The Assimilation of Traditions in the Painting of José Parlá

By Michael Betancourt.

This essay surveys the intellectual framework emergent from a prolonged consideration and engagement with José Parlá's artwork. It is necessarily provisional. In considering this work what becomes apparent is the complexity, not only of the surfaces, but also in its intellectual dimensions. However, to begin discussing this work by applying a name would be to prematurely close off this consideration: to name identifies, catalogs and explains a priori to the examination. As such, starting with a label always already ends the investigation and established a set of expectations—the assumptions that determine all that follows.

Yet, it is tempting to label and categorize José Parlá's work in one way or another, but none of the available terms feels adequate. "Contemporary," as with an earlier generations' "Modern" is so specific and simultaneously broad as to be meaningless except in its most basic function of separating work made now from works made then. It does not help us understand what we see before us. To call them "Post-Graffiti" suggests both that there is something specific that they are a repudiation of, or, in contrast, it implies a transformation of consciousness that puts these works in a novel or different category entirely while remaining safely inside the general description.

"History painting" also seems to be a potential description. The aspiration to recover the cultural prestige of history painting has long been a desire for

critics concerned with Modern, and more recently Contemporary Art. Historian Thomas Crow recognized this particular aspiration for Modernist painting in Meyer Shapiro's famous 1936 defense of abstraction:

> What [Shapiro] wants to discount is the fact that abstraction had increasingly taken over not only the outward prestige of traditional history painting but also its critical function of presenting mind over matter. What he wanted instead was a connection between the rhetorical requirements of history painting and a public space defined in democratic, rather than authoritarian terms, as he put it, an art that would "ask the same questions that are asked by the impoverished masses and oppressed minorities."[1]

Parlá's art might seem a good fit, meeting these desires for an art speaking democratically for impoverished masses and minorities, but this particular term is doubly misleading—the "history painting" of the nineteenth century academy is fundamentally so different from what Parlá has created as to literally demand a radical redefinition of terms. And in Shapiro's aspirations towards democracy, the "speaking for" reveals the problem with all history painting: the usurpation of position—"for"—is always already an elitist one, patronizing in its presumptuousness. To speak for anyone else is to condescend to them, it is the exact opposite of the democratic ideal. All these possible characterizations of José Parlá's work does a basic disservice to it; thus to understand what these works are requires a return to origins: what is it that José Parlá has made?

Paintings.

But of what sort? The more automatic and obvious the answer, the more it needs a careful consideration; the obvious answer is always one where assumptions and prior judgements allow a leap forward—past all the important details—to a conclusion that comes without being thought through. Thus, what, then, are these objects? Attention to their immanent form provides some answers. They are visual; carefully layered and incorporating a vast array of materials—collage, newspapers, writing, drawing, rubbings out and spills of paint or ink. The arrangement is familiar: the works are constructed along familiar harmonic divisions of the space they occupy, revealing more than just an accumulative process of layering; they are composed, a factor that makes them definitely and specifically "paintings" even if paint is only one of a number of different materials employed in their creation. Hence, understanding them must follow from the specific history of painting generally. It does as little to describe the complexity and surface qualities of these works, and is as misleading in its own way as calling them "history paintings."

But these paintings also contain vast expanses of what is clearly text; occasionally legible, often not, these words play a dual role as graphic imagery and as language, the perennial bearer of meanings, beliefs, intentions. The

calligraphy in one of Parlá's paintings in immediately recognizable, a signature of sorts, that spreads across all his work. There are three immediate sources for the calligraphy apparent in Parlá's work: the style writing specific to New York Subway art, especially the forms used in Miami during the early 1980s; Chinese sumiyo brush drawing; and Arabic calligraphy. These influences are combined into a distinctive script marked by flowing arcs, circles and a slope up and to the left. (the heritage of Parlá's style writing under the name 'Ease.')

To encounter language is to encounter purpose; in deciphering what has been written we enjoy the fantasy of communion with other's minds. All too often in looking at language we fail to see the visual dimension of the letters: their arrangement on the page, the structural composition created by blocks of text and the rhythm on letters themselves. To see "language" is different than seeing "picture," yet in encountering Parlá's works, these twin types of vision are invoked at once: we are forced to see language as image and image as language. This duplicity in Parlá's work is redolent of paradox. Consider the following:

[insert the Liar paradox here]

In this word-picture we find a simplified, "laboratory" version of the complexity his paintings invoke. This is the "Liar" illusion. It poises between the realms of image and text: both profile and word, it aspires as, Michel Foucault has noted, "to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to

name; to shape and to say, to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to say; to look and to read."[2] It poses the underlying problematic of viewing Parlá's works: to see them as image or as text, forces us to blot out the other potential—even if momentarily—in a shifting of relationships between reading and looking. We lose the possibility for comprehension when we reject this paradox in favor of a non-inflected understanding. If we choose to reject the superposition of image and text, structure and meaning, we resolve the paradox, but lose the ability to recognize this dynamic. This solution is equivalent to an interpretation that sees the "Liar" illusion as nothing but some black lines—neither face nor image.

