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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Doing Battle with the Remains of Industrial America

by Christian L. Frock

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Two first-generation NUMMI cars ready for battle in Jesse Sugarmann's performance, with the Tesla Factory in the background (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAN FRANCISCO — On a blustery, sunny Sunday afternoon, some 40 or 50 people gathered on a quiet road in nowhere, 45 miles south of San Francisco in a quasi-industrial area of Fremont, to “celebrate the essence of NUMMI.” NUMMI was a nearby automobile manufacturing plant that operated from 1984 to 2010 (the same factory was home to General Motors from 1962 to 1982) and has since been reopened and occupied by Tesla Factory. The gathering was the work of artist Jesse Sugarmann, who had brought two first-generation NUMMI cars, a 1985 Chevy Nova and a 1986 Toyota Corolla, to the lot. Gambling and drinking were encouraged. Bakersfield, California-based Sugarmann works across video, performance, and sculpture to consider the automotive industry as it signifies watershed moments in American life. In his recent project for Creative Capital,

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hosted in San Francisco by inveterate alternative artists' space Southern Exposure, Sugarmann presented *We Build Excitement*, a gallery-wide installation of video and sculpture drawn from largely unsanctioned interventions and performances on the property of vacated car dealerships. Bisecting the space was a salvaged dealership sign spelling out "Pontiac." Installed face down, it emitted a smothered light onto the cement floor. Following the close of the exhibition last week, Sugarmann presented the off-site "Closing Ceremonies" in Fremont.

For the event, Sugarmann maneuvered the Nova and the Corolla, identical except for their manufacturers' badges, through a series of competitions, including drills to time performance from 0 to 60 miles an hour and a tug of war between the two cars. Red, white, and blue cans of Budweiser beer in ice tubs rounded out the celebratory, if clandestine, feeling of a roadside party, with bets wagered on every task. The cars were also given symbolic oil changes, with the spent oil comingled in a decorative jar to be buried nearby with a plaque commemorating NUMMI. Sugarmann moved through the performances like an amiable gearhead, smiling and encouraging folks to place their bets with his wife, who dutifully collected dollar bills while wearing an infant in a baby carrier on her chest. The mood was light and participatory. Some of San Francisco's more reserved curators and art writers had suddenly become grease monkeys, debating the merits of Chevys and Toyotas while chugging Buds. The high point of the afternoon came when the artist created a "temporary monument" and elevated both cars on symbolic plinths made from stacks of Walmart air mattresses. If that sounds implausible, I can assure you it worked astonishingly well. Until it didn't. The mattresses, inflated by mobile generators, slid back under each car, ratcheted their rear ends skyward, and pitched the cars' hoods precariously forward. The gesture was reversed just short of car tipping, and perhaps inadvertently echoed some of the legendary debauchery of GM's old assembly lines at the Fremont plant. At the time of its closure, employees there were considered "the worst workforce in the automobile industry in the United States" by the United Auto Workers (UAW), after infamous stories of drinking on the job, absenteeism, and sabotage.



Cars nearly tipped over.

In his work, Sugarmann picks up on the way the auto industry has itself become a bald representation of American mismanagement and failure. He also pokes holes in the bravado associated with the industry by focusing on hidden or overlooked aspects of car production, such as the repetitive motions of assembly line work or the excessive patriotism heaped on in marketing. (A sideways example: while considering various sites for the closing ceremonies, Southern Exposure approached the nearby UAW office and was told that anyone attending the event in a non-American made car would not be allowed to park on the premises.)



The scorecard — betting was encouraged.

Sugarmann’s closing ceremonies held little of the gravitas of his exhibition. On the contrary, we were out in the sun and open air, socializing and watching the feint antics of two dudes (Sugarmann and his assistant) testing the limits of unremarkable cars. The fact that the vehicles were not state of the art but rather outmoded technologies heightened the significance of the performance. In one direction stood Tesla Factory, the history of the building in high contrast with technology’s latest promises for the future. In the other direction, inactive rail cars cut a line through the landscape as far as the eye could see. Every other freight car was stamped with “Building America” and, like so many other forgotten relics of bygone eras, going nowhere fast.

Jesse Sugarmann’s “[We Build Excitement Closing Ceremonies](#)” took place in Fremont, California, on May 4, 2–4pm. The related [gallery exhibition](#) was on view at Southern Exposure (3030 20th Street, San Francisco) from April 4 through May.

Correction: This article originally misidentified the employees considered by UAW to be “the worst workforce” as those at NUMMI, rather than General Motors. It has been fixed.