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Mandy Morrison

Automatic Art Gallery,
Chicago

Mandy Morrison's video and sculpture installation, 'Os' (1996), castigates mass entertainment for obscuring the 'real' social constructs that inform our lives. Concerned with its homogenising force on mass culture, specifically in the prevalent and clichéd texts of Disney, Morrison attempts to illustrate the false consciousness

tions of Oz. The suspended stuffed-clothing animals are generic 'dopes' sewn together like a mutated DNA strand, each with its head stuck in the arse of the creature above it. Strewn about the floor below are the severed remnants of animal figures: pulled-off legs, arms and torsos spewing stuffing.

A neat, narrow path of tiny sunshine-yellow ceramic tiles stretches along the floor from the foot of the animal string to the wall-projection. This domesticated yellow-brick road delineates

limbs. Briefly spliced into this unpleasant demonstration is a clip of Dorothy's air-bound Kansas home and a haunting poltergeist head, mouthing commands at the viewer in the same way the great and powerful Wizard of Oz terrified Dorothy and her friends.

It's quite easy to assign deconstructed roles to Morrison's cast of characters. The stuffed figures represent the blind 'cultural dupes' parked squarely in front of the screen. The video is an attempt to have the 'other' methodically unravel Disney and its



Mandy Morrison
Os
1996
Video still

of manufactured illusions. Believing, like Adorno, that mass culture colonises the minds of the people, Morrison accuses the entertainment industry of creating a cultural space which collapses diversity into artificial territories of misleading pleasures.

Transforming Automatic Gallery's long exhibition space into a dark hall anchored at one end by a hanging string of hand-made, stuffed animals and at the other with a wall-size video projection and a creepy audio track of obsessive, mechanical breathing, Morrison creates her own sinister analysis of the dangerous implica-

the space between the audience and the image: the big screen Zenith and the media-induced imagination. Formally, this delicate yellow lateral line is the most successful design element in the installation. Unlike the stuffed animals, Morrison's yellow-brick road analogy can hold its own as a sculpture.

The continually looped video component is comprised primarily of a black woman's hands calmly dissecting a Mickey Mouse doll. Sometimes she uses a seam ripper and sometimes only her hands to peel away the fur, remove the stuffing and dislocate the

monolithic industry. And finally, the tile-brick road is one of enlightenment for those ignorant consumers of mass entertainment who are willing to pull their heads out of their arse and follow Morrison's path to inclusive cultural territories based on 'real' needs and 'real' desires.

One great flaw in Morrison's critique is her inability to realise that her visual analogies are condescending, assuming all audiences follow blindly into the 'mass-media light'. Perhaps it would be prudent for Morrison to explore the social experiences of the audience rather than examine

Oz and Disney in isolation from the people who consume them. This would also eliminate the inherent paradox of critiquing mass culture *with* mass culture. Another gap in Morrison's investigation is her negation of the incestuous relationship between Capitalism and the entertainment industry and the more obvious dichotomy between art and entertainment.

Past bodies of work have shown Morrison's fascination with the manipulative aspects of popular culture, but there her uses of recognisable media imagery were more insidious. Large wall paintings, beautiful in colour, form and scale also became ghastly icons of mass culture's ever-present threat to high art. 'Os' lacks this indifference to moving back and forth between the forms and ideas of

high art and mass culture. Here, Morrison uncharacteristically employs the language of art simply to dispute the language of mass entertainment.

Stuffed animals and dismembered dolls are tired assaults on exclusive systems of authority. Paul McCarthy's re-orchestration of B-movies, sitcoms and American horror films exaggerates the perversities endemic to these gen-

res of entertainment by underscoring what the audience already suspected. Morrison, meanwhile, accuses us for watching it all. In this pessimistic one-sided interpretation of media-manufactured space, Morrison forgot what McCarthy, Alix Lambert and David Robbins already know: mass entertainment, as dominant as it is, still empowers its audience.

