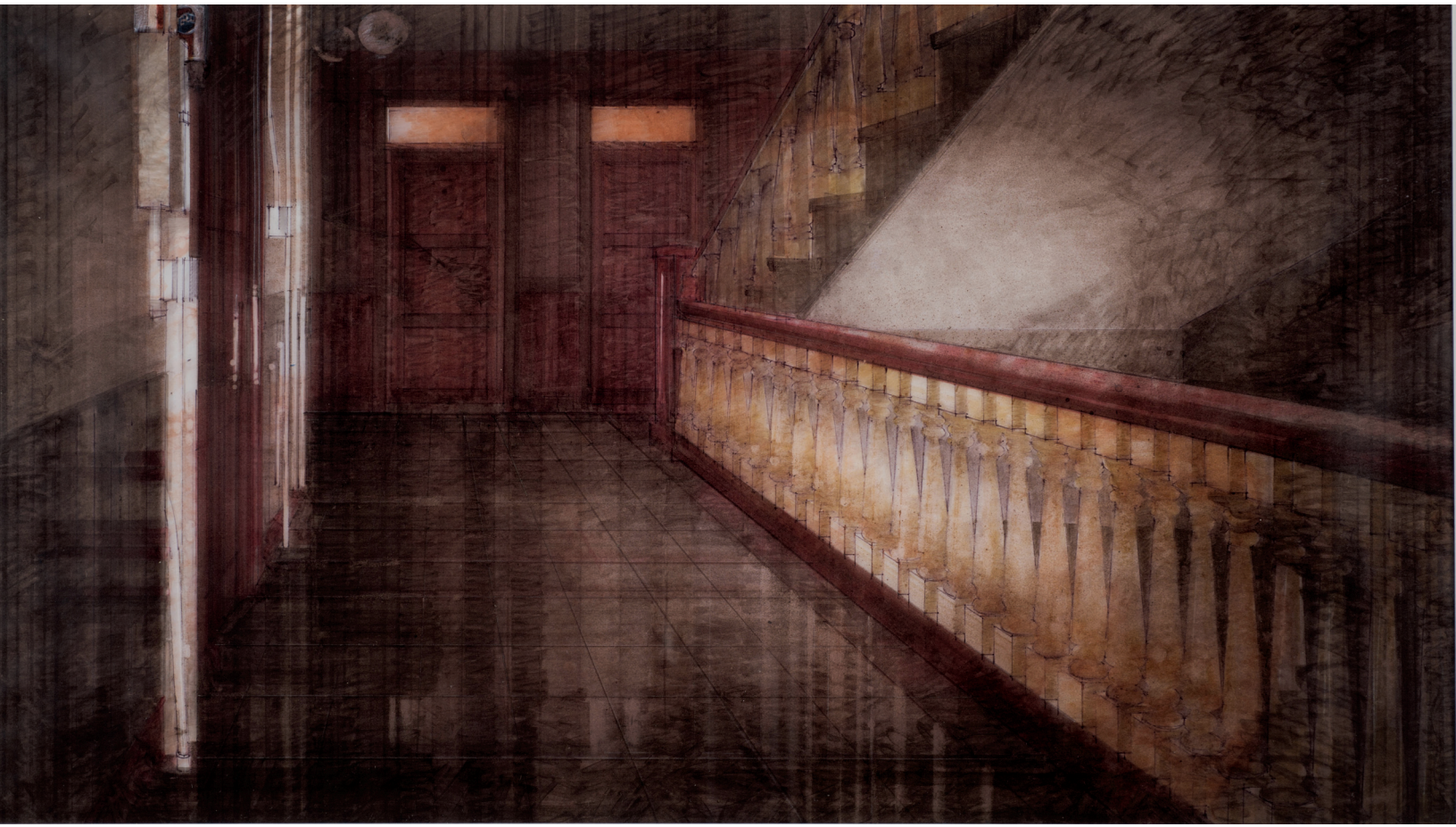

Atriums (cause and cadence), 2010
Fluorescent ink, correction fluid, drafting & masking tape, sprayed house primer on vellum, 17 x 30 in.

