Urbanity: Silvia Kolbowski at Postmasters
"Closed Circuit," Postmasters Gallery, New York, May 29 - 12 July, 1997
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Silvia Kolbowski's most recent work, "Closed Circuit", was to be found at Postmasters Gallery from 29 May to July 12 this summer. Or more properly, *evidence* of Silvia Kolbowski's most recent work, "Closed Circuit", was to be found at Postmasters this summer.

Nine pieces of merchandise selected from nine Soho commercial establishments were arranged on a low platform in one of the gallery's rooms: a woman's outfit (styled), a man's outfit (casual), a writing table, a tea cart, a selection of delicacies, a string of dried peppers, a pair of shoes, a lamp, and a sarong. The room's entrance was sealed off with plexiglass, converting it into a kind of vitrine or shop window. To this was added another window, in the form of a videotape sampling alternately a Soho street corner and an in intersection in West Chelsea, New York's newest art district and home to an ever-increasing concentration of prestigious formerly-Soho galleries. The images were interspersed with excerpts from an email correspondence between Kolbowski and critic/historian Miwon Kwon for the duration of the project, which was also recorded in the show's catalogue.

Elegantly conceived and executed with resourceful precision, "Closed Circuit" refers to what Kolbowski describes to Kwon as an interdependence between the material and psychic economies of New York's downtown art scene and the categories of "fashion, furniture, and food" that have come to characterize Soho. By suggesting an enigmatic series of associations between aesthetic pleasure, the pleasures of shopping, and the periodic, seemingly compulsive relocation of the art scene, the work itself closes the circuit connecting high culture, consumption, and urban geography. Just as art relocates to Chelsea, so are the commodities from which it is fleeing relocated to the gallery. Curiously, in this setting they seem to shift their status: from merchandise to evidence of a process in which the circulation of art and the circulation of goods merge uneasily.

At the outset of the project, the nine businesses were approached with a request that one item, selected by the stores, be lent to the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. In addition, the videotape was to be screened continuously in each store. But the proposal met with resistance from nearly all of them. Either they were unwilling to lend their merchandise, or they found the proposed video too intrusive, or both. Kolbowski was therefore forced to resort to what she describes as a "failure strategy", having concluded in the interim that like similar projects she has carried out recently, the success of the work might depend paradoxically on the failure of its initial strategy. She may have been right, since the potential compatibility (or at least negotiability) of commercial and artistic agendas assumed by the initial approach ultimately gave way to a demonstration of an active discontinuity within the "fashion-furniture-food-art" circuit, despite the sense of seamless closure underlined by the work's title. Consequently, eight of the nine objects were not lent but bought, and the video was confined to the gallery. Thus the work - which disintegrated as the items were subsequently returned or consumed - acquired an improvisational quality that made it comparable to a sly piece of artistic shoplifting.

Oddly, one of the objects that appeared to be lifted from the streets and shop windows of Soho was the very consumer whose presence has struck such fear into the hearts of galleries. This was not the first time Kolbowski had installed a mannequin at Postmasters and sealed off the room. In 1992, in a piece entitled "Already", a moderately lifelike female figure was clad in maid's uniform and positioned behind a plywood wall with peephole, à la Duchamp. Now, the partition was transparent. One mannequin was a duplicate of that occupying the display window at the Product boutique. Thus were consumers gazing at mannequins and wistfully seeing themselves (wearing the latest fashions) brought into the gallery (where they have been all along), still gazing at themselves wearing the latest fashions. But the Product mannequin's counterpart wore casual

attire from J. Crew that one associates with summertime visitors to Disneyland. A new figure had been introduced into the loop - a new consumer brought into the gallery.

Who is this consumer?

During the late 1980s and early 1990s Soho's concentration of art galleries was increasingly supplemented with other forms of high-end commerce - fashion boutiques, furniture shops, restaurants, and gourmet specialty stores. More recently, these accumulations have grown to include less exclusive enterprises, such as chain stores offering casual clothing (Banana Republic, J.Crew), and a plethora of shops devoted to swarming tourists. Having contributed immeasurably to the area's development by taking real estate risks others would not have dared to take, the art world is now in flight.

Beginning in 1994, galleries began leaving Soho in favor of the underdeveloped West Chelsea neighborhood, the home of the Dia Art Foundation since 1988. What began as a trickle turned into a steady exodus, as a new art "scene" was formed in the West 20s. As had been done in Soho over two real estate cycles during the previous decades, entire buildings were bought, converted into raw gallery space and offered to prospective tenants.

