

BEN HALL

THE SPACESHIP IS CRASHING
BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

Objects are heavy things for Ben Hall, bundles of tightly coiled relationships and histories. With a scavenger's knowledge of Detroit, he sources materials for his pieces all over the city, keeping tabs on where supplies can be found, seeking matter that "still has the human in it."¹ Hall listens to his human materials, folding their former lives, places, and contexts into his sculptures. His works are like conversations: unfixed, rangy, and evolving. His approach to materials is metonymic, full of rabbit holes to go down. Take the use of bulletproof plexiglass, repurposed from a vacant liquor store worker's booth into a bookshelf. Hall was unsettled by how the material embodied the protection of the worker, who watches the customer while also being watched. Hall maxes out the conceptual possibilities of the plexi through proxies that pursue and extend its meanings; questions of transparency, surveillance, and protection arise throughout the works Hall made for *How to Remain Human*. Local resources, questions of economic injustice, everyday radicalism and resistance, and personal experience also connect them. Hall's sensitive material approach is further informed by a theoretical framework pulling from Marxism, the Situationist International, critical pedagogy, and the ideas of recent protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the group Anonymous, among others.

Equally responsive to architecture and spaces as to objects, Hall worked with his frequent collaborator Andrew Mehall to develop a 4-channel sound installation, *The assumption that a wild animal is coming into contact with a domesticated one. (After Harry Bennett)* (2015), for MOCA Cleveland's yellow fire escape stair. Completely enclosed within the main staircase, the interior stair's narrow, winding corridors resist the clean geometry and aspirational transparency emphasized throughout the rest of the building's architecture. The artists were fascinated by the positioning of this stair. Although a transitional space designed primarily for emergency egress, it is not a "non-place," design explicitly for everybody and so for nobody. It's decidedly non-neutral: disorienting, intensely yellow, confusing--a "claustrophobia stair." As Hall states:

it's a place where the worker goes and returns a FB msg, technological avoidance that reifies technology and consumerism [...] a weird move by the architect to create a solidarity with the security guard, the docent, the student.

Hall and Mehall sought to heighten the experience of "psychedelic oppression" in the stairwell, working another important 1968

text into the exhibition: Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire's influential book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire criticizes traditional models of education as reinforcing existing power structures and perpetuating oppression, advocating instead for a critical pedagogy in which students gain the agency for self and social transformation through active methods of teaching and learning. Passed through text-to-speech software, the tone and meaning of this impassioned, human-centered text is shifted as the robotic tones stumble over the words, rendering it cold. The sound is layered and chorused, reminiscent of the "human loudspeaker" technique used by Occupy Wall Street protesters. It sounds as if the batteries are running out; or, as put by a friend of the artists, as if "the spaceship is crashing." The sense of emergency is heightened by an ever-present high pitched frequency that reverberates insistently inside one's head, a reference to the ringing sense of strain felt by Hall while taking care of his parents when they were ill. Hall would use the hospital stairway as a cooling off zone when the stress became too much.

The scuffed up liquor store plexiglass mentioned at the start of this essay resurfaces in the exhibition as a book stand that doubles as a terrarium and a donation box. Titled *Lorraine & Fredy* (2015), the piece is a tribute to the quiet radicalism of a local Detroit area couple. Fredy Perlman (1934-1985) was a naturalized American author and activist who came to the US from the Czech Republic. He made the first English translation of *Society of the Spectacle* (1968, Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International) in which Debord defines the spectacle as a hallmark of late capitalist society, where life is mediated rather than directly experienced. This title, among other important texts of the avant-garde, can be purchased by visitors who

are invited to leave the suggested donation, using the honor system. All of the titles on the bookstand are still distributed by Fredy's wife, Lorraine Perlman, who ships them out of her home in Ferndale, a suburb of Detroit.

