



Liz Glynn
Black Box
 2011
 Courtesy of the artist and Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles
 Photo: Calvin Lee

Long Read: On the Intoxication of Ruin (The Party Ends)

by Travis Diehl

III. (The Pyramid Summer)

I was crashing with some friends in Lincoln Heights in July 2010 when Liz Glynn started building a pyramid in their backyard. In the right place at the right time, I became one of the only people to see the cycle of *III* from the grading of its foundation to its eventual decay and collapse two years later. I watched, helped, brought supplies and drank beer as Glynn marked out its footprint in the shimmering heat. I saw the sunburned men who unloaded the pallets that formed the pyramid's tiered walls. And, because I'd been sleeping on a couch, I was invited to sleep inside the pyramid (soundly dosed with Ambien) as part of a death-and-resurrection ceremony, the first performance of the series. Over an afternoon meal of bread, fruit and wine laced with tranquilizing herbs, nine of us—all friends and acquaintances of Glynn's—admitted our irrational fears: heart attack, death, incontinence. Expectations and inhibitions fell away as the sedatives took hold, and we slipped into stoned, restless sleep. Like guests at a costume party, we were not ourselves; we played the role of guests. Our deaths were chemically induced—but the fears we performed were our own, and those who performed honestly awoke renewed, shaken back to life at sunset by a procession of nine wakers.

The pyramid of *III* was the venue of a series of nine performances based loosely on the financial crisis and general climate of uncertainty. Among the events were a discussion with a cryonics expert, out-of-body attempts broadcast live on pirate radio, and a night of “gambling with other people's money.” While artworks in one sense, these performances were also carefully curated parties, decorated with ancient history and imminent collapse. Drinks and food were selected accordingly—a mixture of absinthe, Goldschlager and ginger beer paired with guided meditation, for example—adding to the air of intoxication. Ruin was the theme, yet this party remained insulated from encroaching financial realities; we feasted like Romans under siege.

Like a pyramid scheme, the guest list unfolded from a handful of friends, and by the final night over a hundred people had come to witness the pyramid's destruction, grilling “various fowl,” drinking champagne, chatting, perhaps piecing together the summer.¹ We were invited to drop our burdens, in whatever form, into a pit

within the pyramid. At dusk, Glynn read a passage from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, then set the pit on fire, sending a plume of smoke snaking above the neighborhood. She ascended the pyramid and pried off its wooden capstone. A handful of us joined in, tearing it down, pallet by pallet. Most guests, however, preferred to watch. They milled around with their drinks during the slow dismantling. Soon the fire department charged up the dry hill and doused the grill and pit. Their flashlights danced on the half-unbuilt ruin. Someone rushed the uncooked fowls down to the house and into the fridge.

And so, Glynn's *III* ended as it had transpired: sprawling, omnivorous: fueled by delirium and inequality: a convergence of conflicting references poised between transcendence and obscurity. The set was decorated with fallen empires, and through these resurrections we both re-imagined and forgot our own decline. Egos dissipated and grew; thoughts were exchanged and consumed. The party ended, leaving behind a trail of fractured histories that had at times freed us from fear, and at times confirmed our deepest cynicisms. This process, like history itself, transpired within a leveling, amnesic haze.

The skeletal frame of the pyramid would bleach and warp in the sun for over a year—an ambiguous ruin. The several hundred pallets had been worth around three dollars each. But now the recession had deepened, trans-Pacific trade and trucking were down, and it would be several months before Glynn and her gallery could find a company that would take them for free. An ad-hoc pallet yard took shape around the house downhill from the pyramid site. Meanwhile, the pyramid's hardware was scavenged and the lumber trashed by locals. The guests were long gone, the hilltop was quiet and overgrown, and no one had stayed to clean up.

II. (The Artist's Club)

Glynn's *Black Box* was a licensed speakeasy occupying a vacant warehouse and former bookstore in West Hollywood for eleven nights in January of 2012. Her bar was the official after-hours destination during the performance festival of Getty's Pacific Standard Time initiative. If PST was self-congratulatory and nostalgic as it resurrected important west-coast artworks from obscurity, *Black Box* seduced performers and audience alike through an illegible present. Canonical artists mixed with younger and less infamous ones who had yet to enter the club of history. Among an uncertain number of happenings: Charles Gaines played piano behind Terry Adkins in a jazz quintet; Barbara T. Smith and Paul McCarthy reminisced about the 1980 *Public Spirit Festival*; [John Duncan](#) remixed recordings of volunteers doing "whatever he asked"; and Karen Adelman belted out a song from a stack of shipping pallets on the bar's final night.

I read a poem with nu-age synth act Sneaky Snake on the venue's seventh night—so here, too, I had inside (but by no means total) access. But getting in the door was just the beginning; one night was not enough. The *Black Box* series compelled guests to plunge deeper and deeper (higher and higher) through its levels—and in the process, collect as much "experience" as possible—for this party was charged with the aura of history in the making. Yet much of this history unfolded behind closed doors or at other times. Certainty dissolved like each morning's hangover into another night's binge. As the party grew stranger (rumors of psychedelics and striptease) and more crowded, the subtly magnificent mingled with the horrifying. For the performers, wrapped up in the scene, it was not much different. A fog machine whited out the whole space during Sneaky Snake's second set; the management pulled the plug on their third. The smoke hung around until closing time.

