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WE BELIEVE IN NOTHING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

WE BELIEVE IN NOTHING

By Sarah Bednarek, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: Kendall Buster
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A discussion of the important aspects informing my work, including, ideology, and feminism among other issues.

“Yeah, we believe in nothing, Lebowski”, the Nihilists to The Dude¹

In argument I always find myself saying I believe in nothing. This is only a half truth. For the most part I’m just playing devil’s advocate to continue the argument. I’ve learned that I can trust no ideological assumption, and this attitude has allowed me the most freedom as an artist.

Ideologies are sets of ideas about value, morality, rightness, truth, beauty, good, evil, etc. They tend to shape the world according to their own logic and tautologically perpetuate themselves through this shaping, thus making possibilities outside of the ideology impossible to countenance, understand, or tolerate. As Debord points out:

Ideology is the *basis* of the thought of a class society in the conflict-laden course of history. Ideological facts were never a simple chimera, but rather a deformed consciousness of realities, and in this form they have been real factors which set in motion real deforming acts; all the more so when the *materialization*, in the form of spectacle, of the ideology brought about by the concrete success of autonomized economic production in practice confounds social reality with an ideology which has tailored all reality in terms of its model.²

In a spectacular society ideology is perpetually reinforced by functions of its own making. For instance, the reign of the free market is perpetuated by the media brought to prevalence by the free market. Thus, the E! Entertainment Network becomes a forum for the promotion of fame and celebrity through advertisement (as well as the numerous shows

¹ Joel and Ethan Coen

that are “programming” only in name). As a desirable form of entertainment the E! channel buttresses a mainstream form of culture (Hollywood) and is itself enriched (Hollywood gossip). It supports notions about fame through its very existence, and could not exist without the famous, thereby forming a free market entertainment loop. It would be impossible for the E! channel to report on anything besides Hollywood gossip because it would not suggest the primacy of Hollywood entertainment nor bring in revenue.

The previously mentioned half truth is that I do believe there is enormous value in questioning. Art making is a pursuit of knowledge, an epistemological undertaking. In other words, I make art because I want to learn things and I want to show people what I’ve learned (aside from the obvious selfish pleasures of visualization, creation, and appraisal that are also very much a part of my practice). This is not to say that I hold any truck with scientific reasoning, which seems to be yet another ideological construct designed to seduce, occlude, and coerce. Rather, questioning as a method has merely provided a workable future for my jaded disbelief.

My falling out with ideology is due in part to reading, but also to argument. I realized, ultimately, that all ideological arguments are basically the same. No moral, no value, no attitude towards power, no economic position truly differentiates ideologies. The outcome is always equivalent. Ideologies require force, slow indoctrination, or coercion to implement and do not allow for conflicting or even slightly differing viewpoints. The inability of some to acknowledge that any position on a given issue may be multifaceted or

² Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 212

ambivalent, suggests that ideologies promote inflexibility. Opposition to ideology seems the only route and I, thus, use skepticism as a way of learning about the world.

A brief digression: all of this vitriol aimed against ideology implies a search on my part for some non-dogmatic “real truth.” I am aware that both these terms are relative and are unachievable. In a world of spectacle and simulacra, how can you even attempt to search? Terms like “real” and “truth” regress infinitely towards the horizon³.

I feel a personal responsibility to question the way things are. Specifically, as an American I feel lied to (as we all do) and am fully aware of it (as we all are). I am concerned with revolutionary as well as complacent rhetoric. In thinking about my role in the cycle of coercion and seduction, and in looking at the codes and structures used, I am investigating the romance of ideology and the atrocities committed under its auspices.

My main interest, currently, is my own romantic lefty posture. Mostly I am looking at why I have such deep seated desires to get off the grid, to elude “the man”, to live a globally justifiable lifestyle, and to fully believe I’m doing the right thing. My attitude towards these drives, however, ranges from the critical, to the ambivalent, and to the supportive.