Our understanding of the relationship between text and image requires a distinction between them. Reading forces us to attend to other things than the graphic form of words themselves. We interpret the world through a series of discrete choices: to see the "Liar" illusion as text, or as image determines how we will understand it. Our interpretation proceeds from a "lower level" of building blocks—the recognition of image and/as text. At each level of interpretation we find a paradox between the representation we see and our mental interpretation: interpreting it as text disputes the equally apparent profile, while the profile conflicts with our understanding it as a series of cursive letters. Each additional level we interpret as a "solution" (oscillating between one kind of seeing and another) simply increases the aggregate number of paradoxes. The initial paradox in the relationship between interpretation and

representation exists for each "level," even extending between "levels" themselves. The experience of looking at the "Liar" reveals the limits of language. (The choice of word is surely not an accident.) The oscillation between text and image can arise in relation to any written material, but become apparent only in special cases. The shifting of comprehension is especially important to the structure of Parlá's work because it conditions our experiences.

Interpretive difficulty is an experience particular to Parlá's work, becoming immediately apparent when paintings are encountered "live" rather than through the fundamentally transformative experience of seeing them in reproduction. Scale is crucial to this encounter since the works seen "live" are present in a different way than works seen as images, the transitions between one kind of seeing and another are felt more directly and specifically than when viewing reproductions. Nevertheless, the experience of instability remains a constant, the distinction a matter of degree and direct function of the presence of the encounter. But what is the nature of this "encounter" and what is it that we are encountering with these paintings? Parlá's concerns with adaptation and translation, expressed in the title of this particular exhibition, are appropriate to the interpretative difficulties posed by all his paintings. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has discussed this relationship:

> The very expression which is also a report of what is seen, is here a cry of recognition.
>
> What is the criterion of the visual experience?—The criterion?

> What do you suppose?
>
> The representation of 'what is seen.'
>
> The concept of a representation of what is seen, like that of a copy, is very elastic, and so together with it is the concept of what is seen. The two are intimately connected. (Which is not to say that they are alike.) [3]

The problem Wittgenstein describes is the encounter. The duality of image/language in Parlá's work pulls this moment of experience into the foreground, demanding acknowledgement when considering his work. This issue of encounter is specific to art. It is one of the concerns that has remained a constant since the first avant-gardes broke with the academies in the nineteenth century. Encounter is an apparent concern even in the ascetic denials that are at the heart of the Duchampian Readymades, Conceptual art, and their contemporary descendents who are informed by this ancestry. Parlá's paintings have a "there-ness" that is not just an effect of the particularities of their titles: each picture is a place unto itself—an excision that evokes the external reality of the city, and does so in a direct, immediate way. These pictures are not images of the places described by their titles, they are the places identified in the title. It is a significant difference, especially since the titles do not always refer to literal, physical locations, but the paintings are always a segment of reality brought into our space. It is this quality of encounter that vanishes with reproduction—the encounter not with an image but with a self-contained, independent reality.

Yet these are not readymades or found-objects, collages or photographs even though they may resemble them. They are not only language, even when language is their vehicle of presentation. Like all paintings, they are constructs, built over time in layers and assembled; however, their fabricated nature appears immanent. (This is the heritage of the avant-gardes.) In looking at these pieces, we see the history of their construction. Earlier layers are obscured, erased and written over. Only some of what is present is legible, (if that is the correct term, if legibility even has its normal meaning in the space of Parlá's work) , but these marks' status as language remains present even when the function of language as conveyor of meaning is denied. This is the palimpsest nature of these works: they are the history of their construction made apparent.

The transition between language and image is most apparent in the experience of encounter. Encountering as language, we read the words first, encountering as image, the presence of words transforms the painted surface from art object to actual city wall, from a picture in a gallery to a piece of reality transplanted into the space of exhibition. The duality of image/language mirrors the duality between painting and excised reality. We discover there is no gap between the two, or, more precisely, that the gap is within us, the viewer: it becomes present as we try to hold both views of the work before us together at the same moment. A frission occurs.

