

Certain forms of so-called low-brow art, like the circus tableau in which the elephants stand on their hind legs each carrying on its trunk a pretty ballerina in graceful pose, are unintentional archetypal images of the very same truth we try to decipher in art. Much can be gleaned from such ostracized forms about all that is hidden behind art's current state of development, where art is identified with the forms into which it has meanwhile congealed.

Theodor Adorno

Americans don't need piazzas—they should be home watching T.V.

Robert Venturi

The installations in this exhibition are characterized, as the title suggests, by reference to the vernacular, which signifies a common ground between art and a broader site of semiotic inquiry. A vernacular context is site-specific, suggesting what is immanent rather than an autonomous sphere of aesthetic appraisal; what is modest and local rather than valorizing the necessity of a universal validity of judgement. The vernacular acts as a concept of mediation between aesthetic codes whose power to signify depends on a *a priori* agreement (art history, genres, the museum), and the heterogeneous complexities of the codes that are linked to individual and collective identities – the culturally receptive activity of the “public” located in a wider semiotic environment.

Semiotics constructed on the model of the sign reveals two important correlates: structure and communication. In everyday life semiological references are complex and interpreted as pluralistic or multiple, counter-dependent and juxtaposed, or intertextual, and as such no form of subjectivity is constituted on its own; there are no private significations. Consequently intertextual relations are a system of semiological differences. No text is reproduced independently of other texts and this intertextual relation, viewed in terms of production and reproduction, is inter-discursive in terms of access to the public sphere, for example, public texts are often consumed as if they were private. As social relations are constituted in this system of signifying practices, an effect of presence or absence is reliant on public representation or what is signified.

Postmodernism as an aesthetic category, when closely aligned with this methodology challenges the *a priori* designation of an aesthetic and non-aesthetic sphere of representation, and calls into question the distinction between “art” and “reality”. Postmodernism as a vernacular context of inquiry into the aesthetic sphere, does not concede access to an autonomous sphere of art, a desire for a resolved completeness expressed in Kant's “purposiveness without purpose”, but instead examines the aesthetic as fragments or subsystems, or codes of both high art and popular or informal sign production.

As aesthetic production becomes increasingly immersed in commercial production, the problematics of an inquiry into representation is defined within a questioning of cultural interventions (now reformulated as aspects of postmodernism) or the cultural divisions and constraints within which we experience culture: mass culture, high art, popular culture, folk art, kitsch, the art world, information technology, etc. Postmodernism must not be viewed as a pluralistic acceptance of these categorizations, or as a primary negation of commercial culture, a critique associated with modernism proper, but an attempt to evaluate aesthetic categories which fail to grasp contemporary cultural practices with their various technological and political affiliations. As Hal Foster explains in his introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic*:

*These concerns are signalled by the rubric “anti-aesthetic”, which is not intended as one more assertion of the negation of art or of representation as such. ...we are never outside representation – or rather, never outside its politics. Here then, “anti-aesthetic” is the sign not of modern nihilism – which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it – but*

*rather a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them.*

This reinscription I have contextualized as the vernacular.

The art object becomes similarly viewed as a semiotic system. This re-evaluation of aesthetic criteria also brings into question the modernist privileging of form in conjunction with a *a priori* communicability of reception (Kant's disinterestedness), in opposition to “mass” cultural values (as defined by the Frankfurt School and culminating in Greenberg's definition of high modernism). Postmodernism as a critical categorization establishes the conditions of the collapse of these dichotomies of high and low, taste and kitsch, genuine and spurious culture. While the key words, the structural components of modernism, remain form, autonomy, and expression, postmodernism's keywords, or in postmodern style – catchwords – are difference, absence, and displacement.

