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DAVID HARTT // THE REPUBLIC

By Stephanie Cristello

Casual Violence

March, 2014 – A car thrown onto its side. When we visualize this image, we imagine a symbol of revolt. It is an attack on orientation, on forward movement, on progress – but it is also an image inescapably attached to the political domain, to capital and to the state, though the car itself is ubiquitous. It exists as a symbol that represents the facets of modern culture that are rarely visible – without the institution of the industrialized world there could be no car – yet becomes instrumental in envisioning the landscape of social unrest. We imagine a city strewn with overturned vehicles in the aftermath of an uprising, as if they were interlopers, their presence imposing small, but significant disruptions onto the pristine city grid. This is the image we attach to riots. You can almost hear the chaos, the loud and garish tableau of misconduct and lawlessness that we have based our mediated experiences onto, through snapshots in newspapers, artifacts, and archives. Though we could conjure the image in relation to any number of current events, the car remains part of the iconic and distant image we categorize as a symptom of “revolution,” in black and white, never in color, and specifically *not from now*.



David Hartt, *The Republic*, 2014. HD video – Duration 16:08, Score by Sam Prekop, edition of 6. *Image courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York*

This image is central to how we contextualize the three photographs, two sculptures, and one film on view in David Hartt's current exhibition, *The Republic*, at David Nolan Gallery in New York, but presents itself very differently than how it is excerpted above. Installed near the center of the space, the film that shares the title of the exhibition features a recurring scene of four men slowly, methodically, tipping a wrecked car. They flip it on its back, spin it around so it faces backward and forward again, and ultimately flip it back to its originally, though ruined, upright position. Here, violence is in rare form. One man pauses to pick up his cell phone, others move silently and carefully, navigating the damage. It is a violence that embraces chance, the unintended and spontaneous moments of ferocity that work their way into our daily lives; a soft-anarchism that does not upheave, but affects – slowly changing the texture and form of familiar subjects into fragments of other imaginaries, other worlds.

The body of the film uses the proposed city plans by Greek urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis for both Athens and Detroit as the departure for a formal navigation of the two never completed projects. Based on the 1960s commission of Doxiadis by the Greek military Junta, the master plan was developed in response to the enormous post-war growth and urbanization happening in Athens. The request was followed by Detroit Edison for Doxiadis to spearhead the "Developing Urban Detroit Area Research Project," though the fall of both commissioners – the Junta in 1974 and in 1967 by the Detroit riots – inhibited either plans to ever be completed. The massive LCD monitor, suspended between the ceiling and the floor, leads us through both cities as a voyeur through the architecture, experiencing movement through buildings not as a citizen, but as a detached onlooker. A different withdrawal from the state.



The Republic I , Fragment and The Republic. Image courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York

There is something anthropological about the film, at once instructional and alien. But as the film attempts to describe these two cities by its architectural plans, it realizes a third. The fictitious and scientifically clinical dissection of public space is not the self-proclaimed utopia pictured in Huxley's *A Brave New World*, but something more akin to an Alphaville model

shaped by Godard, in his 1965 film of the same title. Moments of high-modernist architecture are set against instances of futurism; we see a close up of a pediment relief picturing industrial workers on the side of a building, a recording of google maps through another screen that distorts and alters our perception of real satellite footage taken of the two cities, experienced instead as a type of rendering, or computer generated simulation. A constant reminder of the past propels itself into the future throughout the film, surpassing the present moment and absorbing its own invention. Scored by Sam Prekop, every sensory experience of the film echoes this strange sense of a utopia unbound – one that depends on the incomplete fragments of other cities to create one anew, a failure on the front of progress that gives way to illusory forms.



David Hartt, *The Republic I*, 2014. Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond and framed. 59 x 88 1/2 in 149.9 x 224.8 cm. Edition 1/3, + 1 AP. Image courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York

Is this the myth of paradise? Or if not paradise, at least a new way of idealizing unfinished histories. Placed on the floor near the film and one photograph are two acanthus plants, cast in bronze. The plants also belong to architecture; the acanthus was the aesthetic model for the ornamentation of Corinthian columns, though the sculptures are installed here in a more domestic sense. As with the film, architecture is defined through its details, never through its structural utility. This confounding of interior and exterior use is more present in *The Republic I*, a room with a cat caught in the yellow glow of sodium vapor lamps, often used for outdoor streetlamps. The image does not picture a monochrome so much as it pictures the inability to see color. Though the result is the same, the acid hue permeates the image in a different way – it is imbued with a restrictive attitude, exposing the united image as a lie, a trick of assimilated optics. The domestic interior is transformed into a type of diorama, as if the pane of glass that separates the photograph from the viewer performs the same function of the glass that separates us from a fictive and artificial environment replicated in a natural history museum.

As with the entire installation, the limits of unity within this image are challenged. The familiar is turned strange, and the idea of togetherness becomes a sort of impossibility, though the lie of unification on the surface still remains. In this exhibition, Hartt proposes a new Republic; one that favors a quiet rebellion, a small fiction that infects the larger system while maintaining the affect of control – never exposing itself so as to spurn an upheaval, but significant enough that it can strike at any time.