

CLOSED

CIRCUIT

Soho Chelsea

Fashion
Furniture
Food
Art

Silvia Kolbowski
Postmasters Gallery
May 29, 1997 - July 12, 1997
80 Greene Street
New York, New York



CLOSED

CIRCUIT

Soho Chelsea

Fashion
Furniture
Food
Art

e-mail exchange by
Silvia Kolbowski and Miwon Kwon
March 19, 1997 - May 11, 1997

Participating lenders to the exhibition

Product (Soho)

Purchases for display made at the following stores :

Dean & DeLuca (Soho)
Gourmet Garage (Soho)
Moss (Soho)
Miu Miu (Soho)
Aero (Soho)
Todd Oldham (Soho)
J. Crew (Soho)

Video

Post-production technician
Mario Paoli, Film Video Arts



Date: Wed, 19 Mar 1997 17:27:27
 From: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
 To: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.princeton.edu>
 Subject: postmasters exhibition/closed circuit

Dear Miwon:

I'm resurfacing from a flu that kept me in bed for a few days. I fell asleep during the day today, due to the illness, and had a dream which seemed to be overtly about the project, particularly as I had received a message from the gallery earlier in the day. You might remember that I mentioned that the project, currently entitled "Closed Circuit", is to involve the moving of goods from three Soho stores/businesses corresponding to the three categories that are gaining prominence there - fashion, furniture, food - to the small exhibition room in the gallery and then closing off that room with plexiglass, turning it into a vitrine of sorts. Conversely, videotapes of the Chelsea streetscape will be displayed in those three stores. This is an attempt to trace the movement of art uptown, the recreation of what I suppose some consider to be a more pure art scene than it has become in Soho, where it is tainted by overt commerce and tourism, partly bridge and tunnel tourism at that. Anyway, I dreamt that I was to meet Magda* at a building in Soho, to discuss her progress on soliciting businesses to lend goods, etc. I, already at the start of the dream, have an impending sense of failure or at best frustration. This is probably colored by my experience with the London project**, which had many ups and downs in its organizational stage - imagine trying to engage commercial enterprises in a project which contained an implicit critique of their very activities.

In the dream I find myself in a multi-floor building which seems to be on the verge of closing for the day, so there is some anxiety about whether I will find Magda at all. As I travel floor to floor I notice that some of the enterprises are just finishing elegant renovations, but I can't tell whether the spaces are being renovated to hold clothing stores or galleries. Due to the fact that I'm being rushed out of these spaces by not-overly-friendly staff, it is particularly difficult to discern the differences, although I do now remember that one of the spaces, significantly on an upper floor, was selling clothing, and I was standing at a counter that had the minimal look of a gallery desk, but at which one could purchase something. In the dream, of course, it didn't seem odd that a store would be located somewhere other than a ground floor. (Does the tradition of the ground-floor retail business guarantee that the bulk of commercial Soho will always be limited to either offices or galleries?) The rest of the dream is frenetic, illogical, and probably too personal to give any insight into the project.

When I called Magda later, she relayed some of the problems she had had connecting with the f-f-f enterprises - for instance, did you know that Dean & Deluca is now owned by a corporation on the verge of expanding the concept to other cities around the country? And at Miu Miu she came up against a rather imposing public relations machine...interesting little bits of data. Anyway, hope to hear from you when you return from your trip.

Regards, Silvia.

* Magda Sawon, Director/Proprietor of Postmasters Gallery.

** This project, entitled "These goods are available at _____" (1995), consisted of the selection of six retail locations (five in London, one in Paris), and the displacement of goods from one of their display windows to another, on view for two weeks. Goods included club listings from a youth-scene shop on a popular shopping street, listings from a real estate agency in a working-class neighborhood, custom-made women's hats from a high-end hat shop, books from the bookshop of the Royal Institute of British Architects, pastries from a patisserie, and a poster from a gallery exhibition.

