

Exhibition Text: Stuart Blackley

Labour Stylings (Exhibition text) for Artspeak, Vancouver. May, 1992

Stuart Blackley

Each of the works held in place—transitionally, briefly—for the exhibition, *Three Works* have been pulled from other series, and find their new narration as an assembly line dematerializing into ellipses... From the synchronic fragment of *Format Study*, where language as decor achieves a relative stability, we move next to the olfactory-work of *Enfeuillage*, which memorializes the decay of “aura” as Benjamin calls it; or rather; the evanescence of “aroma.” We arrive, inevitably, at the penultimate stage of production in the art process, in *Endorsement Piece*, to the division of labour as a circulation of reinforcing signs and reifying signatures.

Gower's *Enfeuillage* makes explicit the linguistic question first posed by his earlier *Format Study* whether a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Saussure had insisted that language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is comparable to the system of writing, to the alphabet of deaf mutes, to symbolic rituals, to forms of etiquette, to military signals(1). *Format Study* explores the aesthetic possibility of language as an autonomous—literally, a 'law unto itself'—system of signifiers without apparent signified.

Little more has been done to the cheap newsprint of the daily Icelandic paper *Morgun Bladid*, though encased in lovely presentation boxes and braced with bronze fixtures, than tilting it from a horizontal reading to a vertical viewing. Yet the meaning is radically altered, even if we could scan the other works in this series, which use the L.A. Times and The Globe and Mail, and we could still literally 'read' the image. Which language speaks loudest, the demand to be seen as an exquisitely framed artifact, or as a linguistic system of meaning?

Could the “hieroglyphic character” of the commodity, as Marx described it—conceived as a kind of metaphoric letter; label, etiquette—“the objective character stamped upon the product of that labour”(2)—also be translated into Icelandic? Marx noted that ‘the form of the wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity it is changed into something transcendent.’(3) The newsprint of *Format Study* is as much material, even specifically wood, as a

piece by Paterson Ewen, but it speaks for a language as form, a language as decor. The stately oppositions of (blacked out) image and text have an elegance of effect that are kin to the black and white work of Borduas—in his formal “paragraphing” of paint in *Fense and Defense*, for example, but perhaps also in this overthrow of linguistic hegemony in *Refuse Global*. Still, the contradictions of *Format Study* remain suspended, the relation of the framing and content, appropriately arbitrary.

In view of Gower's determination to remove himself from the fabrication process—hiring a designer for *Endorsement Project*, for example, or his present project of creating a painting with “content” “style”, etc. farmed out to various experts in the field—the distinction between art-work and labour as a means of circumventing this conceptual and material impasse is critical, even in crisis. Baudrillard's *Mirror of Production* attempts this distinction:

The artisan lives his work as a relation of symbolic exchange, abolishing the definition of himself as a “labourer” and the object as the “product of his labour” Something in the material he works is a continuous response to that which he does, escaping all productive finality which purely and simply transforms materials into use values or exchange values. There is something that eludes the law of value and bears witness to a kind of reciprocal prodigality. In his work, what he bestows is lost and given and rendered, expended and resolved and abolished, but not “invested”... The work of art and to a certain extent the artisanal work bears in them the inscription of the loss of the finality of the subject and the object, the radical compatibility of life and death, the play of an ambivalence that the product of labour as such does not bear; since it has inscribed in it only the finality of value.(4)

The agony of post-classical art was, for Hegel, just this rendering of the spiritually abstract from concrete materiality, a kind of “stations of the cross” of what he aptly called the Unhappy Consciousness. The trajectory of this progressive dematerialization of art over two or three millennia has, with modern technological progress been recapitulated in a few moments on the production line. *Enfeuillage* demonstrates the process of producing perfume from leaves (feuilles) of old books—not to be confused with the centuries-old method, enfleurage, which used the more conventional petals of roses. This method is tested by its visual recreation, but no actual product

need be incarnated: it is a logical, not liquid, formula—an inessential oil. Perhaps the only possible commodity available to us, while supplies last in latest capitalism, is the odour of sanctity.

