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reviews



Jon Tower *Diluted Holy Water*, 1:50,000 1988

hence the title 'Real World'.

Jon Tower uses such strategies to create artwork which is made to serve as a locus of contexts. His *Diluted Holy Water*, 1:50,000, 1988, was made up of three identical glass flasks mounted high on a wall with metal clamps, each flask containing the same amount of water/holy water solution. A similar work, *Diluted Holy Water*, 1:30,000, consisted of a single glass flask containing the mixture referred to in its title, this time set inside a glass display case atop a pedestal. These works played with a number of ideas at the same time; they indexed both *arte povera* and the recent rekindling of interest in 'natural' materials, as well as obviously attempting to integrate the polarised discourses of religion and science. The flasks with water and holy water were objects that described an impossible reconciliation, a strange immersion of the mystical into the wholly pragmatic. Another work, *Transcription of Genesis*, 1987, was exactly what its title suggested, with said scripture handwritten on a strip of graph paper a few feet long but only inches high. Tower coyly toys with the notion of the artist as mediator between two opposing sides, his work with religion and science acting as a kind of ironic counterpoint to the idea of 'Scientific Creationism', a term that has been employed to attempt a validation of the Bible's story of creation so that it may be passed off as an authentic scientific theory and taught to grade-school students. In two other works, Tower addressed how even genuine scientific and mathematical education functions as a socialising mechanism. *To the Teacher*, 1988, was another transcription, and in this instance a textbook preface served as the source. The text explained to the teacher, and in this case to the viewer as well, the function of the exercises or problems to follow. There was, as a matter of course, a Modernist optimism at the heart of the preface, an optimism foiled by the particularities of the *Captions*, a group of nine reproductions of illustrations with their corresponding unsolved exercises. These exercises, handwritten beneath the photographic images, invoked a number of social situations to set up a problem; what appeared to be mere scientific or mathematical drills had, on their underside, the encoded information that defines our society. Acceptance of traditional ideas concerning race, gender, war and consumerism were shown as unconditional requisites for the student to begin to function.

ing architectural corridor of doorways, each threshold repetitively surmounted with the word 'son' on the front and 'father' on the back, frames the incursive experience of 'crossing over' that characterises the apprehension of self held up to the observer for reflection.

Contiguous to Pistoletto's ongoing minor works are 'social paintings' of another order: the plexiglass pieces, the upside-down furniture, the rag installations, the street performances. Two periods in Pistoletto's work separated by twenty years, the Minus Objects of the mid-1960s and what he refers to as 'hard poetry' or the 'art of squalor' of the mid 1980s, bracket the range of materialisations and negations of the mirror by constituting poles of maximum entropy. While the Minus Objects, wedged between Minimal Art and *arte povera*, do not represent anything, the 'art of squalor,' is determinedly an art that represents nothing. For Pistoletto, who seeks salvation only in extremes, the distinction is critical.

Jan Avglikos

Real World

WHITE COLUMNS

Webster defines 'culture' as 'the enlightenment and refinement of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training.' Does this mean it is contingent upon the separation of our practice from our social problems?

Mel Ramsden, 'On Practice', *The Fox*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1975

It is almost fifteen years since Mel Ramsden asked the above question and the replies still vary. For the most part, queries akin to Ramsden's were met with quiet avoidance in the first few years after the publication of *The Fox*. Now, of course, things have changed. The 1980s have seen a sustained use of the 'political' as product, and we need look no further than to television or pop music for proof. Such a transformation of the use of the 'political' is no doubt related to our culture's penchant for revival. At this particular moment it is the late 1960s and early 1970s that are in vogue and it is that era's level of social awareness and political activity that are now being replayed as farce. Certainly the art world is not immune to such tendencies; but they can serve to problematise the activity of truly socially engaged artists. It thus becomes necessary to discern when a political stance or reference is merely part of an ensemble that can change with the seasons.

