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***Installation as a Subversive Art* curated by Katie Kotler**

Ray Dark, James Knott, Liana Schmidt, Maddy Mathews and Cotey Pope
November 3 – December 9, 2017

For the cinema is a place of magic where psychological and environmental factors combine to create an openness to wonder and suggestion, and unlocking of the unconscious.¹

-Amos Vogel

Cineaste and curator Amos Vogel's seminal 1976 film history book, *Film as a Subversive Art*, examined how cinema's effects on one's physical senses can be used to mesmerize and educate mass audiences. In response, this exhibition, *Installation as a Subversive Art*, examines where films sets and installation art merge. The exhibition's title questions how installation art can translate the fantasy and playfulness that occur within successful films sets into the gallery setting. If installation art's mandate is to fully engage the viewer in a physical space, what can artists learn from film and television sets? *Installation as a Subversive Art* seeks to explore how to make the most of experiencing a work of art. The show asks, how can we derive the maximum amount of pleasure from a piece? How is enjoyment quantified?

"The film experience requires total darkness; the viewer must not be distracted from the bright rectangle from which huge shapes impinge on him."²

Liana Schmidt draws on 1960s and 1970s film and advertising as inspiration for her video installations, *Magic Idea 01* and *Arrangement*. Schmidt's visual language integrates the philosophy of using special effects and props from a pre-CGI era. She does this as a way of employing a self-reflexive DIY approach- "what works". Schmidt is specifically fascinated by creating film sets and special effects

¹ Vogel, Amos. *Film as a subversive art*. London: CT Editions, 2006, 10.

² *ibid.*

using the most analog materials possible. In *Magic Idea 01*, a black projector rests on a black platform, projecting a video onto a velvet black box. As fog pours onto the screen, the contour of a rectangle is revealed. Here, fog is used as a sculptural material, serving as a way to reveal another layer of imagery. Schmidt's work plays with the semiotics of advertising; by working with shapes instead of products, the artist parodies tropes of desire. With *Magic idea 01*, the only relationship to desire is its artifice. With *Arrangement*, two pots of flowers rotate while their shadows prominently remain stagnant. Here, the artist once again plays with low-budget and outdated special effects, poking fun at floundered attempts of illusion.

"The viewer "forgets" where or who he is and is offended by stray light, street or audience noises which destroy the anticipated, accepted illusion."³

Cotey Pope and Maddy Mathews are inspired by naïve theatrical set design, children's television programs and their mutual upbringings as child actors. Their installation, *Kitchen Set*, is a bright, cartoonish landscape, inviting viewers to role-play their favourite animated sitcom. For the work, cheaply-purchased materials are used to create and represent objects as opposed to using the actual objects themselves. The work invites a 'meta' suspension-of-disbelief for viewers, playing on how set design attempts and often fails to represent reality. The artists' work references performance and the stage, but also parodies the fabrication of representing reality in film. *Kitchen Set* is disposable in its temporal nature; meant to be constructed quickly, used for a brief amount of time and then destroyed. In film-making, the set is rarely preserved, or displayed as the main event. Often, set design's failed attempts at reality are mitigated by actors, set decoration, lighting and other traditional elements of set design. Here, this failure is highlighted and perhaps even celebrated for its tackiness.

"The many mysteries of film begin at this moment; the acceptance of a flat surface as three-dimensional, of sudden action-, scale or set-changes as ordinary, of a border delimiting this fraudulent universe as normal, of black- and-white as reality. The spectator...experiences no shock at finding a world in which depth perception has been altered, sizes and distances flattened and the sky is the same color as the human face."⁴

³ Vogel, 11.