But this time, as Kwon notes to Kolbowski: "these galleries ARE coordinated in pursuing this move to Chelsea as a PROJECT." Mysteriously, casually, behind-the-scenes: gallerists consult with each other and with real estate agents, who are now fully mobilized to receive the influx. Meanwhile, back in Soho, the shops are doing what the galleries have been doing all along: selling. Yet there is a sense of betrayal, that it was not supposed to turn out like this. Soho, its remarkable history paraded out on the streets for all to see, senses itself becoming a shopping mall.

This too is not an accident. At about the same time as the overt commercialization of Soho, New York City planning officials began to realize that until then they had undervalued the economic potential of tourism, perhaps the greatest source of urban transformation at the end of the twentieth century. New York, long notorious for its relative inhospitability to tourists, began reconstructing itself in the image that collectively New Yorkers seem to believe others have of the city. Thus began the program of urban cleansing in the Times Square area, where the current Disney stronghold was preceded by the shutting down of the porn shops and peep shows lining 42nd Street and the moving in of art, this time as a temporary occupant of the now vacant storefronts in a 1994 multi-artist public art project. This was followed by the reconstruction of historic landmarks and the construction of theme shops in stereotyped images of Times Square's luminosity. The process, though not entirely complete, has succeeded in converting the area - long the very emblem of public spectacle in New York - into a spectacle of spectacle as such, and an extraordinarily strained reconstruction of a city that never existed.

Soho, although designated an historic district and thus largely unavailable to such "reconstruction" efforts, was not exempt from this project. Cobblestone streets, routinely paved over in New York, were instead reproduced and lined with replicas of nineteenth century lampposts. Historic cast iron facades were repainted, and care of the atmospheric clutter was entrusted to a local street cleaning brigade. It is this management of the city's image that marks a profound shift in New York's cultural landscape, in which art and the institutions that disseminate it have actively participated.

This shift has less to do with the endless remaking of the city within its own confines than with what might be described as the subtle suburbanization of New York. In the local vernacular, the population that has recently joined overseas tourists on the streets of Soho on weekends is known derisively as the "bridge and tunnel crowd". This expression refers to inhabitants of the suburban outskirts of New York - New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island, and other areas - who trave over bridges and through tunnels as they enter Manhattan. So, the new consumer caught in Kolbowski's loop clad in shorts and sweatshirt comes from the suburbs.

Ironically, it was the flight of the middle class from the inner city to the suburbs that contributed to a real estate market amenable to the artist-initiated loft conversions that were the basis of the first move of the galleries from midtown to Soho during the seventies. Subsequent gentrification brought a sanitized image and escalating real estate values. Thus the Soho to which the art market returned in the late eighties and early nineties after a brief foray into the East Village was not the same Soho, economically and socially, that it had left a decade or so before. And since this process has coincided with urban policy-making efforts to attract tourists, it is no surprise that the *flanerie* of artists and cultural elite on cobblestone streets among quaint facades and resurrected lamposts is now tracked relentlessly by fleets of tour buses.

This is another kind of circuit, perhaps less closed, into which the loop matrialized by Kolbowski has become integrated. It is one in which art “districts” are mobilized in reconstructing the city itself. New York, an island outpost barely holding off the America of shopping malls, finds the very mobility of its artistic elite being converted into a formula for economic renewal. Zoning modifications intended to facilitate the conversion of excess commercial space in the Wall Street area are modelled on the “success” of artists in turning once derelict Soho into a “24 hour” community, complete with street life, restaurants, and luxury condominiums. while planners already have their eyes on the numerous industrial buildings just north of the new Chelsea art district, as the potential raw material for what has become a real estate formula of “loft conversion” to accompany more ambitious development efforts.

These longer term, planned maneuvers all depend on continued influx across the bridges and tunnels that has brought the suburban “outside” back into New York. In microcosm, flee as it might, the art community can no longer simply construct itself against the background of metropolitan consumer culture. perhaps inadvertently, it has become a crucial part of real estate formula devoted to the suburbanization of “downtown” seen in many American cities. in macrocosm, the very urbanity of shopping itself - whther for art or for shoes - is confronted with its generic dispersal into replicas and franchises. One year before New York’s fashionable downtown Barney’s department store closed its doors, a Barney’s branch was to be found opening in a mall outside Detroit. By rigorously sampling that small fragment of this dynamic in which art overtly participates, Kolbowski’s “ Closed Circuit” opens many windows onto a much larger series of questions that implicate art in the very future of the city itself..