

## Literalist of the Imagination

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Kelly Mark once said that she wanted two tattoos, one on each shoulder. The first would be the logo for the Canadian Tire stores and the second, the Tim Horton's Donut Shop logo. This was a joke, of course, an ironic and self-deprecating comment on the downscale consumer culture that she frequently, though indirectly, invokes in her work.

On first approach Mark's work appears to be a reworking of minimalist and conceptualist strategies. This appearance has become increasingly familiar in the art of the 1990s, especially in the work of women artists like Roni Horn, Mona Hatoum or Rachel Whiteread. Repetition, the grid and systematic production strategies: these are the essential formal elements of both historical Minimalism and, tempered with a conceptualist emphasis on linguistic and administrative processes, of the work of a growing number of contemporary artists. But the rhetoric of power that characterized Minimalism and the fetishization of language that marked Conceptual art have been largely displaced in this work.

Mark's sculptures and drawings demonstrate this displacement through a reconnection of the formal characteristics of Minimal art to personal, psychological expression. For example, in her work *25 Hundred*, repetition and the grid are stretched well beyond any reference to industrial method, as understood in Minimal art, and into the realm of obsession and an irresistible compulsion to order. In an unpublished note about this work, Mark refers to the balls of wadded paper as a mistake made over and over again. The wadding of the paper is an intense, highly controlled act of violence in the face of a familiar, humiliating frustration. Mark's display of this trauma, in such a rational and elegant form, approaches absurdity. But it also reconnects an impersonal, idealist aesthetic to a psychological reality. This is accomplished without recourse to personal disclosure or the sacrifice of formal discipline. What is remarkable about this process is that it subverts both the impersonal, masculinist interpretation of the minimalist approach as well as the polemics and sentimentality of much of the discourse on identity.

Ideas about time, duration and process became entwined with performance and body art of the 1970s, a lesson that Mark has recuperated for *Object Carried for One Year*. Wherever she went, Mark carried a small aluminum bar in the back pocket of her jeans for a year. Because of the softness of the metal, it registered the year's worth of bumps and abrasions that accompanied her daily routines. At the same time that the bar registered these traces of the artist's physical existence, it became a kind of fetish object, a thing that she was compelled to observe and handle on a constant basis. At the end of the year the bar was engraved, like a trophy, with the artist's name and the title and date of the work. Engraved at a tacky jewellery shop at the mall, *Object Carried for One Year*

takes on the aspect of an award of merit, an acknowledgement for getting through, and ultimately, letting go of an obsession.

Serial production and the ruse of mathematical progression are similarly transformed in the series of drawings *One Castell*, *Two Castell*, *Three Castell*. In these three drawings the artist has used first one, then two, then three identical pencils, as the titles specify. Starting in the upper left corner in each drawing, she has used short, dense strokes to cover the surface of the paper until the pencils were completely worn and she could no longer grasp them. The impression of intense force behind the mundane and repetitive strokes of the pencil becomes the focus of interest in these works. As in *25 Hundred* the artist has concentrated her attention on a banal task, giving the work a tactile sense of compressed violence. Again the artist's notes are revealing: she relates her methods to the violence that arises from the social dynamics of mass production and consumption and which serves to neutralize and ritualize behavior. At base, then, we can see these works as a drive to individuation within numbing social pressures toward uniformity. The companion series of drawings, *Venus Velvet*, *Mirado Classic* and *Dixon*, are also named after common brand name pencils. Within the identical procedure for creating the drawings, we must seek out the subtle details of their difference.

With *1,000 Watts* and *1,000 Hours* Mark gives the viewer an opportunity to "share her pain." Both of these works are composed of ten 100-watt light bulbs arranged in a row and burning constantly. Like a deadpan joke, they give literal expression to the comic-strip shorthand of the light bulb as ubiquitous symbol of inspiration and the creative act. The joke serves to illustrate the often paradoxical and painfully confusing nature of creative expression. *1,000 Hours*, titled after the average life expectancy of the bulb, will burn until the bulbs have all expired and will then become a conceptual relic – the end of the work, the end of the creative process. *1,000 Watts*, however, will have the bulbs replaced, maintaining a uniform level of brightness and constant expenditure of power. Following the phenomenological tenets of Minimal art, the viewer who chooses to share space with this work will have to engage with it physically, but because of the brightness of the light they will have to endure severe physical discomfort in order to view the work directly. Working upon the minimalist logic that designates the interaction with the viewer as the completion of the work, *1,000 Watts* risks its own completion by the physical challenge presented to the viewer, and by that ensures that the creative process will endure.

The challenge to the viewer is made even more explicit and direct in the video *33 Minute Stare*. Likewise it induces the viewer into an uncomfortable confrontation with the work, in this case, with the compressed aggression of sustained eye contact. Again the artist's sheer physical distress becomes manifest as we see her eyes tear and redden as she struggles to hold our gaze. There is a supreme ambivalence in this work. The artist's affectless stare embodies an unresolvable oscillation between suppressed rage and a painful determination to see it

through. Her face on the video screen becomes a shield against the churning of emotion and metaphor that lie on the other side of the gaze.

If we return now to the tattoo joke, we can see that it has more than an accidental consonance with Kelly Mark's work. A tattoo, after all, is an incidence of self-imposed pain through the application of repeated small gestures in order to create something of personal significance that also captures a more general, culturally bound meaning. And, this is also what occurs in Kelly Mark's work.