FLOE Mark Nielsen

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There is no explanation for death; loss leaves those who remain at the edge of the unknown. The works by Mark Nielsen shown at C.Y.N.K. in Ypsilanti in December 2024 brought into tableau the darkness and light with which we who remain are left.

Mark's wife, Karen Dykstra, died on September 1st, 2023. To envision the show over the course of fall 2024, Mark had to shift from certain ways he had found of being in her wake. The result evoked a journey, but also the suspended disbelief of dreams. Can the black hat produce a rabbit (bring her back)? Or can it now magic only a round white stone, and never again a warm bunny?

C.Y.N.K. Studios/Gallery, Ypsilanti, Michigan
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The show felt like a dance; but also a slog weighted down by stones of grief in the dress shoes into which one might step. A jacket hung, ready for a party, but with grief in the pockets. Can the dance be resumed? But there was a partner! Now one must dance alone. Besides, the terrain has changed. It keeps shifting; like ice, or gravel.

We three arrived separately at the opening, and found ourselves in conversations that led to this piece. That night, the polished details of each work shone under vivid white

track lighting Mark himself had installed to improve the gallery. The stark, the numb; the black that tells of darkness, the white that calls to light. The elegance of the show was in each piece, but also in their relationships to one another.

The warmth of the show was in the relationships among those of us bouncing off the works at so many different frequencies and wavelength ranges. We could hear Nielsen's short stories of shared sorrow: "...want you to meet Karen's dear friend; just last week we went together to her favorite curio store, and we each had this strange sensation, as if we felt her spirit, guiding us to buy very specific keepsakes."

Nielsen's show mobilized canonical surrealist elements: umbrellas, water, hats. One installation featured a tiny wavering ship afloat in a wide petri dish, seemingly seeking delivery from its troubled waters. Upon closer inspection one could see it being led around (and around, and around) by a barely perceptible filament attached to a tiny motor. Constrained to move at an un-rushable rhythm (tic, tic, tic) the boat gestured both toward inescapable grief and toward surrealistic automatism, with its mix of conscious and unconscious forces beyond narrative. The piece captured a time in his life, but also current understandings of cycles through what Kubler Ross delineated as stages of grief (denial, anger, negotiation, depression, acceptance).

Artistic movements, of course, are stages of social grief and loss in a troubled world. Negotiation of meanings suffused surrealist works such as 1964's *Son of Man* by Belgian artist René Magritte. Such works co-occurred with enormous consolidation of mineral and financial wealth in a rapidly decolonizing world. William Burden, Board President at the Museum of Modern Art in New York became interested in being Ambassador to Belgium during the heyday of surrealism. That role positioned him in the political assassination (as also the actual assassination) of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba, orchestrated under the cryptic pipe-smoking smile of USA Intelligence Chief Allen Dulles (Ceci n'est pas un Coup d'Etat). Uranium from Katanga not only made money for Burden and his mining and finance cronies (and their art collections) but also made possible ongoing nuclear arsenals that wiped out entire Japanese cities at the close of the Second World War.

The First World War also brought trauma for the Belgian Congo, and beyond. Severed hands and other human rights violations characterized Congo's rubber harvest. But that trade made possible the raincoats,

pneumatic tires and boots of modern artillery warfare at a whole new scale across Europe. Those who remained in the wake of the First World War (and its rapacious resource extraction) were shell-shocked. This horrible discontinuity, the interruption of life by catastrophe, called for a new mode of grief. In art, this became what we know as Dada. As stages of loss, if surrealism was negotiation, Dada was anger and denial in moments between and among discontinuity. The art inflicted shell-shock on the viewer. We who remain are still dazed by Duchamp's urinal. Entitled *Fountain,* it was captured in Alfred Stieglitz's photograph despite being banished from exhibitions. This was art that refuted understanding. In grief and trauma, what's to understand?

Vera Lynn sang "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day." Such strains haunt the quiet of Nielsen's show, a meditation on the dances we perceive but cannot quite bring ourselves to join after the loss of a life's love. Drafting this comment on what would have been Dame Vera's one hundred and eighth birthday (had she lived beyond her impressive age of a hundred and three) we each in our way recall the plaintive melody "Does Anybody Here Remember Vera Lynn" on the Pink Floyd Album The Wall. Roger Waters used the turntables of our youth to call out wider cultural currents within a reverie of personal loss, and vice versa.

We come together in a rapidly increasing range of ways at Ypsilanti studios and galleries for individual and collective reverie and yes, to call things out. If only and until we meet again beyond this world, the one we have must suffice. But beyond our beautifully lit gallery walls is a world where ice is breaking too fast into floating sheets that become floods; stone is breaking still too often into floes from the sharpening of our arrows--no, now we forge rare earth minerals, still and again from Congo—into tools of surveillance and wider scale destruction. We live more than ever in the imbrication of individual and community grieving.

So it is with gratitude and appreciation that we see how Nielsen rendered his grief in discrete works of pain and beauty; lit them, related them to one another, and opened them to his world. In braiding our voices for this writeup we inscribe his show within powerful legacies of art and anti-art, but also describe its beauty, and its power as a beacon of emergent, adamantly for-art principles and practices of C.Y.N.K.

Mark Nielsen (b. 1958) grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His Danish engineer father had more than fifty patents to his credit. In the 1970s Mark moved between various houses and studios in San Francisco and Milwaukee, ultimately ending up at the Walker Art Center. Later, he landed at University of Michigan's School of Art and Design. There he brought thousands of artists' work to exhibition with the highest degree of precise aesthetic attention, but also with great conviviality in the ersatz art communities he enjoys and maintains (and where Babl and Innes are also practicing artists).

Images:

Still of the C.Y.N.K. facade from the short film FLOE

Magritte's *Son of Man* from the Wikipedia entry on the artist::
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Son_of_Man#/media/File:Magritte_TheSonOfMan.jpg

Marcel Duchamp *Fountain*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp)#/media/File:Marcel_Duchamp,_1917,_Fountain,_photograph_by_Alfred_Stieglitz.jpg