José Parlá's work can be divided into three groups: walls, diaries, and {pictures}. Each group shares characteristics, but has a specific thrust that enables a clear differentiation between them when we encounter these pictures "live." The particular oscillations of language and image unite all Parlá's paintings. Walls, the largest category of works, are the key to understanding the other two. These paintings are typically mural-sized, linked through their titles to specific places, often including collage and found objects, and are accumulations of tags, writing, textures, multiple marks and painterly incidents. [insert image of Conversations with Rotella 1] They are mural sized ("mural" means "wall" in Latin) , and often identified as "cityscapes" or as belonging to the landscape tradition. The distinction between a wall and a diary is both a matter of scale, degree of writing, and type of composition. Walls tend towards all-over composition, without a traditional "subject"; in contrast, diaries are multi-layered, heavily accumulative images filled-in with text; both are varieties of palimpsest, yet it is the diary that comes closest to the traditional meaning of one text written over another. [insert image of Stream of Consciousness] The third category of Parlá's painting, the {picture}, has many characteristics in common with both diary and wall, but is primarily defined by scale: it can repeat the forms and imagery of the other categories, but at a different scale—with the result that the painting has the same quality of fragmentation and dislocation

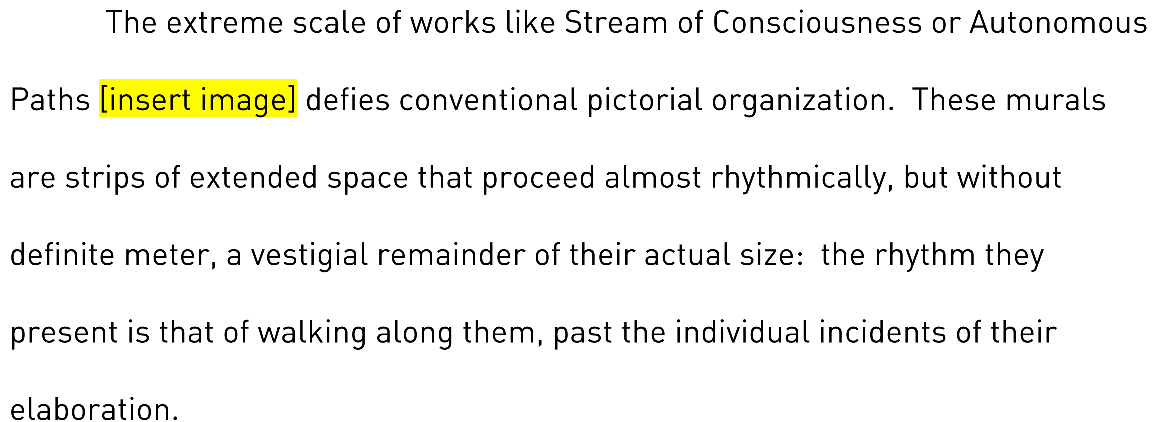
that Parlá's photographs have: the {pictures} remain within the conventions of traditional painting. They depict - the walls are.

Distinguishing between {pictures} and walls mediates their meaning. Because {pictures} remain comfortably within the historical paradigm of painting, they are immediately recognizable when encountered "live"; however, in reproduction the differences between {pictures} and walls disappears, suggesting that it is not a question of approach, but of scale that separates them. The transformations imposed by reproduction illuminate the political dimensions of these works: these begin from a destabilization of the distinction between art object and what it depicts.[4] The walls impose an encounter with reality, while the {pictures} show images of that reality. Aesthetic semblance (Schein) is attenuated by Parlá's walls because these paintings are what they depict: the scale is 1:1, forcing viewers into direct proximity with reality, rather than containing reality within the framing of the picture. Theorist Peter Burger explains:

> [Herbert] Marcuse outlines the global determination of art's function in bourgeois society, which is a contradictory one: on the one hand, it shows "forgotten truths" (thus it protests against a reality in which these truths have no validity); on the other, such truths are detached from reality through the medium of aesthetic semblance (Schein)—art thus stabilizes the very social conditions against which it protests.[5]

Parlá's walls escape the problem of resemblance in a Borges-like fashion: because the scale of the walls is the same as an actual wall (1:1) , they present a dual encounter. One is an encounter with the "segmented reality," the other is interpretative: brought up against a fragment of the city, viewers' engagement becomes active. They encounter the city directly without the mediations of transit through that normally conditions engagement with city walls. The street comes indoors, the motion past typical of our encounters with walls becomes a stationary before.

