
REIGN OF THE WHITE GLOVE

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In the fall of 1990, in place of the usual invitation sent by mail from Postmaster's Gallery, such as, "We proudly announce the fifth solo exhibition by the artist in our recently renovated space..." the following announcement appeared:

an example of recent work
may be seen in the windows of
Harry Winston Inc.
from approximately 4:47pm to 5:04 pm
monday-saturday
november 19-december 15, 1990¹

The announcement was for a work by Silvia Kolbowski, titled *an example of recent work may be found in the windows of Harry Winston Inc. from approximately 5:17 to 5:34pm* (1990). The description in the announcement, which also occupied space as an advertisement in *Artforum*, proved at once too precise and too general to function according to the logic of the fabrication, display, and sale of artworks.

The approximate time during which this work was available for viewing designated an exact duration. Both finite and irregular, it set up the expectation that one brings to the witnessing of a natural occurrence, such as the disappearance of the sun, which, on December 15 1990, would have already long since set. This is reflected in the title of the work, which delineates a different timeframe.

Exclusive Thing

Why Harry Winston? That question may also have occurred to the reader of the announcement. Depending on the direction of their approach to the jeweler's location on 59th street in Manhattan, the attendee would have noted this motto, attached in bronze cursive on the facade: "The Most Exclusive Jeweler in The World."

At the time Kolbowski invited people to the store window, the brand's advertising campaigns circulated this variation on their motto: "Rare Jewels of the World." Kolbowski's artwork points to the possible equivalence in the market economy of two activities that tried to distance themselves from one another for two hundred years: contemporary art and exquisite commodities—both available by way of privileged

knowledge and financial exclusion. In the artist's words: "the project took advantage of the fact that H.W.J. rotates the display of jewels every day in their street vitrines, and replaces these jewels every day at the same time with backlit photographs. The title alludes to this display, transition, and to the highly crafted objects in the windows, which were similar to the contemporaneous regression to highly crafted objects typical of much of the lauded artwork of the late 1990s."²

The making of rings and necklaces retains the residue of hand crafting in an era of serialized manufacture, robotic production, and even industrially produced gemstones. The making of luxury jewelry may start with computer-aided design (a technology capable of not only reproducing what exists, but of simulating what does not yet exist) but it still retains the non-reproducible elements of the grain structure of ferrous materials, the differing levels of refraction in stones, and the fine scratches exhibited by all metals soft enough for prolonged contact with skin.

In the marketing of jewelry, small variations and qualitative distinctions (between individual stones, for example) are presented as the "natural" basis for a quantitative limitation that remains entirely artificial, which is to say, driven by the logic of supply and demand in the market economy. While the production process takes advantage of the repeatability of a highly rationalized design and assembly, the advertisements for these products capitalize on a tradition of craft and individuality. Hence the importance of the motto "rare jewels of the world"—a logic in which even critically aware artworks, and ones that make full use of technologies of reproduction, have become caught.



Work Window

An example of recent work offers a critical reflection on the specialized sector of commerce in which the artist found herself participating during the 1990s. Noticing the potential interchangeability of “backlit photographs” and “jewels,” the reader of Kolbowski’s description might infer that her intervention, as an immanent critique of much of the lauded artwork of the 1990’s, extended beyond the easy target of the already much maligned return to figuration in painting.



If we look closely at the photograph Kolbowski took to document the announcement Postmasters gallery produced in Artforum, we also see the announcement from Urbi et Orbi Gallery for James Casebere’s show in Paris at the time, where the artist exhibited a backlit photograph of a delicately orchestrated tableau. For most of the decade Casebere had explored the form. For example, Hal Foster, who has contributed positively to the discourse around both Kolbowski and Casebere’s work, made this critical appraisal of Casebere’s exhibition of backlit photographs at St. George Terminal, Staten Island, in 1983:

“...the photographs are not quite right: they have the scalar oddity of dreams that will not be contained: and like *natures mortes* come alive, they blur the line between true and false, real and imaginary.”³

Kolbowski's work pushes us to ask, however, if an artist's apprehension of the synthetic character of contemporary life in 1983—these uncanny still lives, seemingly radiating from within—had not become “second nature” in the *nature morte* of commodity display by 1990. With the public release of Adobe Photoshop one year prior, public space was becoming populated with such “uncanny images” so rapidly that, thanks to advertisements, the blurred line between real and imaginary had become a commonplace, even canny, public visual experience.

More importantly, while Casebere's installation anticipated Kolbowski's intervention at Harry Winston in significant ways—especially in its reflection on the cultural status of simulation, using commercial image-display strategies in public space—one critical difference remains: Kolbowski has removed all traces of authorship from the backlit photograph that features in her work. This brings us to a second point of comparison with a contemporary of Silvia Kolbowski, whose own work with commercial-scale backlit photographs has positioned him firmly within conversations of authorship and narrative.

