WHITE HOT

This essay by Marina Roy accompanies the exhibition WHITE HOT by Kelly Lycan
September 12 to October 10, 2009.

The illusion of wholeness which is the fascinating pull of style does not contradict its potential for rupture and resistance. The interest in style has to do with its mobility—its ability to resist the limitations of simple context determinations. …these new stylistic approaches do not simply reproduce or manage social reality as a given, but gives it to us as something new that is produced through the work itself.
- Ina Blom, ”A Question of Style”

Kelly Lycan's exhibition WHITE HOT calls into question our preconceived notions of the value and definition of art as well as the function of the art gallery as a site for encountering elevated art objects or images. The exhibition title itself poses an initial question: What is a flea market doing in a gallery? Then we might ask, what kind of flea market brings together art, commodities, collections, and display items, all under the roof of an artist run centre? And why are some for sale and some not? But unlike the chaotic experience of most flea markets, this space is permeated by a certain stylistic unity, a decidedly more precious ambiance. Here issues around style and taste are being used to disrupt our dominant codes of value, meaning, and aesthetics.

The white hot of the exhibition's title presents two signifiers whose meaning shifts as we peruse the assemblage of heteroclite objects, photos and images that fill Gallery TPW. White hot, as in stolen; or as in new and stylish – hot off the production line; or as in desirous, passionate or fervid. In the context of "stealing," white hot is suggestive of the artistic practice of appropriation. Since the late 19th century, the avant-garde defined itself, heatedly and forcefully, not only in opposition to establishment culture and bourgeois tastes, but also in contrast to the new aesthetic appeal of the mass-produced commodity fetish. Artists came to use the strategies of "stealing" from the most recent fashions, and incorporating the newest modes of production – as well as those fashions and production modes that had fallen into obsolescence—as a powerful lens through which to view the mythologies of a new capitalist culture. The appropriation of the new by art was, on the one hand, utopian—in that it attempted to harness new production modes as a way to project a better future; on the other hand, it imitated the forms of popular culture in a parodic and cynical fashion – as détournement, an effective way to create a disruptive image that critiques new discursive regimes of power in the name of historical memory. Art's appropriation of new production modes and vernacular forms of popular culture ultimately stemmed from the survival strategy of mimicry: to mime the strategies of the dominant ideology as a weapon, but also as surreptitious critique, as a way of mirroring a disenchanted image back to the world.

20th-century avant-garde art was built on ironic and appropriative uses of (1) new production modes and (2) the commodities and pleasures of popular culture: Dadaists assembled advertising and the

detritus of the street into collage works; the Surrealists obsessed over obsolete bourgeois fashions and commodity items found at the flea market; the Situationists plagiarized philosophical, literary or artistic sources, as well as manipulating readymade popular comics; Conceptual art adopted administrative and informational aesthetics through its use of documents and maps, to name but a few. "Stealing" and "détourning" elements from the very value-system one is resisting or attacking are strategies that have continued to proliferate. But in order to remain effective this approach has changed dramatically from

one decade to the next, in keeping with changing patterns of production and consumption. According to Nicolas Bourriaud, current artists are using an aesthetic of “postproduction” that creates new social relations. Postproduction refers to a practice of responding to the chaos of our information economy by appropriating castoff objects and/or others’ ideas, to reuse and re-contextualize them within new social situations. “The dominant visual model,” Bourriaud explains, “is closer to the open-air market, the bazaar, the souk, a temporary and nomadic gathering of precarious materials and products… Recycling (a method) and chaotic arrangement (an aesthetic) have supplanted shopping…” 1

