

Material Matters

by: John Luna

In these ever-growing piles of inert, dysfunctional ‘stuff’, which cannot but strike us with their useless inert presence, one can, as it were, see the capitalist drive at rest.

- Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*.

This morning I visited the place where the street cleaners dump the rubbish. My God, it was beautiful!

- Van Gogh, letters

So much of what we discard is light: a Styrofoam carton floats from your hand on its way to the trash bin; paper latte cups seem more buoyant for their plastic lids and cardboard sleeves. Black garbage bags take on cartoonish loft when hefted, high and dry out the door, only to know their inertia compressing in the damp fatigue of dumpsters, or sliding *en masse* like several thousand years’ mud to drown the apocalyptic shanties of Manila.

The difference is the border that exists between individuality and number, the weightlessness of choosing for oneself as opposed to the speculative purgatory of the need, desire and depth of debt of everyone at large, impossibly huge and dense, a dead star’s worth of waste... And these realities being so often unassimilable, because freedom of choice must feel very light to travel so swiftly where it needs to go, and goods divorced from the productive act that engendered them (from a cup of Joe to a suit of clothes) have a necessarily delayed, occulted weight.

Artists understand this fluctuation – its ridiculous paradoxical demands and surprising flexibility- better than others. Art materials are typically required to feel fluent in their course and obstinate after the act; artists expect and receive reversals of said formula, to their delight or consternation. For many artists a prevailing myth (that materials have spirit or at least, persistent DNA) lies at the root of whole practices’ worth of suspension of disbelief; in love, fame, the economy, you name it... Thus, the inertia of garbage possesses a striking resemblance to the wonderful use-value of a tool at rest that strongly suggests separation at birth. This is why so many artists have conversations with garbage as if it were their last, best friend in the world.

Material Matters is an exhibition that purports to call attention to waste: garlands of paper tags resembling laundry lines for miniature tea towels are made from salvaged cardboard coffee sleeves, neatly torn; bright spirals that corkscrew contorting from the ceiling, are, we are told, the culling of ten months of snack-food wrappers. This garbage looks newer that the space around it; threatens to convert the aging bead board and windowsill to survivals, comments on impoverishment by begging scuffed floors and institutionally flickering fluorescents. If art is a condition of life, life is obviously as hungry as it is hunted.

“[Turning] advertising into abstraction” is how Catherine Holt describes the ‘connective tissue’ of the ceiling piece. Look closely at the various uses of reclamation in Holt’s work – particularly her multifaceted address to the ‘package’ of a wasp’s nest- and you wonder if the issue could be more organically expedited. Advertising *as* abstraction (and the implicit vice versa) might be closer to what we experience every time we gaze lustfully at what we *already* own: images inspire appetite and appetites help to domesticate images. Holt’s snack bags, water bottles and cellophane follow a formula in which tactile, decorative packages become heraldic, salutary arrangements for attraction, protection, circulation... The issue is the chaste, brisk glamour of intact transposition: the packages fall away from their function without losing their alacrity. In this case, Holt’s initial disclaimer “packaging is a waste”, is not quite true. Packaging is a gamble, in which great stakes are wagered, but the house almost always wins.

This is evident in how the wasps’ nest pieces both exploit and extol their subject, exploding its wildly subtle construction while at the same time crinkling a bustle of glare about the ash-fine surface. Packaging can be folded, turned inside out, but never yields up more than surface. Nests, on the inverse, are nothing but the lives of their occupants in a few shabby strokes. The heterogeneous comparisons offered by the hive pieces come closest in Holt’s presentation to delivering a provable practice: chew and keep chewing. Recapitulate, don’t swallow.

Similarly, [Marlene Bouchard’s](#) presentations of architectural flourishes, scraps and notations foreground a collector’s rendition, but in accumulative awareness they acquire a greater depth of deference to connection that any categorization we can pretend to proffer. Her graph drawings propose to record ephemera, but the pressings have overburdened the substrate, so that all means of metering and composition turn absurd.

Based on inner city ornithography (casual voyeurism of neighbouring walls; the country walk as urban drift), they are narratives

based on gallant superfluities, punctuated by dysfunction: birdsongs become 'bird-sirens', or are sirens so striated through the downtown core as to resemble no fitter category than birdsong? The grids become the premise for Bouchard's communion with exploitative waste as a contemplative sensibility...the sheer credulity of their linear reticules makes them less a frame for information, more a porous membrane, a-tremble with selves, senses, Diaspora and dilemma.

To regard the work of Material Matters as a facts-forward disclosure of waste and pollution is to participate in an uncomplicated global narrative, banking interest along the way in the ingenuity of the artists for their use of such 'low' stuffs. This stance pays no respect to the earned presence of the materials, however. A culture of immediate gratification, instantaneous brand recognition, and awesome obliviousness is the subject of the first take. An attentiveness of the character of signals, margins, introductions, revelations and entrapments defines the second.

Tying together the subject of garbage with the outcome of art is the notion of craft, as a less-visible timeline insinuated alongside the historicized problem of imminent waste. Either one happily supplants the other. An art of intimacy and attention provides the imaginative sleight-of-hand that reveals the character of the rift as warm, circumlocutory, and fantastic. Therefore again, the importance of disinterest: the inability to affect change other than by dislocation: the setting free of materials to be themselves. Not an elegy, nor an address as such. An alternative.