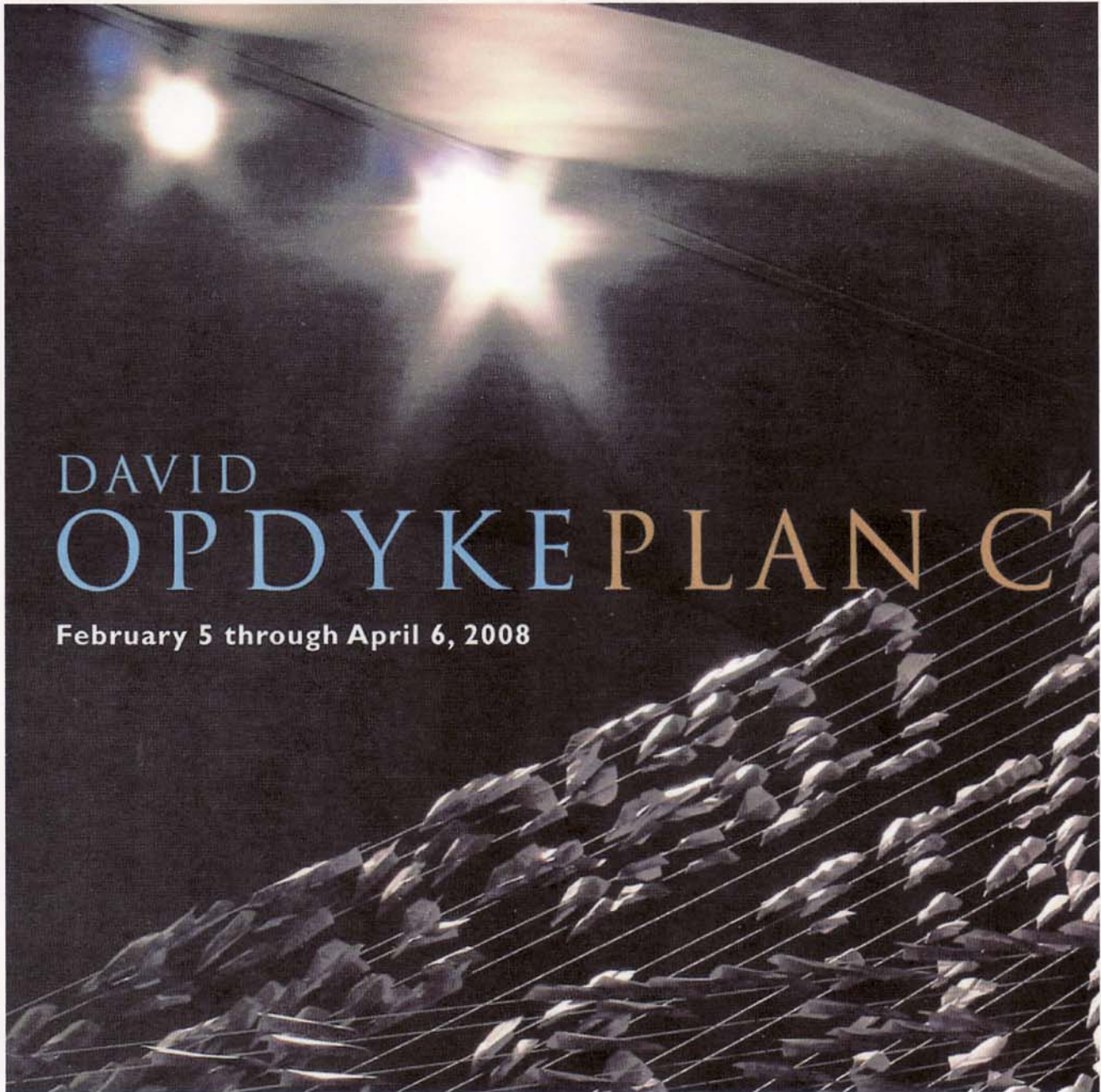