The extreme scale of works like Stream of Consciousness or Autonomous Paths [insert image] defies conventional pictorial organization. These murals are strips of extended space that proceed almost rhythmically, but without definite meter, a vestigial remainder of their actual size: the rhythm they present is that of walking along them, past the individual incidents of their elaboration.



Sculptor Robert Morris' observation that "the awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object"[6] introduces what critic Michael Fried calls "theatricality" into art. This theatricality is inherent to Parlá's working process:

> In my travels I have encountered a similar dialogue that takes place in most cities. I find compositions on surfaces of deteriorated walls, and remnants of construction markings. [. . .] I am using my imagination to capture the psychology of a segmented reality.

> These realities which are deposited into our subconscious everyday are the basis for a dialogue that goes mostly unnoticed. Once these "segmented realities" or images are transferred and converted into paintings they become a "memory document," a sort of time capsule for my experience in history.[7]

Parlá uses the term "segmented reality" in several distinct senses: as a fragment of the external world (as in a photograph) , as individual experience within that world, and as the traces left by our passage through the environment on that environment. The translation of these into painting creates the "memory document" of a place or concept; this aspect is explicitly diaristic. However, this statement reveals a key to the process of these works' creation: the assumption and performance of different roles, i.e. characters other than Parlá himself, who then mark the surface. It is a variety of solo performance-collaboration, a monologue delivered in visual form.

Parlá's work suggests a synthetic rereading of history—Abstract Expressionist painting reinterpreted through Minimalism—to recover the performative (thus theatrical) aspects of Abstract Expressionism: one needs only to think of Jackson Pollock dancing around and across his canvases to see the "big ego" gesture of action painting as a specific performance by the artist. In the case of Parlá's work, each marking or writing is simply one moment in a series of discrete, individual performances. This is what Parlá's statement that, he "creates the history", actually means. Each picture is a document of its own

production, as Parlá has said, "The theme [of a painting] is generally about the layers and transparencies that create history, erase history, or invite the viewer to see different parts of the meaning that is partly hidden. Ever since the age of nine I have been painting on walls around the city."[8] The work begins as the wall against which there are marks. The organization is de facto, before the picture begins.

Throughout the twentieth century, the avant-gardes all sought to "take it to the streets": meaning take art out of its cathedral-mausoleum and integrate it into the reality of everyday life; this process can also be seen in reverse—as the taking of everyday life and integrating it into art. Guy Debord and the Situationalist International's concept of détournement built on the insight that radical change required rupturing the distinctions between art and life, towards a "mutual destruction and fulfillment of art."[9] The former process creates militancy; the latter, the flaneur, the voyeur, the tourist. It is the response to the quotidian, everyday situations and encounters through an aestheticizing lens that defines one aspect of the avant-garde program, whose origins lie specifically with the invention of Modernism in the 1860s. Upon reaching a critical mass of humanity, far in excess of the preceding centuries, the newly industrial European cities, with their embedded aristocracies, gave birth to twins. One dimension was specifically cultural, revolutionary, a process of elision and erasure of traditions, redefining of class and social standing, and most importantly, an intellectual transformation required by the ever increasing complexity of

technology and the skills required to function in the world of technopoly. The other dimension accompanied and contained the cultural through continuously evolving and expanding buildings and roads—the city changed from being a spatially and temporally limited confine into the modern network of transportation, communication, and interconnection that has drawn a few cities close together at the same time as their figurative distance from the countries which contain them has increased.[10]

Yet unlike the utopias imagined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these cities are invisibly stratified, supported at a distance through the arteries of networked industry: they are the head of an all but imaginary body that grips the globe in an unseen embrace drawing everything together into the networked city.[11] This condition is familiar; it is one specific and unique to contemporary industrialism. The 'style' this type of city promotes reflects a synthetic mode, as historian Renato Poggioli observed about an earlier stage of the networked cities' emergence:

> Precisely by being styleless, this type of civilization prefers an eclectic style, where what is technical ability in an aesthetic sense joins with technical ability in a practical sense. Such a style takes shape by the synthesis (better, by syncretic fusion) of traditional academic and realistic forms, regulated by the wholly modern taste for photographic reproductions.[12]

For Poggioli's avant-garde, this taste for synthesis was to be resisted by artists; however, Poggioli is writing at an early time with different values—instead of synthesis being something to resist, it is the specific heritage of Post-Modernism that this synthesis is something to embrace. It is a necessary precondition for an artist to be contemporary; the false opposition of avant-garde and realist approaches collapses in Parlá's work—there is a precarious balance between being and being-made. Burger's observations that