Date: Thu, 3 Apr 1997 20:22:28
From: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
To: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.princeton.edu>
Subject: re: your e-mail status (fwd)

Dear Miwon:

I've been looking for a message from you for the past few days, but to no avail! It suddenly occurred to me when I sat down to write this message that perhaps I could formulate and publish for my installation a dialogue with...myself, consisting of messages that I send to you, with no reply! Well, anyway, I'll tell you some thoughts I've had recently about the project. I went to Chelsea with some friends on Saturday to scout out some sites for videotaping the Chelsea component of the work. I met up with these friends at DIA, but they refused to enter because DIA is now charging admission. This was fine with me, as I had already seen the exhibitions there; I had agreed to go again because I enjoy being in a space so single-mindedly devoted to the experience of art. So we wandered around from gallery to gallery, and because it was raining, the streets were only sparsely populated. And this sparseness highlighted the precious and reduced nature of the phenomenon, i.e. you go there to see art, and art alone, together with other people who are doing the same (although I suppose the argument could be made that one goes as well to look at others looking at art, looking back at one). In fact, those select blocks that house art galleries function in total as a moderately-sized museum, and you move from one exhibition site to another - undistracted - as though they were all part of a larger whole. Unlike my recent experience of gallery visits in Soho, I met so many people there that I know, that it served as an indication of how reduced or concentrated the site is.

One thing that was odd, with regard to the reduced audience, which seems to have been desired by the galleries that moved there, struck me when I was looking at the Serrano photographs at Paula Cooper Gallery. They comprise a kind of sexual freak show of large portraits - pairing old and young, mid-gets, sado-masochists, and a variety of non-vanilla sexual "acts". They were obviously meant to shock...but shock who? The jaded audience visiting Chelsea? Unlikely. What does this say about art and audiences? Doesn't that sort of work benefit from a much more varied audience? Or have I missed something?

Let me know what you think. Regards, Silvia.

Date: Thu, 3 Apr 1997 23:40:21
From: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
To: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
Subject: re: Message from Internet

Dear Silvia:

I am discovering (and you have obviously already) that I am not a good candidate for a consistent or prompt e-mail correspondent. I don't know why I can't seem to catch up on things since my trip to Germany. Apologies for my delay.

But as I have great interest in the work that you did in London and the one you are planning for this May, I wanted to ask you a question. What is your reasoning behind the working title (Closed Circuit) for the piece? It is a little puzzling to me because I found (perhaps I misunderstood?) the structure of your London project to articulate the OPENness of the circuits (of goods, desires, signs, services) that a city is. In other words, I thought your project in London described, in a very smart and humorous way, the city as conditioned by the fluidity and mobility of goods, signs, desires, and services rather than as a "closed" rational hegemonic structure (economically, politically, socially). Perhaps this project is not so related to the London precedent. Certainly there are many associations with the words "closed circuit." But for me it has a particular feel of stasis, something that is complete because it loops in on itself and fulfills its own logic.

I wonder if you've been able to penetrate the select f-f-f establishments. (Did you know that M. Prada was a major sponsor of the Whitney anniversary celebration uptown last year? Also, the news about D&D's franchising doesn't surprise me since I feel they've run out of possibilities in New York City - aren't there already five of them in the city?) Having food, furniture, and fashion occupy a "proper" art gallery space in Soho, and treated like petrified art objects will certainly bring home the conditions of Soho's art viewing experience (as one among many forms of not only consumption but entertainment). I don't know if such a recognition would be cogently received in the "proper" context of the stores from which the objects come (the viewing of Chelsea art activities might seem rather cryptic in that setting). Would it make sense to have the video available in your gallery as well?

But maybe what's really interesting about both your plans for May and the London project is the "impropriety" of objects being found in "wrong" places of display - what you've described as displaced, I've described as (properly) misplaced.

Well, more later. These are just some of my preliminary thoughts (rather incoherent). Hope to hear from you sooner than you heard from me.

