



*Rachel Lachowicz*. New York: Cristinerose Gallery, 1998.

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## **RACHEL LACHOWICZ: APPROPRIATING APPROPRIATION**

*by Robert Hobbs*

Lachowicz's early work relied on the tactic of appropriation whereby the original relationship between signifier and signified becomes the basis for a second order of signification, and tensions are thereby established between former and present meanings. This early work, in particular, debunks the myth of the originary work of art that in the Renaissance was associated with the inseminating brush of male genius. Her use of lipstick, for example, both highlights and veils Marcel Duchamp's urinals and Carl Andre's grids while her Eyeshadow Series does the same with Gerhard Richter's color-chart paintings, becoming perspectives for looking at culture and not simply another set of artifacts. In addition, her *Red Not Blue*, a performance at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery in 1992, critiques the inked female bodies that Yves Klein then imprinted on canvas at the same time that it celebrates them.

But Lachowicz's work is far more than just an emendative art. In addition to referencing the modernist canon, it makes a pointed statement about art's ongoing ontology by dramatizing how any present moment is necessarily in collusion with the past. Lachowicz's appropriationist critique stresses the active role artists assume when they work in established styles and defined genres: instead of being passively influenced by earlier work; they actively establish a dialogic relationship with it.

After her last exhibition at the gallery of the late Joe Fawbush in 1995, Rachel Lachowicz wrote of her need to break

...out of the box in which appropriation has seemingly been closed....That would be the problematic whereby appropriative work is seen as never being able to get beyond the history of its previous production and its maker.

She added, "My concern has been, not to erase the link, but to create a hybrid out of my own practice that may stray to become a unique object." In order to forge a dialectic that then enfolds itself, forming the basis of yet another dialectic, Lachowicz decided to appropriate the appropriator, namely herself, and to initiate a linked semiotic whereby she critiques and parodies her own work and its strategy of quotation, coupled with a usurpation and deflection of former meanings. An example of this semiotic plenitude is evident in her series of Donald Judd chairs that transform these pieces of furniture into art even though this minimalist vehemently objected to calling them sculptures. Lachowicz first transformed these utilitarian objects into lipstick sculptures before pastiching them with a collapsed rubber version. In the process, she also has appropriated the work of Claes Oldenburg and his early interest in parodying abstract expressionist macho-inspired rhetoric by making hard and soft versions of his sculptures.

In her recent work, Lachowicz states that "abstracting the links" of this semiotic process of appropriation is her present aim. This interest in a linked sequence of meaning whereby the form of each new term is predicated on both its position and the element immediately preceding it suggests a familiarity with George Kubler's prescient volume on art historical theory entitled The Shape of Time. In addition, this emphasis on the multiple states arising from successive acts of appropriation indicates a desire to objectify art's history by taking the discrete synchronic slices of time represented by individual works of art and putting them into a chronology representing change.

Lachowicz's exhibition at Cristinerose Gallery intends not only to deconstruct the rules of appropriation through self-quotation and parody but also to unmask the standard operatives of the genre of art gallery exhibition. The exhibition begins with the artist's implied statement of collaborative destruction in the floor piece entitled Molotov and I. This work is based on rudimentary incendiary devices that are customarily made of glass bottles filled with gasoline and stuffed with cloth wicks. Called "Molotov cocktails" these contraptions are named for the Russian commissar of foreign affairs during the Stalinist era, Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov. In the context of Lachowicz's past and present work, this piece, consisting of a number of glass containers partially filled with a flammable liquid to which canvas strips are attached, literalizes her ongoing creative/destructive appropriationist means and sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition which undertakes similar contradictory objectives. Positioned in the center of the gallery, a location playfully suggestive of a structuralist parallel to art's central focus, Molotov and I indicates the potential volatility of appropriationist art, which intends to destroy its opposition through symbiosis in order to establish a basis for itself. Like a Molotov cocktail, the work contains the ammunition not only for eradicating the opposition but also for destroying itself since its primary tool of unlimited semiosis can be deflected back on itself.

This positive/negative process can be seen in the canvas/porcelain piece Nova that joins high and decorative art materials to underscore its present state as an ersatz version of a Wiener Werkstätte design. The title of this work is most appropriate since nova is a category of exploding star whose luminosity increases from several thousand to as much as 100,000 times its normal range, after which it returns to its former level when it often becomes imperceptible to the unaided human eye. Although the piece can be regarded as an affirmation of the downward spiral of vanguard forms that gradually are appropriated for industry, with little of their original meaning remaining; it can also be seen in terms of a subsequent trajectory in which debased designs enrich and empower high art with their streetwise vulgarity.