⁴ *ibid.*

James Knott's installation/performance, *Interrogation (Waiting Room)*, is about the compartmentalization of mental health. The viewer sits in a chair at a table while a receptionist (Knott), armed with a blank writing pad, computer and four pairs of reading glasses, 'helps' them on the other side of the table. Behind the receptionist is a series of staccato projections of film and Abstract Expressionist paintings from artists Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Music bleeps into the scene as Knott accosts the viewer for not having filled out the required form. Paranoia emerges on set; one receptionist appears to be three. In what might ordinarily be a mundane scene, the artist interjects discomfort onto the viewer through visual and sonic cues. This erraticism causes the viewer to be unclear whether or not the receptionist actually said those things, or anything at all. The artist intends for the viewer to question their own reliability. No matter how the viewer responds, Knott remains evasive and increasingly hostile. The supposed doctor's appointment is a failure.

Knott's *Interrogation (Waiting Room)* serves as a bouncing off point to reflect on the reductive realities of the institutionalization of mental health. By observing the limits of the structures that are supposed to help people, whether they are through pop culture or Western medicine, the compartments between doctors, receptionist, patient, pop culture and lived experience inevitably bleed into one another. *Interrogation (Waiting Room)* explores how this can lead to fragmented experiences that leave an individual feeling as though it is them against the world. For Knott, their piece is their way of explaining to the viewer how they viscerally explore mental states.

"Removed from the real world, isolated even from fellow-viewers, the spectator falls to dream and reverie in the womb-like darkness of the theatre. Flooded by images, his unconscious is freed from customary constraints and his rational faculties are inhibited."⁵

Ray Dark's soundtrack, entitled *Installation as a Subversive Art*, consists of short electronic pieces mixed together in sequence, like a mixtape of computer-generated minimalist music combined with *musique concrète*, an experimental technique of musical composition using recorded sounds as raw material.⁶ Forty-minutes long, the piece is punctuated by uncontextualized one-note excerpts of familiar dance hits. By alternating different instruments and effects, each piece mutates into a new

⁵ Vogel, 6.

⁶ "Musique concrète." Encyclopædia Britannica. December 05, 2007. Accessed November 03, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/art/musique-concrete>.

texture, as if the computer creating the music was actively dreaming, going over different memories, historical entries, creating new connections, insights and eventually moving on.

Installation as a Subversive Art (the soundtrack) falls into two main themes: “hi-NRG accidental copy-paste” and “relaxing psychedelic.”⁷ The former aims to be simultaneously unsettling, frustrating and humorous. Used for this theme are some of the most common, well-known electronic sounds — gated reverb snares, deep sub basses and rhythmic arpeggios - the ones the artist used to dance to and hear on the radio. Here, those familiar elements are repeated, rearranged and misplaced, a bit as if the emojis, buttons, or other common UI elements of Smartphone apps were cut and pasted into a glitchy, pixelated reproduction of one’s vacation pictures by a maniacal, dreaming CPU. The latter aims to be more soothing and trance-like, creating long pauses. Bright pink cassettes in Walkmans invite the listener to roam around the exhibition, ingesting all of the artworks. In this way, Ray Dark’s piece aspires to ultimately bring the viewer to pay attention to the moving images to their surroundings.

“Thus, during half the time spent at the movies, the viewer sees no picture at all; and at no time is there any movement. Without the viewer’s physiological and psychological complicity, the cinema could not exist.”⁸

Both film set design and installation art are dependent on suspension-of-disbelief. Each of the artists revel in the failed attempts at manufactured illusions. With Schmidt’s work, the viewer is meant to understand the parody, yet remain mesmerized by the aesthetic appeal. With Pope and Mathew’s work, the viewer is intended to laugh and play in the scene. Knott’s piece is meant to incite a sense of malaise that is, while funny, also jarring. Finally, Ray Dark’s piece uses nostalgia to entice, regardless of cliché. What each of these artists convey from the overlapping mediums in *Installation as a Subversive Art* is that illusion and the mishaps behind them are often what can create the most enticing alchemy for the viewer.

-Katie Kotler

⁷ Conversation with the artist, October 17, 2017.

⁸ Vogel, 12.