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BRICOLER/BROUILLER

Quentin Armand, *Easy Loser*, 2009. Photo : Ivan Binet.

ont été gravés dans le bois avec un couteau de poche, des lettres tracées avec du correcteur Liquid Paper; de la mousse a même eu le temps de pousser dans un des pupitres légèrement en désordre. On se croirait au milieu d'une hécatombe invisible, quelque chose comme l'inquiétante « zone » vivante et désaffectée de *Stalker*, de Tarkovski. Sur les tables, un livre nous renseigne sur la teneur exacte de cette dévastation : *La Jeune-Fille et la mort*, livre-bricolage conçu par le bureau de l'APA et Mélanie Drouin, librement inspiré de *Premiers matériaux pour une théorie de la Jeune-Fille*, du collectif *Tiqqun* (Mille et une Nuits, 2001).

Concept parfaitement asexué, la Jeune-Fille nomme le point culminant de l'anthropomorphose (le devenir-humain) du Capital. Comme l'écrivait Debord, « le spectacle est le capital à un tel degré d'accumulation qu'il devient image[1] »; et cette image quintessentielle, c'est la Jeune-Fille. Du plus profond de son être, la Jeune-Fille aspire à devenir signe : elle représente un effort permanent pour se rendre compatible à l'Empire. En ce sens, elle est l'exact contrepoint du *loser*. Sa soumission à l'impersonnalité du Spectacle lui procure le droit de soumettre qui que ce soit. Là où règne le spectacle, la valeur de la Jeune-Fille est immédiatement effective : sa beauté même est conçue comme pouvoir exécutif. Si parfois, la Jeune-Fille déprime, c'est parce qu'elle aimerait être une chose comme les autres, mais elle n'y parvient pas toujours. La Jeune-Fille est une machine de guerre, le corps d'infanterie des troupes d'occupation du visible, la championne incontestée d'un monde intégralement pixellisé.

Pour le bureau de l'APA, « s'approcher du bricolage, c'est s'éloigner de l'uniformité et de la standardisation ». Peut-on dès lors penser le bricolage comme manière de faire fuir l'étanchéité dévastatrice de la Jeune-Fille mobilisée à force de désœuvrement et d'improvisation indisciplinée ? Telle serait la tension créatrice qui traverse *La Jeune-Fille et la mort*, laquelle trouve un écho de premier ordre dans la remarque de Jean Dubois, selon qui « ce qui caractérise le mieux le bricoleur, c'est l'indisciplinarité, une tactique échappatoire qui s'applique à trouver une solution hors champ ou du moins, à croire qu'une telle possibilité existe[2]. »

Annie Brunette trace, elle aussi, une ligne d'échappée désœuvrée dans sa troublante performance, intitulée *Escale pour les losers*. Les bras reliés par des fils à une guitare électrique posée sur le sol devant elle, Brunette nous plonge dans une déconcertante fiction où elle se révèle comme une espionne-robot contrôlée par une puce électronique logée dans son œil strabique. La femme lutte contre son devenir-machine en tentant d'arracher la puce de son œil et en s'adonnant à une jonglerie équivoque qui déchaîne la guitare électrique. Le malaise bionique que Brunette met fort efficacement en scène peut ainsi être lu comme une authentique tentative de destruction de l'intérieur du corps télécommandé de la Jeune-Fille, ou, à tout le moins, de désaliénation émancipatrice radicale, laquelle avait d'ailleurs commencé avec une séance de masturbation nasale de groupe.

Militant iconoclaste qui clame haut et fort son amour des femmes bien en chair et créateur de la dynamique fondation *Belles rondeurs*, José Breton a profité de la tribune offerte par Folie/Culture pour se questionner sur le caractère profondément *loser* de sa démarche. Sur son site internet (www.missplump.net), on retrouve entre autres choses les photos des candidates du concours « Miss ronde universnet » (64 kg et +) dont il est le juge en chef, pierre angulaire de sa démarche qui vise au mieux-être des rondes. « À travers tous mes textes, dit-il, je veux démontrer que l'appréciation de ses rondeurs contribue à l'acquisition d'une bonne santé mentale[3]. » Le récit de ses déboires judiciaires avec un médecin qu'il accuse d'avoir causé la mort d'une patiente à cause d'une « liposuccion sauvage » achève de nous gagner à sa cause. Qu'on jette un coup d'œil au courriel qu'il a reçu après que son site sur le portail Sympatico ait été fermé du jour au lendemain suite aux pressions du docteur en question :