> George Lukàcs sees the task of the realist (as opposed to the avant-gardiste) as two-fold: "first, the uncovering and artistic shaping of these connections (i.e. the connections within social reality) and secondly and inseparably from the former, the artistic covering of connections that have been worked out abstractly—the sublation of the abstraction." What Lukàcs calls 'covering' here is nothing other than the creation of the appearance (Schein) of nature. The organic work of art seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardiste work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact.[13]

The city presents a duality—both 'nature' and 'artifact'—it grows in an organic fashion, yet is simultaneously a construct, built over time and elaborated by human action. Parlá's walls make a transition from being depictions of walls to actual walls that grow and develop, as do their counterparts on the streets. The

early avant-garde's desires to "take it to the streets" is an expression of the failure Burger describes; unable to resolve the paradox posed by the transfer of reality into the gallery space, avant-gardes have attempted to redeploy into the street. It is the realm of the aesthetic that prevents the transfer of reality into the gallery space. Graffiti art in the early 1980s attempted to escape the paradox, but failed simply because it treated the graffiti as a separable form—aesthetic—thus removing the political confrontation this work would require if encountered in the street. Graffiti separated from the wall becomes art object rather than political statement.

Parlá's walls retain their political charge precisely because they do not pretend to be natural objects (Schein)—they are capable of being seen aesthetically (as is most everything)—instead they are what they appear to be: walls with writing, pieces of posters, etc. Unlike the first collages of Picasso and Braque, there is no contrast between 'reality fragments' glued onto the canvas and the 'abstraction' of painterly technique: Parlá's calligraphic language occupies a different category than painterly mark because it is not simply gesture, but symbolic carrier of meaning. Where in Cubist collage the contrast results from two different types of graphic depiction, in Parlá's work this contrast does not develop because the collaged elements and the written elements do not occupy the same interpretative categories and so exist in entirely different conceptual fields; this is the same gulf that separates the two interpretations of the "Liar" illusion. Language and image are mutually exclusive

interpretations, which is what enables Parlá's walls to avoid falling into aesthetic semblance: here he creates actual walls rather than depictions that happen to resemble walls.

The issue is specifically one of presence. It is a concept defined by Fried as "Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it seriously—and when the fulfillment of that demand consists in simply being aware of it and, so to speak, acting accordingly."[14] The presence of the paintings comes from their non-art character: they are not so much composed as excerpted, like readymades and commodity sculpture, they are selections of reality rather than art objects. These oppositions are crucial to their political dimension: whether overtly political in content or not, the walls are political through their category violation—they break down the distinction between art space and real-world space, forcing a confrontation with the signifiers of urban poverty and decay inside the contemporary networked city. Within this realm there is a continuous flux between entropy and restoration. Reconstruction continues as a barrier against the passage of time. The walls that Parlá presents are dispatches from it.

The avant-garde is believed to have come to an end, according to art history, in the early 1970s, right at the moment José Parlá was born in Miami,

meaning that he necessarily grew up in the aftermath of these movements' declarations, successes and failures—surrounded by the heritage of attempts to remake the city in their own image. Every avant-garde had an inherent program of civic development, expressed through a conception of how art and life interact. The second category of Parlá's painting, the diaries, assimilates another dimension of this heritage, since as semoitician Umberto Eco has observed, "Any difference between knowledge of the world (understood naively as a knowledge derived from an extratextual experience) and intertextual knowledge has practically vanished."[15] Thus the close resemblance between the walls, diaries and {pictures} is significant. It posits the space of the city as both figuratively biographical (in the internal sense of remembered events, personal and public) and literally (in the sense of having one's biography actually written on the walls of the city) . Parlá's description of these works as "Memory Documents" thus has a specific valence:

> I call my paintings 'Memory Documents' because they develop from remembered fragments of places I have been. I am not only using paint to create my paintings, but I am also collecting bits of paper from walls, old newspapers, chunks of materials from the street or subway stations to reuse as collage onto my own surfaces and rework them until the colors of mould, rust and deterioration are right for the composition. The process could take weeks or months.[16]

There are ample precedents for this approach to painting—Kurt Schwitters, the Surrealists, Robert Rauchenberg's combines, Allen Kaprow's happenings—yet in each of these earlier cases, the result resembles established conceptions of art, while Parlá's work does not. The role of surface and excision of reality in this work is the crucial difference between it and its most direct ancestors in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Archaeological strata are the best parallel, where one culture sits atop another resembling a layer cake. It is a conscious relationship, one that seeks to synthesize multiple cultures as overlays (layers) within a singular construct. In this way, these paintings become indexes of cultural relationship and adaptation, and it is tempting to tie this construct to Parlá's personal biography; however, to do so would be more than just an example of the intentional fallacy,[17] it would be a trivialization of what these works mean to globalized culture.