In keeping with this idea of postproduction, Lycan’s installation speaks to us of the search and desire for alternate economies – made necessary in a world where most art/culture does little more than serve up rampant consumption and conformist spectacle. Lycan is as interested in using anti- art as a strategy for art’s continuation, as she is in attempting to foster some form of renewed sensus communi to counter the general sense of social anomie dominating our cities. The artworks, collections, or everyday objects on display in WHITE HOT are not just her own; some have been loaned or donated by others.2 Also, as viewers we become participants, in that we must negotiate how the exhibition elements are to be looked at and/or activated: as décor, art, mere commodities, items in a collection, or somewhere in between. It would be difficult to remain a passive viewer in an installation like this that clearly calls into question the nature of the art object and the function of the art gallery. We can become consumers, but this itself necessitates an interaction with the artist (who tends the gallery once a week as artist/stylist/ shopkeeper), which might then engage us in a more in-depth understanding of the exhibition.

Each fabricated, handmade, found or donated object from WHITE HOT is branded with its own set of value judgments and associations from the start, based on its place within our more of less fixed system of circulating cultural capital. As a way to mess with these preconceived notions of an object’s worth, Lycan displays objects within an ambiguous context or the ‘wrong’ register. Objects are placed sideby-side without apparent rhyme or reason. Display furniture and display objects are mixed with art, cheap commodities, and second hand items. Some items appear to be for sale while others are not. By deploying a flea market or thrift-store aesthetic, this ad hoc installation of items from different competing markets presents the second hand as a more sustainable consumption model. The work offers a subtle critique of an economy based on a combination of highly stylized everyday objects (such as digital gadgets) and planned obsolescence – made possible by the dominant ideology of cynical reason.3

WHITE HOT is further complicated by its blurred authorship. Lycan solicited contributions from a variety of publics to be included within the exhibition, and this along with her cool aesthetic resists the idea of authorship. However, after spending time in the gallery the idiosyncratic nature of the assembled collection – its compilation of objects – begins to reveal an unmistakable austere yet quirky sense of ‘taste.’ In other words, Lycan’s signature begins to shine through. What we begin to see is an allegorical system of economic, social and aesthetic codes that Lycan has developed through the continuous act of collecting and by reflecting on this impulse.

First, there is the collision of different hierarchies of display—the commodity, art, crafts, the second hand item, and the personal souvenir continually swap places. When we enter the gallery, we are immediately confronted with Tab Flyers, a series of paper-thin white paintings that look like public flyers (with tear-off tabs cut into one edge). In this way Lycan presents a work of high art—a series of white monochromes—that mimics a vernacular, pedestrian form, one that is usually trying to sell something. There is also a stack of carpet samples cut out to spell ‘save.’ As we venture further into the gallery, we encounter a pegboard wall with storage behind it, stuffed with white and transparent material. This might make us think of how over-consumption results in the build up of too much stuff,

cluttering physical space and the mind, and resulting in the need for annual garage sales and rented storage space. Last Supper is a photo of a detail of a painting of ”A Last Supper” (from the Louvre) blown up to “life size” and leaning against a folding table from Home Depot: the piece addresses the artist’s experience of encountering an unexpected number of last suppers at the Louvre. A trompe l’oeil effect is achieved as Lycan visually mimics the folds of the table and the folds in the cloth, resulting in a subtle play between photo, painting and sculpture traditions. As we round the corner, we see art and other items displayed on blankets and platforms on the floor and on folding tables. These groupings are titled as separate pieces and include $2 and Under which consists of cheap commodity items (for two dollars and under) dangling from chandelier-like clusters with hooks, zip ties and plastic clips; Three Tiers are display-like tiers, lined with carpet but remaining empty; and a porcelain collectible of Princess Di is found in a styrofoam cooler. All of these examples look like a cross between art and commodity, plinth and display of furniture. Sample Photos, 2 years 2 months are laminated personal photos, reminiscent of laminate colour samples. Here an efficient commodity-based tool is refashioned to serve as a display device for keeping track of research, ideas, as well as documents of everyday life and relationships. With an ironic wink to the phenomenon of male artists mimicking other male artists, Lycan has also produced a Judd or Gillick-like minimalist wall sculpture that is used to hold cheap white plastic bags, ready at hand in case the artist sells something to the gallery visitor. Through these groupings irony flirts with sincerity at every turn.

