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By Catlin Moore

## Conclusion to the Big Ideas: An Interview with Alon Levin

Modernity—in all its West-centric incarnations—has been debated, deliberated and disputed since the last feudal lord packed it in. Baudelaire lambasted the arbitrary parameters that dictate “advanced” civilization; Machiavelli’s antecedents celebrated them. The very notion of a “modern” world results in a perpetual discourse on the factors that prescribe it. Within the walls of Ambach & Rice’s new Los Angeles gallery, the dialogue persists with Alon Levin’s staggering solo exhibition, *Conclusion to the Big Ideas*, a collection of insightful works supplemented by the artist’s publication, *Modernity in Very General Terms*, 2011. Through its meticulous scrutiny of power structures, capricious rules, and sociological myth, Levin’s work accentuates the irrational aspects of so-called rationality. And yes, he’s privy to a bit of satire. *DailyServing* contributor Catlin Moore recently interviewed Alon Levin about his work.



Installation view, courtesy of Ambach & Rice.

**Catlin Moore:** Let's start with the book, *Modernity in Very General Terms*. This piece spans the course of ten years' worth of writing and research for you, and also serves as a tutorial for your exhibition currently on view at Ambach & Rice in Los Angeles, *Conclusion to the Big Ideas*. For those unfamiliar with your work, how are the concepts in the book incarnated in the exhibition, or are they? Is this a relationship you have forged in previous bodies of work?

**Alon Levin:** I wouldn't really call the book a tutorial, it is more of a collection of notes to myself. I made the book before I made the work for the show, and I included the book to serve similarly in the context of the exhibition: as a companion piece that is on the one hand a work in and of itself, but that at the same time provides a kind of background to the rest of the exhibition.

**CM:** Some sections of the book are more minimal than others. For example, "An Introduction to Europolis" consists of incredible detail, empirical evidence and formulas, while "The Object As Never Seen Before" is more allusive. Why the variation in presentation, and how does that manifest in the tangible artwork?

**AL:** All the texts and works within the book were originally made with different intentions. Some segments were written to myself, some to friends, some for publication, and still others as works [of art] in and of themselves. "An Introduction to Europolis" was a work that was published in *dot dot dot* in 2004, while "The Object As Never Seen Before" was part of a reader that accompanied an installation in 2010. Since the book was not written at once or in any linear way, it is as fragmented and seemingly under construction as the rest of the work in the exhibition. Both the written and the physical work range from the severely abstract to the absolutely concrete, while dealing all the while with whatever issues are of interest to me. In that sense, they don't seem so at odds with one another to me. They are two poles of a language that sometimes clash and sometimes merge.

[...] This made possible daily incommensurable quantities, in particular, of the golden ratio—practical geometry in conformity with methods of working and made think undisturbed by a spiritual philosophy, but still, after all, a labour of craftsmen. The result was, first, precision—clear ideas and exact numerical calculations; and in consequence too and less likely for comparison—figures that could not be calculated, and a growing taste for simple ratios."

I see straight away that trying to match the notes diagram with the circular form in position one o'clock won't work. The notes are too irregular compared to the symmetry and equality of the circular forms constructed of four equal triangles.

But I think of another formal method to examine the system: placing all the circular forms constructed of four equal triangles on top of each other and observing how their intersection points connect. Maybe this could illustrate how the system works. I first place the two o'clock circle on the one o'clock circle.

Not much has happened. A skewed symmetry with a big hole in the middle. I position three o'clock circle on top too.

The left and the right sides are now connected on the bottom. Three and four o'clock have joined seven o'clock on the left, and nine and ten o'clock have joined six o'clock on the right, closing the circle on one side. But I still can't see where this is taking me. I continue with four o'clock.

Still, there is no connection between two and three o'clock to eleven and twelve o'clock, or to the other times on the clock. The topside remains open, refusing to complete a full symmetry. Also, only six and seven o'clock don't connect on the bottom. I wonder if it has anything to do with the sun—maybe the reflection of the sun at the times of day. I decide to add new parameters: as a compass, twelve o'clock will be North, six o'clock South, and three and nine o'clock East and West. I proceed by overlaying five o'clock.