SPECTRAL FRAMEWORKS: JEROME REYES' PASSAGES OF AFFECT

Ellen Yoshi Tani

They lived, as it were, in two worlds – in a world they left behind, and in a dream before their eyes.
– Al Robles, from "The Wandering Manong"

The posthumous voice of poet and community activist Al Robles (1930-2009) that wraps around the corner of 868 Kearny Street articulates a dream always unrealized, always already out of reach. For the *manong*, the eldest generation of Filipino immigrants who called this area home in the early 20th century, the legacy of this building remains paradigmatic of their historical loss. It is the International Hotel (I-Hotel)—or at least the reconstructed version—erected in 2005 as a senior housing complex and community center. The first International Hotel, built in 1907, was a low-cost residential hotel that later became the nexus of community involvement and home to the *manong*, the living, walking, breathing memories of Filipino-American history in Manilatown. Intense battles with the city of San Francisco and encroaching developers ensued, and the mostly elderly Filipino and Chinese American tenants were forcibly evicted in 1977 in one of the most dramatic protests of civil rights history that brought together coalitions from across the Bay Area such as the I Hotel Tenants Association, I Wor Kuen, Chinese Progressive Association, and the Kearny Street Workshop. The eviction and eventual demolition of the site on Kearny and Jackson in 1981 revealed the raw human toll of urban renewal.

The eviction of this diasporic community lends a stinging resonance to Al Robles' words, for its very mode of belonging to a world of the past and the future, a perpetual in-betweenness, exists in non-places. This paradigm sets the tone for the 2010 exhibition *Until Today: Spectres for the International Hotel*, created by artist Jerome Reyes and organized with curator Julio Cesar Morales, artist-researcher Tammy Ko Robinson, and a host of collaborators, scholars, activists, artists, and residents. Over the course of three years, Reyes exhaustively researched the I-Hotel and its history, illegally scavenged the bricks of its original foundation, and forged the relationships to realize the project. The same coalition-building inertia of anti-eviction

activists 30 years prior fuelled Reyes' labor for a 21st century exhibition – which, in a postracial context, employed strategies of camouflage and self-effacement to resist overdetermination of the show's subject matter. The I-Hotel's story contains larger discussions of housing, urban space and conceptual territories that occupy the project's four platforms: pedagogy, book, exhibition, and public events.

Far from the galleries of Geary Street, *Until Today* taps into the affective tenor of architectural space: Reyes uses video, performance, drawing, sculpture and installations of ephemera to carve an affective social architecture out of the already highly charged site. Approaching eviction and diaspora as acts of both rupture and regeneration, the artworks stage history as a kind of rehearsal – a ritual whose only stability lies in a repetitive disorientation between worlds. Many of the exhibition visitors never lived through the I-Hotel's eviction, which points to a key question: how do you negotiate on the currency of bodily affect when bodily presence isn't a possibility? Through a combination of perceptual intimacy—in works that demand audience engagement—and historical distancing, the artworks push and pull viewers in a manner of dialogical aesthetics, a conceptual framework that both demands and enables multiple levels of commitment.

In conjunction with a recent body of literary work attending to the I-Hotel,[1] the project dovetailed with educational initiatives from Bay area institutions of higher learning that were then integrated with the exhibition. Reyes worked with Professor Tammy Ko Robinson, whose students in the San Francisco Art Institute's City Studio program participated in the curatorial process and installation of the show. Stanford Professor David Palumbo-Liu incorporated the exhibition into his annual course on Asian American Culture and Community. In its previous iterations, this class had included visits to the gaping hole where the original International Hotel once stood. But in 2010, in conjunction with the exhibition and its activation of the reconstructed I-Hotel, the class featured a service-learning component for the first time. Students helped with the publicity, outreach and senior care at the existing I-Hotel, transcribed oral histories and organized archival materials. The project presented a unique opportunity for students to knit activism, historical work and service learning into the classroom.

The International Hotel (I-Hotel)

Until Today: Spectres for the International Hotel existed for 84 days as an exhibition but as Reyes envisioned, the show would lead visitors to places in the unknown past and future as not only an installation of artworks, but a living thing – a work of social architecture. Working with Morales, Reyes transformed the ground floor of the I-Hotel into a site-responsive installation space for six new artworks that retained its function as a space for regular senior programming: bingo nights, karaoke, and movie screenings. The exhibition takes viewers from the mysterious nostalgia of the building's wraparound text – a quote from poet and community activist Al Robles – to the evening of August 4th 1977, when in the last few moments of a stand against police eviction forces, protest leader Wahat Tampao shared slices of melon to calm the activists. The exhibition space leaves the ensuing violence of that evening behind, but retains its thick tension. As viewers we are surrounded only with shards and traces of violent rupture – left to tread through the aftermath, we navigate between artworks in hopes of piecing together a relatable dialogue.

