still-living celebrity figures. McEwan’s symbolic violence towards the figures again invokes Noland’s “Towards a Metalanguage of Evil,” in which she outlines the mechanics

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of “trashing” celebrities after having built them up as icons—a form of unleashing repressed violence and rage. Facing this allegorical murder is the implied but real violence enunciated in a phrase printed on a large industrial mat: “WHEN I GET OUT I WANT TO BEAT SOMEONE UP.” The work, *WHEN I GET OUT* (2015), is a collaborative piece between Cheryl Pope and incarcerated youth in Washington D.C.—the above-quote a response to Pope’s questions about what they will do once out of jail. At six by eight feet, the size of a cell, the claustrophobic implications of a ruthless industry of imprisonment become adamantly clear.

On the lower level, other examples of the failures of fundamental American idealisms such as self-reliance and “freedom” are addressed in (documentations of) performance and video works. (In the center of such ephemeral work, there is additionally an Ikea chair impaled by a large cardboard tube, Rodney McMillian’s *Untitled* [2009]). Works employing video by Alex Bag, Jen DeNike, Tameka Norris, Mikel Rouse, and others employ starkly different modes—from explicit protest to totalizing irony—to probe American myths of upward mobility, equality, and self-reliance. DeNike’s *The Pimp* (2015), for example, utilizes an entire room. The pink-walled and graffiti-covered installation includes a monitor that plays RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, invoking the dialectics of fame and anonymity with regards to gender non-conforming persons.

In the context of the current dismemberment and failures of (both “small” and “big L”) liberal democracy, American art practitioners took last year’s election as impetus for resistance. Such reactions, however, often appeared obligatory rather than calculated, and part and parcel of the very complicit culture industry that both exhibitions discussed here do well to reject. (See as well, the conversation with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve and L.A. Kauffman, author of *Direct Action*, in the *Rail* this month). While very different, neither curatorial project takes the current horror-story as “new,” but rather as a tangible plateau in a much-longer and developing process of systemic violence. Both were conceptualized, at least initially, before the current presidency was decided.

I find it interesting to mention the only photo of Noland I have seen. Though she has refused artist

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portraits for decades, Martin Herbert did reproduce the closest option in his book *Tell Them I Said No.8 Taken* during her participation in Documenta IX (1992)—for which her above-mentioned essay is reproduced in the catalogue—Noland adamantly covers her face from the journalistic gaze. However, her crossed arms have served to make her refusal of celebrity more tantalizingly fame-worthy, demonstrating how easily acts of resistance are recuperated as commodified spectacle. Rather than probing the gesture to reveal a mysterious artistic persona, or selling that image of arms duly crossed, stamped as “subversive,” we should instead let ourselves be corralled by her gates when the opportunity presents itself. We may duck as Calder’s spinning propeller precariously makes its way towards our body; we might ache over the implied pain that being confined to a stockade would cause as we rust in the sun (like Calder’s outdoor sculpture). Most importantly, we must acknowledge that the violence engendered by (American/broader Western) militarism, the creation and scapegoating of “otherness,” the cult of celebrity, powerful right-wing plutocrats, and on we go, only intensifies if we sensationalize rather than analyze, and if we forego sympathy/empathy for self-motivated comfort and fabricated stability. Rather than feigning resistance, let us calculate an exit and a refusal from modernity’s formalistic holds, from the co-optation of resistance, from the empowerment of tyrants via mediatized outrage, and from the cycles of violence that we quietly and invisibly maintain to counter the precarity of the everyday. Cady Noland—staunch subversive, though reluctant art worker—demonstrates a model of rejection and refusal with an evident and necessary militancy.

Notes:

1. Matt Bruenig, “Capitalism is Violence,” *Jacobin*, 12 April 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/united-airlines-video-passenger-private-property/>.
2. Cady Noland, “Towards a Metalanguage of Evil,” [1989] in *Witness to Her Art* (Annandale-on-Hudson: Bard College, 2007).
3. In fact, Melissa Gordon even went as far to compare Noland’s “Towards a Metalanguage of Evil” to Lozano’s *Dropout Piece*, claiming that the former is a manifesto on the “machinations of being an artist.” Melissa Gordon in conversation with Marina Vishmidt, “Drop Outs: Slackers, Sociopaths and Social Workers,” *PERSONA* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2013).
4. An important excerpt, worthwhile to be reproduced at length: “There is, of course, an ‘outside’ of the institution, but it has no fixed, substantive characteristics. It is only what, at any given moment, does not exist as an object of artistic

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discourses and practices. But just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a ‘totally administered society,’ or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.” Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum*, vol.44 no. 1 (September, 2005).

5. All quoting of Antelo-Suarez comes from her forthcoming book accompanying the exhibition *The Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland*. She refers to this forthcoming book as the “fifth sculpture” in the exhibition.
6. See: Steven Parrino, “Paranoia Americana: The New Work of Cady Noland,” *Afterall* no. 11 (Spring/Summer, 2005).
7. James Rondeau, *Cady Noland/MATRIX 130*, exhibition pamphlet (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1996).