These paintings present an aggressive synthesis not only of oppositional tendencies of art, most visible in the superposition of Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism's conceptions of aesthetic space, but also of different cultures elite/street. The operative paradigm for this synthesis has been called "semiotic disobedience" by law professor Sonia K. Katyal.[18] Parlá's walls belong to a contemporary practice that uses

> appropriation and occupation of intellectual, tangible, or even bodily property. I call these recent artistic practices examples of 'semiotic disobedience' because they often involve the conscious and deliberate re-creation of property through appropriative and expressive acts that consciously risk violating the law that governs intellectual or tangible property. ([from a footnote] This article defines semiotic disobedience to include a number of approaches to visual, actual and verbal representation, including vandalizing, subverting and "recoding" certain kinds of intellectual, real government, and private property for public use and expression.)[19]

Collage always already is an example of "semiotic disobedience"; yet it is not in itself the primary means Katyal describes. Her conception is addressed towards graffiti and other kinds of "culture jamming" that are deployed directly as political speech. But it is the expansion of this definition to include intellectual property and "recoding," which describe Parlá's art and the intellectual project of his work as a whole. Consider Temporary Autonomous Zone, deeply marked with swirls of calligraphy, and a single sheet of poster stating "US TROOPS OUT NOW," torn and ragged, it dominates the painting. This is an "official" statement contained within a network of other statements, "unofficial" but present with equal urgency. They subvert the authority of the official statement, making the political position it espouses but one among others. The ambivalence emergent in this work is deeply threatening to established orders—both of political

domination and political resistance—because it subverts the messaging codes of each. This painting suggests that there may be more at stake politically than just the message of the moment. Individual wars end; the "now" of the poster is always already in the past.

Language has a special, privileged role in these works; it is an essential component of the visual-textual surface, and through the sign-posting Parlá employs through his exhibition titles: Memory Documents, Contemporary Palimpsests, Cityscapes, The Mystic Writing Pad, Pirate Utopias, Autonomous Paths, Personal Alphabet—each of these specifically relates to his intellectual program. Like the titles of his paintings, these exhibition titles describe aspects of a theoretical framework that is operative throughout. Some describe general conceptual tools that find specific analogs in his paintings. "The Mystic Writing Pad" is from a short article by Sigmund Freud[20]; "Contemporary Palimpsests" links the written aspects of his pictures and their layered construction to the mediaeval palimpsest practice of overwriting one document with another, different one; "Pirate Utopias" explicitly ties his paintings to semiotic disobedience—and the utopian desires that lurk just beneath the surface of demands for "more democracy in culture" (as Katyal has noted) .

Paintings may repeat the titles of exhibitions, giving a similar, although more specific dimension to this conceptual framework: "Autonomous Paths," a mural work running 8 x 48 feet in length. "Antagonizer, Opportunist, Propaganda Abuser, Culture Vulture, Booster, Seducer" is a painting whose shape resembles

a document, stella or other legal tract. “Introduction to New Conditions” instantly suggests an essay or treatise, while “Reckoning with Time”, and “Los Sitios, Habana”, are tied to specific places. “Carrying Across a Subculture’s Context” and “Chinatown Chronicle” are diaries, their texts presenting secret chronicles of their subjects. Other paintings, “The Secret Theatre - Art and its audience disappear” and “Verses from the Subversive,” make the recoding of established traditions explicit. These works require continuously shifting interpretations from verbal to visual to recognize the intellectual program in operation. These images force both interpretations into a superposed state, simultaneously co extant, but mutually exclusive. This situation is not simply ambiguity, rather it is the necessary form the political dimensions require. There is no singular meaning present, no single voice “speaking” as author. What emerges is a multiplex of different sets of coded meaning: the visual, the written, the titular, the theoretical and the political. Each retains its independence, (as they exist in different conceptual spaces) , but requires the others to become legible.

In working through the oppositions that defined much of twentieth century art, Parlá proposes what is essentially a political question: How does contemporary art relate to its own history and tradition? By assuming resolutions to the conflicts between the abstract and the representational, the struggle between Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism, the opposition between Modernism and Post-Modernism, these images suggest the emergence

of a new type of historical matrix, one that is not equivalent to traditions of the past, but remains recognizably within their framework. Historical oppositions disappear precisely because the terms of their opposition are recoded not as incompatible, but rather as simultaneous, shifting frames of reference which act as alternatives during different moments of encounter. This contingency of interpretation is a symptom of the recoding process.