« *Michel Morin : Ce n'est pas moi qui a fait fermer ton site web, c'est le Dr. Courchesne, lui-même. Ce que tu fais est mal. Lui il a les moyens et des contacts pour te faire beaucoup de tort. Même avec le meilleur avocat de l'Aide juridique, tu es perdant. Tu devrais cesser de le harceler et l'oublier carrément*[4]. »

Ennemi déclaré de la Jeune-Fille et des canons de la beauté standardisée, Breton a aussi présenté une installation-vidéo basée sur une entrevue du Doc Mailloux à la Radio-X de Québec. Dénonçant « la dictature des grosses », Mailloux s'en prend, avec l'appui incontesté de l'animateur Stéphane Gasse, à la campagne menée contre l'hypersexualisation des jeunes filles, qu'il interprète comme des mesures de représailles jalouses commandées par le Conseil de la femme et toutes ces « grosses frustrées dont le dernier orgasme remonte à 20 ans ». Au milieu de ces propos surréels, Breton tient fort comme un roc, malgré qu'il déplore le fait qu'il soit passablement seul dans sa lutte : « Mon sujet concerne l'intimité des femmes. Les femmes apprécient mon travail dans l'intimité de leur chez-soi devant leur ordinateur. Fait que je suis seul dans ma lutte. Je n'ai de l'aide de femmes qu'à distance grâce au courriel[5]. »

Au final, on ne peut que féliciter l'organisme Folie/Culture pour avoir créé l'occasion d'une rencontre aussi riche et déconcertante à la frontière de l'art et de la santé mentale. On attend leur prochain événement avec impatience !

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NOTES

1 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, p. 32.
2 Jean Dubois, « Le mythe du Bricoleur », in *Penser l'indiscipline*, Éditions Optica, Paris, 2001, p. 51.
3 http://www.missplump.net/ronde/rsantm.htm.
4 http://www.missplump.net/ronde/guerre.htm.
5 http://www.ma-grande-taille.com/jose-breton-miss-plum-net-militant-politique-rondes-3831/.

Paul Couillard, *Beautiful Losers*, 2009. Photo : Ivan Binet.

Courbet's Crime

Q. What if we took lameness literally, straight from the dictionary: lame art as "weak" art; "inadequate; unsatisfactory; clumsy": lame art as "out of touch with modern fads or trends"?

A. We would hit a paradox straight off as we realize that a certain weakness, inadequacy, unsatisfactoriness and clumsiness are prized as signs within much recent art: go see Tal R, David Shrigley, Sean Landers, Karen Kilimnik, Gary Rough, Mike Kelley, Paper Rad, Cady Noland (especially as approximated by Triple Candie), Tracey Emin, Jessica Diamond.

But maybe there's nothing so very new in all of this: the trajectory of modern art's historical development, we are often told, has largely been driven by the improbable power of ineptitude. In the beginning: The wooden awkwardness of the figures in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* and *Bonjour M. Courbet*; the sullen aggression of his slab-like paint; the apparent banality of his subject matter (anonymous nobodies from who knows where): all of these characteristics were noted with derision and contempt by the majority of his contemporaries. Courbet's crime? — He chose to reject all that painting had strived so hard to accomplish. He refused to play by the rules, rules ostensibly established to guarantee the quality and consistency of workmanship, intellectual substance and moral probity of all work produced and exhibited under the auspices of the Academy. Rules, moreover, that replicated within the realm of culture all of those regulatory forces operating throughout the wider social, political and economic spheres. Courbet relativized the agreed and accepted norms, exposing their contingency. And in the charged political atmosphere of post-1848 France, this breach of etiquette was a danger. The gaucheness of his art was borrowed from popular culture (cheap Épinal woodcuts), and was thus aimed at a "philistine" sensibility — at those untouched by the ennobling influence of art, the "wine drinking scum" of the dark back streets, potential revolutionaries. In Courbet's hands, lameness revealed the contingent and precarious nature of power's investment in "good form". The sophisticated urbanite was reminded in no uncertain terms that their taste and hard earned cultural capital did not, in fact, represent a set of unchallenged universal values. Courbet's uncouth and clumsy paintings triggered uncomfortable reactions in many of those cultural parvenus who first witnessed them in the refined ambience of the Parisian salon: uncomfortable because they served as a reminder of all that they had denied, repressed and discarded in order to gain access to "culture". Had they themselves, as recent economic migrants from the countryside, not struggled to rid themselves of rustic poor taste in order to add the veneer of "high" cultural respectability to their newly acquired social and economic assets? And it was this very veneer that Courbet's seeming artlessness — his lameness — had threatened to strip away, exposing the rawness and the lack that always lay beneath.