Feminism/Women’s Work

In conversation I was once told by a young critic and curator from Chicago that my work was insufficiently feminist. While I do not think feminism is primarily the driving force behind my work, I was frankly appalled. Who was this roustabout, who happened to be a man, to tell me how to be a good feminist anyway? His argument was that to be truly

feminist one must point directly to the oppression by copying the masters. He was referring, of course, to Sherrie Levine's oeuvre, particularly her series After Walker Evans, After Ed Weston, and Bachelors (After Marcel Duchamp)⁴. In his mind, my method was passé and insufficient because I was doing what he defined as women's work. To think that sewing and "women's work" was incapable of communicating similarly to Levine's works is simply absurd considering several of Elaine Reichek's embroideries for example, Sampler (Jasper Johns), Sampler (Chuck Close)⁵, and Sampler (Lawrence Weiner)⁶. Stunned, (no one had ever told me I was insufficiently feminist) I was incapable of getting a counter argument together at that moment.

I realized later that his idea of feminist art was outdated by at least 25 years and so exclusive as to suggest only one avenue. What he missed was the obvious point: that I am of a generation that has grown up with work like Levine's. Therefore, my responsibility is to break from what I regard as a dogmatic way of looking at women's struggle in the art world and contribute in more multifarious ways to being a feminist artist. Merely copying the masters as he suggested seems a scanty means of addressing the current complexity of third wave feminist thought.

While "women's work," such as sewing, may appear passé, I am not convinced that in conjunction with the other topics I address in my work that it is so. My attitude is one of both protest and joy, unlike, for instance, Martha Rosler's Semiotics of the Kitchen. Our mothers gave us the freedom to be welders, but I may prefer sewing, and one is not more

³ Baudrillard, *The Hyper-Realism of Simulation*, Harrison and Wood, p. 1018

⁴ Krauss, p. 184-189

⁵ Reichek, Frankel, plate 16

empowering than the other. The question seems not to be if you can or can not do something, but how it is done and what it accomplishes.

Taste/Spectacle/Simulacra

I watch a lot of the Home and Garden Television. I am fascinated by the necessity to *appear*. My two favorite shows are Trading Spaces and Design on a Dime⁷. In both, a person's room is transformed into a paragon of "good taste" through humble means and in record time. This is an amazing conjunction of spectacular processes⁸ and the tendency of middlebrow tastes to be informed by outside guidance⁹. In the world of this cable network there is no trickled down middlebrow taste, only *appearing*, neither having nor being.

I am fascinated by the perfect amalgam of seductive forces in these shows. The participants are not only willing but almost salivating to allow some "expert" to redefine their lifestyle to some mere appearance of affluence and good taste. Perhaps even worse, the viewers of the show are perfectly willing to buy into the surrogate mollification.

This all filters into my work not only through my engagement with furniture, fabrics, and the stuff of everyday life, but also my detournements of familiar elements. I am attempting to bring a sense of the uncanny to the innocuous. Although, how my work can compete with the deeply unsettling unreality of the Home and Garden Channel I do not know. The reality of a television channel devoted entirely to creating simulacra trumps

⁶ Reichek, Cooke, p. 30

⁷ The Home and Garden Channel

⁸ Becker, p. 1

⁹ Lynes, p. 320

any high art such as Richard Artshwager's sculptural simulacra¹⁰. The Home and Garden channel is creating an entirely spectacular lifestyle that one watches spectacularly on television.

Melodrama/Deconstruction

I think about my work as a kind of theater, it is all artificial and contrived. I am attempting to create a corollary to the experience one has in a theatre, the suspension of disbelief, the willingness to be taken away into a false world. The bearing of my pieces is heightened. They are shrill and over the top, overdone Lawrence Oliviers. They can be seen from the back of the house. I name them props sometimes, in order both to suggest a possible contrived interaction, but also, to point up their artifice of being. They exist here as representations of reality, impoverished of daily usage or purpose.

Similarly, their making requires melodramatic literal deconstruction. I rip, cut, and tear things apart in order to reconstruct. In some ways this is a parodic action; I am oh so bad for vivisecting that teddy bear, but in other ways it is completely reasonable; I am destroying this teddy bear because I need some brown for that patch of background.