A sophisticated understanding of materials and objects, and of the potential for their renewal and reinvention, permeates the installation. But the most obvious rhetorical and allegorical feature of WHITE HOT is its use of white to achieve an all-consuming aesthetic, which Lycan refers to as “de-sentimentalization,” “invisibility,” “homogeneity,” and “neutrality.” Be that as it may, it is difficult to approach the exhibition without being at least somewhat conscious of the historical significance or weight of white. In Chromophobia, David Batchelor outlines how white has functioned in the history of colour theory, design, architecture, and art. He explains that, particularly since the mid-19th century, colour has been associated with the primitive, the Orient, intoxication, and excess, while white has been aligned with the “rhetoric of order, purity and truth.”[4] While this interpretation is entirely appropriate to WHITE HOT, Lycan’s exhibition uses the social mythology of colour as an opportunity to deploy white as irony and ostranenie.[5] White imparts an aura of purity, cleanliness and order almost exclusive to the wealthy who can afford the maintenance of such a look within there carefully designed interiors. It evokes class, but also alienating conformity. Be that as it may, there is the sense that Lycan uses white fastidiously as a way to create a new hybrid experience in which her white objects suggest memory and place rather than a exclusive to the wealthy who can afford the maintenance of such a look within their carefully designed interiors. It evokes class, but also alienating conformity. Be that as it may, there is the sense that Lycan uses white fastidiously as a way to create a new hybrid experience in which her white objects suggest memory and place rather than a cold, objective aesthetic.

Lycan’s flea market references lowbrow culture but renders it stylish via the (r)use of the white monochrome. The monochrome itself can refer to a number of conflicting ideas: the death or endgame of art, a search for art’s essence, utopia, transcendence, the sublime, the void, the plenitude of being, absolute nothingness. Reference to this modernist ‘high-art’ extreme takes on new associations within the context of the ‘low.’ Behind this ‘neutral’ aesthetic, one senses the catastrophe of overconsumption – a late capitalist world that can no longer control or sustain itself, piling up waste higher and higher as the winds of progress carry us forward. Surrender Forever, which presents a large white flag falling pathetically to the floor, cannot help but be read as a sign of society’s surrender to consumerism. Flags are the ultimate symbol of belonging, but this flag is left blank. To add insult to injury, the flag is made from a shiny vinyl, like a giant white garbage bag.

Just when we think we've pinned the work down, a glimmer of hope appears through the whitewash: this space actually catches what Lycan calls the "overflow of abundance" – a way of giving new life to discarded things in the form of recycling and revaluing. Furthermore, Lycan's use of white is not consistent. Every object's colour shifts slightly depending on what kind of white it sits next to. There is also inter-subjectivity at work here in the very production and reception of the piece. This speaks to the idea that the marketplace has always functioned as a meeting place. It can be inhabited by heterogeneous publics and active subjects who make unprecedented and meaningful relations possible.

Lycan's installation also evokes the relationship between shared histories and private collections (the exhibition includes examples of Lycan's private collections of things). This relationship was of special interest to the German cultural critic, Walter Benjamin:

> Collecting is a form of practical memory and, among the profane manifestations of 'proximity,' the most convincing one. Therefore, even the minutest act of political commemoration in the commerce in antiques becomes, in a sense, epochal. We are here constructing an alarm clock that awakens the kitsch of the past century into 're-collections.'6

According to Benjamin, obsolete or useless objects can be reactivated in the hands of the private collector. New life is breathed into petrified objects such that the past buried within these objects emerges in unforeseen ways. The sensuous particularity of each of the objects in WHITE HOT is refashioned or recombined to form new contexts. Benjamin refers to this produced effect as a "profane illumination," which he claims is resistant to capitalist amnesia. Through the re-contextualization of historical objects we are reminded of what gets lost or buried on the passage from one discursive regime to the next – past subject positions, ethical/social values, previous power structures.