Best,
Miwon

Date: Thu, 4 Apr 1997 16:21
From: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
To: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
Subject: re: closed circuit

Dear Miwon:

I was happy to get your message today. Although, as of yesterday I had almost resigned myself to a dialogue with myself - a concept which has its virtues - nevertheless, there was a rather pathetic quality to that option! And speaking of the detriments of a dialogue with myself, your message brought home to me something which I become aware of every so often: I consider myself an artist and a "writer," but perhaps because my primary identification is with the role of artist, it is extremely difficult for me to get enough distance or clarity of mind when analyzing art - whether it be mine or not. It is the syndrome of not being able to see the forest for the trees; in my involvements in the field of architecture, on the other hand, I feel that I can see the forest more clearly. This is by way of leading up to your question about the title of the work, "Closed Circuit". The question gets to the heart of the matter, in terms of the positioning of the city in both projects. Although I had not compared the two projects as specifically as you, I do understand the situation that I'm addressing in New York to be different from that of London. Did you notice the extra spaces in the title between Closed and Circuit? You probably thought it was typical e-mail sloppiness, but it is actually very purposeful (when spoken, the title should have a pause between saying the two words, I guess). My intention was that the space between the words create some of the following meanings: closed, in the literal sense that the space of exhibition will be closed during the show by the plexiglass in the doorway, and not be enterable. And closed as a reference to earlier conceptual works which involved the closing of the gallery, like the 1969 Robert Barry piece in which nothing was exhibited except a sign indicating that the gallery would be closed for the period of his show. Barry's show involved the ultimate dematerialization, my project perhaps the inverse - a materialization, but then times have changed. I feel that I have to approach dematerialization through the back door (a service door?). I also used this concept of a "closed" gallery in my Harry Winston project (1990)*, the invitation for which included the phrase "there will be no reception," and in "Already" (1992) where the doorway to the gallery containing a mannequin in maid's uniform was blocked with plywood containing a peep hole.

"Circuit" refers to the pattern of galleries seeking out new areas of the city to "homestead;" it seems like a kind of compulsion in which real estate speculation and the creation of an aesthetic affect are bound together. In this sense, the circuit seems to be a closed one: 57th Street to Soho to East Village to Soho to Chelsea. Should we assume that Chelsea will be the last stop? (In a city so geographically small, is there anything left? Perhaps areas will get recycled the way Soho did after the East Village gallery development overheated, real-estate-wise.) As a phrase, closed circuit was also meant to refer to the intense (renewed) interest today in "real time" (i.e. closed-circuit video) - the video component was to have simulated a real-time look. I suspect that you've thought about this phenomenon. But your comment has made me realize that while the London project was more open-ended (although remember that there there was a circular

* "an example of recent work may be seen in the windows of Harry Winston Inc. from approximately 5:17 p.m. to 5:34 p.m.," New York, 1990. This project consisted of an invitation and ad printed with the title of the work and its dates. A visitor to the site would see only the jewelry display (routinely rotated by the shop) commonly seen in the shop windows of the most "exclusive jeweler in the world," and the closing of the shop by store guards who lock the gates and replace the jewels with photographs every afternoon.

schema), the New York schema is more bipolar. I guess I would have to say that's because I'm looking at the relationship between two urban/aesthetic conditions, but of course, it does alter - as you point out - the reading of the city as fluid.

Sorry about the long-windedness of this reply, but I also want to address your question about the reception of the video. I think that the video display in the stores would function in about the same way as objects for sale do - subjected to passing glances, and the intermittent stronger focus, like when you zero in on something you really want, that "thing" you've been looking for (and it's too expensive!). But I think that you're right, the video could have a place in the gallery, and I'm starting to think about how. Could it also be placed in another location, and would that break the bipolarity?

I look forward to hearing from you, regards, Silvia.

PS Could you save my last message to you, it has disappeared into virtual limbo on my end.

Date: Sat, 5 Apr 1997 11:54
From: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
To: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
Subject: re: chelsea

Dear Silvia:

Of course, I knew you had thought the title question through rather extensively. I just wanted to hear more about it. But let me tell you about my experience in Chelsea. The first time I went there (not counting visits to the DIA - which I hear has planted more of those Beuysian trees around the neighborhood), it was before the "second wave" of galleries. That is, when only Matthew Marks, Pat Hearn, and Paul Morrissey had theirs open on 22nd St. - before Metro, 303, Gladstone, Cooper. The occasion was a triple opening at all three galleries and it being a day of lovely weather, there were a lot of people there, mostly hanging out on the street because the galleries were jammed. It really felt like a scene, a chic block party with major (beautiful) people-watching. I was most struck by what I perceived to be a kind of wary and vague excitement among the people there that seemed more hopeful than convinced of "something new" happening in the art world. This is what I remember the most - I can't remember the art I saw that night.