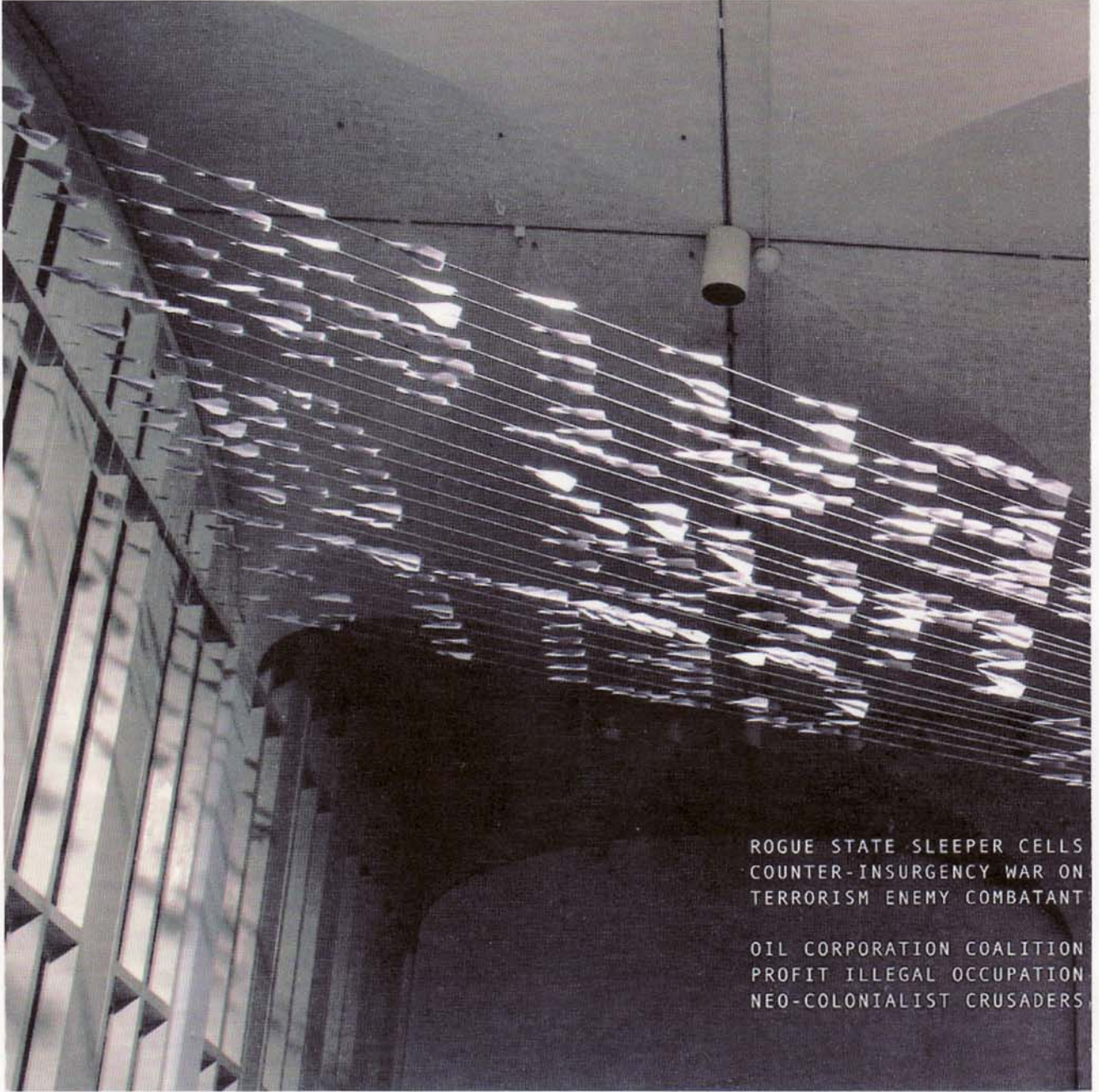


