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Renee Green: Combination Artist

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Renée Green: Combination Artist

Is art the engagement of the viewer or the tangible work created by an artist? Russian author Leo Tolstoy defines art, in an essay entitled "Art Theory," as “a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them” (Banach). Based on Tolstoy's writings, art is a combination of media produced and the abstract: an experience invoked by the media and designed to transmit the emotions of the artist. In the case of artist Renée Green, experiencing her work is critical to understanding the emotions and dialogue Green hopes to present.

Self-appointed "free media agent" Renée Green sees herself not as a specific artist but a multitude of producers. Broadly, Green works simultaneously as a curator, archivist, event organizer, and an independent distributer rather than an artist producing single works (Donovan). Individually, Green works with photography, film, print, and site-specific media but rarely will show these elements alone. Green curates complex, multi-dialogue experiences in site-specific locations that utilize her previously created works to weave a net of dialogue she deems pertinent to the show. Green's installations are a complex web of personal memories, a genealogy of sites, and the dialogues resulting from between the two.

In the case of the films of Partially Buried in Three Parts (1996), Renee Green first focuses on 1970 as a base point but then uses the films to take a viewer on a genealogical journey that Green frames to ask questions relating to nationality, location, and memory. In Partially Buried (1996), an exploration of site-specific artist Robert Smithson's Partially Buried
Woodshed (January, 1970), Green tackles Kent State University in 1996, 20 plus years after the death of four student protestors of the US invasion of Cambodia. Partially Buried Woodshed (January, 1970), an installation created before the Kent State shootings in May of 1970, focuses on the concept of entropy. Smithson finds a shed on campus and then partially buries it in a mountain of dirt, ensuring that the earth will eventually collapse and bury the shed completely. Green returns to the site of the shed and attempts to find any details of the installation, which seemingly no longer exist. To continue her traces of site genealogy, Green searches for clippings and news relating to Smithson’s installation and finds nothing. It would appear Kent State has no memory of Smithson save for a few photographs in the university library. Green documents the burial of Smithson’s history with Kent State and then continues to search for information relating to the shooting of four students, seemingly lost as well save for a few monuments and photographs. She represents this in her film by splicing images in a quick, choppy manner between the interviews with students and filmed exploration of Kent State. Green also includes a mention of her personal experience as a young child of waiting for her mother to return from a class at Kent State. Overall, the film is done in a ‘home movie’ fashion to invoke feelings of nostalgia, nostalgia of "what?" being the key question.

The second portion of Partially Buried, Ubertragen/Transfer (1996) explores the changes in perception of Germans living in Germany during the 1970s, specifically how they saw the United States. Green uses this dialogue of perception to explore the notion of culture shock, both in moving to foreign places but also in returning to "home" after becoming acclimated to what was once foreign (Coulter-Smith). Green's travels between Germany and the United States in 1991 help frame her discussion of displacement and allow her to question how location impacts personal experience (Swartz). Ubertragen/Transfer examines what Green's father calls
'cosmopolitan patriotism' or rather, rooted patriotism: the maintaining of where one comes from while also remaining inspired by present location. In an essay, Green includes a quote from Gertrude Stein who says, "America is my country and Paris is my hometown," to explain her father's point. In *Partially Buried*, Green asks, "how does one return . . . to a location which reeks of remembered sensations? Is it possible to trace how they are triggered and why they are accompanied with as much dread as anticipation?" (Coulter-Smith). This theme continues in *Ubertragen/Transfer* (1996) by questioning nationality and what defines it. By leaving the question unanswered, Green removes herself from the work and observe as if she were a third party, not the creator. Green uses the complex dialogue surrounding nationality to question what the United States looks like to foreigners and those who were once foreign.

In the third portion, *Partially Buried Continued* (1996), Green mixes photos of the Korean War taken by her father in the 1950s with photographs she took during the Kwangju Biennale in 1997. Green utilizes the mix to engage the viewer in a conversation about past and present, far and near. The photographs make up another 'home movie' in which Green asks questions relating to genealogy in an attempt to engage the viewer in a dialogue about relationships with nationalities, countries, peoples, time, location, and identity. As a result, Green's final portion draws attention to the complex nature of mental representations of nationalities, specific times and places, and introduces an element of defamiliarization through juxtapositioning of images of war and peace without context (Coulter-Smith). Green intentionally leaves the viewer without context or a guide in an attempt to heighten the tensions between the photographs of times of war and times of peace.