Nonetheless, I destroy a great quantity of stuff only to reconstruct it into a new hybrid. The point of all this is to bring along a portion of the original connotation, and to change and rearrange the implication. At times it is contextualization with other bits of junk, but it can also be an internal reorganization. Being that deconstruction can not be defined, according to Derrida, I will make no attempt here. However, I do view

¹⁰ I am thinking here specifically of Piano and Table with Pink Tablecloth, two simulations whose very materials are simulated. Artshwager, p. 33, 38

deconstruction as a fact finding mission, each bit has something about it, and I endeavor to manipulate, reorganize, undermine, and otherwise change that bit's place in the world.

Politics/Romanticism

I have been described as a political artist. This is only partly true.

I differ from other political artists, such as Hans Haacke, in that I am not interested in discussing, through art, the issues the politicians talk about, but rather the slight-of-hand. As a person, I care deeply about the suffering of others, however as an artist I am wary of the barbarity of lyric poetry after Auschwitz¹¹. It is the trickery of the political/media machine which creates public indifference to suffering. This trickery is what I investigate.

Likewise, I am doubly interested in the un/conscious drives and desires, inspired by pop-culture, the media, my leftist leanings, and contemporary politics to live a justifiable life. This amorphous set of ideas is largely romantic, and it is fairly indefensible. These are merely things I think I should think because of my perspective. Where do they come from? This is presently my quest, to find out why I need to feel like I am improving the world and similarly why I can not.

Fabrics/Pattern

When I first arrived in Richmond I absentmindedly bought a piece of toile (cheap printed cotton fabric meant to approximate tapestry, often depicting pastoral genre scenes, used for upholstery and wallpaper.) At the time I intended to make things addressing the suburban obsession with decoration in a controlled, well ordered natural world. Soon after

¹¹ Adorno, *Commitment*, Harrison and Wood, p. 779

I deemed criticism of the bourgeoisie to be a given, boring, and so moved on. Cleaning out my studio, I put away the toile and forgot about it for a year.

This however, was not the end of my interest in pattern and fabric as signifiers. The toile proved a haunting theme. So many things seemed inherent in its production: the tradition of genre painting, power relations enhanced by genre painting, the industrial revolution, ownership, class relations, simulation, spectacle, mass production, popular culture, the forgettable-ness of decorative fabrics, subliminal messages, luxury, domesticity, printmaking, and rococo (among other things.) Fabric became a language capable of vast depth and breath of signification.

Upon this realization I embarked on a mission to investigate fabric's capacities as a carrier of meaning. From the cutesy-wootsy teddies and sentimental grandma sweaters to tacky-tasteless afghans and stained carpet, all used and carrying past lives. Everything about the fabrics began to speak, the type of fiber and pattern started to suggest class, it suggested the age of the previous owner, the type of place the fabric inhabited, even the attitudes of the previous owner were suggested. How can something so banal speak so much? In fact, the very invisibility of fabrics and their seamless integration into our lives are their power. We can make so many assumptions about a person by their choice of dress, but do we really notice the fabrics the clothes are made of; know the provenance of the cut, history of hound's-tooth? It is a feeling, an association, that gives this assumption.

Humor/Recursion

It is not funny to claim that you are funny.

John Baldessari's Singing Sol LeWitt's Sentences on Conceptual Art is funny, so funny in fact that I couldn't contain myself. Here was one of the contemporary masters sincerely screwing up some of the most austere theoretical phrasing to the tune of Camptown Races. I just about fell out of my chair.

Pope John Paul II is dead now. He wasn't when I saw Maurizio Catalan's The Ninth Hour¹². An act of god strikes down the pope, who looks so vulnerable and surprised. I half expected when I read the news of the pope's death that he had been taken out by a meteor. I realized the image of the pope struck down by a meteor was more iconic to me than any other ecclesiastical image. Somehow the dead pope had superseded Jesus on the cross, the Pieta, Moses opening the sea, and even the kitsch crap imagery of my Catholic School. This is ridiculous.