Perhaps naively, I thought at that time that this Chelsea venture would fail because unless the activities among the galleries could be coordinated rather extensively, there would not be enough foot traffic (I still think it's kind of a drag to go there). This means not enough business, not enough exposure, etc. What I didn't realize was, first, that these galleries ARE coordinated in pursuing this move to Chelsea as a PROJECT; this is not an organic emergence or growth. And secondly, that "exposure" available via incidental pedestrian/tourist/consumer traffic as in Soho (that is, the extension of an audience by "accidental" conditions of circumstance and location) is perhaps not desired at all. This move to Chelsea among a small group of dealers is to articulate a hierarchy of "seriousness" in art appreciation, to demarcate a sense of exclusivity once again in relation to contemporary art (to relay that sense to its collectors? who would want to be distinguished from the general "audience" of Soho?).

This is a different kind of distinction than "serious" art versus "run-of-the-mill" art (i.e., artistic quality), I think. Or rather, I think there is perhaps a need (among artists, dealers, collectors - players in the art market) to distinguish their activities (buying, selling) from those surrounding them in Soho. Perhaps Soho has changed so much, with the infiltration of so many f-f-f businesses that art galleries need to cut a different path to say in essence "we're not like you (miu miu, dean and deluca, face, j.crew, mac, french connection, olive's, etc.)" Which is to say, I think the move to Chelsea in many ways allows for the repression of the commerce part of art's trade.

Anyway, my most recent visit to Chelsea was with my sister to catch Louise Lawler's show at Metro (loved it). Quite unlike your experience in Chelsea, though, no one seemed to be around that day. I didn't bump into a soul. And it turned out that the other galleries around the neighborhood had different hours, so we couldn't make a day of art-viewing in Chelsea. But then again, I realized that even when I go to Soho to see art, with a handful of galleries on my list, I never can have a complete art-viewing experience because I inevitably get distracted by the things I want (gotta check out agnes b., tehen, steven allan, etc.). In fact, "let's go shopping" comes first before "let's go see some art" in many plans for visits to Soho now. So in comparison, even though I felt a little frustrated by the Chelsea visit (perhaps that's the point), it felt more like a "pure" art-viewing

opportunity. Like you have to deny superficial (consumerist) pleasures if you are serious about art.

Actually, I don't go to either place very often. But when I do, I come home exhausted.

More to come,
Miwon

P.S. Yes, I'm saving all the correspondence - yours and mine. And no, I didn't realize about the gap between closed and circuit. hmmm.

Date: Thu, 10 Apr 1997 23:49
From: "Silvia Kolbowski" <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
To: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
Subject: re: postmasters exhibition/closed circuit

Dear Miwon:

Speaking of coming home exhausted, that's my excuse for not writing back sooner. In fact, it's just as well, because now I have a more extensive project update to report. Since I last wrote, we had two stores almost lined up to go - furniture and fashion - and we approached a food store through the general store manager, who recognized me from my years of coming into the store when I lived across the street. Then it occurred to me that I needed to also approach a chain store, in order to fully represent the types of stores which now fill many of the commercial spaces in the area. First, I suggested to Magda that we approach Victoria's Secret, but that seemed to depress her, for two reasons, one being the prospect of having to get through their PR and management structure, and the other being that she considered their goods to be extremely cheesy. I don't know, I kind of liked the idea of high and low...but then I remembered that I might be able to reach someone at another chain store through a friend, and that seemed as good a choice as any. So now they have been sent material. Subsequent to that, we heard today that the furniture store is out. To be honest, I'm not very surprised since although the project does not take a purely critical view of commerce in the area per se, it does bring up some issues relating to the transformation of the area into a consumer paradise.