In the original installation at Pat Hearn Gallery, Green displays all three parts of *Partially Buried* on three old TV sets in a mock living room filled with furniture and colors reminiscent of
the 1970s. The film's 'home movie' style allows Green to present her work in a comfortable and easy environment. However, the content of the film would invoke memories of the Kent State shooting, bringing a viewer back to the original broadcast of the Kent State shooting and the pain and confusion surrounding it. It also would highlight the memories of the Korean war, and then create this somewhat confusing dialogue on nationality. Green's intentional presentation of her film in a carefully arranged gallery setting allows her to frame the perspective of her viewers and challenge the dialogues created by memories and documentation of events. She replaces the infamous photograph of a white dead student with images of students of color protesting, subtly underscoring the lack of media attention on the racial diversity of the protest movement. Furthermore, her intentionally chosen photographs and narration create this complex film that at face value appears to be a film collage of sorts but in reality is a juxtaposition of cultural tensions and media portrayals.

Born in 1959 in Cleveland, New York based artist, Renée Green, comes from a family of musicians. Growing up, she was surrounded by creativity in the musical sense and in retrospect, realized “musicians have always provided examples of ways of being an artist in the world” (Green). Green’s place in the world, while varied, ultimately became one of education, experience, and reflective prose. *Other Planes of There*, Green’s most recently published collective, contains essays written by her and other artists over the years. It serves as a

Green attributes the greatest early influence to her uncle, Steve E. Simpson Jr. due to his combination of being an artist and writer, a concept she uses later at Wesleyan University. She employs Simpson Jr.’s theme of being a combination producer in her writings, research and theories to develop her graduate thesis *Discourse on Afro-American Art*. Ironically, Simpson Jr. is the only close relative to Green that was never a musician. While developing her artistic
process, Green studied the works of Muriel Rukeyser, Toni Morrison, George E. Lewis, among others. Rukeyser’s idea that “the universe is made up of stories, not of atoms,” from her work Speed of Darkness has informed Green’s artistic approach. Many of Green's films are collections of stories: hers and others. To experience Green's work is to experience the magnitude of stories she curated for a specific reason: creating a tense dialogue between a multitude of bodies of work.

Renée Green's graduate thesis from Wesleyan University, Discourse on Afro-American Art takes root in Green's early readings of George E. Lewis's A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music. While Lewis's writings primarily study musicians, Green attributes much of her modern artistic inspiration to his and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). Green uses elements taken from Lewis’s A Power as inspiration, specifically Lewis’s attempts "to encourage younger African-American artists to see themselves as being able to claim multiple histories of experimentalism . . . and if you find yourself written out of history, you can feel free to write yourself back in" (Green). Ultimately, Green identifies as a combination artist: a blend of writer and artist hoping to engage viewers in an objective manner. She addresses her title as a combination artist through her inclusion of Lewis's quotes in Other Planes of There but leaves the connection to her uncle to be made by the reader.

Inspirations for Green's work, especially in engaging forgotten memories and implying rather than explaining, can be traced to work produced by documentary filmmaker Alain Resnais (Coulter-Smith). Resnais's most famous work, Nuit et brouillard or Night and Fog (1955), is a black and white documentary film of Nazi concentration camps that Resnais uses to imply that the horror of World War II has become distant, difficult to recall, and even covered over in some
instances. Green utilizes this concept in *Partially Buried* (1996) by employing a similar film format and through her content framing. Green intentionally leaves out a narrative in the film and allows the explorations to create an unheard dialogue about the Kent State shootings, how they have been forgotten, as well as the memories of Smithson’s work. Green also makes the point to thank Resnais in her essays for serving as an example for artists that wish to make their works socially relevant without "descending to the level of cliché or propaganda" (Coulter-Smith).