We are presented with a series of shots that deadpan the masterly technical manuals of the '50's in a captionless, barely coherent narrative made up of stages of the production. Hands carefully, safely, mete out lubricous lard in a parody of the tactility of the reading process, the pleasure of the text caressed by the stroke of the index, in the Vatican's phrase, *librorum prohibitorum*. Or perhaps we should call these, 'vignettes' of production—those illustrations that decorate the pages of antiquarian volumes, often of 'bust' format portraits—which by their etymological origin in little vine leaves recall the Edenic episode, in Hegel's narrative, when art was still inhabited in the redundant human form, such as the mysterious hand model presented here, before its completed spiritualization into abstraction. That golden time when, as Benjamin recalls, “the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.”(5)

Enfeuilleage immediately brings to mind Duchamp's project of artistic debunking for the cover of New York Dada, Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette (6) the label (in French, the *etiquette*) for an imaginary bottle of perfume showing Duchamp's face in drag, with the borrowed hat and hands of his good friend Germaine Everling. Duchamp's 'Lovely Wind' sends up the fallacy of artistic genius as divine inflatus, especially its role in turning artwork into a fetish of commodities, which he systematically tried to deflate with his concept of the readymade, most pertinently in *Why Not Sneeze, Rrose Selavy?*, where he used the name of his drag persona.

Unsurprisingly, Freud's work in psychological fetishism from the same period begins with the case study of a man whose sexual fetish was the shine on the nose of his sexual object (7) but few could have predicted the impact of even the pathological osphresiolagnia fetish (sexual gratification from the smelling certain odours), charted in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, where the pleasure of this fetish recalls the period, in the childhood of mankind, before the smell of feces gave way to our present-day disgust.

Such a reversal of values would scarcely be possible if the substances that are expelled from the body were not doomed by their strong smells to share the fate which overtook olfactory stimuli after man adopted the erect posture. Anal eroticism, therefore, succumbs in the first instance to the “organic repression” which paved the way to civilization.(8)

This accounting of the exorbitant price of civilization not only presupposes the Marxist assessment of the alienated social conditions of post-industrial capitalism, still in place, but more radically exposes as nostalgia its model of preindustrial, even pre-homo sapien, utopia. Freud's myth of origin, of the emergence of the over-valuation of the fetish, however fanciful, is still a more convincing scenario than the Marxist yearning for blissful unobstructed use-value, and finding it in the misty precapitalist past.

Gower's work is topographic in the sense that it takes as its theme, or topos, precisely the sites of this utopia where and when human labour and religion were consubstantiated through the agency of art as a flexible, evolving structure of belief systems, or stylings. Whether as critique or nostalgia—from the clinical term in ancient Greek for the disease of wanting to return home—the object of Gower's *Endorsement Project* is vividly described by Baudrillard's reference to the artisan's relationship to society before consumer capitalism, in classical scholar JP Vernant's depiction of the Greek city state:

The unity of the polis is not based on a distribution of tasks, a division of labour, functional differentiation, but on a "philia": a political community of citizens defined as peers. There is no human or social function of labour. The social bond is established beyond the craft at that level where the citizens can reciprocally love one another.(9)

This ideal world, where the artist completely merges with a citizenship of lovers, has been destroyed by the alienation effects of capitalism, which has reduced the products of labour, including art, into commodities... but worse, overvalued them as fetishes, like false gods. As Marx says,

There is a definite social relationship between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist enveloped regions of the religious world.(10)

Or to the perfume enshrouded regions of P.R., which have become the new public relations in our

more debased era. The inadequacy of the nostalgic model, however, is still being reiterated, as in Thierry de Duve's recent call for a more humanized economic model that will make "manifest social relations worthy of the name between men, rather than men, all dealing in exchange, manifesting social relations between things." (11) By now the citation of the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick seems inevitable to break up this circle, especially her recollection, from *Between Men*, of the strategic need for homophobia

for the regulation of the male homosocial bonds that structures all culture—at any rate, all public or heterosexual culture. This argument follows Levi-Strauss in defining culture itself, like marriage, in terms of a "total relationship of exchange... not established between man and woman, but between two groups of men, [in which] the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners."(12)

Lacan corroborates, if not inspires, these considerations with further investigations of Freud's Oedipus Complex and the role of repression, anal or otherwise, in the creation of the patriarchal civilization.