These are some of my favorite individual works of art. The reason these works are so funny to me is that they are sincere as well as being derisive. They make light of the rigidity of the system, but at the same time memorialize its majesty. Their recursion opens up possibilities and withholds conclusions. This both-ness is a place I like to work (it also fits quite nicely with my ambivalence). Although I am not as much of a trickster as Baldassari and Cattalan, I like to think that I participate in the tradition of shaking things up.

Appropriation/Retro

My work is based on research (in the traditional sense, books, magazines, the Internet, etc.), and I appropriate imagery from my sources. Appropriation focuses attention

on the original, but it is also a connotative language. Among my contemporaries I find that there is immense usage of pop-cultural, historical, and cinematic imagery. This has become an acceptable way of working; it is no longer the revolutionary challenge to authorship it once was. It appears that appropriation has become a drive to include references that expand, contract, change, pay homage, and insult (among other things) based on context.

The ways I use appropriation are many, sometimes it is a direct theft, but at other times it is more hidden. My imagery is often filtered through various processes in order to come out the other end as an applied surface. My appropriation can be integrated into the matrix of the fabric, for example printmaking, or added later as an appliqué. Either way, it is always used to alter the meaning of the object upon which it is placed.

Appropriation is also capable of suggesting time. As much of my work is historically informed, I find that the way I appropriate is becoming much more evocative of a particular era. I'll call this the retro impulse. Because the entirety of history is available to me I pick and choose imagery depending upon my aims. There are those who find the retro impulse to be an impoverished form of understanding history. I would agree. Trying to appreciate historical events from a contemporary perspective will always be weaker than a first hand experience. The retro impulse lacks the richness of everyday life, but this does not mean that no attempt should be made to comprehend.

Conclusion

¹² Cattelan, p. 39-40

Being fed up with my own lefty rhetoric but also wanting to memorialize it I created Pastoral.

Hippies fascinate me. I cannot help but commend the nobility of trying to make the world a better place, but I cannot let the majestic fall of hippie values go unmentioned (likewise, the decadence of the hippie lifestyle). My personal (untested) theory about the hippies is that the hyper-decadence of transgressive lifestyles evolved into the hyper-debauchery of consumerism. This is beside the point. I am primarily concerned with my own need to conform to a leftist agenda, but also my inability to allow myself to conform to ideologies. This conflict or ambivalence was what I attempted in Pastoral.

My impulse was to create a hesitant utopia. Through the overuse of conflicting pattern on blobby, dumpy landscapes, as well as sex and drugs appliqué, I created a simulated utopia. Hopefully, one that was as disturbing as delightful.

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- 2006 Annmarie Garden/St. Mary's College of Maryland Sculptor-in-Residence
- 2005 Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society Member
 - VCU School of the Arts Travel Grant
 - VCU School of the Arts Scholarship
- 2004 VCU Graduate Teaching Assistant Fellowship
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- 2003 VCU Graduate Teaching Assistant Fellowship
- 2001 UMN Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program Grant
 - UMN Visual Arts Committee Commission

Solo Show

- 2001 *Once Removed*, Paul Whitney Larson Gallery, St. Paul, MN

Selected Group Shows

- 2005 *Ribbed for Her Pleasure*, Cynthia Broan Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
 - More Fresh Meat*, Kim Foster Gallery, New York, NY
 - Exchange Rate*, Sky Lab, Columbus, OH
 - Pastoral*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
 - Sweet Substitute*, Stevenson Blanch Gallery, Valencia, CA
 - Pork Barrel*, Keith Talent Gallery, London, England
- 2004 *Top Shelf*, The Barrel Factory, Richmond, VA (Curated by Lisa Shroeder)
 - No Pun Nintendo*, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
 - Madison's Cave*, Keith Talent Gallery, London, England
 - Candid*, Plant Zero, Richmond, VA
 - Casserole*, Art Works, Richmond, VA (Curated by Ray Kass)
 - Student Art Show*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA (Curated by Ashley Kistler)

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