





RAINBOWS AT EITHER ENDING THOUGHTS ON U · TURN + ALTERNATIVE CULTURE BY MATT MORRIS

When Zach Rawe put the idea of starting U · turn Art Space on the table in 2009, we were a group of friends in crisis. At various stages in and past our art educations, we were each likewise in different positions on our life maps, each occupied with the underlying task of growing up and forming an identity, even if only to reform it again when it became necessary. This time it was necessary.

For my part, I was once again looking to art as a useful space for the personal and the political to collide. I had been thinking often about something my friend Denise said once about how oppression can be subtextual, and how frequently we deny ourselves the space to express our feelings about being oppressed. I had developed a set of conceptual tools in my own art and in curatorial projects I had developed in the couple of years prior to the summer we started planning U · turn with which to observe and comment on dynamics of power, tensions I sensed between visible and invisible aspects of the human experience, and the problematization of a globalized visual vernacular in which symbols have been taken out of a specialized context and rendered absurd. Abstraction; ambiguity; found and recovered objects' potential to hold a conceptual charge; installation art consisting of dispersed, ephemeral aggregates: I felt with U · turn we could employ these tools to cultivate art conversations that circumscribed oppression via today's culture wars. Most of all, I wanted to believe we could address the obvious in less than obvious, optimistic and open-ended ways.

Even though I had been working with various gallery projects since moving to Cincinnati in 2003, the vision that formed in discussions with Zach, Eric, Molly and Patricia was for a space that was curated collaboratively. This was particularly different than what I had done, say, in the Art Academy of Cincinnati's Chidlaw and Pearlman Galleries, where I learned all the basic skills of maintaining galleries and putting up exhibitions; a brief period of working with an arts, music and cultural space called Murmur in South Fairmount; or semantics, an artist-run alternative gallery that my partner Eric and I had been working with for a couple of years. Semantics was in Brighton, a neighborhood in Cincinnati's West End where we lived, and also where we were discussing opening U·turn.

U·turn didn't seek to be innovative in the model of how an alternative gallery with little or no budget operates; rather, as a group we sought to execute a simple gallery project with elegance and excellence. We drew from what we had learned and observed from other spaces we admired like semantics, Minus Space in Brooklyn, the Suburban and Western Exhibitions in Chicago, not to mention the legacy of alternative spaces in Cincinnati that had come before us, namely Publico in Over-the-Rhine, Keith and Tina Benjamin's Warsaw Projects in Price Hill, the Artery in Newport, DiLeia in Camp Washington, and C.A.G.E. in Downtown. Semantics, Publico and Warsaw were part of my circuit during my college years; their influence on my art and my conception of what the art world can look like is immeasurable. Matt Distel's DiLeia project, Hollis Hammond's Artery and the collective-run C.A.G.E. were long gone before I was planted into Cincinnati's art world, but their reputations lingered, and when I have been faced with decisions for U·turn, I've recalled anecdotes from these different projects that came before us that played to the problem at hand.

When U·turn began in September 2009, we were part of a network of other alternative spaces that were also just opening or would open soon after. Aisle is a short walk from U·turn in the West End, on the third floor of a complex housing the blue-chip commercial Carl Solway Gallery, as well as studio spaces for various artists. I frequently say that Aisle is my favorite space in the city. Krista Gregory and Bill Renschler have decisive, fine taste; I've rarely left their gallery disappointed or uninspired. Several friends who had worked with Murmur started CS13 in Over-the-Rhine, and a few months later, a group of MFA grads from University of Cincinnati opened Museum Gallery/Gallery Museum across the street from CS13. After founding Visionaries + Voices, an organization that supports and promotes art made by individuals with diagnosed disabilities, and operating it for a decade, power couple Keith Banner and Bill Ross embarked on a new gallery project called Thunder-Sky Inc. in Northside. The gallery takes its name from Raymond Thunder-Sky, an untrained artist Bill and Keith met through their jobs as social workers. After his death in 2004, they decided to create a space that continues Thunder-Sky's legacy, encourages individuals to wave their 'freak flags' proudly and challenges unhelpful taxonomies in arts culture like "outsider" and "folk." Just a mile or so down Hamilton Avenue in Northside is David Rosenthal's Prairie, whose space has focused on neighborhood outreach, classes for youth and investigations into the many ways photography is being used in contemporary art. I could go on with the underground music venues Art Damage and Bunk Spot, or U·turn's neighbor Mason Paul's Synthetica-M, or the curatorial project parProjects, or Lily Mulberry's 1305 Gallery in OTR....

