

## *Arranged for Effect*

Essay by Ana Teixeira Pinto

In one of my recent trips I flew to Manchester. It was my first time in the city and the experience would prove baffling. It all started at the airport, not the grey/blue hues one would ordinarily expect, but something closer to an amusement arcade. On the central turnaround, a BMW revolved on a rotating platform under several strobe lights – a lottery, we were told by young lads carrying loudspeakers. Duty-Free racks cascaded into the transit areas, brimming with Transformer toys, M&Ms and electronic gadgets. All appliances looked edible and all edible items looked wax coated. Though it was early morning it felt like late night and though we were in Great Britain, it felt like LA. But the experience only became even more mystifying upon exiting the airport – to be sure, it felt as if I had never left the airport. The whole center is a pedestrian area where commercial surfaces foray into the arteries and corporate buildings overrun the sidewalks. A downpour of steel and glass, plastic and neon confounds indoors and outdoors, public and private, day and night. Any given café is equipped with a Jumbotron and slot machines, red carpet aisle runners and countless LED screens. All apples come in plastic wrapping. Befuddled and bewildered, I feel I am fighting an uphill battle to keep a sense of introspection and my presence of mind.

What is the psychology of polyurethane? Is subjectivity commensurable with centrifugal pumps and screw conveyers? What is the status of art-production inside the Gesamtkunswerk of petroleum foams?

Art has always had an ambivalent relation with consumer culture. Artists have, for one hundred years now, been appropriating industrial objects as “ready-mades”. In the 1980s, art tried to tackle the rampant commercialization of everyday life by exhibiting what became known as “commodity sculpture”, mass-produced items arranged atop plinths and displayed in galleries. But what of the non-products? For every BMW or IKEA there is a RAYCORE or a GE. What of the insidious objects and equipments, which operate under the threshold of consciousness? The imagery of corporate phantasmagoria is not constituted by charismatic commodities alone. What of the invisible hinges, bollards and coat racks that determine urban transit and interaction?

Down the rabbit hole of aluminium and polyisocyanurate, the Norwegian artist Marte Eknaes examines the glue that holds our scenery together. Common enough to blend in and quirky enough to stick out from the climatized world they inhabit, Eknaes’ camp structures are a conflation of seemingly contradictory principles. Halfway between sleek and derelict, most of the artist’s pieces partake in the tradition of primary structures and geometric abstraction,

which, from constructivism to minimalism, constituted the formal lexicon of modern art. Squares, plinths, frames, columns, racks, populate the exhibition space. Yet what modernism saw as pristine geometries and universal gestalt, resurfaces in Eknaes' work as a garishly inauthentic, corporate "second nature." And whereas the idea of a universal Gestalt represented culture as classless, unitary and universal, the world Eknaes geometries stem from is thoroughly made-in-china, her sculptures seamlessly dovetailing with budget in-built environments and paltry corporate surroundings. While the generations who preceded her investigated the structural relations between the objects that compose the imagery of modern art, Eknaes is more interested in their ideological underpinnings. What she struggles to make manifest is not the formal logic that requires these objects to have the structure that they have, but the conflation of political and industrial imperatives whereby modernism's formal elements and conceptual frameworks came to be put into place.

Modernism was always pitched against corporate consolidation – this dichotomy was famously argued in the wake of Clement Greenberg's essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939, Fall issue of the *Partisan Review*). But criticism notwithstanding, only inside capitalist societies could modernist art forms flourish. And for all its claims to autonomy, late-modernist abstraction is driven by a logic of design, in fact by the very logic of Detroit styling it seeks to oppose: imagistic impact, fast lines, speedy turnover<sup>1</sup>. However ironically, under the pressure of consumer society, an "identity was forged between modernist forms and the very forces it was supposed to supersede"<sup>2</sup>, namely "kitsch", consumerism, and corporate design. In other words, whilst modernism's influence in fashion, design and in the textile industry became ubiquitous, what Greenberg theorized as a "strictly optical" space of pure form, resurfaced as a "strictly scopophilic" space of pure design; and what Greenberg theorized as a modernist subject, fully autonomous and "morally alert", reappears as its apparent opposite, a fetishistic subject, openly desirous.<sup>3</sup>

In *Enhancement* (2011), an installation composed of a plexiglas cut-out TV frame and support pole, a plexiglas shelf, an MBT exercise trainer and two silicon cock rings, Eknaes conflates the museum, the household, the gym and the sex shop into one single smooth environment, which collapses all distinction between contemplation and concupiscence.