Projected onto the floor[2] of the new building, *Analgesia (and Armament)* frames the hands of original anti-eviction leader Dr. Estella Habal as she reactivates the memory of trauma and its anesthetization. The space between her hands and our downcast eyes is but one of the psychic spaces in the exhibition that brings history, architecture and viewer eye to eye. The distance between the site of that event (a single-occupancy unit in the original hotel in 1977) and its representation (an expansive open gallery space in the displaced, rebuilt I-Hotel in 2009) enacts the dynamic of the exhibition as a whole. Binding cultural temporalities to architectural space, these accretions of meaning invite viewers into the present by way of the past.

What does it mean to live in two worlds, to experience difference in simultaneity, to be pulled in two directions between the past and the future? To be an immigrant displaced from your home country and then threatened with eviction from one's adopted home? Once entered, the exhibition space is dark and silent but for the sound of a solemn butterfly knife against melon against wood cutting board – a thick, slice-thunk sound of resisting and relenting. Like the historical scar that the I-Hotel eviction represents, the sound of Estella's knife is determined and irreversible. The exhibition space reads as a narrowing corridor: the seemingly depersonalized

Hotel staff, Stanford students from Comparative Literature I-Hotel course, and senior tenants singing karaoke together inside of exhibition during ongoing senior services.

artworks initially give visitors ample breathing room in their non-figural mode, but the space siphons viewers through a winding hallway of ephemera from the archives of the I-Hotel.[3] Embedding the more conceptually abstract works within the accretions of history, grounding them in a context of the local and specific, the exhibition architecture employs a mode of dialogical aesthetics, to use Grant Kester's term, in which they trade on duration rather than immediacy.[4] This type of artwork, writes Kester, "is based on the generation of a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded instead at the level of collective interaction. Subjectivity is formed through discourse and intersubjective exchange itself."[5] It is an architectural collage whose meaning comes as much from the pauses and stills between artworks as from the artworks themselves, emotionally driven and time-based, an architecture of fluid mood that remains accessible to individual viewers from all backgrounds.

Below is a conversation with Jerome Reyes (JR), David Palumbo-Liu (DPL), and the present author (EYT) who speak about the project's multiple synergies between education, exhibition, history and activism.

History / dialogues

JR: One of the show's successes is that everyone was saying yes to it, even those who had moved on and gotten PhDs came back to the project. And those interactions were the best with everyone.

DPL: I love that line: people said yes. It was hard to say no – and it would never happen again. The more people signed on, the better. What we did now becomes part of the story. Your generation's ability to pull together this coalition of people shows that the issues are alive, they move people, they affect people. And it's regenerative: when I teach this course next, or even mention the exhibition, it will have a new kind of dimension that it didn't have before.

JR: What did you observe with your students and their involvement with the project?

DPL: One day the students were handed these flyers and told to go out and post them in the neighborhood. They had watched the film *The Fall of the I-Hotel*, they knew the history and they wanted to change the world. So they look at these flyers, thinking it was busy work. But then they actually came back and said it was one of the best experiences they'd had because they could actually go out into the neighborhood and interact with people: as they put the posters up, people would walk by and ask about them. All of a sudden it became this really interesting interface, not just between Stanford and the I-Hotel, but the whole community.

JR: As you said, the students were part of the exhibition artwork – live, in a way – and whether they knew it or not they were part of this social sculpture history, with Julio Morales, Suzanne Lacy, and others. What other theoretical positions did you see, despite or even because of the fact that it was at a senior center in Chinatown?

Above:
Of two worlds (Robles), 2010
Metallic copper vinyl text wrapped around building corner
75 x 1 ft. (truncated section for larger quote: They lived as it were in two worlds, in a world they left behind, and in a dream before their eyes)

Right:
Routes and Seasons (After Carlos Villa's quilt of hope), 2009
Cast fedora made of International Hotel brick debris, fedora bird feather made with brick dust (accumulated from transporting and protecting the last remaining ton of I-Hotel bricks, as a promise to the activists not to break any of them), raw wood table designed from tenant interviews, 2005 bird feathers covered in brick dust. 8 x 8 ft. (floor), 30 x 20 x 24 in. (table) 9 x 7 x 7 in. (hat)


WERE IN TWO WORLDS
IN A WORLD THEY
EFT BEHIND

DPL: Students unanimously said that being there at the site gave them a sense of the lives that were affected in a way that books, theory and the film could not. When they saw what it was like to live there, talked to people, and moved around those spaces, they had a completely different sense of the history and even the idea of space: What does a neighborhood look and smell like? What would it mean to not have those sights and smells, to be displaced from those rooms? It would completely change your sense of identity and your interactions with people.