But while Lycan's collections tap into this type of historic and emotional investment, they also partake in a savvier – less melancholic – way of making art. Her work inserts itself directly into a network of disparate markets rather than limiting itself to pointing to a constellation of privately acquired obsolete treasures. In this way, Lycan's installation partakes in a new ethos of art making. Her performative methodology is consistent with the current generation of artists who have been given the label of 'post-production': the flea market (Rhoades), the incorporation of works by other artists(Tiravanija), the recycling of cultural artifacts into new meaningful configurations (Deller), remixing (Bulloch), service industry strategies (Fraser), focusing on the atmospheric and interior design (Gonzalez-Foerster). Postproduction artwork uses these various strategies as a way of mirroring

consumer culture and its obsession with an aesthetics of services, décor, sampling, packaging, programming and remixing. What makes Lycan's work stand out from much of this type of artwork, is what I perceive as her allegorical bent – a sensibility that is usually missing in the work of these other artists. Lycan's work is less obvious and cynical, and has greater sense of historical memory. In this way, her work seems to borrow heavily from Marcel Broodthaers' fictional museums (in particular Musée d'Art Moderne, Departement des Aigles) and from Duchamp's first display of his Roto-reliefs.7 In an experience economy deprived of first-hand experience, Lycan's cool resistance underscores the need for disenchantment in a world obsessed with conspicuous consumption. Her flea market functions as such: to re-enchant the public sphere by means of creating alternate economies.

The invisible global network of circulating goods, services, and investment capital of the world at large is in stark contrast to the value systems and art strategies that make up WHITE HOT. Because our experience of markets is increasingly saturated with immaterial goods – virtual products and services – artists like Lycan, who stress materiality, invoke a collective sense of loss. If her monochromatic assemblage also addresses style, this is to address a new take on the social – not to reproduce the "experience economy," but to retaliate against it with new methods and purpose. Lycan reinterprets and reassembles a variety of high and low objects and strategies, blurring the distinction between substance and style, "production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work."8 By making art largely out of stuff that has been collected rather than produced, she is clearly asking: "In art as in life, do we really need to continue contributing to the insatiable cycle of consumption and planned obsolescence, which points to future catastrophe, or can we simply make do with what we already have?" Through the strategies of postproduction, allegory, irony, and ostranenie, Lycan's critical stance directs our attention to the capacity of art to wrest the imperative of established production/consumption modes away from subservience to capitalist domination, to make way for the possibility of a more engaged and habitable socio-political condition.

Notes:
1 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, NYC: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002, p. 28. 2 In response to an invitation to participate in the event

1. According to Peter Sloterdijk, cynical reason is 'enlightened false consciousness'; the feeling that one is without illusions and yet unable to act be- cause one feels dragged down by the 'power of things.'
2. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 47.
3. Ostranenie is a Russian literary term referring to the experience of having the everyday made strange. This opens up a re-engagement with objects/ situations, imparting new meanings to them. This becomes especially important when a once novel experience becomes ordinary, and is therefore left unexamined; ostranenie is want to make one look at a situation/object with a new critical perspective.
4. Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*, section H, quoted in Douglas Crimp, On the Museum's Ruins, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993, p. 202.
5. Displayed at the Concours Lepin, Salon des Inventions, between a rubbish-compression machine and a vegetable chopper, Duchamp's optical machines seemed to occupy a status between scientific invention, art object and commodity. Broodthaers collection of objects in his Musée comprised of display items, commodities, art objects, decorative objet d'arts, commercial and fine art prints, etc. and each item was labeled with a number and the statement "The is not a work of art." All were bound by the symbol of the eagles, just as Lycan's items are bound by the colour "white."
6. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, NYC: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002, p. 11.