I'm not too concerned by the furniture store dropping out, since I will then resort to my secondary strategy, which is to purchase goods at the store, and to indicate in the installation that such a purchase was made, as opposed to a loan having been made. The only drawback is that I will not be able to have the video of Chelsea run in the shop. I have had to develop a "failure" strategy because it is very possible that no store will agree to participate, and I will have to put together a show which somehow takes that into account. Up to now, only one designer clothing boutique is still tentatively in. Did I mention to you that I have recently formulated (and given) a talk on my work entitled "Recent Failures," because I realized that so many of my recent projects include some component of failure. Sometimes, in fact, they seem to be dependent on "failure" in order for the critique to succeed. I have to say that there is an odd pleasure for me in openly admitting to failure, in possibly the most driven city in the world, and as a woman (women in particular rarely have the luxury of failing).

A couple of other things. I received an e-mail from a friend (art historian) who is currently in Berlin for a few months, who mentioned that certain areas of Berlin - such as Mitte and Prinzlauer Berg - seem to be like what Soho might have been like in the 1970s. I lived in Soho in the 70s, but don't know what Berlin is like now; she was too young to have lived in Soho in the 70s, and is in Berlin now...so perhaps it's hard to interpret that statement. But she did mention that there seems to be an art migration from Koln/Dusseldorf to Berlin in general. Her sense is that these areas are poised to change more quickly than Soho did, given the current mania to develop Berlin as quickly as possible, and the imminent move of the federal government to Berlin. In that case, can artists play any other role than the typically late 20th Century one of facilitating gentrification, even if by passive means?

And lastly, I was speaking to another friend (also an art historian) about the project, and she speculated that it might be the case that the exodus of some major galleries from Soho had something to do with the fact that the

prices of the more moderately priced artworks are close in price to expensive designer clothes. Certainly an "outfit" at either Comme des Garçons or Yamamoto could easily come to \$6000 or \$7000. This view is close to your comment about the move being related to the repression of the commercial aspect of art.

All I know is, the more the store negotiations fail, the more things I'm going to have to buy to make this show work! There seems to be something perverse in that, don't you think? I'm supposed to be making money...in the end, we may have to go shopping together.

Regards, Silvia.

Date: Sat, 19 Apr 1997 13:17
From: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
To: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
Subject: re: fashion

Dear Silvia,

I have to say that the update on your efforts to get commitments from the stores reminds me of the days when I was involved in curatorial work, pursuing loans for shows. In many instances, the decision for an artist, a collector, an institution, or a gallery dealer to lend or not to lend a piece was predicated on knowing in advance who else was in (or sometimes who else was lending to) the show. Each had an investment in knowing in advance their "context" or perhaps more accurately their "company" (like going to a dinner where you want to know who the other guests are in advance so you can be sure you won't have a horrible time.) For instance, there would be a situation in which an artist/collector/dealer/museum would only agree to lend a piece if someone else was also in. So they would say I will lend you this piece if so-and-so is also lending (or is in the show). And that so-and-so would only confirm if another loan was confirmed (or in some cases refuses to lend if another so-and-so is IN the show), etc. At times, this turned into an incredibly intricate network of wishes/demands in which one move implicated dramatic repercussions for the entire show.

So, at times, I had to tell white lies or feign ignorance. I'd say to #2, yes, #1 is confirmed, to get #2 to say yes (before the actual confirmation); then go to #3 and say we're not sure about #1 (or don't mention it at all because #3 doesn't like #1) to get the commitment from #3; because #1 really would like to show with #3 and #1's confirmation is predicated on #3's consent (and #2 has been assured of #1's participation). And so on. It got a bit confusing at times. Also, sometimes the "deal" was based on whether the work would be reproduced in the catalogue - but that's standard in the museum world, I think.

Anyway, it seems in the context of displays and exhibitions, everyone is especially sensitive to their company. For artists, I think it is more about the conceptual framing of a show, the possibility of being part of a discourse with artists that one feels some kinship with. I think for collectors and dealers, the investment in the company is a bit different. But in any case, it is about having some control over self-presentation or directing the "reading" of the work in terms of content and more immediately in terms of value (cultural/economic).