I'm telling you all of this because I want there to be a record somewhere about what Cincinnati's art landscape looked like over the past two years outside of the larger institutions and commercial galleries. None of us who have run these spaces are wealthy, and our ambitions may not make any of us famous. What has driven us to operating our art spaces is surely a diverse array of reasons, but our missions are similar insofar as our having done what we've done out of a care for our community and out of a sense of the importance of artist-friendly projects in cultural outposts like Cincinnati. Nothing about running these galleries is easy, and very little of it is glamorous.

I am sustained by the very occasional moments of grace, in which the expected and banal gives way to the sublime, the appreciative and to an underlying connectedness among a diverse population.

By some standards, U·turn has only existed for a brief time, just at two years since we first began meeting to conceive of it. But it is true to alternative spaces: these are ephemeral things that crop up when there is a convergence of energy, resources, space and time among a set of good-hearted art folk. We've often likened the gallery to a TV sitcom. Too many of my favorite shows were renewed for a few too many seasons, and the storytelling became repetitive and sloppy. The best shows are ones that solidly know what they are, tell a story, and then are done. U·turn is like that. It became clear what its purposes were for us who created it and what spot it could fill in our city. Several conversations have permutated through our exhibitions. We've done far more than we ever anticipated being able to do.

During our run, we have exhibited 80 artists in 20 exhibitions, not to mention special zine publications, readings, video art screenings and collaborations with other organizations scattered throughout our tenure. One of the missions that became clear to us early on was that we wanted to exhibit favorite local and regional artists alongside artists working elsewhere around the globe. It places our vivid community into a larger context.

We saw the opportunity to bring people together and to continue work that others had once done, and we had benefited from as younger artists. In particular, I envisioned a space where our community could spend time with art comfortably and without pretense. At our openings, food and drink becomes something altogether different than the meat trays bought ready made from grocery stores often found elsewhere in lackadaisical corners of the art world. U·turn has been a feast, with each month a new, lovingly prepared course. We've made food that was inventive and surprising, attempting to match the tone of the exhibitions, and Eric has always supplied us with a spiked punch that is seasonal, and usually revives some historical tradition. These 'extras' at the exhibitions are evidence of my hearth magic, home cooked religion, that there is power in those kinds of warming experiences where we eat together and communicate with one another. Wrapping that atmosphere around the edges of an art space has been close to my heart throughout the last two years.





U-turn's first exhibition was a conceptual project, an expression of gratitude. Entitled *Brought To You By*, it sought to recognize the artists who had influenced each of us in such a way that we wanted to start an artist-run space. With our last exhibition, *Aloha Means Both Hello and Goodbye*, we reprised this idea, turning our thanks to those individuals who have been supportive of the space in material, conceptual and even spiritual ways. They've lent us chairs when we needed chairs, let us bounce ideas off of them, brought the attention of important art world-ers to our doorstep and been so consistent in showering us with love and attention in what we are doing, that we wanted to complete the gallery's life circuit by bringing their work into the space, so that they could also be loved and attended to.

The result is faceted, iridescent thought-clouds in all kinds of media. If it's a requiem, it stays upbeat. Hovering over all of the other works is Mark Harris' *I Made A Big Painting*. At 131 inches tall and 79 inches wide, it nearly fills the space between floor and ceiling. The painting is a collage, a collection of fragments of paper printed with acrylics that have been mounted onto a stretched canvas. The painting appears to be tattered as swirls and notches of a black-printed paper have been cut open so that pieces fall forward in spirals and tongues. The backside of the paper is silver, so that the whole thing glitters dully. Through the torn and cut bits another layer of painting peaks out. Glazes of magenta and teal overlap to create a lavender hue and the three bars of color scallop and arch like a rainbow bouncing around within the parameter of the canvas.

