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Still Life, Vanitas, and Commodity Culture

Introduction

Still Life: Things Devouring Time is a group exhibition that focuses on the visual representation of vanitas, symbolic objects that warn against excess and the shortness of time. The exhibition brings together a seventeenth-century painting by Willem Kalf and contemporary artists, working in diverse media, who respond to consumer culture and the social, environmental and sustainability issues it produces today. Objects made from non-biodegradable materials and the human inclination to collect possessions contradict the concept of *tempus edax rerum*, time as devourer of all things.

Vanitas paintings bring to our attention the finite nature of life, to remind us that our time is short, and our actions have consequences. In seventeenth-century still-life paintings the food objects express symbolic messages of immoral pleasures; they warn us that a judgment is coming. Today, we most frequently view still-lives in adverts. Commodities are presented to us as temporary possessions that are easily discarded. We are trained to be wasteful and expect immediate but short-lived pleasure. Jordan Seiler, the artist and activist behind the organisation Public Ad Campaign, says the ubiquity of advertising in capitalist societies is problematic:

By privileging one type of message over another we are, through repetition, setting the terms of our cultural and political discourse. Considering the great hurdles we face socially and environmentally, the commercial discourse we surround ourselves with not only ignores our current reality but actively works against it by distracting us from each other in favor of ourselves. (quoted in Anon., 2017, p. 28).

In this exhibition art works challenge the cultural and political discourse that dominates commercial visual culture, to bring attention to the human and environmental cost of our consumer habits. To complement the work installed in the gallery, a poster campaign will place art works from the exhibition in advertising spaces around the city. A series of workshops will enable members of the public to create still life objects out of packaging materials. The objects will be photographed and posted on social networking sites with hashtags that consider the social cost of consumption. It is intended that these interventions into the commercial domain will disrupt the repetitious order of consumerism, creating a space in which the public can critically consider advertising and the consequences of consumption.

In the fourteenth century the term 'consume' meant 'to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust.' (Williams 1988, pp. 78–9). From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the word became more neutral, meaning simply to buy things. Through the genre of still life this exhibition seeks to return to the earlier, more destructive notion of consumption. It brings to attention what is wasted, used-up, destroyed and exhausted by our consumer culture. The exhibited artworks also remind us that consumption has another destructive characteristic: what remains. Today, when we use commodities we discard large quantities of packaging, made from non-biodegradable materials that is transported to land-fill sites or discarded as litter. Natural resources and habitats are destroyed by this product of contemporary consumer habits. The artworks in the exhibition comment on the social and environmental impact of consumer habits through the genre of still life.

Still Life: Things Devouring Time

The still-life genre began as a marginal artistic practice, denigrated because it does not depict 'the large-scale momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance.' (Bryson 1990, p. 14). Norman Bryson says still-life painting 'assaults the centrality, value and prestige of the human subject.' (1990, p. 60). Objects rather than people, take centre stage.

Bryson writes that one of the unique facets of still-life painting lay in the ability of the painter to change props rapidly to reflect the transformations in the culture around them. In the seventeenth-century Dutch republic, still-life paintings communicate a shifting relation to consumption and a nation becoming accustomed to material wealth. As consumer culture developed, the type of objects in the paintings also changed. (Bryson, 1990). Hal Foster writes that Dutch still-life paintings from the 1620s and 1630s predominantly depicted useful objects in a straightforward manner. Later still-life paintings began to portray expensive, collectable objects painted in a dazzling way. (1993). For example, the drinking horn in *Still Life with Drinking Horn* by Willem Kalf (1653) is a unique and expensive collector's item held in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. (Chong and Kloek, 1999). The painting is a celebration of expensive food and tableware from across the Dutch empire: the world of trade has recoded the table in the language of competition and prestige rather than domesticity and conviviality.

In contemporary consumer culture the still-life genre can also document rapid changes in the type and variety of commodities available to buy. Caroline McCarthy's *Humbrol* series (2009) brings together a variety of plastic containers in a way that resembles a cabinet of curiosities. However, these domestic objects are not unique, exotic or expensive. In *Ghost in the Machine* (2013) by Simon Ward, the books that are sometimes depicted on Dutch still-life tables to symbolise knowledge and intelligence have been replaced by kindle screens. The screens suggest the

potential for knowledge through reading but the distorted frozen images on their screens also speak of fragility and obsolescence.

In the 1960s Eddy de Jongh, an art historian, used symbolism derived from emblem books to decode the 'original intentions of the artists' who produced still-life paintings in the seventeenth-century. (1997, p. 21). The objects express symbolic messages of immoral pleasures and dangers to the soul; they warn us that a judgment is coming. A soap bubble that could burst at any moment reminds the viewer that life is short, and rare porcelain dishes and fragile Roemer wine glasses are balanced precariously close to the edge of the table, teetering and ready to fall off. Expensive spices such as pepper are carelessly spilled across the table. The precarious placement of expensive objects suggests that wealth and the pleasures of consumption can be lost at any moment.