These changes in reception, the communicative aspect of the work of art, continues an inquiry begun with Walter Benjamin's belief that art would lose its “auratic” qualities within forms of mechanical reproduction. While contemporary conditions have proved Benjamin wrong, his analysis is validated in relation to the image, and in wider cultural terms, television has altered the technological image by both certifying experience and converting experience into an image. As a recent article in *Macleans* observes:

*It is not a new thought that some people think reality is defined by what is on the small screen. It follows that their doubts about their own reality can be reduced if they can put their own image up there... ‘I must be real’ they think... That would explain a lot. It would explain why studio audiences keep whooping and applauding the appearance of Letterman and Carson, long after it is polite to have ceased. They have set their VCR's and want to see themselves yelling.*

Social relations as a community of identification have become displaced by appearances of participation as technology has made it eventful to wave at oneself. The modernist paradigm of reification – not entirely separate from a reference to false-consciousness – has been replaced by the sign as the closure of signifying systems, the commodity form in its most advanced and transferred state, or Baudrillard's simulacrum of contemporary culture.

A vernacular context, as a sphere of postmodern “mutation” to use Barthes terminology, is intertextual, confronting established representation with a primary awareness of difference. The modernist prescription of the singular and the new, stands in contrast to the investigations of the interdisciplinary postmodern. As a textual work does not demand a master-narrative of representation, it accepts the allegorical as a process of constructing not the symbolic, but the real. The allegorical process occurs when there is a primary awareness of difference; as it demystifies the symbolic form, there remains an awareness of the difference between the object as it is signified and meaning imposed through the displacement of signifiers. The postmodern text no longer validates a single and authoritative reading, but is composed of contradictions, paradox, and reformulations.

The *Canadian Frieze* is the documentation of an inquiry into regional architectural form. This project by architects Nan Legate and Eric Fiss examines architectural miniatures as both replicas of actual buildings and outlandish reconstructions. The miniature houses, birdhouses, and mailboxes were photographed, where they were found, on the front lawns of houses and farms on secondary roads across Canada.

The frieze made of polyvinyl chloride examines the specific details of regional architectural folklore that connects design with both the economic environment and levels of social identification. The frieze documents this infrastructural relation as regional folkloric representations. This marking of economic, social and cultural relationships demonstrate the maintenance of a traditional dependency but also the constructs of “lived experience”. The frieze establishes a conceptual intervention or semiotic “play” in the juxtaposition of

## IN THE VERNACULAR

Excerpt from catalogue

environmental details taken from the photographic work with the high art connotations of the structural and narrative elements associated with the classical frieze.

Architecture provided an example for Walter Benjamin to discuss the social function of art. Unlike the isolated, visual perception undertaken in viewing a painting, architecture serves as an identification with a tactile and interactive experience. Folkloric architectural representation can therefore be taken as a context valid for a social response rather than the phenomenon of universalization. Thus social experience and levels of production are culturally in the forefront of defining values which are valid within regional architectural representation. In contrast urban forms of architectonic identification have become increasingly conditioned by technology and a striving for a universal order within modernism. Benjamin's description of the first Paris Arcades as "essentially consumer objects" is continued in contemporary terms by Kenneth Frampton's analysis of architecture as becoming so increasingly polarized between a so-called "high tech" approach predicted exclusively upon specific priorities of production, or the provisions of a "compensatory facade" that covers up the realities of the universal system. Thus as insight into reception as well as production, architectural folkloric representations can contribute to an inquiry into contemporary conditions of art.

Science and art have an extensive history of theoretical concerns. The beginning of the theoretical formulation of aesthetics as an independent discipline and the placement of aesthetics as an autonomous sphere is closely tied to the scientific developments of the 18th Century. Within these influences, art distanced its production from theological and metaphysical concerns, by evaluating and legitimizing aesthetics as institutionalized knowledge controlled by experts, thus structuring new relations (social as well as commercial) between art and the Public.

Michelle Normoyle's photographic work *Protocol* establishes a semiotic identification with the scientific process of encoding and decoding knowledge. The relationships between science, technology and the human condition have been explored in varied cultural forms, from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, Futurism, the film *Metropolis*, and more recently *Robocop*. Designing machines for perfection and superiority over human capabilities is a paradoxical situation of struggle and approval, a situation which dominates the paradigms of science and technological development. Reconciling this conflict (especially the changes in the conditions that affect the complexities of nature) is reliant on scientific proof. The text in Normoyle's work reads RESEARCH; the fundamentals of scientific research are reliant on proof. As Lyotard explains in *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, the question of proof is a problematic site of inquiry, and as proof is re-examined in reference to "reality", it is not outdated to ask "what is true and what is just", but to view science as if positioned within a status of unlegitimated learning. Here technology establishes its position, because as Lyotard observes the senses are viewed as deceptive and limited, so technology gains its importance as an absolute rather than an aid to the methodology.