The Drill (2015), a large, complex structure, occupies the largest space in the galleries. A base of cement blocks supports a ramshackle scaffolding of broom and mop handles in a rough V formation. From this, other objects are draped, hung, and stretched. One wall of the piece is made of 150 backpacks which hang side-by-side like bricks in a wall. The same as those approved for use in the Detroit Public School system, the backpacks are transparent, a visualized buzzword that references the constantly surveilled environment through which the schoolchildren move. Transparency is a key concept of MOCA Cleveland's architecture, though rather to oblige porousness and accessibility within the Museum than to enhance security and protection. In both cases however, transparency makes the inhabitant of the building or the wearer of the backpack ostentatious, aware of being watched. Within the Museum, the boundaries and codes of acceptable behavior are invisible yet clearly and swiftly delineated once transgressed, requiring an internalization of surveillance--of self-policing--in order to enter and remain.

The backpacks double as cacti terrariums, each one a "living monument" to (and bearing a sticker portrait of) Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man beaten to death by auto workers near Detroit in 1982, cast as the feared specter of the foreign worker. Barely discernable, Chin's faint, fragmented portrait is printed large scale, forming the backing of the terrariums. At the closing of *How to Remain Human*, the backpacks will be distributed out into the world, further disseminating Chin's monuments. Inside the transparent traps, the

cacti strain; organic matter stands for the liquor store worker, the school child, and the docent. Personified, they don't have room to breathe, time to pause, the latitude to make mistakes, unwatched spaces--all things that more and more people have less and less of. The backpacks literalize the burden (of responsibility, of the performance of innocence, holding it all together) in an ever narrowing social and civic sphere.

A large, handmade quilt made from old t-shirts covers the other outer wall of *The Drill*. Three repeated graphics tumble across its surface: the text "Emma Goldman Sachs," the unlikely merger of Emma Goldman (1869-1940), an anarchist writer and activist, and Goldman Sachs, one of the global investment banks that profited from the subprime mortgage crisis; the Adidas slogan (shifted to read All Day I Dream About Situationism), and the free parking square from the board game Monopoly. The interior of *The Drill* contains two used t-shirts stretched on crowbars, adorned with red, blue, and white buttons in a patriotic array. The red and blue buttons show two African American Major League Baseball players: Larry Doby, the second player to integrate the league, joining the Cleveland Indians in 1947, and Ozzie Virgil, who played for the Detroit Tigers, the second to last team to integrate in 1958. The white buttons show Rich Uncle Pennybags, the monocled tycoon from Monopoly, who Occupy protesters adopted as shorthand for the corruption of Wall Street.

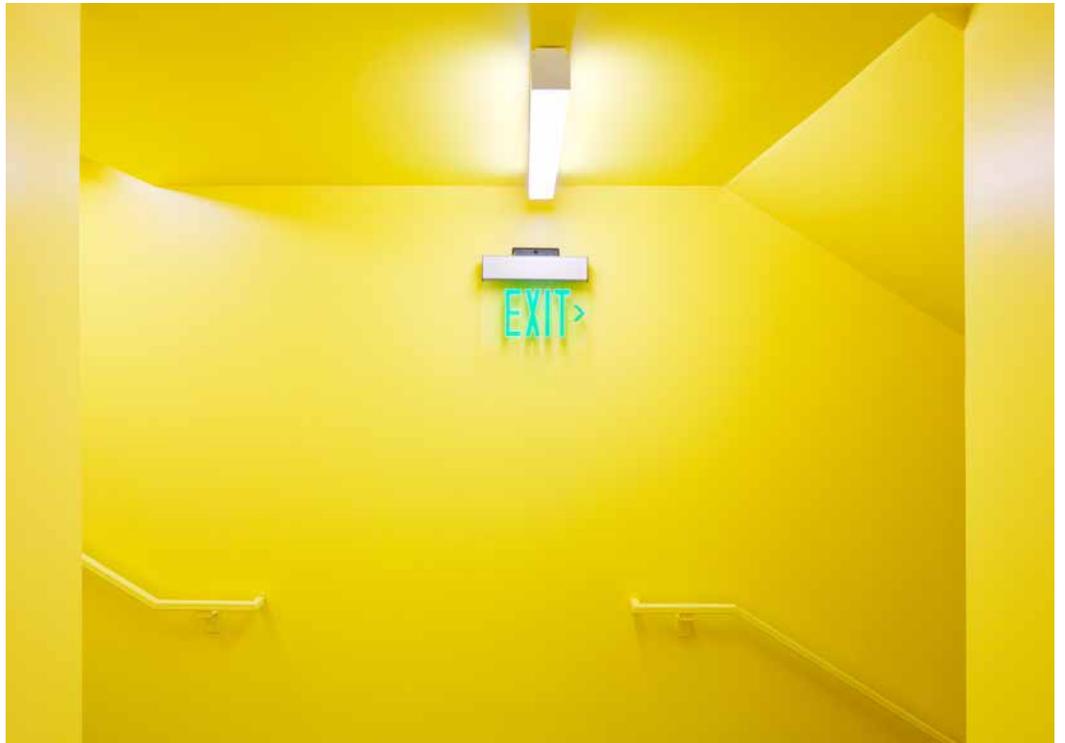
In *The Drill*, Hall implements objects to form a visual grammar, becoming glyphs that inscribe deep narratives about contemporary life: the intertwining of the global financial market, worker exploitation, sports and entertainment, and brushes with the US healthcare system. These broad themes are anchored to Hall's lived experience through the inclusion of deeply personal references. One screen features an image of