"Sometimes it is necessary to move outside the world one seems designated to inhabit in order to gain another perspective about what one is doing" (Green 19). As a producer, Green chooses to explore multiple perspectives and gain information that she uses in her work, artistically and in writing. Green's writing on African-American art led to a symposium in which she attempted to create a conversation between cultural producers and cultural critics; a dialogue in which she intentionally left out themes like colonialism, Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and imperialism in order to focus on the art and the context in which they reside. While Green's influences by Lewis and her studies of African-American art framed much of her philosophy, she recognized the importance of not fixating on the effects of prejudice in order to better focus on the art itself.

Green engages in a diverse range of site-specific topics, similar to archival artists’ Adrian Piper, Fred Wilson, and Mark Dion. Specifically, in *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992), Green chooses to engage in dialogues about race in a more confrontational manner than in *Partially Buried* (1996). An earlier example of Green's works with installation and archived media, *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992), explores questions of translation between Americans and Germans and functions as a space for the German public to interact with hip hop artifacts. Unlike *Partially Buried* (1996) however, Green elects to focus on cultural media and how it translates
between the United States and Germany. Beginning as a collaborative project with students from Lüneburg University, *Import* was a 3D installation that utilized a space filled with hip-hop cultural products. These included recorded conversations between Green, Diederich Diederichsen vii (DD for short), people with opinions or knowledge about hip-hop culture like educators, politicians, and interviews between Green, DD and Germans the two met on the street. She included photographs of hip-hop figures, tapes from DD and her personal collections; audio of native German speakers reading slang terms relating to hip-hop language; and magazines, films, and clippings that revolved around American hip-hop culture.

Green utilized her relationship with DD for his art criticism as well as for his status as a German citizen. Described as a sort of cultural leader, DD not only offered insight into how hip-hop culture translated, but was also able to frame questions relating to loss of culture and identity, even when synthetically moving culture across divides. In the case of *Import*, DD's involvement produced a higher number of visitors, sparking reviews and critiques that were integral to Green's understanding and the project's theme. The presentation of the work lacked the portability and time that viewers would need to immerse themselves in the content. To counter these limitations, Green began experimenting with the digitization of *Import*, e.g. into a CD-ROM viii disc. Owners of the CD were able to virtually access all of the archives that previously existed in the 3D installation. Interestingly, the digitization of *Import* likely contributed to a "lost in translation" feeling due to the lack of physicality. Much of Green’s work with *Import* revolves around cultural context and the portability of the installation on a CD-ROM disc removed the context, according to Green.

In several essays written about her works and approach, specifically pertaining to *Partially Buried*, Green points to the ease of access with the dawn of computers. As Green tends
to refer to a geographical location and the impact it can have upon viewers of her work, it is interesting to realize that Green has elected to digitize Import in order to make it more accessible. While explaining her artistic process, Green describes the CD-ROM format as solving the problem of her work’s institutionalization; which tended to prevent viewers from spending the time and thought necessary to fully explore and made connections.

Earlier than Import/Export Funk Office (1992), Sites of Genealogy (1990) employs an archival and evolutionary layout. Originally on view in the group show Out of Site**, at MOMA P.S.1, Sites of Genealogy (1990) blends Green’s literary references with cultural ones. Set in three spaces, an attic (tower), boiler room (cellar, dungeon) and a stairwell for the space in between, Sites draws its inspiration from African-American authors, specifically Richard Wright and Harriet Jacobs. Wright’s Native Son for the attic, and Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl which share a main character’s need to go into hiding for survival. Green describes both canonical texts with turning points as featuring an attic or boiler room and the character’s need to hide at these points. However, in the spirit of Green's style, she does not identify the references. Instead, she makes allusions using clues, fragments of the texts, commentary on the texts, and sound/light effects.

Greens canonical references are not limited to African-American literature but also nod to prior artistic installations like Marcel Duchamp's 1,200 Bags of Coal (1938) and Mile of String (1942). She adopts Duchamp's style, in that the space changes throughout the year as Green wraps string around the elements inside Sites (desk, ladder, chair etc.) and then logs each activity. Green also notes her journal entries in pages that accumulate and fill the room over a 10-month period with what appears to be clutter. Green describes much of Out of Site as tracing genealogies, previously noted in canonical texts but also in "blackness and whiteness" which
Green describes as having a sense of hierarchy, the white on top and blackness on bottom, hence the attic or "tower" and boiler room or "dungeon." References to black as evil-filth and white as good-pure are found in the Bible, Shakespeare and Western authors as well as in contemporary references and attitudes. Green attempts to tackle these derogatory associations by using the texts of African American authors and removing such connotations by eliminating the color references altogether (Green).

