

"APPROXIMATELY"

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By Ingrid Jenkner

Kelly Mark makes certain, in her typically laconic way, that each body of work she exhibits will register her presence as maker. Given that her art is neither confessional nor lyrical, the Mark persona tends to emerge through myriad small acts, both physical and administrative, whose traces are meticulously documented. Seriality, repetition, and gridded formats confer anonymity. The works in *Approximately* wear these formats like a uniform; they are costumes in the production strategies of the recent avant-garde. Together they perform a paradox that yokes the normative impersonality of minimalism to the psychological intensity of abstract expressionism. In *Approximately*, Kelly Mark presents the visual conventions of minimal and conceptual art as the props of an obsessional personality.

Mark's allegiance to a reductive aesthetic lets her inhabit the work without risking the personal disclosures that some contemporary discourses insist on. Because of this her art retains a psychological resonance that is capable of critical extension. By this I mean that the work is situated; the artistic persona it supports is indexed to historically and socially specified identities. Positioned by age and education as an inheritor of post minimal and conceptual production strategies, Mark grounds herself socially too, as a low-skilled, subsistence-level recruit to the surplus labour force.

For example, her presentation of 25 different, individually framed disposable napkins (*Take-Out*), and her arrangements of cheap, utilitarian salt shakers (*Salt Set/Approx. 6,089,876*, *Salt Set/Approx. 5,727,472* and *Pillar/Approx. 99,934,560*) are too obsessively task-orientated to be construed as mere expressions of a perverse connoisseur ship. In the context of her other, process-directed work, they might be interpreted according to a material economy of production and consumption. Thus, as indicators of the artist's consumption patterns and income level, the restaurant table wares portray the habitual diner-out and sometime server in low-rent establishments, who might be expected to want to salvage ritual significance from the repetitive routines of need. Mark's selections of readymade collectibles display her as a market outcast, the sort of consumer no status-seeker would wish to emulate.

Her salt shakers may be mass-produced, but in Mark's taxonomy we are forced to recognize in the differences between specimens both the mirage of consumer choice and our own need to be recognized as individuals. But what is the value of counting, of even estimating, the total quantity of salt grains held by each set of shakers? Furthermore, why engage 500 times in a manual procedure (the wadded-up "mistakes" of ER-500) that invariably falls short of the objectives of the set task?

These insistently quantitative designations, while furnishing "objective" descriptions of the art, also underscore the oppressive rationality that frames Mark's activity as alienated labour, akin to factory work. Perhaps it is through such absurd excessiveness that Mark declares her critical agenda. Given the controlling logic of her chosen idiom, in order to figure in the work at all, the artist must appear to have been flushed out by a traumatic event -- her own failure to stick to the plan. In the case of ER-500, it may be inferred that a compulsive activity was gradually overcome by the frustration that made her quit after wadding up 500 sheets of paper. In the series of which Venus (titled after the brand name of the pencil) forms a part, the task was to begin at the center of the sheet and extend the marks outward, with uniform density, until the pencil is too worn to be grasped any longer. Conceived as process with a fixed beginning and end, as an antidote to subjective caprice, this drawing nonetheless betrays, through the forceful distortion of the paper surface and the aureole of lines at the perimeter of the graphite disk, the gestural trace of Kelly Mark's impatience.

Throughout *Approximately*, the tension between emotional violence and self-imposed discipline is sustained across a series of elegantly austere works. Their appearance cannot be reduced to a set of rational causes, but is only approximately predictable. The accounts of conception and of completion can never be identical. One way of understanding the significance of this in historical terms is to compare Sol Lewitt's dicta with those of Kelly Mark. "To work with a plan that is present is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn." (*Sol Lewitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, 1967.*) "I really should get my shit together." (*Kelly Mark, I Really Should 197*)

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