Bui, Phong. "David Opdyke in conversation with Phong Bui." University Art Museum, University of Albany (exhibition brochure): January 2008.



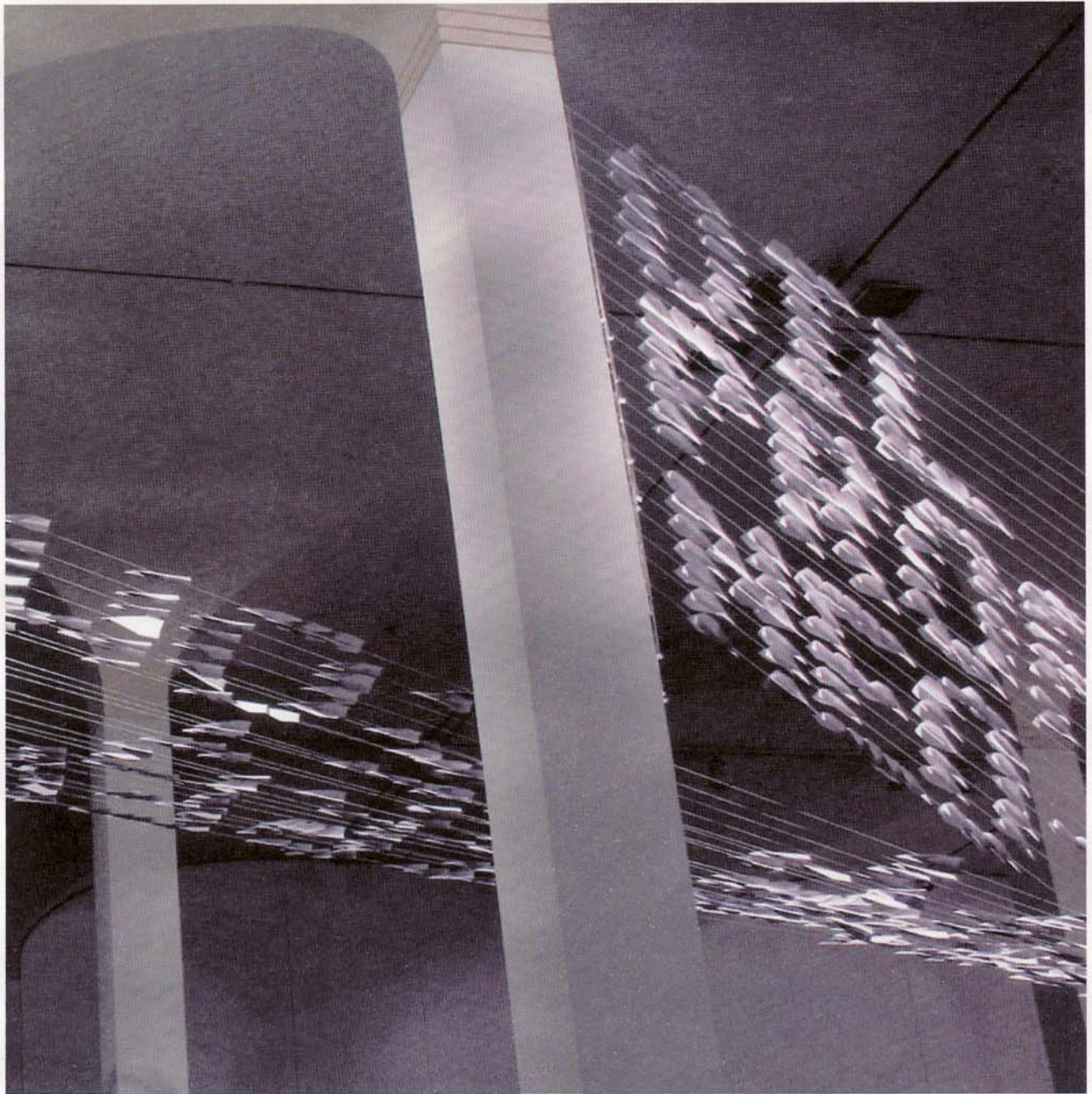
DAVID
OPDYKE PLAN C

February 5 through April 6, 2008



ROGUE STATE SLEEPER CELLS
COUNTER-INSURGENCY WAR ON
TERRORISM ENEMY COMBATANT

OIL CORPORATION COALITION
PROFIT ILLEGAL OCCUPATION
NEO-COLONIALIST CRUSADERS



David Opdyke in conversation with Phong Bui

January 2008



Progress, 2006

Phong Bui: When and how did the subject of dystopian views of the U.S. suburbs become such a fascination for you?

Opdyke: After I graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 1992, I started going to Home Depot, which had all kinds of affordable non-fine art materials that I could experiment with. The whole home-improvement big-box store thing was brand new, and it got me thinking about the "American Dream," private property, and all the products you suddenly needed to protect your perfect suburban home. Later on, during the 2000 presidential election, I became fascinated with the red and blue map that supposedly divided the country into enemy territories. But it also seemed like the difference between your house being Republican and mine being Democrat was just a choice of paint color or brand loyalty. Those absurdities led to the piece *Taste Test 2000* (2001).

Which is constructed in the shape of the U.S. map as an endless suburb riddled with cul-de-sacs, with red and blue standing in for a contest between Coca Cola and Pepsi logos.

Then, of course, September 11th happened. That's when I started to pay attention, along with everyone else, to the messes we made out in the rest of the world. The world came crashing into my studio. I couldn't ignore it.

