

Mindy Yan Miller

Dropout

Maria Zimmermann Brendel

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MINDY YAN MILLER

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MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDI

Dropout is Mindy Yan Miller's recycled performative work of over five thousand empty Coca-Cola cans cramped into Galerie La Centrale's small *salle de projet*. The arrangement is immensely attractive, both as familiar consumer product and as a reactionary gesture. Coke tins cover the floor and glisten in the spotlight. A few cans form 1960s peace signs and flowers. Also part of this project are three colour video-stills mounted on the walls, one in the *salle de projet*, two in the *foyer* where the viewer stands. The stills record the artist's prior performance in which she pours the well-known beverage onto the ground — and not into a drinking glass. The video camera captures the action as the sweet, brown liquid hits the ground, splashing a foot and forming a white froth — an aesthetic delight.

Interestingly, the installation coincided with the conference *Aesthetics and Cultural Recycling* at Université de Montréal, from whence I came. After having listened to engaging discussions on concepts of appropriation, framing and "the consumption of the things of thinking" associated with current intellectual and visual trajectories, this artwork prompted me to add: "and drinking." Uncannily, the parallels could not be more obvious between *Dropout*'s articulation and those of the international scholars who came together on the following premise:

In observing the contemporary world, we are confronted by the preponderance of materials re-used from the past. In this phenomenon we can perceive a recycling aesthetic: a way of making things that revalorises the traces of the past, buried memories, and [...] materials that have [...] become waste. How can we rethink this idea of aesthetic experience?

*[...] For many philosophers, the answer lies in redefining the object and function of aesthetics [...]*²

As I beheld the Coke scene, a room filled with consumer waste in which there was no place for me to enter, the large door frame affirmed its presence and directed my gaze. The scene appeared theatrical. The frame became the demarcation line between observer and the observed, viewer and aesthetic object, actors and spectator. And the Coke tins demanded my attention due to their familiarity. They became the proscenium and performed the act, and in their excessive presence conveyed a movement toward me. The two video stills beside me confirmed the continuity of the performance and declared the frame as unstable.

Framing in contemporary art, argued one speaker, is an important strategy. For when objects are appropriated from life, the frame supplies the distance required to aestheticize the object and position the viewer. The frame becomes crucial, it separates and connects, involving the medium which is always *in between* — between art and life. In *Dropout*, the objects are bracketed from the space of consumer life in order to heighten reality and cause the viewer to reflect — and react. Art is increasingly about social concepts and not about social unproductiveness, as the arguments went at the conference. Twenty-first century productions cannot rest in the narcissistic refuge of pure aesthetic experience. Contemporary directions are about the staging of emergent responsibilities, hermetic fluctuations of inside and out, and the blurring of previously separated realms. The channelling of this new aesthetic lies in the performative and through the instability of the frame. The frame is most often animated, as here, in the massive excess of Coke cans, or through electronic devices, of which only traces appear in this work — in the arrested video-stills — so as not to distract our attention from the "moving" tins.



Politically and socially, these containers can be seen as relics of a capitalist, imperialist enterprise, a consumptive exchange in which sophisticated and pervasive advertisements constantly manipulate consumers into drinking Coke and thus being cool. But what is being poured out, what lies in the reactionary gesture? To my mind, corporate power is being questioned. Pouring out is a strategy of critical resistance to the hegemony the United States and its companies have on consumer trends and soft drink consumption. Coca-Cola has taken on global proportions as the corporate structure expands throughout the world. Aggressive marketing and advertisement strategies from which one can hardly escape (in the West) have turned Coke into "the world's most popular drink," sold in 195 countries.³ This brand name product, mass produced since 1888, was already "global when global wasn't cool," the company's director proudly states.⁴ Starting in the 1950s, its televised ads changed from chess-playing Cola bottles to an emphasis on the product's "quality of taste as refreshment," to its more recent campaign in North Africa and other non-Western countries where

Coke is marketed as "adding something special to everyday life."⁵ Last year's ad, entitled "First Experience," was in fact directed by film director John Madden who focuses on the young, the next consumer generation.⁶ His "film" stages a boy's first encounter with Coca-Cola (the scene is set in Morocco) and likens the experience to that of his first kiss.

Nostalgic as this is, Coca-Cola's advertisements (no longer merely confined to American historical consciousness) play on our memories, on innocence and on those precious moments many of us want to treasure. Importantly, nostalgic materialism is the stuff of which both contemporary art and commerce are made of, which makes the two hard to distinguish. The once clearly marked division is erased or has become unstable, fluctuating between cultural production of visuality and commerce, aesthetic intellectualism, and environmental responsibilities. While the line between art and commerce was already destabilized by Andy Warhol in his large 1962 canvas *Coca-Cola Bottles* (acrylic and silkscreen), his work is about the play of representation and art's status as commodity. His is a factory lineup of them — two hundred

Mindy Yan Miller, *Dropout*, 2001. Photo courtesy of the artist.

