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Benjamin Tong on Krista Buecking

Good jokes depend on a kind of compression. Things are left out in such a way that produce an explosion of associations. There is a form of pressure, kPa, that exists inside all of us that is released when provoked by the forces interacting between various levels condensed in a joke. The best jokes are economical.



In her installation *WE THING*, Krista Buecking borrows the comedic device of the light bulb joke. The signature punch line almost always involves targeting certain traits of a defined group, revealed in their quest to screw in a light bulb. Take for example the jokes playing on one of the monitors within the space of the gallery. Targeted are various schools of economic theory – the punch lines revealing principles attributed to a particular school of thought.

Q: HOW MANY MARXISTS DOES IT TAKE TO SCREW IN A LIGHT BULB?

A: NONE. THE BULB CONTAINS WITHIN IT THE SEEDS OF ITS OWN REVOLUTION.

These jokes set up a dialectics of expectation and failure within a structure of question and answer, problem and solution. Abstract models, like those employed in economic theories, attempt to describe and forecast features of the real world. Sometimes these models fail to account for the suppleness of reality. Sometimes with unintended consequences – as is historically the case when people have placed too much faith and mistaken the abstract for the concrete. In the context of the more recent economic situation, the economist light bulb jokes illuminate (sorry) yet another instance wherein no absurdly complex model of analysis could have predicted more less prevented, what with ethics and common sense out the window and all.

Perhaps the psychology of the joke can account for part of the modality of reading Buecking's work. We know, there's nothing that halts a joke's intended effect quicker than trying to explain it. To submit the work to the mechanisms of the analytical machine, to break down themes and decode symbols, to come up with the logic of an argument, will undoubtedly inhibit laughter. Here I must admit that my endeavor to write about her art is partly complicit. We have a strong desire as a culture, I think, always to arrest the movement of artworks within an apparatus of capture. But I also believe that this irony is not lost on the artist. Rigidity applied to the mobility of life, an awkward attempt to follow its lines and counterfeit its suppleness, after all is a target and source of good laughter in Buecking's work. I am thinking here about another video sequence playing on a flatscreen monitor affixed to the gallery wall, featuring sequences of a live body interacting with the various forms found in the installation. Something lifeless in the living is evoked when this human body repeatedly attempts to merge with the red pyramid. Or when the same character is seen twitching inside the giant GAP bag – a digital animism effected through post production editing. Or once again in the unflinching rigidity of the figure who is atop the vanilla upholstered wedge, eyes to the television set, spellbound by her communion with the bi-valent drama of the light bulb jokes – blissful catatonia. There is a comic element of such rigidity in the face of the supposed mobility of life. This is awkward – we laugh. But this is because we recognize some thing in ourselves, a parody of modern consciousness. People are living beings. Things are mechanical arrangements. When people become things – consider this image – we laugh because we ourselves are complicit. Because we recognize ourselves – psychic automata as we – within a society that has become mechanized. Living beings mimicking inhuman traits. We things.

Through its iconic and then somewhat more subtle references to past tastes, the outward signifiers in the installation employ an anachronistic temporality. I'm thinking 80's or early 90's. It is during this period when the retail brand the GAP – referred to by the giant replica – strategically corralled a market, and wall-to-wall carpeting – the post-shag type that covers the stage structures – marked middle-class comfort and stability. In the present these trends have lost their mass-flavor-of-the-moment-ness. It is from this critical distance from prevailing taste and trend that the work produces a consciousness of time. Take for instance the example of the trademark ad campaign put on by the retail brand the GAP which assaulted us in the 90's. The tagline involved the statement “everybody in khaki!” or “everybody in vests!” and involved groups of young ‘individuals’ dressed in similar outfits.¹ Implied in this imitation is a suggestion of social equalization. But the paradox is that fashion helps to facilitate the process in which temporal and social divisions are made – a process that quickens with the increase of wealth.² Anachronism becomes a method to feel a series of form through a historical time. Furthermore temporal distance evoked in the forms throughout the exhibition facilitates a reflection on the way external forms have been employed in an agenda of social division. Past tastes evoked by carpeting or the GAP clothing reference, point to a process in which a form is covered or veiled for the dual purpose of distinction and obliteration between social hierarchies. Individuals are presented with an illusion of being able to close this gap, for example by mimicking what is in-fashion. However they become subject to mechanical cycles – conspicuous consumption – which reify social divisions. This distancing becomes more palpable as taste and styles are abandoned, thrown into the ever accumulating debris of the trash heap. More fashion victims. The infra-distance between one's skin and clothing becomes greater as the form that functioned as the veil can be objectified in the course of time. On an earlier note, there is also an aspect of the humorous in this perception. Only when we are set at a distance do we perceive an element of the ridiculous or laughable in yesterday's fashion – remember shoulder pads and parachute pants?