Two, three, eleven and twelve o'clock now connect to the rest, but still not between themselves. East and West still do not connect to North and South, but the cycle continues and the circle now has a centre point: North to South and East to West. But the only thing really worth noting so far is a consecutive semi-symmetrical cycle. If it were to become a tube at this point I would call it *See Arise See Descend*, or, less poetically, *See, Do it My Way*. Six o'clock is a half, two quarters; if there is a pattern surely it should be apparent by now.

But six is still not symmetrical: East and West do not mirror. The two connecting lines between two o'clock to twelve and ten o'clock do not

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connect to their opposites in the East. Ten o'clock does not connect to one and three o'clock to construct the full symmetry. But the asymmetry feels like an exception to the system. East and West connect in the North, but still twelve and one o'clock are not connected to each other as six and seven are in the South. I decide to examine seven, eight and nine o'clock together as a whole quarter.

I really don't get anywhere with this system. The third quarter is not symmetrically mirrored. I do not see any systematic pattern revealed by consecutively placing the twelve hours on top of each other. Just more connections, more intersection points, at times hinting towards perfection, gradually forming a circle with all connections between all hours. Maybe it's not a consecutive system at all, just a passively-constructed semi-regular pattern intelligible only to its creator. Still, I know I must continue, examining ten, eleven and twelve o'clock.

Nothing. By twelve o'clock it's still just a semi-regular pattern, symmetrically mirrored from North to South, but not from East to West. Twelve and one o'clock, and eleven and one o'clock have never connected, and the same with six and seven o'clock, and five and seven o'clock in the South. Only two, three, eight and ten o'clock have all eleven connections each. Four, five, six, nine, eleven and twelve o'clock have only ten possible connections each. And one and seven o'clock have only nine connections each.

[...] in trying to prove that a system of proportions has been deliberately applied by painter, sculptor or architect, one is easily misled into finding in a given work those ratios which one sets out to find. Comparison in the scholar's hand do not result. If we were to avoid the pitfall of such speculations we must look for practical prescriptions of ratios applied by the artist themselves [...]. Here, on the contrary, beauty resides in the relation in the first whole number, simple relationship easily read as a glance and always measurable. Certainly enough, that has never been done systematically.

We do not find inside us that aptitude to unity, to legs and to clarity which is a need of our spirit and seems to us a reflection of the divine. Therefore, any coincidences between the forms of our mind and the outside world enchants us [...]. Certain it is that nature is in all things similar to itself!"

This test is just like the attic: six windows facing East, six facing West, North and South not connected; no complete cycle. I see it no longer as four quarters of three. Instead, two-four-six seems to be the consecutive pattern. Two hours with nine connections, four hours with eleven connections and 6 hours with 10 connections. I have to switch to numbers.

Because of twelve's versatility, some modern mathematicians have argued that the most practical base for a numbering system is twelve rather than ten. Their reasoning is simple enough for itself and one, one is evenly only divisible in whole numbers by only two and five. But

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Book view, courtesy of the artist.

**CM:** The book explores the experience of finding patterns and relationships within power structures and modern realities. Did you unearth data or information that caused you to view your practice differently? What is alluring about parameters, rules, taxonomy and thematic patterns in modern culture to you?

**AL:** Maybe it is my background—between countries, cultures, schooling systems, and nationalities—that drew me toward the subject of power structures. I had many run-ins with bureaucracy, and never did well with authority. I went to six high schools in three different countries. At a young age I had already decided that power was assumed through symbols and costume and was not to be trusted. I suppose my strong distaste for hierarchy is the reason for my obsession with it. I can't locate any ideological shift as of yet, but the constant confrontation with 'modern reality' in its many incarnations of administration has undoubtedly informed my practice.

**CM:** Do you find yourself employing irony or humor as a means of illustrating these points?

**AL:** I don't see my work as being nearly as serious as its subject supposes it is. Maybe because power and its structures are so severe, I try to approach the work with a kind of humor. I don't mean to illustrate some joke or have a punch line, but I do think it is important that people recognize the irony and can see the subject with some distance. I think the subject (*and* my practice) can use a little mockery.