Such a genesis of sexual repression is not without sociological reference: it is expressed in the primitive rituals where the link between this repression and the roots of all social bonds is manifested; celebration rites which, in order to liberate sexuality, designate by their orgiastic form the moment of the affective reintegration into the whole.(13)

Under the rubric of gift, or don, in the oedipal framework of all societies, a number of the rites are seen as the agency (the original sense of 'orgy') for effecting the harmonious mediation of the individual (male) and society, not only the orgy, but the sacrifice. Hegel describes at one point the struggle of spirit and matter in the Unhappy Consciousness as resembling the "triune Persons of Christian theology" in which the consciousness of the Holy Spirit reconciles "the eternal essence (of the Father) with the changeable non-essence (of the Son) in a deeply joyful manner."(14) This manner was not without its costs to some, as the early heretics of Christianity attest. Not to believe in the complete consubstantiality of the Trinity, the strict Homoousian dogma, branded you a heretical Arian, who held that Christ's humanity substantially altered his divine essence. This controversy, with many burnt at the stake, was more or less rendered redundant by the rise of the cult of Mary, whose intervention, "between men" of the circuit of Father Son and the Holy Ghost, was effected by the transformation of the latter into the feminine.

The female “reconciliation” has rarely been a friendly “given” among men, however; but the stolen, raped, purloined. Gower's *Endorsement Project* exemplifies one of the most celebrated of these, Lacan's excluded, sacrificed sign of the feminine. Endorsement, meaning literally something written, or signed, “on the back” of a document, is hidden in plain view like Poe's famous purloined letter; “face down, address uppermost.” In the Lacanian reinterpretation of the oedipal significance of Poe's mystery story, a number of men change places in a triangular power struggle depending on their possession, neglect, or loss of a letter to take on the attribute, literally, of the feminine, and simultaneously leave oneself vulnerable to dispossession.

Here the sign and being, marvelously asunder, reveal which is victorious when they come into conflict. A man manly enough to defy to the point of scorn a lady's fearsome ire undergoes to the point of metamorphosis the curse of the sign he has dispossessed her of. For this sign is indeed that of woman, in so far as she invests her very being therein, founding it outside the law which subsumes nevertheless, originarily, in a position of signifier, nay, of fetish.(15)

Gower's *Endorsement Project* attempts to reinstate the uncommodified art work in a relationship of reciprocal exchange that includes the historically sacrificed homoerotic and feminine, in woman and man. There is so little left of solid materiality, of the commodifiable, that the sign (signature) of value, the name of the buyer, is absent—though this may change over time. Almost the perfect spiritualism of the various inadequate and discarded belief systems had been mimed, perhaps achieved, in these gestures of solidarity. As Gower has stated, “faith, however styled, never seems to go away; whether we call it the sex drive, love or belief, it is always being transformed into such things as nationalism, art or religion.” If we are destined to always repeat the “intersubjective triad” of Lacan, of the holy, oedipal trinity, as more and more sign on for the latest belief structure, we can at least restructure it to get the appropriate exchange-value for our money.

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Notes:

1. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 16
2. Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of the commodity and the Secret Thereof", in *Capital Vol.7*, p.41-3
3. Ibid
4. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), p 98-9
5. Walter Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production, in *Illuminations* (N.Y. Schocken, 1969), p. 22:1-4.
6. Marcel Duchamp, *Catalogues Raisone* (Paris: Musee National d'Art Moderne, 1977), p. 102-5
7. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism" in *On Sexuality* (London: Penguin. 1981), p.351
8. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (N.Y. W. W. Norton, 1962), p.47
9. Baudrillard, Ibid.
10. Marx, Ibid.
11. Thierry de Duve, "Andy Warhol, or the Machine Perfected" in *October #48*, Spring 1989, p.8
12. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California Press,1990),p. 184
13. Jacques Lacan, "The Oedipus Complex" in *Semiotext(e)*, vol. IV, #1, 1981, p 194-5
14. GWH Hegel. *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), p.525
15. Jacques Lacan, Seminar on "The Purloined Letter" in *Aesthetics Today* (NY: NAL 1980)