Failure to meet expectations — a certain weakness, inadequacy, unsatisfactoriness and clumsiness in 'fine' art: this, according to art historical orthodoxy, was always modern art's way to keep culture moving throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Flatten the image and undermine spatial illusionism (Manet); discard draftsmanship (Impressionism); ditch fixed-point perspective (Cubism); embrace chance (Dada); problematize the creative process (readymades); celebrate the irrational (Surrealism); abandon the recognizable image (abstraction); dispense with the art object (Conceptualism); elevate mass culture (Pop); vacate the gallery (site-specific and land art). To claim, however, that such art failed to meet expectations begs two questions: first, whose expectations were thus thwarted; second, how successful were these attempts to out-manoeuvre the "enemy"? I guess we would have to say that those expectations came from the direction of the putative owners of high culture: the bourgeoisie, the class that had wrested control of symbolic capital and currency from the aristocracy during the eighteenth century. Disdain for the bourgeois — for his lack of "class", his philistinism, his crass instrumentalism, his vulgar materialism, his usurpation of high culture — may have provided the gas that fuelled the motor of modern art, but this rhetoric of contempt was ultimately both counter-productive and disingenuous.

It was counter-productive because — falling into the trap of all strategies of critique-by-opposition — it served to legitimize that which it wished to counter: locked in a master-slave relation, its very survival demanded the continuing dominance of that which it defined itself in opposition to. And the disingenuity of this stance derived from two principal — if rather mundane — considerations: i) the overwhelming majority of artists were themselves of bourgeois social origin; ii) the despised class was also the means of the artist's financial survival (in the memorable phrase of Clement Greenberg, artists were attached to the bourgeoisie by "an umbilical chord of gold"). Power thrives on challenge, provided that such challenge is limited and contained: dissent acts upon the social body in much the same way as an inoculation acts upon the biological body, the introduction of a controlled amount of the virus serving to strengthen the body's resistance.

We have already, then, begun to answer the second question; how successful were these attempts at negative critique through the staging of lameness in art? A full answer would demand serious historical research far beyond my meager resources, but I'm pretty certain that the results of such research would suggest that the effectiveness of this strategy of negative critique would be subject to the law of diminishing returns. *Épater la bourgeoisie?* What may have worked for Courbet and his successors in nineteenth century France had certainly lost its edge by the time it had reached NYC in the 1960s. Claes Oldenburg summed it up when he lamented the fact that the art audience had now come to *demand* shock, that outrage was the guarantee of a genuine art experience, and that the appetite for shock far outstripped the artist's capacity to satiate the hunger: to shock is chic, as we have now learned. (Incidentally, it may be that the vestigial power of the lame to shock was revived in those rare moments when an artist chose to "go lame" after having already established a reputable position: Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* as a recanting of his Blue and Rose periods; Magritte's inexplicable *Période Vache*; Philip Guston's shift to his 'cartoon' style after success as an Abstract Expressionist. Such radical shifts — experienced and understood as traumatic losses — not only dismayed the public, but also fellow artists and, not least, the artists' dealers.)

Another key factor in modern art's thwarting of expectation by means of deflation was provided by a certain understanding of art's relation to an increasingly industrialized mass culture. Although social class and the mass culture industry cannot be finally separated — the culture industry's means of production are owned by particular social groups — it was in its overt relation to mass culture, rather than to class, that modern art increasingly addressed its critical tendencies. Influenced in his thinking by Adorno and the Frankfurt School, Greenberg vilified mass culture — "kitsch" — as anathema to art. Cynically exploiting the underdeveloped tastes of the urban masses, the mass culture industry pandered to the lowest common denominator in order to maximize profits. Whilst occasionally looking to high art for inspiration, the mass culture industry stripped high art of its difficulty and resistance,

rendering it ingratiating and immediately consumable. Under such circumstances, the introduction of mass cultural elements into the realm of fine art was intended to produce a "laming" effect, a crippling desublimation of art's lofty ambitions. Picasso's use of newspaper ads in his collages; Schwitters' incorporation of printed ephemera in his Merz works; Stuart Davis's introduction of advertising imagery into his paintings: the list of bathetic intrusions is endless and it signals a fundamental transformation of art's procedures and its identity.