Blue Green Transformation, consisting of gridded and punched aluminum sheets filled with eyeshadow, underscores the decorative subtext of Ellsworth Kelly's work, as does the blue and white eyeshadow used instead of Ben Day dots in Lachowicz's version of Roy Lichtenstein's Temple of Apollo minus its columns called ironically enough Temple of Apollo. In it Lachowicz parodies the great pasticher Lichtenstein as well as herself. Instead of the elevated language of abstract form, related to an intended purity of means in Kelly's work and a commercial vernacular in Lichtenstein's, Lachowicz has inscribed in these pieces a purely cosmetic medium traditionally employed by women to enhance their eyes (i.e. their vision).

Gordon Matta-Clark is the source for Lachowicz's companion wall and floor piece Technical Drawing employing face powder and photography. Relying on a passage in a geometry book dealing with intersections and developments, Lachowicz takes the example of the intersection of a plane and an oblique cylinder as a textbook means of paralleling Matta-Clark's companion photographs and architectural cuts. Her example enlarges on the disparity between Platonic geometric solids existing in a real/transcendent realm and Matta-Clark's industrial synecdoches by setting up disparities between photographic models of a silver-colored paper construction of a geometric cylinder and of a pile of face powder with a sculpture that is an unfolded aluminum "realization" of the photographed geometric cylinder that has been partially caked with face powder. The piece emphasizes differences between conception and realization and between appropriated models and their asymmetrically positioned second-generation offshoots.

Both Kelly and Chuck Close are transformed in the eyeshadow piece, Reproduction, that plays with the geometry of the former artist and the abstract language of grids of the latter. In line with the Close prototype, Reproduction consists of grids of dark and light eyeshadow outlined by a border of white eyeshadow. Since grids in the 1970s, together with a predilection for centered compositions, were proposed as formalist equivalents for an essentially female aesthetic, Lachowicz's liberal use of grids in this work, as in Blue Green Transformation, is indicative of the incisive spoofs her pieces are intended to be. These works, as the others in this exhibition, play with accepted visual languages of high art at the same time that they unmask their shadowy decorative subtexts.

The final two works in the exhibition, known under the joint title Tomb and Tweedledum and Tweedledee, reinforce the overall intent of this exhibition. Consisting of assemblages of superannuated computer keyboards intended as send-offs of John Chamberlain's abstract expressionist sculptures of wrecked automotive parts, this work bespeaks the rampant obsolescence of our culture -- an obsolescence that is a necessary concomitant of any new creation, including Lachowicz's, which forges links with the past and also is implicated in its own obsolescence. For these sculptures Lachowicz burns computer parts to create a variant of some of her earlier work such as her burnt parody of Jeff Koons' stainless steel bunny.

In her exhibition of new work, Lachowicz outlines a map of artistic misreading, to transpose the title of Harold Bloom's important book A Map of Misreading. As pointed out by Bloom, an important means for creative individuals to make space for themselves in highly self-conscious ages such as the late twentieth century is through deliberate and strong misreadings. In his book Bloom stresses the contradictory tugs created by "the romance-of-trespass" and "the guilt of belatedness" that have afflicted modern writers from the early nineteenth century to the present. Lachowicz appears to be following Bloom's advice with the added proviso of going one better when she deliberately misreads her own work. Her art thus dramatizes the rapid obsolescence of artistic languages, the necessarily appropriative nature of creative activity, the decorative and emendative power of late twentieth century post-feminist feminism, and the inevitability of all artists ultimately to quote (i.e. appropriate) themselves. In "abstracting the links," Lachowicz presents a new meta-art that is as much about art's history as it is about art's ontology.

1. Rachel Lachowicz, typescript, artist's archives, Los Angeles, California.
2. Ibid. .
3. Rachel Lachowicz, telephone interview by author, 17 August 1998.
4. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). Kubler writes, "The problem disclosed by any sequence of artifacts may be regarded as its mental form, and the linked solutions as its class of being....In general, formal sequences exceed the ability of any individual to exhaust their possibilities." (pp. 34ff.)
5. In the 1970s emphasis was on finding a feminist formal equivalent to the predominantly formalist work still in its hegemony. In addition to grids, centering was proposed as a feminist form as evidenced by the Lucy Lippard collection of essays on early feminism using this title. More to the point is Lippard's later estimation of feminist pursuits contained in "Escape Attempts," her introduction to the republication of her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) which she lists, as follows: "narrative, role-playing, guise and disguise, body and beauty issues; a focus on fragmentation, interrelationships, autobiography, performance, daily life, and, of course,...feminist politics." (p. xi)
6. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
7. Ibid., p. 35.

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