Today, Green is, first and foremost, an artist, but also a writer, filmmaker, professor at MIT, and advocate for cultural media. Green’s art primarily focuses on a combination of film, print, and oversaturation of information to both engage and deter viewers. In her most recent project, *Begin Again, Begin Again* (2015), Green ties examples of her life prior to the installation to Rudolf M. Schindler, the architect and sole resident of *Schindler House* and a subject of Green's research. Many of Green's essays reference Schindler as a source of inspiration and as a sort of overlap with her work. Green intentionally chose the Schindler house as a symbol of Schindler, something not to be forgotten when entering the installation. Initially overwhelming, *Begin Again, Begin Again* ebbs and flows with a sense of vibrancy that ultimately draws a viewer in. The structure, filled with Green’s collection of sounds, films, texts, and photographs from her career including clips from *Partially Buried* and *Import/Export*, intertwines with Schindler’s life. Ironically, the viewer expects new content but finds that much of what fills the exhibition is work from Green and Schindler’s past. Green remakes her previously shown works, *Partially Buried in Three Parts, Import/Export Funk Office* and some sections of *Sites of Genealogy* inside *Begin Again, Begin Again*. Given context, *Begin Again* appears more digestible but in an interview, Green addresses the absence of information as pertinent to the experience. One critic refers to the work as an overdose of information that overwhelms viewers.
in isolation. Truly, *Begin Again, Begin Again* requires a sense of Green’s previous work or else risks being swallowed whole by the ambiguity of the exhibition.

To call Renee Green an artist is likely an affront to her process. Green repeatedly refers to herself as a cultural producer, a distinction that must be made when examining her work. Experiencing art requires very little of the viewer. To observe a painting or sculpture, a viewer brings only themselves and questions to ask of the work. Visual analysis can be made; assumptions can be drawn of the work one sees. Viewers are then able to take what they have seen and either apply it to their lives or search for more. In the case of Green's work, however, viewers are literally awash in a series of complex dialogues. Cultural significance is a theme that runs throughout any and all of Green's installations and it remains up to the viewer to find it. To neglect that directive is to neglect the entirety of Green's works. As Tolstoy addresses, art is a combination of the media and the abstraction it embodies. Green's cultural products are complex media installations that engage viewers in dialogues relating to race, location, and the identity of self.

**Bibliography**


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i Green also uses "cultural producer" as a synonym here. Primarily used to refer to herself as an artist as she sees the title too limiting.

ii This work has three literal stages, spanning 1996-1999. Each exhibition varied in that Green focused on a different element, a key theme, but primarily recycled similar ideas, hence the title.

iii Throughout Smithson's career, he seemed fascinated with entropy and the eventual slide of life into chaos.

iv The shed was destroyed several years after Smithson installed by Kent State. Only the foundation and some walls remained.

v Archival artists loosely defined here as individuals that "mine" or search a site for cultural references, topics, art, writings, or stigmas. Fred Wilson mines museums and institutions, Dion similarly. Piper focuses more on cultural stigmas much like Green's work.

vi In *Other Planes of There*, references to Piper allude to some history with Green. "P.S. Jimmie Durham lives in Europe and, and it is said he will not return to the United States. The same is said of Adrian Piper. I hope they live happily ever after" (Green).

vii A "cultural critic" employed by Spex Magazin. Who worked as a writer and critic, and who had cult status among young Germans.

viii It should be noted the time elapsed from the birth of *Import* in 1992 to the CD phase was approximately 7 years and new technology made the digitization possible. The World Wide Web also began to catch on in residential applications, changing how culture could be accessed.

ix In 1996, Adrian Piper released a collection of essays, *Out of Order, Out of Sight* that may have been a nod to the show at P.S.1. Support for this theory is only in conjecture and slight asides authors make of Green and Piper's work.