Ward's series *Signs* (2007) also present moralizing messages about wealth, and remind us that the pleasures of consumption are not enjoyed equally by all members of society. Small signs written by homeless people to request money might be overlooked by viewers as they walk through the city. But in the exhibition, they are transformed into large-scale, inescapable announcements of the inequality produced by capitalist societies. Like the valuable objects teetering on the edge of a table, *Signs* invite us to consider what is valuable and valued in society, and question the morality in which human beings can be viewed as expendable waste.

Ideas of waste and mortality are conceptualised in a number of pieces of work in the exhibition. *Vanitas* (2007) by Caroline McCarthy presents an image of a skull, an archetypal vanitas symbol, made from circles of black plastic hole-punched from a bin bag. The bin bag, installed beneath the picture, will leak if it is used, connoting waste and contamination. Death is eternal, and in this vanitas warning, death is made from plastic. The disjuncture between a transitory commodity and plastic packaging echoes one of the paradoxes encapsulated by vanitas paintings. The paintings depict a fleeting moment in which a candle is extinguished and fruit begins to decompose. However, these moments in time are frozen and immortalised in paint. They never end.

My series *Memorials* (2016) alludes to the disjuncture between the life-span of the consumer and the products they consume. The still life's look like party settings but the organic material in each photograph is beginning to decay. When commodities show their age they can be discarded and replaced but the consumer is unable to buy back time.

Dutch paintings warn their viewers of the damage to the soul that greed, excess and waste can cause. Today, vanitas might warn us about irreversible environmental consequences, caused by our dependence on plastic. Blemishes on the soul are replaced by materials that do not biodegrade: traces of our consumer habits that

persist, filling up landfill sites, polluting seas, and killing wildlife. Nicole Keeley's *Tide Line* (2017) photographs remind us of the impact of our consumer practices. In a series of photographs of fish tanks marine wildlife have been replaced by polystyrene cups, plastic bottles and other litter gathered by the artist from UK beaches. *Tide Line* presents a warning of what will become of the oceans and rivers if we continue to pollute them.

For the *Relics* series (2017) I produced still-life objects using packaging from a wide variety of commodities, demonstrating the vast range of products that are available to buy today. *Relics* resemble devotional objects displayed in anthropology museums, implying that commodities are also powerful objects that are worshipped by consumers. However, these objects don't belong in a museum, they are not preserved because they are culturally significant, but because they will not biodegrade.

In vanitas paintings, the painted surface is rich and sumptuous like the foods depicted, but the emblematic interpretation warns against the indulgences displayed. The visual style of the painting contradicts the allegorical message and the viewer must determine which message dominates. This mode of interpretation is structurally similar to ironic interpretation, when the obvious meaning is undermined by the manner of depiction, impelling the viewer to conclude that the opposite message is being communicated. In eighteenth-century literature irony was often viewed as 'corrective' because the author is detached and objective, offering multiple points of view without adopting a position. The viewer is left to make up her or his own mind. Richard Harvey Brown describes irony as dialectical because it demands active participation from the viewer, stating that the author 'simultaneously asserts two or more logically contradictory meanings such that, in the silence between the two, the deeper meaning of both may emerge.' (1983, p. 544). Hayden White writes: 'they appear to signal the ascent of thought in a given area of inquiry to a level of self-consciousness on which a genuinely enlightened – that is to say, self-critical, conceptualization of the world and its processes has become possible.' (quoted in Brown, 1983, pp. 544–5).

The art works in this exhibition contain contradictions and paradoxes that encourage the viewer to engage in self-critical reflection. Ironic use of materials and juxtaposition of objects produce dialectical images that challenge the rhetoric and values perpetuated in consumer culture. Dr Sergio Fava's points to the dialectical potential of contemporary art in his essay in the exhibition catalogue:

It is time we give more importance to other modes of prompting immediate action and less to our endless craving for more information. Art has always been at the forefront of sharing new ideas and new worldviews. The still life work in this exhibition continues and develops this tradition [...] It does so without imposition, not inviting reflection based on yet more information, but

asking us to consider the issues ourselves. [...] Art stands at a unique junction between affect, personal narrative, belonging, creativity and action. These continue to be part of the answer. (Fava, pp. 26-7, 2018)

In contemporary still life, objects are given centre stage to question the centrality of commodities as signs of value and prestige, and foreground the wasteful destructive consequences of our appetite for things.

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