The process in which material are draped and then pulled taut over the various geometric forms in the installation inspire some thoughts on the significance of this particular treatment. An image begins to condense around nature and culture. This particular distinction makes it possible to perceive a parallel series; matter or things, and the cultural activity of inscription unto things. Not unlike the previous examples of fashion that become dated and thus amenable to a perception of shifting cultural temporality, the ‘skins’ that are pulled taut and made to form around the geometric shapes in the installation can be peeled off – imagine this – revealing a once infra-thin distance between skin and naked form. This back and forth evokes Kant's description of epistemology wherein experience of things in the world is not given but arises because it is structured according to a priori patterns the mind imposes. Through this framework Buecking's platoideal forms can be read as the internal analytic structure, intertwined with the external synthetic experience – applied as red latex or carpeting material. This structure reflects how the particularities of experience or subjectivity are linked to existence within an exterior culture – culture is made intelligible from the conditions of cognition and vice-versa. Moreover the possibility of experience is a function of the distance, between the internal and external, subject and object. It is the gap that produces a desire to close a distance, between myself and a some-thing other. And this desire itself is nothing other than a meaning or a value. Influenced by Kant, George Simmel's theory of value in *The Philosophy of Money* analyses this relationship between cognition, value, and socio-economic activities. Here he shows how selfhood and modern economic

¹ There's a spoof somewhere in here that includes nineties GAP ads and the more recent subprime mortgage situation; “Everybody in a McMansion!” would be the tagline. And of course in a video sequence the human figure is literally in the GAP Bag!

² Georg Simmel, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Volume LXII, May 1957

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existence are intertwined. Simmel writes that cognition and value have similar structures because it is the gap between consciousness and its object which makes something meaningful or valuable: “The possibility of desire is the possibility of objects of desire. The object thus formed, which is characterized by its separation from the subject, who at the same time establishes it and seeks to overcome it by his desire, is for us a value.” Therefore distance is not a principle of alienation but one of motivation and integration. And so money can come into being as an independent system of exchange that nevertheless extends our potential for activity in the world.³

The abstract geometric shapes employed in the installation evoke what in modernist and Kantian aesthetics regards as purposive⁴ form. It is precisely this quality which leads us to a desire or aesthetic ‘interest’ in these forms. Whereas the skin applied to these forms – the carpet or the vinyl – brings us back to the way in which these forms are made ‘useful’ within a particular discourse around class and taste. The “economist jokes” provide another structure that point to the way theories of economic exchange become so abstract that they become detached from having any practical value. However, it can be precisely this distance which potentiates activity in the world; between aesthetic forms or economic abstractions and their particular uses within culture and society. This is an interaction between things and individuals in society, catalyzed through distance.



The work suggests a ‘bad’ gap and a ‘good’ gap. There is a warning in the work that proposes a distance which creates unjust conditions within society. We see this in the example of light bulb jokes where science fails to relate to concrete reality, or in the way the inclusion of the GAP bag shows a facet of how style reifies class divisions, or when money becomes an abstract amount that the greedy begin to hoard, creating a one percent. There is another seemingly insurmountable distance – let’s call it an ontological distance – between a subject and an object, a distance which makes experience possible. It is our longing for what separates us from things that leads us back to a practical

engagement with things. Thus distance not only makes experience possible but is how things, taken in this sense, can be said to provoke change. The forms in the work draw on a language of modernist aesthetics, historically argued to be autonomous, and complicates this by proposing how the very distance of these things can be a critical element in effecting a politics of change.

Influenced by another reference in Buecking’s installation, I’d like to borrow a meteorological metaphor to conclude. Karl Popper once said that “clocks are neat, orderly systems that can be solved through reduction; clouds are an epistemic mess, highly irregular, disorderly, and more or less unpredictable.” The work acknowledges this complication and proposes, not a science of being able to forecast change, but rather, moves towards clouds. Things in their potential to encourage growth.

³ Continental Aesthetics Reader, ed. Clive Cazeux, p298

⁴ The experience of beautiful objects, Kant argues, that they should affect us as if they had a purpose, although no particular purpose can be found.