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The Knowledge We Produce: Pato Hebert's *Inordinate Coordinates*

by Sylvia Sukop

Standing beside a public drinking fountain in the bustling third-floor corridor of the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, I overhear this warmly shouted exchange between two students rushing in opposite directions.

> *—Hi, how are you?*
> *—I'm fine! I'm sorry I don't have time to talk now.*
> *—It's okay, I'm in a hurry too!*

Their brief dialogue serves as the perfect aural counterpart to the vast grid of color photographs covering the wall before me. The images, shot from a low angle, capture delegates at an international AIDS conference passing through a carpeted concourse between sessions. Only legs and feet are visible, often blurred by movement. The sheer number and diversity of feet suggest differences in gender, age, race, class, and culture, but simultaneously convey a sense of collective energy and common purpose. High-speed hustle for an urgent cause.

Now turning to face the white wall behind me, I read these words in an elegant gray typeface above the water fountain, realizing only later that they form a Haiku:

> *Normally I rush*
> *distracted by thoughts and tasks*
> *but not so today*

Such quietly arresting juxtapositions occur are at the heart of the 2010 CIIS exhibition *Pato Hebert: Inordinate Coordinates*.

For Hebert, a Los Angeles-based artist and activist whose work in HIV prevention began in 1994 in the Mission District neighborhood that is home to CIIS, his show marks a return to familiar territory, not only in terms of place but also in terms of theme—a continuing exploration of what he calls "the power and soulfulness of our bodies, the knowledge people produce together when we move."

Deftly organized by CIIS arts curator Deirdre Visser, the exhibition brings together several bodies of Hebert's work at the intersection of photography, performance, and sculpture along with a series of spatial interventions unique to CIIS that the artist describes as "site-responsive" rather than merely site-specific. These vinyl text pieces

infiltrate the building's hallways, windows, stairwells, and elevators, and were developed by Hebert mindful of those who would be engaging with them on a daily basis—the school's students and faculty, and neighborhood residents.

If architecture is a metaphor for the social body, Hebert makes carefully considered "incisions" into it. Like a graffiti artist, he marks and disrupts the building's surfaces but is at the same time deeply respectful of its inhabitants.

"There's the 'spaceship landed from outer space' way of presenting art," he observes. "But most of mine is more the notion, 'I've been invited into this room as a guest.' It's a tricky political-ethical dance."

Hebert is an artist who loves to dance, both literally and figuratively, and he does so with extraordinary grace and subtlety, whether solo or in collaboration with an institution like CIIS.

Viewers' experience of the work begins even before they enter the building. Thirteen shiny gold letters fill thirteen large windows at street level. The muscular, masculine font, aggressively slanted—Hebert dubs it his "vroom" font—seems more suited to the world of race cars than higher education. Equally unexpected and not immediately legible are the words they spell out: *debt a dire ruse.* In the tradition of Jenny Holzer's *Aphorisms,* the phrase interrupts a public space with pointed social commentary that also leaves room for interpretation. For Hebert, it gets at notions of allure, impatience, and acceleration, all of which can lead to unhealthy imbalance—personal and collective, spiritual and financial.

On entering the building, one encounters more words, much smaller in scale, on the glass front door. Hebert has inserted two easy-to-miss phrases alongside the standard institutional admonishment that smoking is prohibited within 20 feet of the lobby entrance. The first phrase is legible from outside, the second from inside.

The building inhales
The building exhales

Approaching the double bank of elevators, one sees the artist himself in a photographic self-portrait laminated on the elevator doors. It's a confusing image at first, a man wearing a strange optical contraption on his head with moveable goggles and mirrors. The contraption itself turns out to be *Diálogo*: *Óculos*, an object created in 1968 by pioneering Brazilian conceptual artist Lygia Clark. She designed it for two "participants" to wear to look at each other. Hebert's self-portraits seem to offer a similar invitation: let's really *see* each other, let's use all our eyes, all our tools of perception.

Numerous variations of Hebert's self-portrait are dispersed among the interior and exterior of the school's elevators.

The stairwell is another transitional space where text pieces only reveal themselves through the movement of the visitor's body—and even then, only if the person is paying attention. As I slowly descended the stairwell I made a point to stop and contemplate the five phrases Hebert inscribed on the walls, one per floor, a kind of architectural poem that can be read either forward or backward; but I passed at least one man on his way up whose gaze was fixed instead on the glowing screen of his iPhone.

> *no longer a nagging sense that connection is ever elsewhere*
> *an honesty that opens space and nourishes courage*
> *inviting us each to an excellence not dependent on exceptionalism*
> *sharing a communication reciprocal if sometimes still asymmetrical*
> *the syncopation of our movements finds us here once again*

Hebert himself admits to a degree of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and practices meditation to become more present and focused. He also acknowledges that the mere proximity of bodies does not necessarily mean connection. Not only does he accept the fugitive nature of attention and connection in contemporary life, he has made them the animating subject of his work.

"I don't go for the spectacle, where the work is the primary focus," he explains. "Art in a dynamic environment like CIIS is different from 'destination art' in a gallery. Here people have multiple exposures to the work and it requires a willingness on my part to have some of the work go unseen the first eight or ten times that someone passes it."

For Hebert, the one time that person finally tunes in is absolutely crucial to the "activation" and "completion" of the work.

From a distance, Hebert's *Tocado* photographs (2005-06) look like abstract paintings, gestural sweeps and scatterings of color. But moving closer to the work you see traces of footprints and realize that these large-scale images document the aftermath of a "private dance" carried out in Hebert's studio. Inspired by the use of baby powder on house club dance floors, he sprinkled ground spices and chalk onto large sheets of paper and danced on it, moving to music, to football games, to simple silence.

Tocado, like the series *Trying to Catch Your Breath* (Hebert's photographs of his own breath suspended in the cold night air), is a life-affirming manifestation of the artist's existence, yet it also embodies a mournful absence—the artist himself is gone. As in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's empty bed photographs and beaded curtain sculptures, traces of movement, of a passing presence, are all that remains.

The second-floor corridor dead-ends at a fire escape alongside plate glass windows with views onto neighboring buildings. Here, away from the main circulation routes through the building, one reaches what might be considered end of the show. To the right: vinyl text on the windows addresses Hebert's ambivalence and struggle around "working in institutions without being institutionalized." To the left: a single photograph is tacked to the wall, unframed, taken, it turns out, not in San Francisco but in Hebert's neighborhood

back in Los Angeles. Silhouetted against a pastel sunset sky—bright peach and pink fading to dark blue—an aging TV antenna, artifact of a bygone era, resembles a giant comb with missing teeth. Rickety yet strangely monumental, the antenna, after many decades, continues to do its job as a receiver.

I see this photograph as another self-portrait, keyed to another low-tech contraption, offering one more invitation to get past our limitations—our ambivalence, our haste, our fear, our self-centeredness—to slow down, pay attention, be receptive. For the world is constantly, inordinately communicating with us. We just need to listen.