The exponential expansion of mass culture — as a uniquely modern phenomenon — could not be ignored by modern artists. Existing 'outside' of art, an injection of 'cheap', vulgar, manipulative mass culture could act as a leveling force within art, negating the (class based) privileges associated with traditional connoisseurship and — notionally, at least — democratizing art's appeal. "There is a sense," Leo Steinberg writes of such moments, "of loss, of sudden exile, of something willfully denied — sometimes a feeling that one's accumulated culture or experience is hopelessly devalued, leaving one exposed to spiritual destitution."[1] This crisis arises, according to Steinberg as a consequence of the viewer's failure to understand the nature and significance of the artist's "sacrifice". For only through an understanding of the sacrifice involved can the nature of the achievement be fully appreciated. Thus, presumably, the presence of weakness, inadequacy, unsatisfactoriness and clumsiness are to be understood as betokening an absence: the absence of all that has been sacrificed on their behalf. The notion of sacrifice necessarily entails an etymological connection to the notion of the sacred and, thereby, to its antonym, the profane. Yet the supposed profanation of art by mass culture is only capable of sustaining a critical force when mass culture is understood as base, corrupt and perhaps even immoral. When, in other words, the character of mass culture is defined negatively in relation to those positive values purportedly enshrined within dominant, high culture.

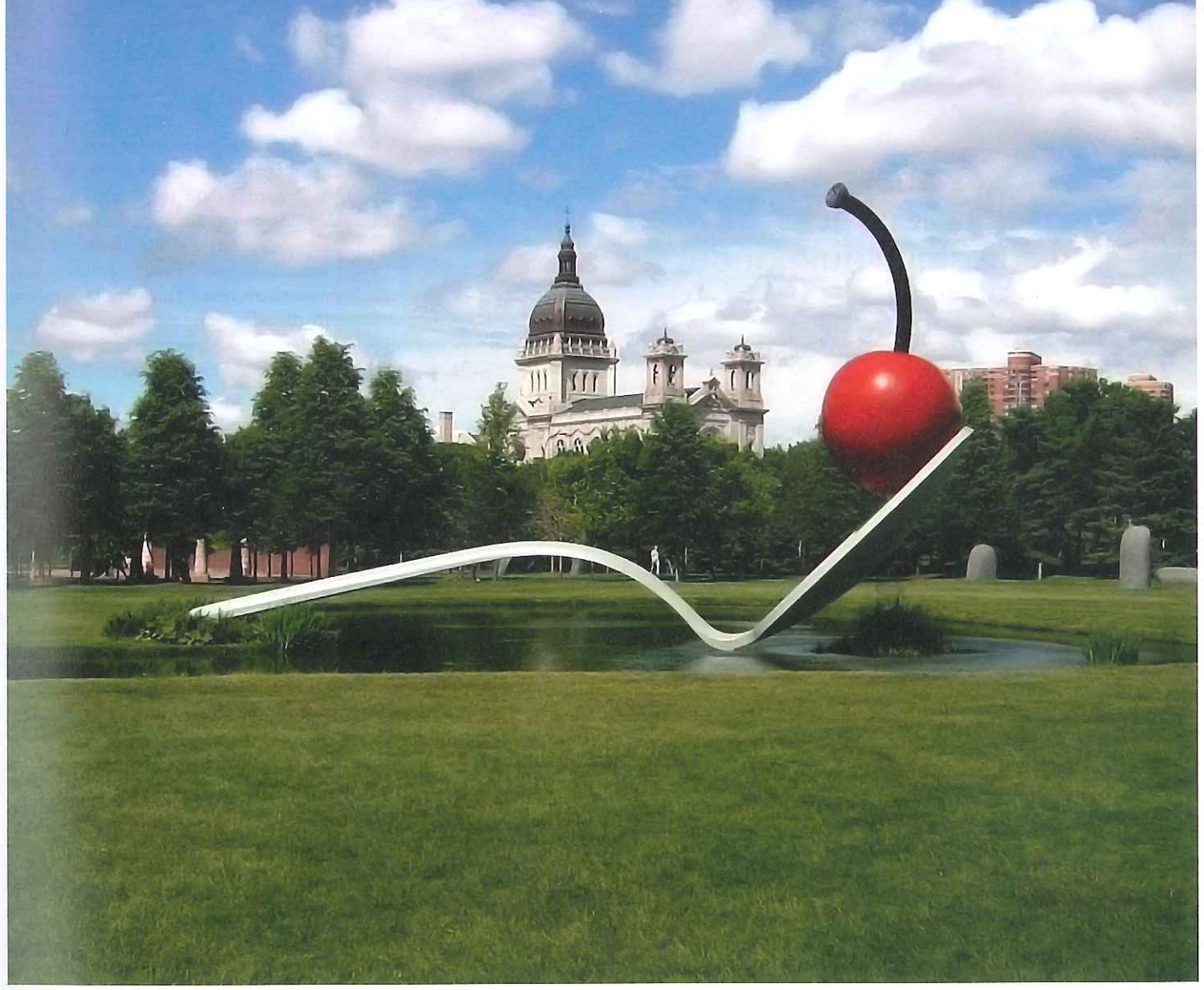
Today, however, a different relation pertains between the concepts of high and low culture, a relation in which it is no longer clear what might constitute "high" and "low", or even whether such a distinction is possible to sustain, let alone have relevance. Whereas, formerly, high art might have been instrumental in the definition of mass culture and in its reception, mass culture is now the lens through which we are increasingly invited to view high art. Whereas, formerly, those signs associated with high cultural forms (intellectual ambition, formal innovation, a critical disposition, etc.) were only deemed to exist within the restricted realm of art, they are now evident in a wide range of mass culture products (commercial movies, best-selling novels, popular music, TV drama). As a consequence, what I have been referring to as "lameness" in art — namely, a form of critique intending to expose ideological investment in cultural value by means of a failure to meet a set of imposed expectations — is no longer available as a strategy of resistance or negative desublimation. We are now more likely to find art ridiculed in mass culture, than to find mass culture operating as a symptom of subversion within art. Lameness - to the extent that it could be characterized as a positive evaluation within art of the inartistic — has lost its former edge. These days we are just as happy to get our cultural highs from the globalized image industry as from the cottage industry of the art world.