JOSÉE DUBEAU Rêve d'apesanteur et autres travaux

FRANÇOISE CHARRON

and ten —, evoking a mechanical representation in which the bottles' extreme obviousness can both erase and reinstate the famous brand: as art and consumer product.⁷ Interestingly, both *Dropout* and *Coca-Cola Bottles* share the cultural industry at large as a source from which the object/subject derives. Yet, Warhol's repetitive lineup of the soda bottle, which appears in various forms in his work, is taken further by Yan Miller. She reflects not on *representation* but on *presentation*, on the actual presence of five thousand empty cans, where the object's presentness matters. Hers is a gesture of social critique, drawing attention to the waste in excess, to the burden of its management. Related are the 1960s symbols, which produce a historicity in this installation. It was in that "swinging" decade that aluminum cans became the new drink containers, liberating consumers from bottle openers. It was also in the 1960s that what people did with their empty soft drink containers started to matter on an ecological level.⁸

Speakers at the conference emphasized the artist's role as appropriator and/or recycler by using the arguments of important thinkers (including Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Bourdieu). In my opinion, insufficient weight was given to Walter Benjamin and his prophetic stance on the issue. Yet, already in the 1930s, it was he who assessed modernity's impact in terms of waste, and the artist's involvement in it as rag(wo)man. According to Benjamin, the artist will appropriate the objects from the city's refuse — the fruits of the 'divine industry' — and place it into new constellations.⁹ The rag(wo)man will be the revealer of the catastrophic underside of modernism.¹⁰ S/he will be able to select the object, recognize its importance, and look through it and beyond. S/he will expose the detail (waste) of our consumer society and set it into a significant relationship with the total (globally) — as Yan Miller did. In so doing the object

becomes an exhibit, staging a performance.

Dropout is an exhibit, a show that shows itself, makes visible and exposes.¹¹ But since the exhibition is mute in terms of the medium, the cans' presentness matters. They perform in their excess, involve the beholder and produce a strong argument. ■

Mindy Yan Miller, *Dropout*
Galerie La Centrale, Montréal
April 5 - May 5, 2001

NOTES

1. This is the title of Mario Perniola's talk. Sincere thanks go to Nina Roy for her editorial and argumentative contribution.
2. These lines are excerpted from the conference program: *Aesthetics and Cultural Recycling* (April 26-28, 2001), Université de Montréal, organized by Walter Moser, Professor of Comparative Literature.
3. Jack Hayes, "Dr. John S. Pemperton (inventor of Coca-Cola)," *Nation's Restaurant News*, February 1996, 120-121. See also on the internet: "Fifty Years of Coca-Cola Advertising - American Memory."
4. Coca-Cola developed out of John S. Pemperton's popular formula the "nerve tonic, stimulant and headache remedy," www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmphtml.colainvent.html; and Hayes, 120.
5. Internet/Coca-Cola home page: "Fifty Years of Coca-Cola Advertising - American Memory."
6. John Madden directed *Mrs. Brown and Shakespeare in Love*, *ibid.*
7. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Andy Warhol Line," Gary Garrels ed., *The Work of Andy Warhol*, Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Art, 3, (Seattle: Bay Press), 1989, 55-57.
8. *Beverage Industry*, 87, 6, June, 1996.
9. Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk* (Frankfurt: Shirkamp), 1982, vol. 1, 271. Fabienne Lasserre is another Montreal based artist who uses refuse, old TVs, to productive ends.
10. R. S. Zons, "Hauptstadt der Ware, Hauptstadt der Revolutionen," N. Bolz and B. Witte eds., *Passagen: Walter Benjamins Urgeschichte des XIX. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink), 1984, 64.
11. I am extracting from Mieke Bal's "Introduction" to (Mieke Bal ed.), *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1999, 4-8.



En circulant dans l'exposition *Rêve d'apesanteur* me revenait ce poème de Saint-Denys-Garneau : « -Je suis une cage d'os / Une cage d'os / Avec un oiseau ... C'est un oiseau tenu captif / La mort dans ma cage d'os¹. » Dans la galerie, un oiseau gît sur une petite plaque métallique carrée, installée à hauteur de taille. Curieusement, il est façonné d'une multitude d'aiguilles de montre qui tiennent toutes ensemble comme par magie, la magie de l'aimant.

Mais l'oiseau et l'aiguille ne ponctuent-ils pas nos jours — réveil ou corneille — tous deux, au matin, nous éveillent ? Pointe de bec, pointe d'aiguille, est-ce là leur parenté secrète ? Non, dira le poète Pierre Reverdy : « L'image [...] ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte — plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique. [...] On crée [...] une forte image, neuve pour l'esprit, en rapprochant sans comparaison deux réalités distantes dont l'esprit seul a saisi les rapports². »

Voilà qui explique la force et la cohérence que nous percevons en entrant dans la

Josée Dubéau, *Rêve d'apesanteur*, 2001.
Vue partielle de l'installation.
Photo : François Dufresne.

galerie. L'impact visuel et sémantique des œuvres repose sur cette intelligence des rapports. Dans la disposition spatiale des deux motifs, c'est celui de l'oiseau qui domine : l'immense radiographie, le pic-bois au parachute emmêlé, et son image défunte qui gît en quinze dessins à la gouache noire disposés en trois hautes colonnes de cinq feuilles chacune, équidistantes les unes des autres et séparées par d'étroites vitrines rectangulaires où se déroule à l'infini (pour ainsi dire) un ruban d'électrocardiogramme. Sur ces parcours cardiaques sont piquées des milliers d'aiguilles de montre de toutes tailles, argent, or et de couleurs, qui tournent autour de l'épingle droite qui les retient — sauf qu'elles tournent à vide...

Dans *Rêve d'apesanteur*, Dubéau travaille sur deux axes : la révélation par le dessin³ et la réflexion par la sculpture ou l'installation. C'est la première fois qu'elle fait converger ceux-ci dans un même espace et, en acceptant d'allier la palpitation émotive du dessin à la rigueur de sa pensée sculpturale, elle parvient à rendre la singularité de la souffrance humaine. À mon avis, son exposition *Huis clos* chez Skol, en 1996, annonçait déjà ce mouvement. Entre *L'autopsie*, autel sacrifi-