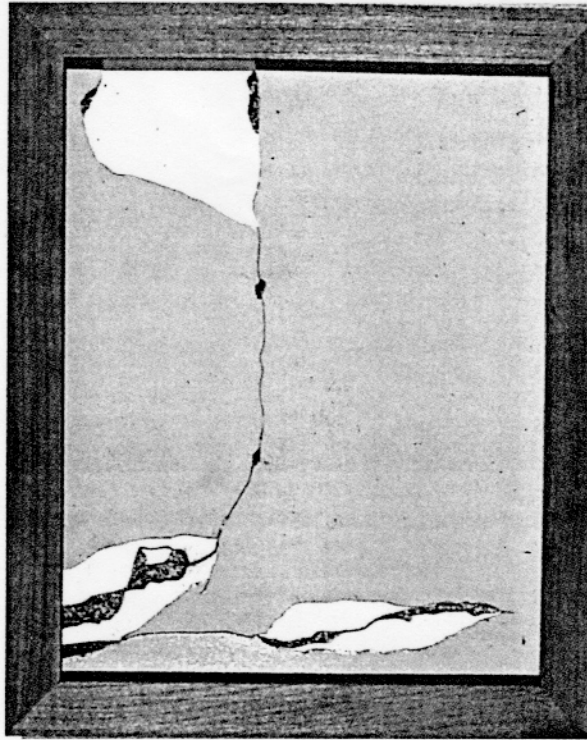


## William Radawec's "Retro," An Authentically Fake Prequel to the Future of Uncertainty: Post Gallery • Los Angeles, California

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William Radawec, CRACK-UP, 1997

In this two-part exhibit, artist William Radawec presents superbly ironic and delectable works on the theme of the absence of history, natural ruptures, future angst, illusions of security, and the embrace of the fake as an acceptable ersatz to shield us against true experience.

### **Of Safety on the Brink of the Abyss**

The first installation is in an ordinary brick-walled white room on the first floor of the gallery. Upon entering, the gaze naturally peruses the walls at eye level (the height at which art work is usually found) and completes the circle having found . . . nothing. A second, more expansive sweep, reveals a pair of paintings hanging approximately three feet from the ceiling. Gleaming in the bright light, the twin pieces proudly and realistically represent white-painted brickwork with a square lozenge in the middle, pierced and fastened by a thick bolt. The white is Malevichian, the detail of the bricks Magrittean, with all the titillating poetic mystery emanating from the deliberateness and precision of execution.

On the opposite white brick wall, at a parallel height, are eight white bolted lozenges 22 inches apart on a horizontal line. They are the fasteners to invisible retention cables within the wall, in order to prevent its possible collapse in an earthquake. Because this structural reinforcement is posterior to the original construction of the building, it is called a "retrofit." The engineer, however, is Radawec, and he is nonchalantly revealing the fake security provided by the perfect replicas of the retrofit plates. These retrofits are actually white Plexiglas attached to the wall with Velcro.

The white lozenges are perfect icons of Minimalistic simplicity. They are innocuous, bland, and absent of any other than utilitarian character. Esthetically, they almost beg to be dismissed. In content, however, these ironic simulacra are just the contrary: rich, funny, questioning, menacing, and open to narrative. No self-referential snobs, these works—they put the viewer right on the spot.

While this writer believes that the religious need of a plethora of contemporary artists to refer to Duchamp is generally misconceived and self-aggrandizing, in this case one can safely (!) say that Radawec is terrifically true to the spirit and sardonic wit of Dadaism, as well as to the concentrated/concentrative power of Conceptualism.

As we stand in the empty space between the fakes and their replicas, we are positioned between the reassurance afforded by well-crafted appearance and the less-than-uncertain probability of natural devastation—the basic desire for security vs the basic reality of annihilation. We are caught between the consensual tranquillity of daily life at the end of the continent and the century, and a pervasive absence of historical content and context. We are exiled from authentic experience, isolated from collective memory and threatened with mindless wipe-out. There is no consolation to be found in the regular geometry of the white bricks, the deadliest of building materials since they crumble like cookie crumbs under tectonic pressure.

The irony is furthered by the dialogue the retrofits engage in with their painted semblances, right above our heads. The beauty in the execution of the paintings makes them almost lyrical, except that they are singing the praises of the ersatz object and so, of course, the doom of ensuing dissatisfaction—as in the impossibility of fulfillment of function. As Duchamp would have said it, “Pas mal.”

### **Of the Domestication of Cracks**

In an adjacent room, seemingly ignorant of the orderly presence of the other artwork, Radawec has inserted three “drawings/paintings/sculptures” (let’s call them D/P/S’s for short) featuring cracks, like excavated fragments from a scarred wall.

Each D/P/S is conspicuously positioned in an apparently arbitrary location—above the door frame, stuck into a corner three feet from the ground, or moving out of another corner at six feet. As opposed to the retrofits, the cracks are immediately recognizable as objects of art because they are framed in oak. Their color (beige) demarcates them, and they are hung with other works. Upon close examination, they reveal themselves to be calligraphic gems, painstaking reproductions of the traces of a dramatic event.

Each D/P/S is traversed horizontally or vertically by a razor-thin line bouncing in a rhythmic staccato from nowhere to nowhere. Here and there the line breaks open to reveal the dull whiteness of the (fake) plaster itself, punctuated by sandy gray crevices. These pieces are perfect reproductions of cracks in the walls of Radawec’s Los Angeles residence, and were originally produced by the January 17th, 1994 earthquake.

Here are hilarious, delicate, and disquieting celebrations of the absurd. Radawec has again chosen to set up a dialogue between the obvious and the banal on the one hand, and the invisible and virtually lethal on the other. Micro vs macro, past vs future. The trace vs the march of time and history. The artist’s intentional amusement vs nature’s arbitrary blindness. This reproduced crack is the reconstituted trace of an enormous, almost immeasurable event. It is a remnant: intimate, tame, so easily beheld—domesticated.

We are also looking at the banalization of the Phenomenal. We are looking at archival paper painted a whitish beige known as “Navajo White” or “Landlord White” because it is a McDonald of a color; it does a good job at covering and it does not offend. The crevice is rendered in pencil and ink and White-out. Nevertheless, in Radawec’s hands, this trace

has become an effective signifier, capable of recreating its generative event in our minds. The event then can be projected into the future, a probability for the manifestation of chaos. So from the banal we return to the Phenomenal, the immeasurable. The crack is now the harbinger of the unknown and the uncertain, raw disruptive power beyond the variables of time and place.

Finally, for Radawec, these cracks are valid contemporary historical landmarks. Personal and individual perception of history is a slippery notion, and an elusive experience. In the age of media and pervasive "Disneylandization," what makes for a (direct) historical experience of a (live) historical event? How does one perceive oneself as a historical being in a city where the past is young, often eradicated, where the urban sprawl hides many of the revolutions taking place within it (birth of the Internet) and events are mostly mediated (Barnacle Bill on Mars)? There is mostly uncertainty, absence of delineation and demarcation. Earthquakes are great historical events—loci for the intersection of the individual and the collective, the manmade and the natural, consciousness and memory. And their cracks, particularly fake ones, are reliable expressions of uncertainty and change. Ah, the rips and tears through the sameness of things. Ah, the quivers afforded by the cracks!

Stephanie A. du Tan, N.Q.R.H.  
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1997