Too often we have seen politics used as a crutch for work deficient in formal or theoretical resolution. Fortunately, that did not seem to be the case with 'Real World'. Jon Tower, Lorna Simpson and Félix González-Torres all share a strong connection to critical theory, and all maintain a practice that is rigorous and engaged due to that connection. There is a practice informed by both feminist theory and Conceptual Art's mid 1970s critique of itself. This relation is evidenced by these artists' informed use of language, which serves to specifically locate both the viewer and producer in the context of a larger system of concerns;

Five Day Forecast, 1988, by Lorna Simpson, placed a subjective experience or projected experience of the social within a regular, serial format. This work featured five photographs placed side by side, with each picturing the same image: a black woman wearing a white shirt, her arms crossed in front of her. This image, cropped at the model's neck

and waist, was flanked on the top and bottom by etched plastic plaques. Above the photographs, five plaques listed the business days of the week, while plaques beneath the photographs registered the trials and tribulations such a week might bring: 'MISDESCRIPTION', 'MISINFORMATION', 'MISDIAGNOSE', 'MISIDENTITY', 'MISFUNCTION', 'MISTRANScribe', 'MISREMEMBER', 'MISGUAGE', 'MISCONSTRUE' and 'MISTRANSLATE'. These words suggested a breakdown between two or more parties, a hopeless alterity, and the body language of the model in the photographs reinforced this idea. *Five Day Forecast* addressed problems of interpretation that go along with the realities of cultural and sexual difference and in doing so also addressed that tendency to ghettoise certain cultural producers, that ethnocentric and sexist sensibility that would automatically relate Simpson to Adrian Piper or Tracy Chapman to Joan Armatrading.

Félix González-Torres centred his operations within the domain of recent history, emphatically positioning each work inside the limits of that chronicle. *1988, 1988*, consisted of a wooden pedestal with an inches-high stack of photocopies on it, each sheet bearing the same message across its lower section: *Helms Amendment 1987 Anita Bryant 1977 High Tech 1980 Cardinal O'Connor 1988 Bavaria 1986 White Night Riots 1979 F. D. A. 1985*. González-Torres's reprocessing of these events was egalitarian in the extreme, collapsing memory in history, fashion into legislation and apathy into repression; serving the whole mess up in a *mélange* not unlike the network news highlights – a list of interrelated events freely available to the public. *1988's* list of events spoke of a culture obsessed with the monitoring and regulation of desire in its every manifestation. Another type of monitoring, that of medical technology upon the body, was indexed in González-Torres's *Bloodwork 1988, 1988*. Made up of seven 20 x 16 inch canvases, each painting represented the same image: a results graph from a series of bloodtests. Over pencilled grids of varying density, light red lines mimicked with cold precision an ominously arcing line from an actual test, reconciling the delicacy of an Agnes Martin brand of abstraction with the horrible reality of a white blood-cell count gone out of control.

Ironic rapprochement also served as a strategy for González-Torres's two remaining works. *Madrid 1971, 1988*, was made up of two photo-puzzles, each within its own shrink-wrap bag. One puzzle offered a straight-forward snapshot image of González-Torres as a boy, while the other presented a Rodchenko style image of an heroic figural monument. This juxtaposition recalled the 'date' piece, echoing its conflation of the personal with the

social and emphasising historical circumstance. The artist once again indexed the idea of time in *Perfect Lovers, 1988*, in which two clocks, one seconds ahead of the other, were placed side by side. The anthropomorphism of the work's title suggested a rather solemn idea: a perfectly matched couple but for the inevitable cessation of one before the other.

This exhibition dealt with the idea of finding content, as well as context, in the 'Real World', a world populated by the 'general public', a manufactured and projected society that feels it must, at any cost, be protected from its enemies. This 'general public' understands itself as the norm, and all outside its limited boundaries are submitted to that society's homogenising tendencies. These artists offer a resistance to such bents, pointing out that even as our society monitors itself ever more closely, it fails to recognise that it is tearing away at its own fabric, eating its own flesh.

Steven Evans