Mark tells us that the painting became situated amidst a series of song lyrics by Ed Ball's post-punk band The Times. He quotes: "*Through the years I've made big paintings of lots of things that made us think... You mean so much to me, far more than any gallery...You're the reason I feel quite good.*"

U-turn (and its principals) has maintained a relationship to contemporary painting that remains skeptical at best. Of course, there are painters among us, but even they recognize the delicious problems of the medium in such an age as ours. My expectation of all contemporary art is that it be present and self aware of the circumstances in which it comes about. For painting, this is doubly important, because the medium itself refers to such a hulking tradition.

We've stayed interested in painting as objects (as in some of our monochrome artists, like Marcia Hafif (February 2011) about whom Mark wrote our catalogue essay, or Matthew Deleget (April 2011)), or their possibilities as spaces (as in Lynne Harlow's *Limitless and Lonesome*, a pale pink wall painting in *Breakups R Tough* (April 2010) that registers as an expansive yet private space for a viewer sitting on a small bench with ambient music playing just in front of the painting). *I Made A Big Painting* encompasses both of these research notions, and really much more. In Ball's song, he sings of painting across the sky, and the scale of Mark's work really becomes something cosmic, but also casual and blasé. Its height makes it the backdrop of all else in the room, and its physicality becomes a low-relief sculpture. It could be a wall of band posters in an absurdist theatre, all worn down long after the performance dates. Its overall affects are like a sponge that has soaked up painting's history and unanswered questions, only to display contradiction, play, hope, disaster and the medium's tendency to turn back in on itself in search of the meaning of its existence. It is not the first painting, and won't be the last, but in this place and time, *I Made A Big Painting* is the end of a rainbow and the trappings therein found.

In the context of a gallery's finale, its black, silver and pastel hues are a run-on sentence that merges solemnity with levity. The painting is coherent enough, and still, it could be a sign at a crossroads, making pluralist cases for abstraction, psychedelia, bricolage and humility. It seems to critique its own size and the monolithic ideologies that have been attached to such enormous works in art history. My heart and the painting's seem to race for the rewards of curiosity, yet when a passerby's movement rustles the silver scraps, the whole thing shudders. One more sign at the crossroads is suggested; it's Dorothy's and says "I'd turn back if I were you."

To every thing, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn....

As an anecdotal aside, Justine Ludwig, also in the exhibition, told me once that she was a passenger in a friend's car, when the friend said "I need to make a u-turn," and before Justine remembered this driving maneuver, she first thought that the friend wanted to take some time out for art.







Brighton is a satellite within the larger arts community in our area. It is not a thoroughfare, in respect to art. It's actually a very industrial neighborhood, full of businesses, project housing and low-rent apartments full of artists, musicians, poets, hipsters and bohemians. It is quiet, and one would rarely get there accidentally. Its seclusion ensures that nearly everyone who visits us and our gallery-neighbors comes with a level of expectation to find profundity within an unassuming, ordinary place. It possesses a beauty that is only realized latently. I believe our aesthetics drew us to this place, but in some ways, the place may have further developed our aesthetics. U-turn's exhibitions have resonated with the spirit of the place through a concentration on how ordinary found objects can become magical within a gallery.

Of course, Duchamp. When he and his Readymades are brought up, they are usually meant to connote a cynicism that entered into 20th century visual art, but I've never thought of them that way. Objects extracted from everyday life and manipulated towards an artistic area of thought encourages phenomenological, peripheral encounters with what we assume we have always understood. And in one form or another, they've been part of nearly every U-turn exhibition. The humble, the unaltered, the honest object has been our base visual language alongside pure formalism.

Aloha is no exception. Video, photographic works, installation, paintings and most of all a series of discursive, strange objects litter the space. At closer inspection, their visual poetry razes your preconceived notions of what you are seeing.