As the artist most closely associated with Duratrans—the trademarked name for large format commercial transparency printing—Jeff Wall's elaborately constructed photographs have been rightfully acclaimed as technically masterful images that draw on the history of painting to allegorize the historical conditions in which they are made. But by bringing the illuminated, transparent image into a relation of exchangeability with haute-luxury jewelry, Kolbowski's work implies that even photographs as discursively aware as Wall's could be reduced to mere limited-edition merchandise circulated alongside the wares of a jeweler. In such a comparison, Kolbowski's work would shift the conversation from the ethical intention of representation to the inescapability of economic complicity of all forms of artistic production in the financial speculation that overwhelmed the artist by the end of the 1980s. Retrospectively, Kolbowski has spoken of the “destabilizing effect” that the pressure of speculative capital had on her practice:

“It became impossible to feel like one's contributions to the field and to audiences had much meaning, or to work at an individual pace that wasn't geared to the market and its networks – fairs, galleries, etc.”⁴

Is it possible that for Kolbowski the artist-authored photographic print—the closely focused demystification of which she, like Casebere and Wall, had originally garnered the support of viewers and critics—had lost its critical power by the end of the 1980s?

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In *An example of recent work* Kolbowski upsets the very expectation fostered by her title. There is no “work,” in the sense of an image produced or even appropriated by the artist exemplifying a technique of representation. The resistance to this offering of a representational artifact seems to reflect a disenchantment with the promise of technologies of reproduction, the presumed radicality of which was supposed to inhere in their potential for endless reproduction. But, like “rare jewels” in an era of laboratory gemstones, photographs—at the beginning of the period of their easy digital replication—were sold in arbitrarily limited editions or even as individual “examples.”

The image of the artwork gingerly cared for and the marketable illusion of the artist as the exclusive purveyor and sole author of carefully crafted objects conceal the many manipulations that constitute work in our time: the sweaty palms of the assistant answering phones and sending emails, the suede-gloved hand of the shop-worker producing pedestals and other wood constructions, the latex-gloved hand of the painter’s assistant, the white-gloved hand of the shop assistant, which is also that of the preparator, or the art handler.

In witnessing the transition between the goods on display and the images that replaced them, Kolbowski invited the viewer to see “recent work,” in an expanded sense. This sense does not simply—or at least not only—refer to a trend in imaging, but also to a labor of handling and maintenance. During the sixteen minutes designated by her work, a window opened onto the activity of handling rarified commodities that the artist momentarily refused to distinguish from her own “work.” Had Kolbowski shown photographs or a video installation within the walls of Postmasters Gallery, her images would have required a similar careful unwrapping, measuring, and hanging by hands that would have had to disappear as quickly as they materialized.

The work of the art handler and the assistant have until recently been excluded from public discourse. The work they do, in art, must hide its traces in much the same manner that work in retail, as such, must hide under the demands of management, which strives to set up a seamless experience of desire for the customer—in accordance with the fundamental economic principle by which commodities absorb the traces of labor that make them luster. After the retailer, the jeweler and the art gallery, comes a further abstraction of the practical labor that makes them possible: the image. Kolbowski’s “work” pointed to just this: the transition from capital (diamonds and gold predate currency as a medium of exchange) to image (the representation that came to replace the valuable material of common measurement). Before the time that began to elapse at 4:47—at 4:45, say—the window would still have shown only the jewelry glinting, polished stone unmoved by the passerby. Yet by 5:30 the jewels and the labor that maintained them would have withdrawn behind the stasis of the luminous image.

The evacuation of labor from the general stock of images that frame public life has been observed with increasing frequency. A representative example of this observation comes from Slavoj Žižek, who, shortly after Kolbowski directed viewers to Harry Winston, noted in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* how mainstream Hollywood films almost always present work in impossible subterranean recesses or as hidden criminal enterprises: “What one should recall here is that the only place in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its intensity is when James Bond penetrates the master-criminal’s secret domain and locates there the site of intense labor (distilling and packaging the drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York...). When the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of the production in a factory?”⁵

Where Žižek bemoans the concealment of labor, the virtue of Kolbowski’s work consists in showing how the traces of labor hide in plain sight. One of the photographs replacing the jewelry during that autumn and winter of 1990 showed a necklace comprised of some thirty individual strands of massive teardrop shaped diamonds. In the photograph, the platinum and diamonds of the necklace floated over a backdrop reminiscent of a nocturnal sky, on which this text also appeared:

Harry Winston

Rare Jewels of the World

New York, Paris, Geneva
London, Beverly Hills, Tokyo

The famous slogan encourages the reader to imagine the value of the object presented as the result of geographical happenstance and geological scarcity. With each distant place-name added to the list, the subterranean mines from which the glinting substance originates through anonymous labor is more obscured. Obscurer still are the hands that have cut the stone, polished it, packaged it, transported it, posed it, photographed it, retouched and, ultimately, printed it.

These of course are only a partial list of the work involved in the conferral of value on a “rare jewel of the world.” The exchange economy presents the things made valuable by people as the inherent property of things as such. The power of Kolbowski’s comparison is not that of an exposé that shows the secretly nefarious dealings of the exclusive dealers, but rather an observation of the disappearance of the traces of

history into objects that seem to radiate meaning, to reflect value, as if these were natural properties of things themselves. As Marx said, at the end of his description of the commodity, “So far no chemist has found Value in a pearl or a diamond .”