Installation view, courtesy of Ambach & Rice

**CM:** Some of the text is purposefully nonsensical in its evaluation of social patterns and successes. Why is this an important attribute to highlight?

**AL:** I seem to make things just as nonsensical as the quest for a social pattern.

**CM:** Can you explain the notion of "objects attempting to understand themselves?" Is this an intended parallel to the human condition?

**AL:** It's a little hard to give an explanation about that. I was meaning this more as an intuitive thought rather than a scientific analysis. Obviously, things do not become aware of themselves. So let me give you another somewhat cryptic anthropomorphic thought: I am thinking of an elephant trying to hide behind a skinny tree, not being aware of its own dimensions.

**CM:** "Quarter Report 1 / Men With Ties" is perhaps my favorite section of the book. What was your goal here, and how did the concept manifest itself in the exhibition?



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Book view, courtesy of the artist.

**AL:** "Quarter Report 1 / Men With Ties" is a series of collages from images published in an entire quarter of the *New York Times*. It is a somewhat absurd reorganization of all these images by theme or subject. I started collecting the images without a clear idea of what I was going to do with them with the intention of somehow making sense of it all in the end. When I started sorting everything, some groupings that emerged were very concrete: such as "International protests" and "American protests." Others, on the other hand, were simply collections of recurrent gestures and tendencies. Examples of these are "Men with one hand I and II," "Men with two hands I and II," "Three men," "Men with ties I, II, III" or "Verticals."

In some ways the current show is like a quarter report, though one that spans a longer period of time and is not particularly methodical. Some things have been omitted, while many new things have been added. The show is a kind of rearrangement and reinterpretation of thoughts, ideas and actual physical works. This is particularly clear in the work *Untitled, 'The Everything of an Almost Future I - V,'* 2011. This tower-like structure houses a collection of sketches I made for a series of painting cut-outs that were based on Malevich's work. These sketches were used in preparation for an installation I made last year and now are restructured as an exaggerated archival shelving unit.

**CM:** Focusing on the art itself, much of your earlier work included color, both as an organizational illustration of your practice and an aesthetic choice. This show is quite minimal and stark. How does that choice function for you?

**AL:** Though the show may give a first impression of being minimal, beyond perhaps the aesthetic relation to minimalism, I think the work is anything but. The objects in the show have an overload of layers, both in the physical sense and conceptually. Rather than ideas being reduced, they are in fact expanded and all layers of the process are kept transparent. Be it the stacks that hold the piles of frames so that they can be painted, the earlier paint job still shown on the edge of an object, or simply the expanded history of modernity in the two-volume, custom-made, print-on-demand Wikipedia-book, *Modernity in Very General Terms*, 2011, that serves as a balancing foot to the object in *Prospects of Validation IV*, 2011.



Installation view, courtesy of Ambach & Rice

**CM:** Many of the works feel deconstructed. In your evaluation of constructed societal practices, was this a tongue-in-cheek decision, or purely compositional?

**AL:** Definitely not purely compositional. The deconstructing starts in my initial dealing with a subject matter; this is later translated into the process and thus is still evident in the resulting physical structure. Deconstruction (and my general demeanor, I'm afraid) is usually perceived as a rather serious matter, so I am glad you asked. And yes, I mostly mean it to be tongue-in-cheek!

**CM:** Despite exploring the very notions of genre and boundary, your work defies common art historical references. There is no nod to abstraction, realism or the like, but it does remain conceptual. Was this an organic development in your work?

**AL:** Well, just as I have a resistance to power, absolutes, and definitions in the real world, I suppose I avoid it within the realm of art. Any one genre with its doctrines or manifestos is fun to investigate, but mostly to then push off of, not

to adopt or join. I don't want my work to belong to something that is already defined, or to be read from any singular perspective.

**CM:** You've referred to your works as a stage. How does that hold true?

**AL:** I guess I say "stage," because the work often functions as a model for something else: something bigger, or something real. In the meantime, the work itself is more of a prop, part of a somewhat theatrical version of societal operations.

Levin's current exhibition is on view at [Ambach & Rice](#) through October 8, 2011.