Michelle Grabner

Tamara Grčić

Galerie Monika Reitz and Portikus, Frankfurt

Red, red, red. When you look up into the gallery from the street you might think that dim red lighting has been installed. In fact, Tamara Grčić has filled a room with an irregular arrangement of Red Cross beds. These are covered with red blankets, sheets or duvet covers with heaps of red clothing on top of them, all either borrowed by Grčić from old clothes collections or bought at flea markets. They include woollen pullovers, cord trousers, velvet blouses and undershirts – in every imaginable shade of red. The clothing reflects both light from outside the gallery and the subdued white lighting inside. This creates an atmosphere that could not possibly have been planned. Viewers are confronted with a momentarily perceptible boost that transcends the work's material elements. This gives the work a shimmering completeness that is never totally there and sometimes not there at all. It cannot be reproduced: no photograph could convey the impression of colour that strikes viewers who see it at the right moment. And absolutely nothing could convey the strange smell that emanates from such quantities of fabric: the smell of clothing stores, overfilled stockrooms, dry and stuffy.

In *Melonen auf Tischen im Raum* (Melons on Tables in the Gallery, 1994) Grčić created a similar effect. She filled a large portion of the



exhibition area in the Frankfurt Portikus with different-sized tables covered with brightly-coloured, untreated cotton fabric. 700 Spanish melons were spread over this area of 12 x 7 metres. The exhibition lasted for twelve hours, and during this period an intense aroma emanating from the fruit developed in the gallery. Added to this was the impressive spectacle provided by the sheer mass of melons. When the twelve hours were up, the melons were taken back to the Frankfurt wholesale market from which they had come.

The aesthetic impressions of light, colour, smell and volume produced by the two works in their respective venues is an aspect of much of Grčić's output. The fact that the work and viewer are present

only temporarily is always important: the image is not complete until they come together. Grčić calls her works 'pictures', not installations. A film still can stand by itself and yet would not exist without whatever preceded or followed it; likewise Grčić's pictures are snapshots of working processes, developments and cycles. They are detached images, and yet still maintain a life of their own. Grčić emphasises this by producing substantial portfolios recording how she prepares and organises her work, but she does not publish them. This could constitute a source of criticism, because by taking this course Grčić risks suggesting that sensual impressions are autonomous (the red colour described above, for example).

Born in Munich in 1964, Grčić applied for art college, submitting her own Super 8 films, after studying art education and cultural anthropology. She started working with fruit and vegetables while at the Kunstakademie in Frankfurt. She was interested in two aspects: firstly, their direct, vegetable existence, in other words, their shape and tactile qualities, smell and colour, and secondly, the 'nature' of these plants – how they make an impact on people, how people use them for their own purposes, as foodstuffs for example. Fruit, cut flowers and vegetables are also inexpensive, everyday materials that are easy to get hold of. They are ready-mades that exist on the borderline between nature and culture, between their own purposeless existence and a

Tamara Grčić
Untitled
1996
Installation view

What happens when the objects of one's desire are scrutinized to the point of assimilation—as we subsume everything that is? Mandy Morrison's site-specific sculptural installation "Os" conflated the genre of television documentary with cultural and personal simulacra, using video as a method of inquiry into the physical and psychological parameters of lived experience. Appropriating recognizable iconography from Disney and *The Wizard of Oz*, a wall-sized video projection was juxtaposed with found stuffed-and-sewn cloth figures.

A floor-to-ceiling assemblage of monochromatic cloth forms spewed from a horizontal, partially desecrated, brown felt personage, whose own detached appendages, bits of stuffing, and mask-like countenance were strewn about the gallery as in the aftermath of some dizzying procreative effort. Headless and truncated, the ascending grey, brown, and black figures stemmed from one another like fragments of disparate yet related thought, suggesting the trace of authorial production while confounding any direct relationship to the artist or to the process of their own making. Tenuously linked by mismatched, curving fabric limbs, the forms implied an organicism that, while not altogether human, conveyed terms of proliferation, redundancy, and self-similarity via the reconstituted tactile gesture; a single red component within the grouping seemed to emphasize the figures' (otherwise) unremarkable similarity.