Inside this particular ecology the subject reappears as the user, whose interaction with the world is endlessly mediated, cushioned and restrained. Another one of Eknaes recurring motifs is the bollard – a short vertical post, originally used for mooring, but currently more

---

<sup>1</sup> Steinberg, Leo, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* University Of Chicago Press (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Steinberg, Leo, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* University Of Chicago Press (2007)

<sup>3</sup> Foster, Hal, *The First Pop-Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha*, Princeton University Press (2011)

common for traffic control – which, in the installation *Escalate* (2011) she combines with three strips of anti-slip tape (*Anti-Slip* 2011) and a photo of a panic bar – a spring-loaded metal bar fixed horizontally to the inside of an outward-opening door, meant for easy exits. These seemingly benign architectural elements function as biopolitical props, however. They are both training apparatuses and ergonomics of power, which harmonize the user to the used equipment to optimize system performance.

Drawing further on what we could call environmental consolidation, Marte Eknaes' installation *Overlay* (2011) addressed the redevelopment of the area surrounding the Oslo Kunsthall– Bjørvika. Incorporating psychology, engineering, industrial and graphic design, statistics, operations research and anthropometry, her works make manifest in how far corporate design impacts user's capabilities and limitations, his psychology and politics.

In her most recent installation, *Arranged for Effect* (2013), the already mentioned *Enhancement* is shown outside a terraced hall. Through the glass panes the visitor can see *Bollard II* (2012), a found object taken from the new real-estate development in Bjørvika, Oslo, hindering a possible escape route. Inside the main hall a brush strip seal *Better Furnished, More Fortunate III*, (2012), is torn away from its urban ecology and mounted horizontally at ankle height against an exhibition wall. *Verticalia II* (2012), a rickety chair holding a transparent plexiglas tube and semi-covered with anti-dazzle strips, halfway between telescope and office erection, is shown together with a somewhat inquisitive ventilation tube, *Aspirational* (2012), which stands aloof, midway between the other works. Reminiscent of a submarine periscope, it suggests an unknown water world beneath the concrete slabs. In the adjacent room one finds *Thermos Columns* (2012), a column made of ventilation tubes and filled with stickers depicting thermos in a tawdry conflation of homey, infantile and lewd. Further into the space, and hovering over three vertical steel gratings hinged together –*Conflation situation* (2012)– an uncanny over-sized hinge –*Connector* (2012)– startles the visitor. Upon closer inspection it turns out to be a cut-out print, instead of an attempt to fold up the room along a vertical rotation axis. The conflation of the domestic and the commercial resurfaces, yet again, in Eknaes analyses of the manifold ways shopping centers are marketed – the artist references the advertising campaign for the new complex in Leipzigerstrasse, in Berlin, whose slogan is “Shopping is Coming Home”. “Home is coming shopping” would just as well do it. Commodities, like families, exist in a space/time vacuum. Turning the “total art work” of urban equipment and safety appliances into Eknaes' own, quizzing, art works, these somewhat haphazard objects strive to strike a balance between retaining a sense of the personal and emulating corporate culture's frenetic attempts to colonize subjectivity.

Fittingly, for Eknaes – who in one of her Temporary manifestos wrote: “All drawings/collages are both plans for potential structures and documents of already existing

structures” – there is no distinction between model and building, plan and edifice. In History, time signifies social change and the uniqueness and irreversibility of political events. But corporate consortiums know no history; their shareholder value depends on their semblance of permanence, and on the promise of ever-lasting growth. Likewise, in the world of stainless steel and plexiglas there is no arrow of time, only guidance arrows signaling the fire exit. The sequence from project to execution is thus a meaningless one. To quote the artist, everything is reversible.