Embodiment

EYT: The exhibition's affective qualities seem to really hinge on embodiment: the corporeality of a fedora made of brick dust, the occupation of the stage for continued senior programming, live performances,[6] and the pins that visitors take with them. Yet the works in the show are strikingly empty of bodies. Can you talk about this?

JR: There are almost no figures in the exhibition, especially in the vacant hallway drawings. The video projection serves food towards the audience with two hands. What do you think that does psychologically when these modalities of vacancy operate as invitations to guide you into the work? What does that accomplish when it also blurs temporalities, and the exact time of those events are not as clear? As audience members noted upon entering the space, "we lose our sense of chronological location when we're actually inside."

EYT: What are the stakes of that chronological dislocation?

JR: Well, one thing that came up constantly was 'how is this going to be a post-race show?' and 'how am I going to connect with different audiences inside the space?' The show had these different masks: it could be framed as a contemporary art show and discussed in terms of its autonomy separate from ethnic history. But in the Asian American context, I had to get the blessing from the main leaders [of the original I-Hotel protest] to do the show in the first place. What's striking is the fact that we're living in a time where I *had* to camouflage it, in a way, to make it work for different audiences.

DPL: I've always framed I-Hotel as a quintessential Asian American event, but it wouldn't have the importance if it wasn't attached to much larger issues of history, migration, labor, and housing. What brought people together was something that transcended race: housing as a basic human right. These issues don't go away.

EYT: If that human right was one trigger that transcended racial boundaries at the time of the I-Hotel, what is it now that unifies people and draws them to this exhibition? Is it that contemporary art speaks an abstract and non-referential language and remains accessible to everybody? Or is it a sort of a fictive kinship over memory and loss – loss of places that need to be remembered and history that needs to be dug up and re-hung, as it were?

DPL: I think the initial hook is probably the aesthetic – after you enter that space, the history starts coming out. People wanted to know what provoked somebody to do this: housing rights is a huge thing, knowing something about the history was also very important and again, neither of those issues – either that of race or community or housing have gone away at all. They are probably just as present, and it makes you wonder whether we should teach it or if people should just catch on?

Affect: materials of resistance and access

JR: There were specific affective triggers. The brick, for example, was like the golden key for everyone. I gave a brick to Estella, Karen, David, Stanford historian Gordon Chang, urbanist Chester Hartman, among others and their taking of that brick in their hands was a sort of material acknowledgment of their cooperation in the project.

EYT: So, materiality transformed into a commitment toward another materiality, that of the show.

DPL: For me, it's whenever I show people the video clip of the dust cloud coming up during the buildings demolition. And then I show them the picture of the fedora and the feathers and there's always, without fail, an audible gasp. The audiences says 'wow' - that's the high point, the transition – it's exactly like what you were saying, the materiality transformed by art into another kind of materiality. That signals something different while still indexing the trace of the building.

EYT: Yes – but it's also about immateriality. These spectral drawings that hang in the walls of the new I-Hotel are based on photographs of a non-existent building – the building wears its own ghost, you could say. The video restages an act of giving, cutting, and the act of digestion. The effect of this play on the material and immaterial gets to people's emotions in a big way. How is the show, through its liveness and its elegiac quality, a kind of memorial? Both for students here, in terms of knitting together theory and praxis, and for an artist invested in community and social justice?

JR: I approached it piece by piece. For the feather piece, which was informed by Daniel J. Martinez's work,[7] I was thinking "How can I break someone at 30 feet? How can I take someone at 40

Abeyance (installation view), 2011, vellum drawings and sculptures, variable dimensions

feet? How can I make the work transform perception, and can I do it all with a static object that has a huge history embedded within it?" That process helped streamline the rest of the show: I needed to just make it work and make decisions from the heart. People said they couldn't remember what anything looked like, they only remember that they were scared. Taking that on as the author made the show way more successful because it didn't have to be about representation.

EYT: How do you make a show about Filipino American history relevant to audiences in a postracial age? In other words, how to you make routes of access so the show isn't just about Filipino Americans?

JR: I had to prepare for the kinds of criticism that would come from each group – for me at least, I had to expect what those criticisms were going to be and to leverage them against each other (it's legit because it's about urbanism and for others it's legit because it's art).

DPL: The same thing is at work when you look at the exhibit, Karen's novel, Estella's history book. The same cross-referencing goes on over a common interest in social justice and in history.