a piece of old cypress wood that Hall cut from under the sink in his mother's Detroit home. Scaled up and monolithic, the wood looms large. It bears marks and scratches, scars of domestic breakdown and parent-child roles reversed. The wood image overlays a meme-like joke about cowboys and American Indians, another reference to racial and economic inequity. These as with other objects are available for endless processing, a mix-n-match syntax of hopelessness and structural violence: Goldman Sachs Healthcare Murdered Occupy/ Monopoly Backpacks and Watched Schoolchildren Made in China. Situationism Could Not Stop It, We Were Entertained/ Interchangeable in a system of victims.

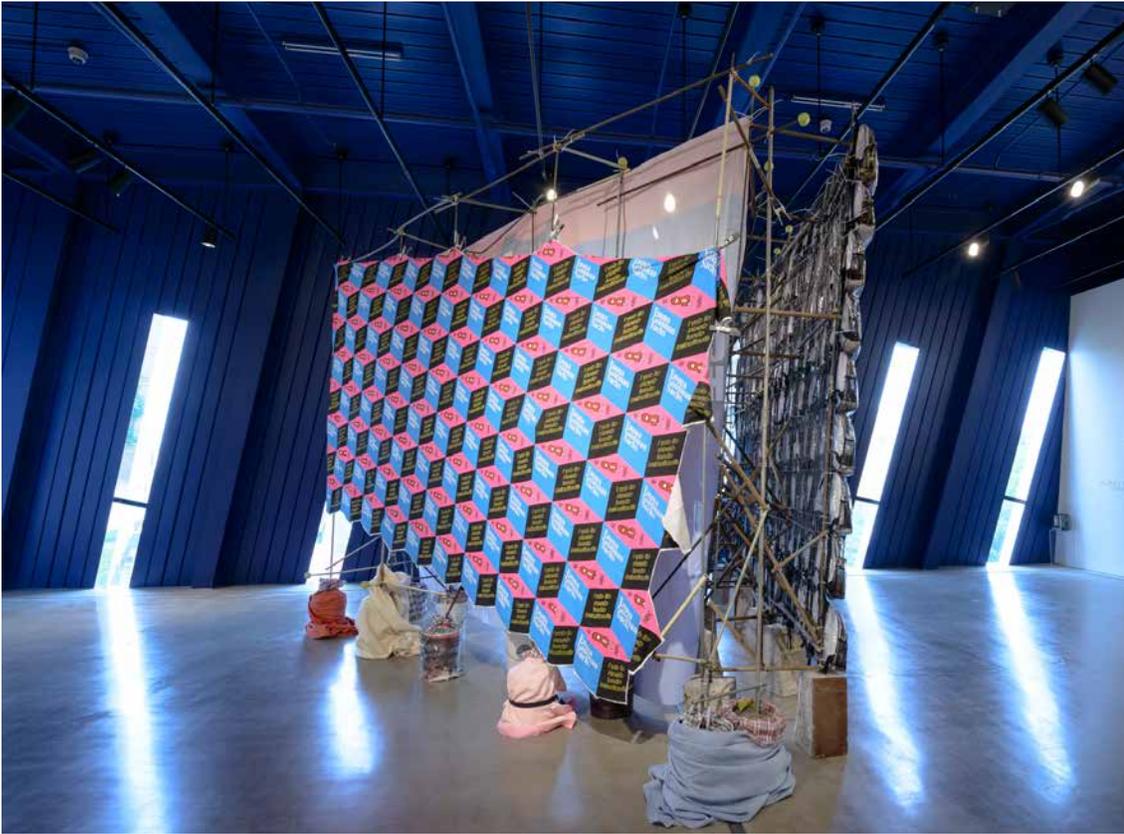
Stretched thin and curiously bodied, *The Drill* also suggests a different reading, a superstructure that appears to clutch at its garments, gathering itself up in vain, its rickety supports showing through. From this angle, the work conveys a hopeful precarity; the ungainly monolith nearing its tipping point, while the base is strong. Hall's sculptures are never static; assembled in place and later deconstructed, their objects flow in and out, given away as gifts, absorbed into new works, all merrily proceeding towards entropy, circulating in parallel economies. Perhaps it is Hall's process, his resourceful and sensitive approach to making, which suggests a way to keep moving. When the syntax is destabilized, new sentences can be written. The spaceship is crashing, but those who were never permitted to board in the first place are watching from the ground. Once it hits, it's time to build again.