Unlike Tony Oursler's rag doll/video/sound installations, in which video technology is literally interwoven within the fabric's yielding surfaces, Morrison was content to allow media to play out across the uneasy distance of a spare and dimly-lighted interior; the artist created a distinct schism between the casually constructed tactile reality and the scripted, fictional space of video. Referencing the viewer's own bodily scale and position within the real and metaphoric spaces of the installation, a yellow tile pathway extended between the figural sculpture and the video screen located opposite, as if to imply that by stepping onto its literal plane, one might in some way become ensconced within the drama. While the tile construction didn't eliminate the need to consciously revert back to each element (it was difficult to view the two components simultaneously or unbroken), it nevertheless had the effect of mediating the viewer's physical and perceptual passage between still and moving imagery.

The five-minute, looped video narrative decompresses mythic, visual, and political models by presenting a direct and singular confrontation with an archetypal cultural icon: Mickey Mouse. A pair of hands deliberately executes surgical incisions along a Mickey Mouse doll's skull, methodically peeling apart its material layers and tearing away the mouth and jaw, mirroring the fate of the dismembered, sculptural figure pile. Perhaps referencing the alchemy of plastic surgery and the drive toward physiognomic perfection, the transformative mutilation reveals the wood mannequin's underlying structure while systematically depriving the object of its speech centers; repeatedly, the videic eye reverts to the doll's expressionless gaze as though attempting to expose the surrogate's true cultural sources. Implicating the

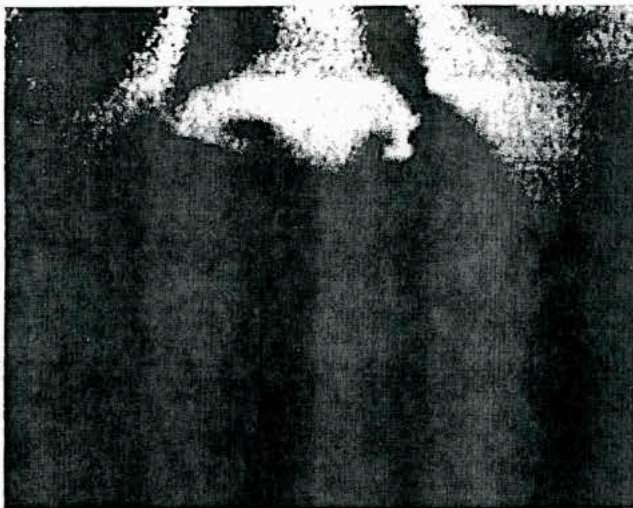
play of memory—or the role popular media fictions have in shaping personal identity—intermittent magenta and grey-violet film outtakes rupture the smooth plane of the video's narrative exposition: the short segments depict voiceless, moving lips; a farmhouse hurtled on tornado winds; and generalized maelstroms of natural disaster.

As the opaque, aural screen against which thought becomes possible, an uneven and somewhat eerie respiratory drone comprises the video's soundtrack, extending the perceptual field and functioning much like the "undersound" of Bill Viola's video/sound installations. Moving closer to the point where voyeur and viewed are variations of the same function, Morrison's installation transposed roles of myth and ritual; as the ceremonial process of dissecting cultural mythology seemingly obliterated the foundations of its own beliefs, the performing subject (located in the video as the pair of hands disabling Mickey Mouse) in effect exacts its own interrogation.

Bringing to mind the networks of commodity, desire, and exchange that permeate consumer-driven societies, "Os" forms in its paradoxical construction a direct visual correlate to Jean Baudrillard's tenet that "everything is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form." The interplay of time-based video with static, sculptural components establishes a flow of information between the disparate mediums (between unlike systems, or those systems which are variations of themselves), and suggests an intersection of one kind of reality with another: the juxtaposition of temporal and tactile imagery sets up an interpenetrability between the spheres of ideas and objects in space. The viewer is asked to internalize the installation's ongoing psychological interrogation and to correlate suggestive sets of relations presented by the artist—in short, to engage both visually and cognitively.

Having dealt sporadically in the past with such issues as gender, consumerism, and the pervasive influence of pop cultural iconography, Morrison seems here to more adroitly challenge cultural preconceptions without succumbing to cliché. Posing images of media/entertainment/reality as interchangeable systems of signification, "Os" suggests that by disseminating mythic structures that are clones without sources, the entertainment vehicle negotiates cultural identities only by deferring authentic fecundity.

Olga Zdanovics, South Holland, Illinois



Mandy Morrison, "Os," 1996, video installation
(photo courtesy Automatic Art Gallery).