I've been watching this program on Bravo (do you have cable?) called "Expose: The Look," hosted by Lauren Hutton. It was originally a BBC documentary on the fashion industry, now dubbed by Hutton for an American audience. (To hear words like hegemony and ideology is quite refreshing for television viewing, I must say). It is quite good. In the recent segment (there are several segments, I don't know how many), Ralph Lauren, Karl Lagerfeld, and John Stussy were featured, focusing on the intricate relationship between the designer's auteur status (i.e., their personality and taste) and the consumer's desire for distinctive identities for themselves, via fashion. What the designers sell, precisely, are fantasies of identities and subjectivities, and the three designers were quite cogent and articulate about this.

Rei Kawakubo seems to have, more than other designers, the sense of self as artist. (Her recent "tumor" dresses, as a friend calls them, were outrageous!) So the conflict you had with Comme des Garçons last year

doesn't surprise me. Even the display of her clothes aspires to treating them as "works" rather than clothes to buy and wear. And certainly she's adopted the traditional ideology of art as being timeless as part of her own self-fashioning. But I think the idea of clothes being timeless, while it can inspire the idea of autonomy from the social, is really directed elsewhere.

What is so profoundly interesting about fashion in general (and it is totally apparent in the language of fashion journalism) is this need to articulate, as you say, "whimsey" as timeless (in fashion lingo I think the word "classic" substitutes a lot for this idea). There are always new versions of the timeless as the "latest." The latest and the timeless...both "positive" attributes, often evoked at the same time (i.e. the "new classic"), is the fundamental contradiction that defines fashion discourse. Even in couture, as for example the new "radical" bloods taking over Paris couture houses (John Galliano at Givenchy then Dior, Gaultier going to Givenchy, even Yves Saint Laurent is nurturing a successor while keeping the name, the way Lagerfeld took over Chanel - although all these houses are owned by one man, as far as I know), the same ambivalence or schizophrenia operates.

I think the idea of clothes being timeless associates clothing (or dressing) as artistic events (everyone is "creative" in their consumption of clothing). It also represses the \$\$\$ insofar as there is an implication that you can wear the same thing season after season without buying new stuff. But, of course, the "new timeless" outfit requires, properly speaking, all new accoutrements including a new cosmetic palette. Then you get bored with the timeless and need another timeless outfit. Which is to say the evocation of the timeless in fashion for me is not about the quality of the objects but the logic of its turnaround.

Blah, blah, blah. I probably have much more to say (I follow fashion with commitment) but haven't thought them through. To be continued.

Miwon

Date: Mon, 28 Apr 1997 17:27 -0500
From: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
To: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
Subject: re: The Look

Dear Miwon:

Funny, around the time that your last e-mail came, I happened to skim a magazine article excerpted from a new book on Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart. Lauren Hutton hosted the TV fashion documentary titled "The Look" as you mentioned, and Lauren Bacall was made famous by "the Look" which was the term used to refer to her particular affect in "To Have and Have Not". This "Look" consisted of Bacall lowering her head so that her chin was practically touching her neck and then raising her eyes from this position to direct some pithy comment to Humphrey. It's ironic, since her success was based largely on this type of toughness, that - as she recounted years later - she devised this "look" as a way of stabilizing her head, which she could not keep from shaking from fear at the beginning of her career! Her toughness literally sustained what she describes as a body almost collapsing from weakness brought on by fear - knees knocking, head shaking, voice quivering. This is, of course, what furniture, fashion, and food, have always been about - about sustenance, about the pleasure of excess...but also about fear. Its displacement. And this is what makes these arenas more complex than what purely economic analysis can perceive. Tumor dresses, hmmm...I read somewhere that the tumors are detachable.

I have been wondering, probably in response to the continuing, fragile negotiations with the stores, what readings I am creating for the commercial enterprises in this project. It seems to me that the meaning cannot really be pinned down - i.e. the merchandise is on display as art, and this could generate a somewhat reductive reading: you know, commerce is supplanting art...on the other hand, other readings are possible, in support of the impure, the dirty complexity of the scene...I don't know what possible readings the stores consider - if they are even considering in those terms - when they try to make a decision about whether to participate. What do you think?