Normoyle's photographs establish a paradoxical questioning of these scientific paradigms. *Protocol* refers to a record of experimental observation (as an original document) and the observance of official procedures and etiquette. Research that takes place under the subordination of cognitive elements to scientific value illustrates similar assumptions delegated to art, for example, notions of autonomy and consensus (taste). Similarly these photographs of the documentation of scientific progress of the 20th Century, taken from sources reminiscent of *Time Life* books, can be read as allegories on discourses of validation. The desire for a vernacular is at the least a desire not for a singular invention, but for an intervention or counter-examples to one "reality". Like art, scientific paradigms no longer have access to a "grand narrative".

Arni Runar Haraldsson's photographic mural, titled *Agree*, is an

iconic reference to the distribution of public and private concerns. The handshake, as a gesture of greeting and agreement, is also a reference to agree to disagree and in its inverted grasp suggests the hegemony of social structures and communication. As Foucault has demonstrated, power should be viewed in a productive role, that works from the bottom up as well as from the top down: "How not in the sense of 'How does it manifest itself?' but 'By what means is it exercised?'" To approach the theme of power in this manner introduces an analysis of inter-relationships, rather than power as a singular element. This gesture then is a semiotic referent as a source of information about ideology and the communication of cultural codes.

Cornelia Wyngaarden's video installation is both an allegorical and "self-focusing" text. Semiotically speaking the allegorical ambiguities of this "self-focusing" text displace the rules of the codified message. The installation, as the title *Blurred Lines* suggests, is a video portrait of "subject-positions" within broader social influences. We can approach this installation as a deconstruction of the realist text, by taking a position that locates the points of contradiction within the text. Each of the elements of the text provide an "openness" to produce meaning, but as none is privileged, a textual reconstruction forms an allegorical reading of the conventional antithesis between gender, labour, and nature. The video portraits of five men working in primary resource based industries (two fishermen, a farmer, a miner, and a logger) are juxtaposed to a video tape suggesting nature as environment, but nature as mannerist in its structure and romantic in its communication.

Umberto Eco wrote in his discussion of the aesthetic text that to change semantic systems means to change the way in which culture "sees" the world. His example of multiple interactive codification is useful to examine a point of entry into *Blurred Lines*. Wyngaarden has made reference to Gertrude Stein in earlier work; Eco's example is particularly applicable. Eco refers to the well known quote of Gertrude Stein: "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." and explains the "normalacy" of this sentence. All elementary rules of the English language are respected, and as for content, it offers a basic kind of information: "a tautology for truisms". But also the message gives the impression of saying something that is semantically overcoded and allegorical.

The tension constructed within these levels of codification is enhanced by the reluctant image on the three monitors which lay under the broken glass, that reveal, when approached, the viewers own image and the street traffic. In addition, burnt wood confine the monitors in an enclosure.

In the video portrait, the men discuss their labour and experiences of their working life, concluding with a summation of their co-operative and equitable working relations with women during their labour in these different resource based economies. Juxtaposed images of nature establish a metaphoric reading of the status of biological determinism in relation to the rationalizations of gender inequalities. The semiotic references act on a number of different levels or interventions. As art is what produces an aesthetic effect, rather than vice-versa, the video image operates on multiple levels of message codification: entertainment, vernacular familiarity, the authoritative presence of the video image (T.V.), nature as last primitive reference and nature as spectacle.

The postmodern text therefore establishes the 'reader' or viewer as a consumer positioned between acceptance and repudiation of cultural codes. But the vernacular context is not the acceptance of cultural pluralities as a levelling out or homogenizing relationship, also found in artistic spheres of production and reception, but a process of (re)evaluation, that is best summarized by Paul Ricoeur, in a paradoxical reference: "How to become modern and return to sources". Postmodernism remains a paradox.

Petra Rigby Watson  
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