The rhetoric of social mobility within the so-called developed world — underwritten by the nomadism of capital — suggests that class has disappeared as a significant historical force (how often do we hear the terms bourgeois and working class today?) At the same time, the sheer ubiquity of mass culture — maintained and even accelerated by digital technology — disallows its availability as a privileged reference point for art: when something is everywhere, it is also nowhere. Art is now already an immanent presence throughout mass culture, a culture in which the image — all images — service and subtend the spectacle. The qualities of speed, mobility and ubiquity suggested here also have an effect upon place, in so far as place loses its particularity, and the places of modernity are increasingly supplanted by what Marc Augé has termed the non-places of supermodernity, «spaces of circulation, consumption and communication» that exist beyond history, relations and the game of identity, spaces in which symbolic codes are replaced by the instrumental regime of information.[2] Speed, mobility and ubiquity are equally destructive, as has been frequently observed, of historical consciousness, with the mass media — in their relentless pursuit of the new and the now - functioning, in the words of Frederic Jameson, "as the very agents and mechanisms of our historical amnesia."[3]

The various historical conditions under which lameness could be seen to operate effectively as a means of negative critique are no longer present. In fact, the grounds for critique in general - whether transcendent or immanent — seem hard to secure. The critique performed by the historical avant-garde(s) was predicated upon spatial and temporal metaphors that no longer hold under the circumstances outlined above (i.e. there was a distance between the avant-garde and mainstream culture, a distance that was both spatial: the avant-garde occupied a clearly separate position within the field of cultural production — and temporal: as the term itself suggests, the avant-garde constituted a "before"). Subsequent to the (cultural and economic) institutionalization of the avant-garde, and of art in general, there is no longer any "outside" position that offers itself as a point of critical leverage on the mainstream, be it official/bourgeois culture or mass/popular culture (which, in themselves, become increasing difficult to separate). A further, yet related, problem arises within this situation. The colonization of the former public sphere by private interests is matched only by the invasion of the former private realm by public interests. According to Rosalind Deutsche, "the pseudo-public sphere has yielded to a public sphere that is privately owned, determined by profit motives, and … "the public" is defined as a mass of consumers and spectators."[4] Thus public space is no longer a privileged site for the exchange of ideas, but a site in which one 'voice' dominates — the voice of capital speaking in the universal language of commodities.

