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ISSUE 117 MAR/APR 2020



Tuan Andrew Nguyen on Daniel Joseph Martinez

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“I CAN’T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE.” Daniel Joseph Martinez will forever be known for this sequence of eight words, strategically split up and printed onto a series of admission badges for the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

I consider Daniel a key mentor, who, in all his calmness, unleashed a sense of political urgency and agency that enabled me to consider what it means to have a practice invested in change. Choosing a life-path of art was one of the first transformations he effected in me.

I entered the University of California at Irvine (UCI) in 1994 as a biology major. My goal was to become a doctor. I had been in California for about three years before my enrollment. The transition from the Midwest, where I had spent my teenage years, wasn’t smooth by any means, but was a step toward a string of necessary disruptions that marked my life. In 1991, a few months after my family and I had landed, southern California saw the Rodney King incident, the killing of Latasha Harlins by a Korean-American liquor store owner, the Los Angeles Riots, and the release of the film *Boyz n the Hood*—all within 12 months. I had experienced a heavy load of racism in the Midwest, but being in California at that particular moment taught me that racism and violence in the United States was not just street fights but something that saturated every level of culture, from the media to institutions, and one would have to develop sustainable strategies to be able to confront it at each and every point effectively.

In 1995, I took my first art class at UCI, thinking it would look good for medical school applications. Quickly thereafter, I met Daniel, whose reputation as an inspiring speaker and challenging teacher preceded him. My immediate sense was that Daniel is a person who cares, even when he is trying to “spit in the face of the rich man.” Daniel’s intervention at the 1993 Whitney Biennial was one of those moments he brought fire to the institution.



DANIEL JOSEPH MARTINEZ’s *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture); or, Overture con Claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members)*, 1993, paint and enamel on metal, 30.48×38.1 cm each. Photo by the artist. Courtesy the artist.

Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture); or, Overture con Claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members) (1993) was vilified by critics and institution leaders. For others such as myself, it was seen as honest and, thus, quite revolutionary.

Though I had met Daniel, I didn’t study *Museum Tags* until it was covered by another professor in a different class. I didn’t know much about contemporary art at the time, and I knew even less about the culture wars and identity politics. Institutional critique was way beyond my framework of understanding. Yet I found myself repeating the phrase in my head, like a song lyric. I would get stuck between the words “IMAGINE” and “EVER WANTING,” bouncing between their fragile boundaries. Desire is a fascinating human trait—one that can be exploited. There is a history of desire being used as a mechanism for oppression in the many lands plagued by the colonial project. In Vietnam, this “desire” was intertwined with colonial “prestige.” Wanting to be like or liked by the colonizers was what kept subjects controllable, unable to imagine something else and wanting to be like their oppressors.

Daniel’s proclamation was also a proposal to himself. That there was an attempt to imagine, even if it was a failed attempt, was radical, because the space opened up by that imagination is where things get flipped. *Museum Tags* tried to re-envision “whiteness” and in turn the construct of the “other”—“whiteness” was put in the position of the “other.” It proposed, and as I believe, that once we look

at the ways otherness is constructed, we can more effectively approach empathy.

As I continued to study art at UCI, a few of us undergraduates, and one graduate student, developed a growing appetite for philosophical discussion through aesthetic practice. We approached Daniel to see if he would lend us his time outside of the official curriculum to head up a critique class. Daniel nicknamed us The Renegades. This was my first collective art endeavor, setting a foundation for how I would consider collectivity in my own practice.

Decades before downtown Los Angeles became the art hub that it currently is, Daniel, along with collaborators Glenn Kaino (another former student of his), Rolo Castillo, and Tracey Shiffman, had also founded an artist-run space called Deep River. Besides highlighting underrepresented artists, Daniel allowed some graduates of UCI’s MFA program to produce a group show there, which included a work by The Renegades. Daniel’s support had tremendous impact on us and the many marginalized artists in LA. More than ten years later, I co-founded an artist-initiated space in Ho Chi Minh City with collaborators Dinh Q. Lê, Tiffany Chung, and Ha Thuc Phu Nam. We called it San Art, which literally translates as “a floor space for art.” Its presence, as I saw it, was political, and simultaneously disruptive and inclusive.

I am still ever wanting to imagine and create spaces that expand beyond myself—spaces that make way for a radical empathy. Thank you Daniel.