1. This and all subsequent quotes of Hall are from emails to the author, April, 2015



MOCA Cleveland's interior stair, installation site for:
Ben Hall and Andrew Mehall
*The assumption that a wild animal is coming into contact
with a domesticated one. (After Harry Bennett)*, 2015
Four channel audio installation with Adobe pdf reader,
pirated version of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the
Oppressed*, latent frequencies, non-repetitive sound
waves, chorus. Total running time 05:00:54.
Courtesy of the artists and Young World, Detroit



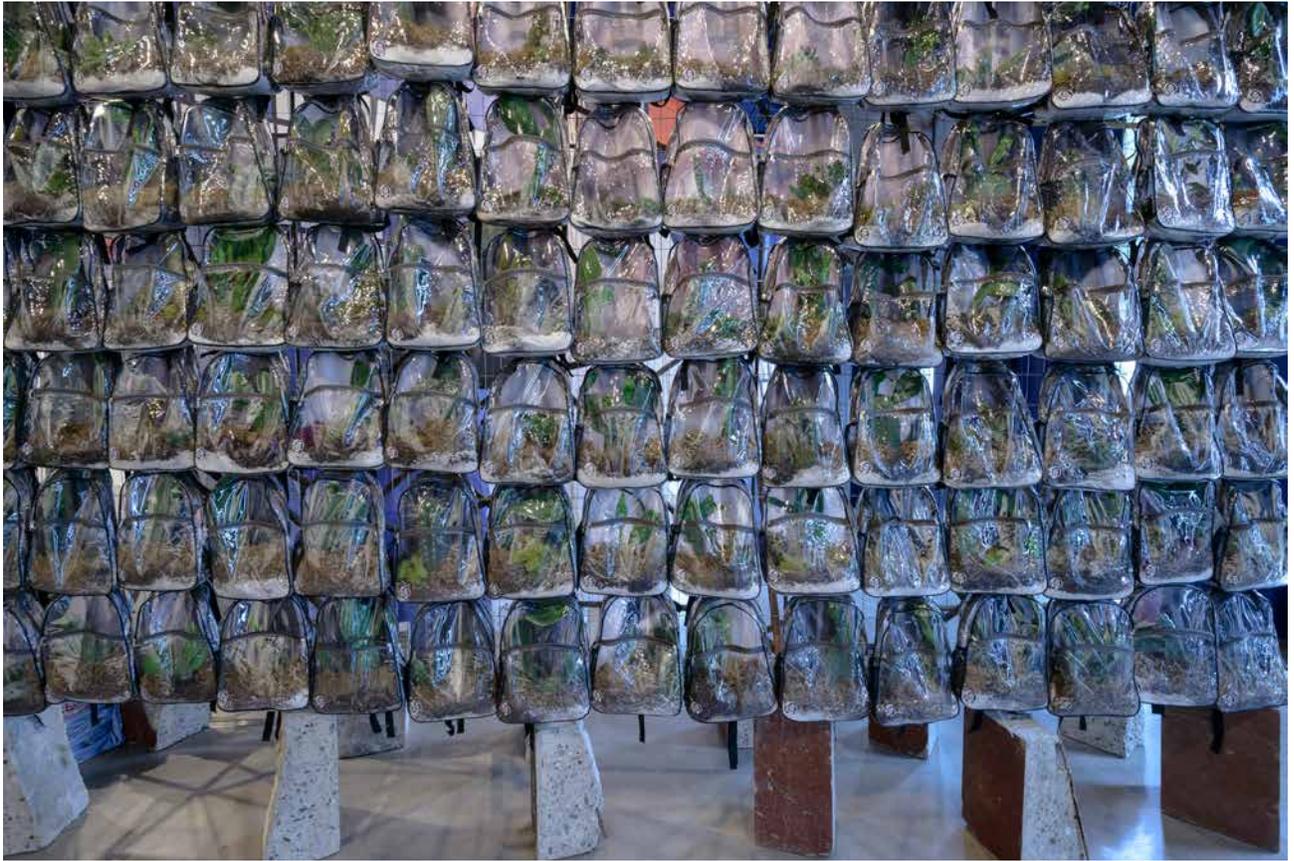
1.

