

NOTES ON THE WORK OF MARTE EKNÆS

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Writing about a young artist, whether that artist is prolific or not, whether they have very early on produced a 'style' or signature, or whether the work resembles or references other, historical or contemporary practices, is always an issue. Sometimes it's seen as a problem for artists and at other times a virtue. It is always, however, a way of explanation or description that provisionally (or sometimes permanently if they're unlucky), endeavours to capture for the reader a sense of what might be because a young artist is often measured, that is, given a 'value', by her production set in the future conditional: that which will have been made.

Critics, art historians and viewers often require and trade upon that capture, with its unkempt notion of the artist as an autonomous producer of things and their work as a direct extension of that autonomy despite the very lessons of history, of the critique of modernisms that have argued against such interpretive strategies, once and for all to dismantle the moribund *role* of the artist-genius but they still dutifully embrace it grasping its slippery moorings, its untenable configuration of 'truth' suspended in symbolic value. This value masks the means of production all artists work under and through: the set of social relations that engender the very conditions of production and the reception of the work of art itself. But this value is necessarily inscribed within those very conditions because art has no use value as such and is structurally activated by this internal contradiction. An antidote to this problem is to keep the discussion in the present, the 'now'. This is about the now of Marte Eknæs.

Marte Eknæs is interested in the contemporary urban built environment, the myriad ways we negotiate it, inhabit it, speak about it and 'solve' it. She is forever looking to solutions to unasked questions imposed by architecture and planning, the way they represent objects to us – life even – almost unconsciously, inculcated as we are through our daily routines and our perception of our surroundings as representations, as carriers of meaning. By harnessing found, stolen or specially-made objects or parts of things, things we don't even notice in our waking lives broken off from the mundane order or narrative of objects, Eknæs takes, combines and returns what was already there – almost. By viewing the environment as an abstraction, as a freighted representation, her work leaves those meanings to persist and signify boundlessly whilst 'completing' them with new meanings in their configuration as a work of art. The elements that make up the art object cut off from the world are sent back to that world, recombined, in the gallery space as diagram-like arrangement in space.

Indeed, many of her works' titles refer to the environment, architecture and structures in parallel with their actual material elements: *Bricks, Fountain, Entrance, Façade, Milieu, Obtuse Angles and Parallel Plaza*. Her collages and sculptures are shown side by side, in conversation with one another not like plans and architectural models but on equal terms in a kind of relay,

augmenting our perception of the complexity of spatial representation. The sculpture *Urban Planning* (2010) plays upon the materiality and form of a steel bike rack, plate glass and an anti-slip mat, where the rack becomes a support structure holding the plates of glass, itself supported by a white wooden plinth set atop a rectangular black and white traction mat. With one plate of glass etched with a triangular design and another with birds, protective devices to warn off people from walking into them and the safety mat, Eknæs cuts off the use value of objects only to return them back into possible new representations about and within the public sphere. *Anti-Slip* (2011) adds to rather than subtracts from public space by placing three strips of traction adhesive to the steps outside of the gallery for a recent show at Between Bridges, London. This circularity not only re-inscribes the sculpture-object on the level of image but also with the viewer's literal steps, her mobility, takes it back to the real conditions of every day life.

The notion of the semantic cut that persists – that break with the real of partial objects recombining as ensembles in a gallery space – is further complicated by the partial appropriation of the systems and strategies that order and situate them – almost invisibly. We are constantly bombarded by images and information and the rules that insert themselves in our unconscious through them. Eknæs subtly disables these rules or conditions of behaviour by allowing them a half-life as sculpture by dulling ideology in lieu of form. This does not suggest, however, that the political is absented or denied but rather that it has migrated into another discourse, another system of articulation in the art objects themselves: estranged but still present.

Decorative Relations Column I (2010) for example centres upon the nuances of control societies, where leisure and health become the re-territorialised domains for (corporate) profit, (self) control and potential (exploitation). Here a Nintendo Wii Balance Board sits upon a plinth with a vertical tube of Plexiglas covered in stickers of covetable furniture and vases. Eknæs states:

My interest in the Wii Balance Board is a combined formal and conceptual one. It has this soft, almost organic form, with its curved lines and no sharp corners, but it is totally clinical-looking in its whiteness, with its wipe-down plastic surface. This is part of a trend in both architecture and product design, where hi-tech processes are able to produce amorphous forms that seem both to imitate nature and to celebrate the technology itself. The integration of the technologically modern with quasi-organic forms, as for example Apple has achieved very effectively, seems to aim at an unthreatening infiltration, a quiet merging of the idea of ourselves and the digital other. The computer can be our friend, and the Wii enables you do things alone that once would have been at least minimally social. It's your tennis or dance partner, your yoga teacher or personal trainer.

In our knowledge economy, where everything is outsourced, privatized and finance-driven, we become the last resource of the transnational flows of capital: our communication skills (general knowledge) and our bodies are the new factories of production. This notion is taken to extremes in *Enhancement* (2011), again part of her show at Between Bridges, comprised of a TV frame and support pole, a glass shelf, an exercise trainer and two rubber cock rings.

This assemblage is precariously constructed such that the rubber rings keep the entire work together, with the trainer and shelf held in fragile counterbalance, the horizon to the vertical elements of the pole and frame. This work, located in and blocking the threshold an anterior space of the gallery, powerfully allegorises in miniature the manipulation of our bodies through the merging of various technologies of control where leisure (TV), sex (cock rings) and health (the trainer) literally all hang in the balance and the uses of desire a cautionary tale.

Like the anti-slip mats, *Bollard* and *Visions (Bollard)* (both works 2011) introduce the idea of human modes of behavior and their attendant risks. The bollard functions as both prevention and deterrent against car accidents and the protection of property. Here a lone steel bollard, crushed but still standing, is displayed as is, having been found by the artist in the redevelopment area where the Kunsthall Oslo is located. This work is paired with a computer generated video of the bollard created by Photosynth, software that animates still photos, a kind of digital sculpture loop that fragments the objects, collapsing two corrupted realities, vandalizing both the object and their material or dematerialized forms and the discourses imparted by them.

Context is everything: the built environment, the gallery, life. In Eknæs' sculptures and drawings, the world as abstraction is broken off into distinct elements, structures, and arrangements, recreating new systems and strategies, that return to the world in hacked or corrupted form. The questions she extrudes from the world push their way back and persist again as unanswered solutions in the world for now.