Regards, Silvia

Date: Sat, May 3 1997 16:39
From: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
To: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
Subject: Message from Internet

Hello Silvia:

I was going through some old notes and came across some that I wrote after your seminar at the Whitney Independent Study Program (11/9/95) where you discussed at length your London project. Thought you might be interested, so here it goes:

[Specific places in the city with their itinerant socio-economic conditions are "condensed" into representative objects/commodities. This identifying feature is revealed as objects are taken out of their initial context and placed in a "foreign" site. The commodities seem to stand in for specific places within the city as if rehearsing a kind of reification of space. The simple artistic gesture of displacement and visual/conceptual disjunctures (not unlike Gabriel Orozco's 1992 supermarket project) seems to highlight the socio-economic gaps that make up the city rather than producing a continuity that falsely gathers the city into a unified whole (although the circuit seems to be completed with the placement of Silvia's poster back at the first shop).

When a work moves outside into the realm of the "real" world (i.e. non-art), social space, reactions tend to privilege the meaning of the work as experienced in person (at the site of its physical presence) over its mediated dissemination via lectures, publications, re-presentations, etc. Meaning is hierarchized in spatial terms, as an issue of proximity to the real presence of the work (that is, its material presence). Thus, the critical and challenging questions regarding Silvia's responsibility to account for the reactions of the "public" that would encounter her intervention directly rather than accidentally and only in partial form. Ron* made the observation that this project seems to collapse or overlap two different models of the city into one - the city as a hegemonic configuration of fixed socio-economic relations and the city as a system of circulation and mobility (commodity culture) with loose play of signification.]

In your last message, I wasn't quite clear what you meant by saying that food, fashion and furnishing are in some ways about fear. You said they offer sustenance and pleasure (of excess) but also are about fear???

I think in terms of an artworld reception, the reading of your piece may be a reductive one...that somehow you're indicting the massive commercialism of Soho, pointing to the exchangeability of consumer goods (albeit expensive and of high style) with art. Perhaps some would see it as a cynical piece. I think to a degree, then, there is a need to register the ambiguity and ambivalence involved in the pleasure of shopping because shopping is now one of the key activities through which we continuously (re)constitute our identities and seek a kind of affirmation of our subjectivities. In this sense, perhaps the different categories of art vs. fashion or food or furniture don't really make a difference. But beyond our psychic economies, of course, they have distinct positions within the social. I think the difficulty is in trying to speak to both these registers.

Granted, I don't know exactly how the details are working out at this point. As for the stores, I think they might be familiar with museums approaching

* Ron Clark, Head, Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, New York.

them for something (like sponsoring a show or another type of event) but are probably not used to an artist/gallery asking for participation in a piece that is in a sense about display and presentation (at least at one level), which is what they normally do anyway. That is, if an institution had invited them in some form, they would understand fairly clearly that they were entering the zone of art (good p.r.) but in Soho, the zones aren't so clear...perhaps the commercial gallery setting is too close/similar to their own operation.

In any case, I saw in the new issue of Vogue (a great source of info) an article on the design of boutiques, not just in terms of style (minimalist setting - like art galleries - being the most preferred by the top designers) but in terms of choreographing shopping behavior among customers. How to inscribe "decompression" zones, how shoppers always turn right when entering a store, etc. Quite interesting.

Hope all is going well. More later, Miwon

Date: Sun, 4 May 1997 15:22
From: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
To: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
Subject: re: both registers (psychic + Social), plus FEAR

Dear Miwon:

Fear - in the sense of composing, or recomposing oneself, one's environment, in response to what seems uncontrollable or out of reach. Or boring, but then boredom is also about fear, i.e. in the psychoanalytic sense of something being represented by its inversion. Instead of feeling anxiety one feels boredom, which of course fuels consumption. A new this or that...This happens at the level of fantasy, as well as material effect. Especially since it is impossible to will self-composition per se. But the fantasy of willing achievement or acquisition dies hard - particularly in the White House!