2.

1. Ben Hall
The Drill, 2015
 Concrete, DPS approved backpacks,
 cacti, perlite, soil, mesh, rebar,
 cement, laundry bags, reprinted t-
 shirts, chiffon, spray enamel, broom
 and mop handles, scrapped conduit,
 buttons
 168 x 180 x 84 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Young
 World, Detroit
 Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics



2. Ben Hall
Lorraine & Fredy, 2015
 Repurposed bulletproof glass,
 cacti, soaps, enamel,
 independently published books
 62 x 38 x 38 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Young
 World, Detroit
 Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics



Ben Hall
The Drill, 2015 (details)
Courtesy of the artist and Young
World, Detroit
Photos: Timothy Safranek Photographics

BEN HALL

FEEL, TO FEEL MORE,
TO FEEL MORE THAN
BY FRED MOTEN

1.

Ben Hall has a kind of evangelical obsession. Some joker gave him something and now he wants to give you some. See if you can see and hear and feel certain passages in and of a collective head arrangement, as if Lygia Clark were touring with a territory band.

2.

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"—all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some

jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.

I went toward the microphone where Brother Jack himself waited, entering the spot of light that surrounded me like a seamless cage of stainless steel. I halted. The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces. It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me—for they were applauding—without themselves being seen.

"May I confess?" I shouted. "You are my friends. We share a common disinheritance, and it's said that confession is good for the soul. Have I your permission?"

"Your batting .500, Brother," the voice called.

There was a stir behind me. I waited until it was quiet and hurried on.

"Silence is consent," I said, "so I'll have it out, I'll confess it!" My shoulders were squared, my chin thrust forward and my eyes focused straight into the light. "Something strange and miraculous and transforming is taking place in me right now...as I stand here before you!"

I could feel the words forming themselves, slowly falling into place. The light seemed to boil opalescently, like liquid soap shaken gently in a bottle.

"Let me describe it. It is something odd. It's something that I'm sure I'd never experience anywhere else in the world. I feel your eyes upon me. I hear the pulse of your breathing. And now, at this moment, with your black and white eyes upon me, I feel...I feel..."

I stumbled in a stillness so complete that I could hear the gears of the huge clock mounted somewhere on the balcony gnawing upon time.