The conceptual framework Parlá employs is anthropocentric: it is concerned with human engagement where the city itself functions as the repository of a long-running dialogue about society. That this dialogue flows through channels which are not necessarily condoned by society—as various forms of semiotic disobedience—is the inherent political dimension to the dialogue. Often, it takes the form of forbidden speech, violating the conditions under which dialogue normally proceeds. The writing and other 'scrawl' that emerges in Parlá's paintings, photographs and in the cities themselves, as well as all the other posters, advertisements and detritus collected in these pictures is the site and the form of this dialogue. To say that "marginalized" groups lack a voice signifies a failure to understand what is happening in the environment of the cities themselves. Because it occupies spaces outside authorized zones and challenges established authorities right not only to speak but to exist, Parlá's deployment of semiotic disobedience is simply a continuation of his earlier work on actual walls in Miami.

In considering the role of Parlá's photography, the depiction of time and city as sites of conjoined personal-public biography illuminates the dynamic visible between photograph and painting. Parlá has explained his photographs as analogous to the paintings:

> I see walls as a perfect point of departure to take inspiration from. Also, I am absorbing all things in contemporary culture. Walls display a psychological feeling of cities or places that I travel through and I am mostly attracted to walls and surfaces that are deteriorated and marked. There is a sense of urgency in people's marks; in deterioration, there is neglect.[21]

The accumulation of marks and erasure that attract Parlá, and which appear in his photographs, are the historical process itself. There is no single author of the urban, instead it emerges from the collective action (and accumulation) of many layers over time. Parlá's photographs insist the world is composed of alternative visions and understandings, what he calls "segmented realities." French theorist Michel Foucault has theorized both the idea of "segmented realities" and their emergence as semiotic disobedience:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because

> they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to but also opposite one another) to "hang together."[22]

The heterotopia is crucial to understanding Parlá's work: they are an encapsulation of the accumulation visible in every city, presented within the gallery space as a segment of reality. As is visible in his photographs, the heterotopia emerges autonomously from the interaction of Parlá's discrete markings and performances before and upon the painted surface. In recreating the interactive effects which emerge on city walls, the appearance of the heterotopia should not come as a surprise: it is the democratic multitude Shapiro desired for a contemporary "history painting."

The same selection process that produces Parlá's photographs enables the creation of city walls in his paintings. It is not a matter of imitating his photographs. His process is an extension and elaboration of the growth of a wall, but within the studio. The jumble of styles, marks, comments, and decay apparent in the photographs, demonstrates the collective action of time and humanity passing the walls Parlá documents. The translation of this reality from photography to painting returns to the performative and requires a theatrical dimension—the artist as "actor" in the sense of theater—assuming different guises and then writing on the wall surface as those characters might, and "actor" in the sense of political action, of one who acts rather than standing by.

The heritage of earlier avant-gardes is an implicit presence in these paintings: they balance between visual experience and mental encounter; the push-pull of image-language is also the push-pull of planes and fields of light, darkness and color. The significance of Parlá as the author-artist of these works becomes most readily apparent in his watercolors where the expanse of the page is nearly empty except where he has written. [insert image of Parallel Memories, here] Within his words are explosions of color; the city walls literally emerge through the brush strokes of each sign. Other smaller gestures and writing mingle and overlay the watercolor, yet remain distinct. It is a conjuring of spaces contained by his use of language. This effect is alchemical—word magic—and owes something to the calligrams of Apollonaire and to the graphomancy of Islamic manuscripts where names of animals are also their pictures, as with the "Liar" illusion.

These watercolors occupy a unique position in Parlá's work. While they are definitely {pictures}, at the same time, they are not simply depictions of walls. These pieces are the least densely layered of his works, and consequently are the most readily legible. Their titles appear directly at bottom center, suggesting calligraphic subtitles in a foreign film: In Search of Lost Memories, Faz – a recollection of style, Parallel memories, Record 1988. These titles

continue his concern with memory and documentation, but the resulting paintings clearly are a personal iconography that remains hermetic.

These pictures are immediately recognizable as “memory documents”: they are both concerned with remembering and the recording of the past, but at the same time, they also demonstrate, in explicit terms, one of the central tenets of Parlá’s conceptual framework: the idea that cities are literally documents of memory for their residents. Calenture defines this relationship. Memories are evoked from fragments suddenly, transforming the passage through the city. The opposition of text to image reaches its apogee with these watercolors: text literally is the image.