How about the relationship between consumer culture and political power as we can see in, for example, *Ownership Society* (2005), an ink drawing of the Capitol building, made minutely with various consumer products and furniture, as well different types of cars, trucks, vans, SUVs and so on?

My fascination with drawing piles of stuff started with *Everything You Need* (2004), which is sort of a house made from the tangled extension cords of all your appliances. "Ownership society" is actually a Bush administration phrase. It sounds great: you own a home and a car, you are in control. But, you also own your health care, your retirement, and your mortgage, so maybe you aren't in control—seductive, simple phrase, with complicated side effects. The next one in that series was *Achievements* (2006), which changed the tottering piles of accumulated stuff into a vast, craggy landscape. That happens a lot—images cycling in and out, combining and recombining in ways that I didn't expect. For example, I keep doing Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade drawings. *A Show of Force* (2005) was the first, turning tanks and bombs and troop transports into hot-air inflatables. After a few more, I made *Aeronautical Manifestation* (2007), which takes a column of giant plastic bald eagles on a helicopter-driven tour. Houses and airplanes keep popping up in different configurations too.

I thought *Pre-Emptive Product Placement* (2003) was a good demonstration of corporate America and its investment in war, naturally followed by *Unity* (2004), a piece of jigsaw puzzle-like configuration that squeezes other countries into the shape of the U.S. map. It's a total satire on American culture and its political domination.

I'm an NPR junkie, and *Pre-Emptive Product Placement* (2003) started with an interview I heard where someone suggested that bombing Afghanistan "back into the Stone Age" presented an opportunity. We could create a new society so they, like us, would want suburbs, malls, and SUVs. *Unity* came about after my



Delivery, 2006



Fiduciary Remains No. 3, 2007



Zenith (detail), 2008

son was born and someone gave him a U.S. map puzzle. That started me thinking: fears of globalization, the French headlines after September 11th saying "We are all Americans," the Coalition of the Willing. It all fell together—we'll just redraw the world map. That sort of big, absurd idea really appeals to me.

Landslide (2005) and All in the Same Boat (2004) seem to be about ecology and environmental waste...

Landslide was originally a response to the political waste of the 2004 election and the idea of "battleground states," which I thought of as the landscape of the country fractured and broken by a massive earthquake. The effects I got from that piece stuck in my mind, eventually leading me toward ideas and images of decline, decay, grand crumbling remnants. The *Fiduciary Remains* (2007) drawings depict ruins in the jungle, variations on a Machu Picchu of the West made from elements of the dollar bill. But it's almost as though someone will figure out how to make a theme park out of the ruins, or that we're witnessing our own collapse as if it's just something cool on YouTube or a documentary on the History Channel. That's sort of what's going on with the two large sculptures in the Albany show, *Zenith* (2008) and *Nadir* (2008).

Recently, in Miami during Art Basel, you did a huge installation of some 800 plus paper airplanes hanging on a network of strings spelling out the word "ONE" from the U.S. dollar, which recalls *Aerial Assumptions* (2004). Could you talk more about this body of work?

Aerial Assumptions was part of the show *American Paradigms* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, where I was offered their 30 x 50 x 45 feet high atrium to do an installation. I'm reinventing the piece for the University Art Museum, with a better title, I think:

Mixed Messages (2008). In both cases, I begin by cutting the pages out of an Arabic-English English-Arabic dictionary, and then make paper airplanes which hang on intersecting and colliding strings in the form of skywriting. The texts read like bombastic newspaper headlines or overloaded political phrases from the so-called clash of civilizations: terrorism, occupation, rogue states, Western imperialism, etc. The viewer has to go upstairs, seeing it from every angle in order to decode the entire message.

Did your experience as an architectural model-maker, which you did for 12 years, have a direct impact on your work?

Absolutely. I learned a lot. Materials and skills from my job found their way into the studio, especially the notion of model-making itself: the presentation of a grandiose, ambitious project in miniature. If not for that experience, I'd be doing very different work.

How do you negotiate with the incredibly minute and intensified sense of focus which is required in your work?

For each piece, I form a set of rules, materials, and techniques for myself. Within that framework, there are hundreds or even thousands of tiny little decisions that I make intuitively. The repetition itself can also become meditative. It's a very odd combination of obsession and freedom, of restraint and release. ■

Phong Bui is an artist, editor, publisher of the monthly journal *The Brooklyn Rail*, and the curatorial advisor at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York.



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