EYT: On that note, there's kind of a beautiful resonance between intellectual production as putting a brick in the wall, and the notion of this project's multiple authorship. The

Analgesia (and Armament), 2009
high definition video, 8 x 6 ft.
floor projection, 4:45 min

cacophony of voices that somehow came into sync to produce this exhibition, unified through the dissemination of the "golden key" brick: coherence through distribution. I think what made the show work really well was its commitment to materiality, of the traces of the building, these archival fragments that triggered affective responses from people where they say "well yeah, I can understand what it means to take the dust of these bricks and make it into an object. That's something that has a material resonance and applicability to my own personal history." I think that helped you escape the entrapment of making a show too grounded into identity politics, which could have ended up excluding people.

JR: I think I draw on that accessibility to allow viewers into my new work. Certain stories are always told. The thesis show conjures rehearsal and ritual performances as a way of sharing a story that is always told.

DPL: I think the concept of rehearsal does two things in the case of the I-Hotel: first, through Karen's book you get the sense of history coming alive again. But it's also a way of critiquing mistakes that were made at the same time as understanding why they were made. It gets us thinking a lot about – most importantly – what do you do with ideas?

The rehearsal of the I-Hotel's story through both the interview and the exhibition's dialogic aesthetic translates to Reyes' more recent work, which takes a more personal turn. Entitled *Abeyance*, this series of works comprising Reyes' 2011 thesis project evoke the history of the refugee, the internee, and the political exile that resonate throughout American history. The conceptually and materially invested public structures of *Until Today* are now enfolded within an archive of drawings, sculpture and ephemera that marked Reyes' family history. Vellum acts as a medium for drawings of jetbridges and for ethereal sculpture, folded to make objects of self-measurement, such as a carry-on luggage scale and the metal rack to measure carry-on suitcase size at airport gates.

As spaces of arrival and departure that characterize the immigrant experience, *Until Today* and the jetbridge works share a conceptual framework: both are structures with complex architecture; one enters both only to be exploded in multiple directions in time and space. The telescoping nature of the jetbridge enacts physically what the exhibition does historically, evoking a sense of gravitational instability and disorientation. The ghostly corridors of the I-Hotel resonate with these non-spaces of international air travel and the depersonalized private spaces to which they lead (airplane tray, bathroom). Reyes' agenda here is less concerned with social justice than with personal and anonymous history as a binding force of human experience, and of a kind of contemporaneity that draws on affective spaces of the past.

Reyes uses drawing as a kind of rehearsal, recreating in two- and three-dimensions the spaces, surfaces and objects that make habitable only the space *between* the utterly depersonalized, public arena and the deeply personal and private. The affective tonalities of architectural space – particularly the spaces of transition – are used here to bring audience members into a social architecture that may be foreign to them. But while the corridors of the I-Hotel suggest an eternal haunting of a world left behind and a theater of trauma, the jetbridges are, for many, markers of transnational belonging that open onto a dream before our eyes.

1 Dr. Estella Habal, one of the youngest protestors at the 1977 event, authored the book *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* in 2007. Habal's groundbreaking publication lent a generational and cultural specificity to the I-Hotel's place within Asian American history, focusing on the Filipino elders *(manong)* whose voices were crucial elements of the eviction. This important work complements Karen Tei Yamashita's recent novel *I Hotel* (2010). A work of historical fiction that contextualizes the events within a broad view of 20th century Asian American history, Yamashita's work consists of ten novellas staged in ten consecutive years of the Yellow Power movement. The book was a finalist for the National Book Award.

2 The floor is significant: Reyes obtained a grant from the San Francisco Arts Commission to specifically install a new hardwood floor in the ground level common space, leaving an architectural investment in the space.

3 This installation features news clippings, photographs of protestors, fliers, documents, the original eviction notice, all whose specificity emits a remarkable gravitas in contrast to the more abstract works preceding it.

4 Grand Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 12.

5 Ibid, p.112.

6 Reyes and Ko Robinson co-programmed a theatrical reading of the novel *I Hotel* during the exhibition's run influenced by Paul Chan's 2007 *Waiting for Godot*, in which the artist gave voice to unheard victims in post-Katrina New Orleans.

7 But I didn't tell anyone what I was looking at while I was referencing Daniel J. Martinez's catalog. Of course, one of the most controversial American artists of all time, but I was looking at how he was deciding to make work through materials, through titling, through different ways of negotiating space, tricking the viewer, and that became my 'textbook' for that quarter, and I only made that one piece, it was that feather piece.

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