Love Shouldn't Be So Melancholy is Keith Banner's contribution to the exhibition. Banner is a gallerist, an author, a social worker and an artist. He attends to all of his roles with quick-witted imagination, visceral insights and a no-bullshit mantra that rivals Tina Fey's. With his works of fiction, I weep, and with this sculpture of his, a grin shapes the bottom half of my face and it persists.

Leaning against one corner of the gallery, a yellow plastic mop bucket and mop seem to have been left out since the gallery's last cleaning. The first clue that its presence wasn't negligence on our part is the Byzantine light that bathes the assemblage. To walk up and look into the bucket is to find what one would have assumed would have been murky water is actually a bucket full of candy, Skittles in fact.

Taste the rainbow. Sugar coma. Candy itself isn't queer, but Felix Gonzalez-Torres brought it into contemporary art in such a fashion as to make it so. His piles of individually wrapped candies—meant to be distributed freely, generously, and in infinite supply—are an awkwardly sweet gesture. They were Cher's "different kind of love song, dedicated to everyone."

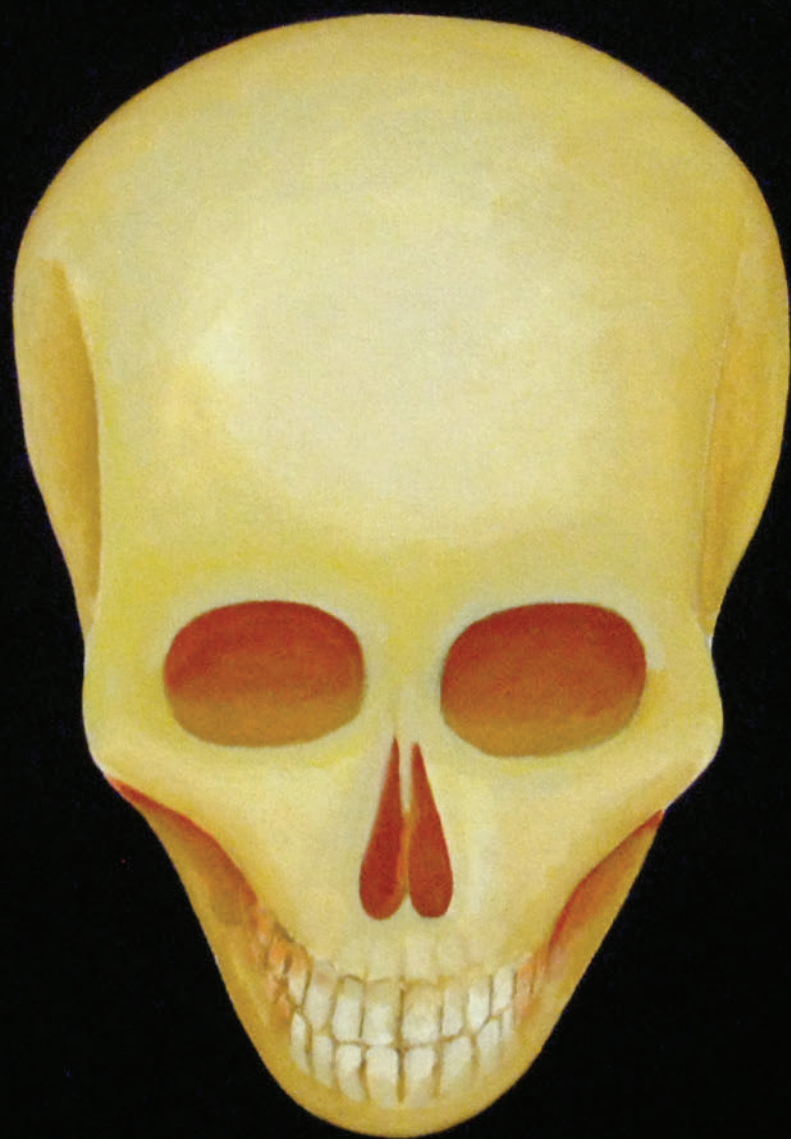
U·turn's exhibitions have always represented an inversion of principles. In a concept's deconstruction, the reality is that it is the same as its opposite, and as the continuum of other positions between the two. Consider Shinsuke Aso's collages from *Palling Around with Socialists* (June 2010), in which garbage becomes party decorations, advertising becomes political propaganda, ugly becomes beauty. On another plane of existence, everything is the same thing—there is no difference—and works I've championed in our exhibitions have been intended as markers to point towards that truth. Eastern-influenced, sure, but it's ultimately a strategy learned from queer culture. Gender, sex, age, background are all plural, and if we are open, we can all share in experiences of love, sublimity and expansive thought patterns. Access to these states of mind is through the simplest of acts, as in Gonzalez-Torres's candies and more recently Keith Banner's sculpture that defies assumptions. The only thing easier than stealing candy from a baby is a faggot asking the world to love itself through little pieces of sugar.