Like the unfolding pyramid scheme of *III*, *Black Box* depended on a balance of insiders and outsiders: those on and those off the stage; those who were there and those who weren't; the sober and the drunk. A wall of pallets divided the building into an open performance space and a lounge complete with bar, low stage and a baby grand piano. Redacted Facebook invites advertised the series; each night's entertainment was a guarded secret. Ivette Solare mixed custom cocktails with names like "Keep Talking" and "Swoon." Performers and other VIPs drank for free from a small edition of handmade ceramic mugs—proof of their status. Upstairs, a "green room" hosted more intimate invitation-only performances, as when Glynn buried one person at a time under a mound of soil. And within this, accessible only by a select few, was a bank of lockers stocked with liquor infusions, champagne mini-bottles, odd photographs and other favors.

The party factor of the *Black Box* suggested openness and abandon, yet was in fact bound by the expectations and desires of high-powered socializing. If you knew the right people, for example, it was possible to borrow a mug or find your way upstairs. You could wind up locked in conversation with dealers, gallerists and anonymous barflies.² You could get blackout drunk, find a bump of coke, wake up somewhere

strange—and it would not be enough. The collapse would come, as it always does: the next morning, in the parking lot or—as it happened for me—alone in a foggy arena, inching around on a mechanical horse as its batteries died, glad I hadn't taken those mushrooms.

I. (Receding Reality)

Like an **orgone energy accumulator**, the pyramid at *///* enfolded a facile nu-age spirituality. This unqualified mysticism mingled with the “hard facts” of the recession, rendering economics irrational in its own right. During a performance titled “On Not Seeing Corruption,” Glynn interviewed an anonymous college acquaintance regarding his time at Madoff Investment Securities. Predictably, he pleaded ignorance of his company's crimes, though in the nuances of his testimony—meeting Glynn at a New Years Eve party; making a drunken pass in a taxi cab; and the terms of his trip to LA, which included a ticket to Burning Man courtesy Glynn's gallery—the Madoff “Ponzi” scheme no longer seemed so alien to the culture that had produced *///*. Within the pyramid's interstitial zone of metaphor, these new connections were effective to the extent that you believed them. The pyramid provided a boundary between the rational and the irrational, as good art often does, by which our world was reconfigured and resolved. Dusk settling in, the skyline ablaze, augmented by the vulnerability of drunkenness or sleep, things like death and financial collapse fell into place within a sprawling system; relationships, for a time, masqueraded as beliefs.

But this blending also loosened the boundaries of ethics. *///* framed the recession through an ambivalent figuration that suspended rightness or wrongness. The economic underpinnings and social exploitations of Glynn's projects, though palpable, were never acknowledged. The builders of *///* and *Black Box* (surely not Glynn alone) remained anonymous and unseen. Glynn's pallet ziggurat, perched halfway up a valley in a hilly Hispanic neighborhood, quickly became a local landmark—yet one whose purpose was obscure, impenetrable—a monument whose audience lived elsewhere.

That the drinks and décor were so carefully arranged speaks to an awareness of the art-event as a social setting (indeed, often preeminently so). Yet the inequalities and inadequacies of the party in decline were naturalized, not critiqued. This aspect seemed incidental to or merely supportive of Glynn's interest in history, obscurity and ruin. In contrast, consider Cyprien Gaillard's *The Recovery of Discovery*, 2011, also known as the “**beer pyramid**.” Here, Gaillard imported a huge ziggurat's worth of Efes beer, a Turkish brand, from Turkey to Berlin, following the path of so many plundered artifacts. As visitors climbed and drank the beer, crushing boxes and breaking glass, the work took its final form. Yet if Glynn's two series also positioned inebriation as the basis of the experience, an agent of detachment and indulgence, it was not so brutal or clear—less a darkly humorous extension of the art world's alcoholism than another carefully groomed element within the party's larger spread. Drunkenness was atmospheric at the *Black Box*, ritualistic at *///*. In both cases, drinking did as much to erode preconceived boundaries as did Glynn's recession-chic sets and historical programming. It was, after all, a beery and familiar ungrounding. This drunkenness was real, hard, sloppy, freeing, damaging—part of a predictably unstable chemistry.³

Draped with historical references and flavored with systems of belief, Glynn's parties treated the outside (non-art) world with ambivalence. And as the work shirked responsibility in the name of experimentation, this ambivalence overpowered its complexity. The pyramid of *///* and the *Black Box* were frequented by rumors and avatars. In its way, this liminality restored a kind of control, a metaphorical agency. A banner draped in the pyramid interior on the final night echoed a slogan from the UC student protests earlier that year: “WE HAVE DECIDED NOT TO DIE.” Not yet. Not tonight. Yet these series embodied a cynicism about politics and political art, tending towards nostalgia and escapism, ultimately courting rather than confronting decline. A dis-ease persisted as the pyramid slowly came apart, its pallets carried, dragged, then tossed drunkenly down the hill against the house and yard below: the feeling that ruin was not only the theme of this party, but its chosen end.

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1. “Each invitation stated ‘you must bring a guest.’ As pyramid schemes go, the audience doesn't necessarily grow exponentially; rather, it almost folds in on itself. Many who came frequently in the beginning were absent until the end, replaced by a new group. The audience grew far beyond the circle of people I see regularly. . .” Liz Glynn, in conversation with Corey Fogel, *Public Fiction 2*, Summer 2011.

2. Glynn hired a handful of people to sit at the bar and mingle with the guests; their mugs were red, the performers' black.

3. Elsewhere, in other artworks similarly primed for failure, Glynn has held a dance party on fragile plaster tiles (*Smash the Solid State/Pick Up the Pieces*, 2008) and has restaged an

unsuccessful demonstration of R. Buckminster Fuller's tensegrity principle (*Utopia or Oblivion*, 2011).

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