However much the act of reading is implicated in the form of these paintings, the frission of that engagement also forces a visual response. To return to the “Liar” illusion, the type of recoding employed here begins as a categorical mistake: the illusion shifts because the category it belongs to changes from image to language and back again. The same shifting of categories is what makes semiotic disobedience work. This approach works through a subversion that disrupts the established boundaries of interpretation, forcibly occupying spaces that are unsanctioned and invest the object of their engagement with “subversive meanings; simultaneously they decrypt them, rendering their seductions impotent.”[23]

Miami, Florida, where Parlá began working, is a product of a similar, continuous transformative process: always in flux, balanced precariously

between construction and a rapacious environment that quickly overtakes any construction (however well maintained) . Miami is a place where time moves rapidly and yet remains stationary. It is a place where what would normally be the unseen effects of time become visible overnight. It is not accidental that so many of Parlá's paintings bear titles referencing locations in Miami: this is not mere biography, or diary—although there are aspects of both to it—it is a specific depiction of time and the city.

Parlá's work is mercurial, absorbing influences and metamorphosing as time progresses—all symptoms of a vital intellectual framework that is still in the process of expanding and consolidating its developments so it can move forward.

The philosophical considerations evoked by the experience of looking at Parlá's paintings demonstrates a position on human culture and civilization. By looking at the work, and reflecting on it through the lens of our past experiences we discover our interpretations are not limited to the narrow range of precedents and immediate conventions of art. Instead, we are forcibly required to engage with our everyday experiences in navigating through the human landscape of the city. The political dimensions of the work begin to assert themselves only when we acknowledge that our everyday experiences are different in kind, meaning

and intensity from what art provides—the rarified experiences of art and the programmatic experiences of everyday life are incompatible. The frission of text and image familiar from any encounter with Parlá's paintings is simply one of a series of dualities stretching throughout all aspects of his work.

The political failures of the historical avant-gardes critiqued by Marcuse, Lukàcs and Burger all originate with the idea of an autonomous aesthetic, separate from social function; yet it is precisely this social function that is the omnipresent subject of Parlá's work. His view proposes cities as an aesthetic, documentary process encoding the memories and political concerns of its occupants. Paradoxically, this social function for art in Parlá's work is both invisible and displayed in every work; it appears in his documentary photographs of actual city walls. It is apparent in the durational process—the history of a work—rather than in the forms we find on display. A critique of society is an ambiguous potential to all these images through their deployment of/as semiotic disobedience. A paradox ensues.

The critical dimension of these politics requires a relinquishment of authorial control and status by the artist—Parlá cannot be the author of the works—but at the same time, it is the nature of this type of political statement to be compromised, conflicted. As Lukàcs has noted, the paradox for political art is the distinction between aesthetic resemblance (Schein) and reality, but in considering the work of José Parlá, there is a different dynamic emerging than resemblance; reality. The problem for Parlá is the opposition between the

collective and the individual, a problematic issue that applies equally to the actual walls that inspire Parlá's work. Since no collective group exists beyond the additive efforts of its individual members, it can be subject to the same limitations no matter how many participants there are—thus the quantity of individuals engaged in writing on a wall is unimportant. There is no reason not to accept the political dimensions of work produced by a singular artist (who adopts multiple guises in making a work) any more than there is not to reject the collective actions of an always already limited group. The issues raised by such political objections that the "group" is necessarily exclusive and thus limited ignore the necessary and inherent limits applied to any group, no matter how large.

However, the veil of nature—the creation of a natural appearance (Schein)—which traps aesthetic objects in a position where their forms cannot directly engage in political action may also be a product of exhibition in gallery spaces, rendering any political action by any artist who remains within that space moot. But, the gallery space is not actually hermetically differentiated from reality, there are multiple opportunities for movement between these spaces, and it is this "messiness" of lived experience that fosters the hope for a political function for artwork. If we accept the idea that any object moved into a gallery setting and called "art" must forever surrender its relationship to reality, then there can be no politically engaging art (and we would expect there to be no consideration of art by politics). This belief that the realm of the aesthetic is a

specialized type of hyper-space that lies beyond the ability to interact outside its realm is readily recognizable as fantasy; such a view is contradicted by the history of the past several decades of "culture war," not to mention the role of art in propaganda. Aesthetics clearly do have some form of agency beyond and within the realm of the gallery. When we consider politics in Parlá's work, we are left with a simple question: to what extent can we recognize an alternative paradigm for art and politics than the established dialectic of false consciousness and irrelevant, forgotten truths?

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