Lameness in recent art, then, might be thought of not as an outmoded instance of negative critique, but as a form of accommodation. Unlike those social theorists of the Frankfurt School who cast the culture industry in the role of exploiter and oppressor, lame art accepts mass culture as something far more flexible and ambivalent. Rather than seeing themselves as its unwitting victims, they are able to discriminate between its various aspects and manifestations, and they know how to work with it to their advantage. Most important, these artists are trying to find ways to inhabit it as much as it inhabits them. They operate from within, not from some external vantage point. In many instances, then, they adopt the position not of the critic, but of the obsessive fan, the enthusiastic amateur, the nerd, the geek, the dork. This often entails an apparent regression to a feigned adolescence, the only form of "distancing" (emotional, psychological, cultural) available, perhaps, after the disappearance of those other productive sources of difference: class, place, history, public/private, high/low.

With the collapse of history into an undifferentiated scene of immediately available "pastness", indexing adolescence allows a degree of temporal distance to re-enter the work (an earlier stage of "I"). Furthermore, references to and citations from a range of mass culture products aimed at the teenage market — pop music, TV shows, computer games, teen magazines — serve to establish autobiography, rather than conventional history, as the temporal yardstick, and to prioritize the activity of consumption as a key component of identity formation. Adolescence is also associated with incomplete assimilation into the world of work and



Spoonbridge and Cherry, 1985-1988. Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

responsibility, so that, perhaps, the youth culture/adult culture conflict replaces the high/low pairing as a means of establishing otherness (although some theorists maintain that youth culture serves merely as a preparation for adult culture, rather than as its resistance). Thus a lot of this work looks as though made by teenagers, alone in their bedrooms. Much of it is scrawly drawing in pencil or ballpoint pen on cheap paper: sometimes it appears as hand-written texts, breezily misspelled. Alternatively, it may take the form of a painfully wrought drawing derived from a magazine photograph, immense time and labour expended on an apparently futile exercise in copying. Some of it uses the lo-fi look and feel of outmoded video and computer game imagery and technology (lurid colors, chunky pixels, analogue video effects). A great deal of it appears arrested at that stage before full maturity, lagging and lacking. Inevitably, the spirit of nostalgia haunts this enterprise, suggesting that access to the past in our post-historical state is only possible if re-routed through the filter of private attachment and feelings of personal empathy.

Crucially it seems that, despite being intended for exhibition, this kind of work often speaks in a private voice that seems oblivious to the need for public engagement or wide public recognition. It is as if the artist were saying; this work has been made for "me", or for my circle of close friends — we watched the same TV shows as kids, listened to the same music, played the same computer games; now we laugh at the same in-jokes, use our own special language, admire each other's trainers and haircuts, and do lots of stuff together. It is an attempt to construct a private, bespoke universe in response to the impossible demands of a world experienced as immaculate image. Constant interpellation (cf. Althusser) by the mass media — the constant demand to respond to messages addressed to "you" when one is not always certain whether the "you" in question is actually one's self — is countered by asserting "I". And this "I" is not fully prepared: this "I" feels inadequate and incomplete, kinda lame. Nevertheless this is "my" work: you will recognize it by its own particular ineptitude, its own unique failure. This is the world I have fabricated, constructed out of fragments scavenged from yesterday, already obsolete: I do not presume that you would necessarily accept it as "our" world. On entering this world you may feel as if you were reading my private diary, or searching through my trash. What did you expect to find? It's not aesthetic satisfaction or intellectual curiosity that overcomes you when you look at this work; it's a feeling of awkwardness and embarrassment. You probably didn't find what you thought you ought to find.

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NOTES

[1] Leo Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public', *Harper's Magazine*, 1962.

[2] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Vero, 1995.

[3] Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in Hal Foster (ed) *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1985.

[4] Rosalind Deutsche, *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics*, MIT Press, 1996.