"What is it, son, what do you feel?" a shrill voice cried.

My voice fell to a husky whisper, "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong, I feel able to get things done! I feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of militant fraternity! No, wait, let me confess ...I feel the urge to affirm my feelings...I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home... Home! With your eyes upon me I feel that I've found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land. I feel that here tonight, in

this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived. In each of you, in me, in us all.¹

3.

If one is human, as a matter of sheer biological determination, then to feel more human, which is given only in the experience of having been made to feel less human, is, in fact to feel more than human, which is given, in turn, only in the experience of having been made to feel less than human. What if the human is nothing other than this constancy of being both more and less than itself? What if all that remains of the human, now, is this realization? What if the only thing that matches the absolute necessity of remaining human is the absolute brutality of remaining human? Is there any escape from the interplay of brutality and necessity? Serially excessive of itself in falling short of itself, brutally imposing the necessity of its retention as the only justification and modality of its retention, the human is only ever visible as the more than complete incompleteness from which it cannot quite be seen. Invisible Man marks and is the blindness and insight of this impossible point of view. Invisible Man can't quite see when he tells us how he feels; and when he tells us how he feels he does so by way of a paradox that is contained by the very feeling it cannot quite approach. All we know about what it is to feel, to feel suddenly that one has become more human, is that it is to feel immeasurably more than that. The immeasurable, here, denotes every earthliness that remains unregulated by human distinction and distinctiveness. At stake is the sheer, slurred, smeared, swarmed seriality of mechanical buzz, horticultural blur, geometrical blend, an induced feeling's indeterminate seeing Ben Hall musically instantiates in his art. Let the gallery's held logisticality explode into the Brotherhood's improper displacement. Give a sign. Shake a hand. Dance.

4.

Charismata--the gift of spirit of which Cedric Robinson and Erica Edwards teach--is conferred upon the one who cannot see by the ones who see him, in their hearing of him, in their bearing of him, in the touch of their eyes, in the brush of their ears, in the look and heed of their open, lifted hands. It's as if he fades into their senses, them, the ones who in being so much more and less than one can only be figured by science as the mob. To be held in the mob's embrace, in the wound and blessing of their shared, accursed sensorium, is to be made unaware of one's own invisibility--to feel, to feel more, to feel more than, to feel more than I feel, I feel. Can you hold one another tonight in the blur, so that one and another are no more? A table is prepared for your common unawareness, for the disinheritance you might not know you long to know you share, the share you're blessed to share right now that only unawareness of yourself will let be known. Invisible Man had withdrawn, if only for a moment, into the external world, which responsible subjectivity rightly understands to be no world at all in the brutality of its wrongful attempts to eradicate it. Adrian Piper, pied, in motley, blind, silent in her consent not to be single while, at the same time, loud, and felt, in the intensity of her confession, has been led to lead us out of the art world and into this exteriority with that same pentaphonic song Armstrong was always playing no matter what song he was playing. No matter what song he is playing, they are the ones who are not one who are playing it. That's what this entanglement of Ben Hall are playing. You have to excuse their grammar. DJ Crawlspac's repercussive counterweight is stairwell, in golden light well, in sound booth, in reverberate hold. That Armstrong plex, given elsewhere in Hall's *Some Jokers (For 5 Turntables, basement, ice cream and sloe gin)*, regifted as Paolo Freire, vocoded,

digitized into uncountability by an unaccountable sonority Freire now would recognize, is the undercommon instrument whose instrument we'd like to be. In the glow and blur of the collective head's collective embrace, more precisely and properly valued in its fuzzy disruption of valuation, in its radical unbankability, in its inappropriable impropriety, light and sound are the materiality of our living, the basis of our revolutionary pedagogy, the ground of our insurgent, auto-excessive feel.

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1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 7-8, 341, 344-45.



Ben Hall
The Drill, 2015 (detail)
Blue, red and white pins showing the
faces of Larry Doby, Ozzie Virgil,
and Rich Uncle Pennybags
Courtesy of the artist and
Young World, Detroit