As for readings both "reductive" and "cynical" - if this is the case, then the project would be a COMPLETE FAILURE! I don't think of the project as cynical, because to my mind a cynical approach would require that the project, its objects, and their processes - of conceptualizing, producing, marketing - would be made equivalent at the level of meaning. This would include the overall art project as a whole as an "object" and process, in relation to the other products and references included in the show. I agree with you that categories of objects have "distinct positions within the social" so while I try to keep my distance from a moralistic position - i.e. this object is good, this object is bad - I would hope that there is some kind of differentiation at work, that the display of the goods in the gallery is NOT equivalent to the commercial display of goods in Soho. On the other hand, a visual art gesture operates under such limitations. Do these letters compensate by registering the ambiguities of a matter-of-fact acceptance of the psychic regard for things and processes which have a different, and sometimes reactionary life in sustaining social and material hierarchies? Even if this is the case, these days I find myself thinking that this text reveals too much. As part of the art work. You're the critic/historian, what do you think?

Food, fashion, furniture...and art (f-f-f-art?) - it's funny, isn't it, that Soho reads like some spin doctor developer has turned the necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter) into a glorious consumer game. And where does art fit into this? I don't think that the question of autonomy with regard to art should be dismissed out-of-hand. That is, there is a political necessity to resist the conventional/conservative tendency to want to purge art of any interaction with a larger social frame than its own, but don't some recent attempts to make it too much like everything else camouflage it to death? Another question for you.

Regards, Silvia

Date: Sun, May 11, 1997 10:49
From: Miwon Kwon <mkwon@phoenix.Princeton.EDU>
To: Silvia Kolbowski <SKolbowski@compuserve.com>
Subject: Final response

Dear Silvia:

I just returned from a short holiday. I hope my temporary silence hasn't been too big an inconvenience.

A couple of weeks ago, I felt a rather urgent need to change my immediate surroundings. I felt so cramped not only physically but mentally and emotionally...I felt I couldn't think at all (or think only dumb thoughts). I needed a clearing of some kind. I wanted to hit someone or break something or scream in a major way. It may have been simply spring fever, but I think what I wanted was a change for myself (or, maybe more accurately, to change myself). So I rearranged the furniture and bought a new pair of shoes. Which is to say, I understand how fear and boredom impact my wardrobe and apartment setting. I feel much better now.

As for the reception of Closed Circuit and the impact of these letters in encouraging a more complex reading, I don't really know. (I usually operate with the least amount of expectation --that way I won't be too disappointed.) They will certainly direct the perception to some degree, but I think it will be in a good way, because the "direction" will not be toward a single position that is more or less predictable and closed. Instead, I hope the letters contribute to opening up new ways of thinking about art, boredom, consumption, display, fear, space, and the city as a more complex set of relations.

Speaking of relations, I think what is being lost in much of the "art-into-life" or "art-into (mass) culture" move (both in terms of the way the rhetoric of avant-gardism has been adopted and translated by a lot of art people and in terms of capitalism's equalizing force, which strangely go together) is the attention to the specificity of differences and relations among various cultural practices and products. Granted, these relations and differences are not fixed. But I feel the attempts to articulate this unfixedness is driven toward the obliteration of differences altogether. I don't know why this is. You interestingly used the word "camouflage" to describe the way art looks like, and enters into?, non-art systems, as if it is really a pretense (to fake a relevance to the everyday?). Perhaps so.

I've raised objections in public to this kind of "erasure" of art and have been accused of being a conservative, a formalist, an elitist...Unfortunately, the resistance or basic questioning of the phenomenon is too quickly interpreted as an insistence on the autonomy of art all over again, which seems to me just as ridiculous and unproductive in this day and age. (Although depending on the circumstances, I will argue FOR such an autonomy when I feel it is necessary.) I guess what I would like to see is a more nuanced response to the whole thing. Some way to address various cultural practices that reveal the connections between them - their internal ties and shared external pressures - without collapsing their relational differences into a single category.

Because buying a pair of shoes, eating at a particular restaurant, shopping for a new flower vase, and looking at/buying art may be considered mere symptoms of a singular political economy, but each activity is distinct in relation to the social and each satisfies/frustrates me differently.

Well I hope we can continue our conversation beyond your project. We can at least go shopping together some time.

Best,
Miwon

Note: As of May 16th, 1997, one clothing boutique had agreed to participate, one clothing store was still undecided. All other business concerns had either declined to participate or had not responded; goods were purchased at those locations. At this point, the video was to be positioned only in the gallery.