That Rare Individual

The more readily gemstones become available, the more stridently companies advertise their natural singularity. Today mass manufacturing can, for example, produce diamonds by placing carbon under extreme pressure, and the finest watch makers have used laboratory-produced rubies since the end of the nineteenth century. Yet advertisements still present jewels as irreplaceable artifacts miraculously wrested free from the Earth’s depths; in magazines, on billboards, and especially on websites, they shine as terrestrial stars; adamant, indomitable, as a fixed set, they can circulate for a million years.

The representation of famous diamonds and other jewels is one of the clearest examples of the manner in which the most privileged members of a society project their power onto natural phenomena. When disguised as nature, privilege does not appear as a result of the historical process; rather it seems inevitable. Theodor Adorno described the way in which, even before industrial commodity production, diamonds and jewels crystallized social relations: “The radiance they reflect was thought their own essence. Under their power falls whatever is touched by their light ... The magic adhered to the illusion of omnipotence.”⁶

Naming, or, in many cases, renaming, is the simplest form of projecting power onto the inanimate in the hope that it will reflect the social hierarchy as an immutable fact. This is how we end up with names like the Rosser Reeves Star Ruby, the Hooker Emerald, the Logan Sapphire, and the Hope Diamond. In 1958 Harry Winston took possession of the Hope Diamond, the provenance of which dated to a period long before its namesake, the London Banker Henry Philip Hope, and whose previous owners included Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette. Winston was the last private owner of this 35 karat diamond, donating it to the Smithsonian Museum.

Harry Winston uses a phrase like “the world’s most exclusive jeweler” to capture the mind of the customer where that mind is most impressionable: the imaginary perception of its own uniqueness. The pieces that are truly unique are reproduced most often in the promotional materials for the brand in order to lend the aura of irreplaceability to the widely available designs. Exclusivity in the market economy is the correlate to the perception of individual uniqueness in the psychic economy. The ego imagines the entire sensory world as an extension of its sovereign territory, an exteriority that

exists only to confirm its interiority, and this is one of the reasons why advertising images have developed such effective techniques of isolation: the seamless backdrop, or sweep, which wipes away all traces of process and labor involved in the making of products. Instead these objects appear as if from the beyond, from a context-less, unworked place. The backdrop to the advertisement that replaced the jewels around 5:05 PM on December 15, 1990, presented seemingly infinite modulated gradations of blue.

A Glinting Facet

While the audience regarded this work from the sidewalk, the exchange relation was suspended—culminating with the closing of the gate over the entrance to the store. Beholding the photographs of the jewelry behind the glass of a shop window would have placed the viewer in a self-consciously contemplative position. Twice removed from the product of labor (which was behind image and behind glass), it would have been impossible to act against it without splenetically violating the binding law of capitalism—the maintenance of private property. But possibly there is another way to think about this contemplative position.

Perhaps just such a distance, and the fact that, as Kolbowski reminds us, “nothing in the location was changed,” would allow for the temporary dissolution of the power that commodities seem to magically emanate. Like the horribly grimacing teeth of the carnivores that now adjoin the Hope Diamond in the Museum of Natural History, the viewer can get close to this example of nature that has become “second nature”—without fear.

Adorno concludes a meditation on jewels with the following words: “Contemplation, as a residue of fetishist worship, is at the same time a stage in overcoming it. As radiant things give up their magic claims, renounce the power with which the subject invested them and hoped with their help himself to wield, they become transformed into images of gentleness, promises of a happiness cured of domination over nature. This is the primeval history of luxury, that has migrated into the meaning of all art.”⁷

Staring into a shop window, allowing oneself to become absorbed by this scene and even to see in it the abbreviated logic of one’s own disenchanting world, is the first step in demanding that luxury live up to its “primeval” promise: the potential of life to exceed practical requirements. The often lamented tendency of artworks to exert no will over their surroundings finds its counterpart in an artwork that distances the viewer from things that have been animated by commerce, holding them in suspension, and refusing to “appropriate” those things as part of its own, even more exclusive

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commerce. Outside, where the evening air grows cold, looking into the warm and plush interiors from which we are debarred, we are reminded that the problem with luxury is not its affront to practicality but rather the fact that the experience of excess, deliverance from the delirium of usefulness, is not available to all.

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- 1 Silvia Kolbowski, announcement reproduced on artist's website [accessed January, 2015, <http://www.silviakolbowski.com/projectDetail.cfm?ID=1>].
 - 2 Ibid.
 - 3 Hal Foster, "Uncanny Images," *Art in America*, November 1983.
 - 4 Silvia Kolbowski and Michèle Tériault, "Models of Intervention: A Discussion between Michèle Tériault and Silvia Kolbowski," *Silvia Kolbowski: Nothing and Everything* (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, 2009).
 - 5 Slavoj Žižek, "The Desert and the Real," (Online: 2004) [http://nosubject.com/The_Desert_and_the_Real]
 - 6 Theodor Adorno, "Magic Flute," *Minima Moralia* (London, New York: Verso, 2005) p. 224.
 - 7 Ibid.