

GLADSTONE

Tina Rivers Ryan, "Distress Signals", *ArtForum*, February 2026

ARTFORUM

EDITOR'S LETTER

DISTRESS SIGNALS

By Tina Rivers Ryan



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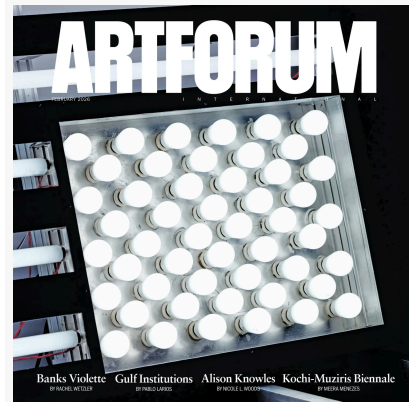
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IN THE SUMMER OF 2009, I flagrantly ignored the sound counsel of my lawyer boyfriend (now husband) by signing Deitch Projects's mandatory waiver ensuring that I would "assume and accept all risk and liability for losses, damages, expenses, personal injuries, and death" resulting from entering Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe's *Black Acid Co-op*. This sprawling installation (or in the New York gallery's parlance, "spatial collage") had transformed the Wooster Street space into a warren of rooms and hallways that resembled a series of stage or film sets, including a "clandestine drug lab," a Chinatown basement store, and a pirate radio station. I gingerly navigated through half-destroyed walls and over uneven floors strewn with detritus, escaping with vivid memories of one of the strangest contemporary art experiences to be had in those years.



Banks Violette, *not yet titled (flag)* (detail), 2007, aluminum, fluorescent tubes and bulbs, ballasts, wiring, road case, hardware, dimensions variable. Photo: Leslie Artamonow.

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What struck me most about this and other seemingly anarchic installations of the aughts—including Dan Colen and Dash Snow’s notorious *Nest*, which preceded *Black Acid Co-op* at Deitch’s Grand Street location in the summer of 2007—was the uniquely nihilistic quality of the psychosis (both individual and collective, pathological and pharmacological) they put on display. Framed by the “War on Terror” and the global financial crash, these installations were, in my view, rather like a bad trip—the kind that left you with grime under your skin, but also with the vertigo of standing at the precipice of an abyss that threatened to swallow everything whole, including politics and history. Instead of the giddy *la fée verte* of the riotous Belle Époque, or the mind-expanding LSD of the turbulent ’60s, or the empathy-inducing MDMA of the globalized ’90s, we Americans in the aughts got stuck with methamphetamine as metaphor of the decade’s high-speed, violent collapse of hope for a better future.

As *Artforum*’s executive editor Rachel Wetzler notes in her feature essay in this issue on Neo-Goth 2000s art star Banks Violette and his recent revival, suddenly, the aughts are seeming newly relevant. With President Donald Trump’s illegal kidnapping of Venezuela’s despotic President Nicolás Maduro and our government’s seizing of the

months of 2003 all over again. Back then, I joined a convoy of students converging on New York to protest President George W. Bush’s illegal invasion of Iraq; I optimistically wore a T-shirt that on its front quoted him as saying YOU’RE EITHER WITH US, OR YOU’RE WITH THE ENEMY, while its back was emblazoned with the word ENEMY. As Wetzler observes, the next month, “we went to war anyway—proof positive that the will of the people was no match for the imperial ambitions of the Bush administration and its cronies. In this climate, it made sense that the era’s most provocative art was shot through with adolescent angst: *Everything is bad and I am powerless to do anything about it.*”

Back then, Violette repeatedly invoked the idea of the “exhausted” image. On the occasion of his 2008 show at Maureen Paley in London, for example, he explained to *Interview* his use of the galloping horse of the TriStar Pictures logo (echoing artist Jack Goldstein’s appropriation of the MGM lion): “Like a lot of the images that I’ve used, it’s iconography that’s just kind of exhausted and overmined. It’s the visual equivalent of strip-mining.” His rehashing of empty, depleted imagery is not exactly an affirmative or activist project—but Wetzler argues it is nevertheless the gesture that perhaps best captures our present despair, while also holding open the possibility of a kind of social friction or antagonism (especially in Violette’s more recent works, with their references to MAGA-coded

It then falls to the rest of us to wonder how we might reinvest images with meaning, making them a renewable resource, as it were. The answer, of course, is that first, you have to give a damn about something—have to resist the nihilism that screams there is no point in articulating positions (itself a position that is a privilege to countenance) or, at the very least, in expressing some type of feeling, question, or truth. Violette’s sculpture *Not yet titled/(flag)*, 2007, which appears on this issue’s cover, is one of the many flag works the artist has made; in this one, white bulbs stand in for the stars and stripes of an upside-down Old Glory, referencing the tradition of inverting a flag to signal distress. The meaning of any such inversion necessarily is determined by context, including the timing and the political inclinations of the person who is flying it. On the cover of an art magazine in February 2026, Violette’s sculpture signals distress over the existential and material threats to American artists and cultural organizations posed by the government itself. At the same time, its stark, interrogative light suggests a question transmitted from deep within the dark: Yes, everything is bad; *what are we going to do about it?*