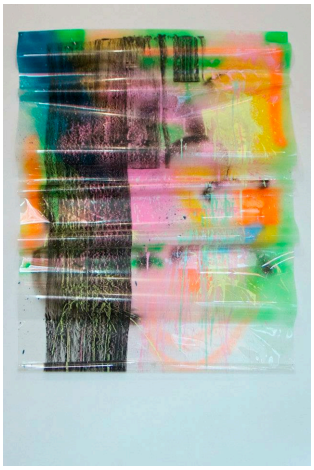
# On Provisionality

By Dave Colangelo
and Alex Fraser

Exhibition Essay for
*Everything and Nothing*
May 4-7, 2012, at N/A
Curated by Michael Vickers



You Could Bet Against Us But Why Burn Money, 2012
Michael Vickers
Spray paint, Enamel paint, India Ink, Chalk on Acetate
44' x 68'
Installation view

*The provisionality of their work is an index of the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting.*
– Raphael Rubenstein, *Art in America,* 2009

In his two-part series on "Provisional Painting," American critic Raphael Rubinstein rounds up a number of painters whose work he describes as purposefully "casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling." Rubinstein posits that these artists set abandonment and negation against the twin spectres of virtuosity and permanence that, despite the challenges posed by the historical avant-garde, continue to influence contemporary painting. Some critics in recent years have called for a return to the aesthetic, to an emphasis on the wholeness and sublimity of the experience of the artwork; to slick, figurative painting and practiced virtuosity. The hope is for a second coming of the affective power of the handmade image that will stop its viewers in his or her tracks; to images that will wager in an attention that is, however, in short supply these days. The four artists in *Everything and Nothing* address this proposition, and render it impossible. Instead they call it up and then consciously reject it. Michael Vickers' paintings are executed quickly and disrupt long-held expectations of finitude or polish, Oliver Pauk's photographs of motel rooms are emptied out and ravaged; these works operate in a vocabulary of disruption, dashed hopes, and a new order of the day. They reference the language of finitude—of modernist painting, the stubborn referentiality of photography, and the filmic text—and deem those strictures not only expanded, but irrelevant.

To understand this criticality after the end of modernism, we might return to its beginnings. In 1876, reflecting on the painting of that now-great modern master, Édouard Manet, Émile Zola bemoaned the fact that his friend was "unfortunately satisfied with unfinished work." Echoing his early critics, Zola spoke of Manet's refusal to produce a finished canvas. Instead, so they said, he simply stopped short of the process and submitted an *ébauche,* or working sketch, as finished product.

Manet's *ébauches* were, in hindsight of course, seen to react to and reflect the increasing industrialization of the modern world; the multiplication of traces, from the daily newspaper to the fleeting impressions left on those strolling subjects and accelerated passengers in cities and the rail networks that connected them. A sketch seems more than appropriate to represent a new world of ever changing vistas and spectacular displays that had the ability to both capture and confound the attention of the painter of modern life.

Yet the question remains. How, and why, does abandonment and provisionality operate in art after the long history that began with Manet? After the so-called high modernism of Abstract Expressionism—of large scale colour field and "drip" paintings— in the 1940s and '50s and then painting's subsequent "death" that directed art towards the hybrid and conceptual "anti-aesthetic" of the '60s and '70s? Why do the artists in *Everything and Nothing* reference the provisional, the abandoned, and the cast-off today? In short, why now?

*Beach Motel rm #31,* 2011
Oliver Pauk
c-print
12'x18'

The unfinished, dashed-off, and seemingly empty works in *Everything and Nothing* obviously exist in a very different time and place than Manet's 19th-century Paris, both in relation to technology and the history of painting. As much as they might share with the historical avant-garde an acceptance of the limits of figuration, they exist in an environment where the image has never been treated more casually. Whereas Manet's paintings may have been half-finished, these works remain suspended somewhere between a beginning and an absolutely indefinite end. After the Internet, every image is unfinished. A provisional painting, a remixed video, or the photograph of an abandoned motel room are entirely appropriate when the landscape is virtual and ephemeral, refreshing itself faster than a multitude of screens can ever keep track of, and certainly faster than any painter, or even photographer, can ever hope to account for. Is it any surprise then that these works highlight the "tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling"?

Thus, these works do indeed have their place in an historical, cultural, technological, and artistic lineage. Their provisionality renders them commensurate with a period eye that not only views imagery in the form of art hung on walls, but as digital images and self-effacing surface effects on screens. The works in *Everything and Nothing* exist as art works and simultaneously cancel their status as such.

And so what does it mean to inhabit these conditions? Might these traces, always provisional and always temporarily instantiated in code, light, protocols, and networks, evoke the feeling of being part of something larger, yet something necessarily undefined, and unfinished; a moving target, something always in process—like crowdsourcing, or the "occupy movement"—on the knife-edge of nothing and everything? And why do we need painting and photography to show us this at all?

Perhaps in the end, it is not only the weight of the history of both painting and photography, but of the definitive and declarative power garnered from their existence in an exhibition such as this that suspends these works between a confirmed evocation of our times and an acceptance that they are ultimately unable to embody them. As such, these works consciously occupy a precarious position; they may either kill our curiosity or propel it into the hysterical sublime.

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