That kind of self loving, open ended, collective experience is what we're all about here at U·turn.

On a U·Crew field trip to New York at the end of 2009, we all saw an exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres' work curated by Jim Hodges, along with a number of his own pieces, at the FLAG Art Foundation. The cabaret drag genius Justin Vivian Bond wrote an essay for that exhibition, and in it, v writes:

"And yet, there are insistent and unrelenting strands of gold that are inextricably woven through the fabric of our culture deflecting and rejecting the shit our society chooses to invest it's energy, time and resources maintaining. Within the mire there remains a core of belief in the possibilities of a stronger nature, a fiercer heart. The power of beauty -or of candy- resonates through time. ... Funny how romance, once so deadly has now proven itself to be, in a certain sense, immortal. The act of loving killed, the art of loving remains pristine and wrapped in plastic on gallery floors, time keeps ticking, perfectly synched between the hearts of the living and the dead."

Bond correctly maps that the simple act of candy in galleries brings up mortality, time and decay. In Keith's piece, we're reminded to keep it light. It shouldn't be melancholy, and so it isn't. Slouching in a gallery corner, we find the opposite end of the rainbow, and in lieu of a pot of gold, there is a cheerful gesture that excavates the mundane and replaces its center with something gummy, sweet, glossy and problematic. Surrealism as straightforward as a simple syrup for cocktails.



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There is no such thing as endings. There is no true death in art and love. Specifics aside, what I believe U·turn has accomplished is an attraction of energy, like rubbing two sticks together to start a campfire. The artists we've brought into the city, the audiences who have loyally come and seen month after month, and the efforts the space demanded from the five of us to keep it in operation are all movements of energy that gathered at this place and in this time. When this last show is over, the energy that is currently held in the show between the artworks will become available for new purposes. Some of it will stay in the space, for the next gallery that moves in. Some of it will go with each of us in the U·Crew as we move to different cities and start new adventures. My hope, though, is that animating sparks will shoot off in every direction so that the power we've harnessed during the past two years spreads to empower everyone who has been a part of this journey with us.

We didn't create the phenomena that have been situated in the space month to month. We've only done the work necessary to see their arrival. As this chapter closes, I am full of gratitude for the spaces and hardworking artists who have come before us in Cincinnati, upon whose efforts we built this next generation of artist-run spaces. I am thankful that our network has extended beyond our quiet neighborhood, across the globe, to London and Berlin, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, Austin, Philadelphia, Providence and many smaller communities between these cities. Energy came in with histories from all of these places and lives, and what U·turn has been is now added to that history. We've seen new, surprising sights in our gallery, and the experience has reinforced my need for more discoveries into a lifelong pursuit.

I see rainbows in our last exhibition, but, truthfully, I saw them in all of our previous projects as well. Our mission says that we "provide an opportunity for discourse, ideas, and play to be forced together, awkwardly or elegantly, and offer itself to a viewing audience." I believe our offerings have indeed been all of these things. We've given that paradigm to our viewers, our community and our city. I look forward to seeing new sparks flying soon.