

## Kelly Mark: Aestheticizing the everyday

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Central to the development of the arts in the twentieth century has been the desire to extend the boundaries of the traditional definitions of art, and at the same time, expand the ways and means of creating works of art. Particularly important is the desire to go beyond traditional materials and to use found objects or incorporate non-art materials. From Marcel Duchamp and Constanti Brancusi on, the process of creating a work of art has involved the development of an articulated system of references between object and context, form and presentation. The work of art is no longer seen, and hence created, as independent of its background and setting, but is experienced as a single whole in which there is a symbiosis, an interweaving of both spheres. For example, by placing ordinary objects within the sphere of art, Duchamp exalted the decisive and meaningful role of the container – the gallery – as much as the rite of putting a work on show, so as to set up a dialectical interaction between choice and meaning, input and creation.

In her work, Kelly Mark aims to reduce the distances between ordinary objects and art, to blur the lines between life and language, but with a critical focus on the relationship between experience and expression. Mark's work has been frequently described as being based on conceptualist strategies developed in the latter 1960s, when art centered on the artistic experience as well as theoretical components. It was the American art critic, Lucy Lippard, who coined the phrase "the dematerialization of the object" as a means of defining the conceptual ideal. Conceptual artists' concerns rest more with engaging the mind than the emotions. Their focus may centre on common tasks and activities. In Canada, the critical statement of art in a conceptual context was codified by a number of individuals. Garry Neill Kennedy in a work titled, *Canadian Contemporary Collection, Average Size, Average Colour*, used art in the context of a public gallery as the subject. He questioned not only the process of artmaking but also the support systems that presented it. Some of the most prodigious and inventive conceptual artworks stemmed from other artists such as the N.E. Thing Company and Gathie Falk in Vancouver, Gerald Ferguson and Eric Cameron in Halifax. American artist Vito Acconci, explored the artist-viewer relationship in a work titled *Following Piece* (1969) which he created by randomly selecting individuals on the street in New York and following them until they went into a non-public place. By this act, Acconci, became a passive participant in someone else's time and space. One episode lasted nine hours, ending when Acconci followed the person into a theatre showing a film entitled *Paranoia*. This entire body of work spanned 19 years ending in 1988.

Situated within a like premise, Kelly Mark's work demonstrates a similar performative aspect that extends into the everyday world. Her work refers back to the artistic subcultures that produced DADA historical avant-garde and Surrealist

movements during World War I and the 1920s – movements that sought to efface the boundary between art and everyday life and challenge traditional notions of artwork in a gallery setting. Duchamp's *Readymades* – urinal, shovel, bicycle wheel, typewriter, etc. – attest to his irreverent nature. Mark's *oeuvre* aims to demystify art, disassemble its sacredness and challenge its location. Although not as anti-gallery as her predecessors, she explores the idea that the detritus of mass culture, debased consumer commodities and everyday action can be art – an approach shared with such proponents of Pop Art as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Art, in Mark's eyes, is found in the anti-work, in the "happening" or the transitory lost performance which cannot be museumified, as well as in the body and other sensory objects in the world.

For Mark aestheticization is about turning life into a work of art. The central fascination of her work in this exhibition, is the argument that life should be devoted purely to aesthetic enjoyment. This ethic of life as a work of art can be detected as far back as around the turn of the century with the writings of Bloomsbury Group member G.E. Moore and Oscar Wilde. Wilde assumed that the ideal aesthete should realize him(her)self in many forms and by a thousand different ways and be curious about new sensations, tastes and possibilities.

The rapid flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of contemporary society shows our fetishization for commodities and objects. This is highlighted in the works, *Prime Time* and *Points of View*. In *Points of View* a series of seven wedding photographs have been hung behind a period sofa (c. 1940) with French Provincial accents. In front of this couch, on the coffee table, is a television through which *Prime Time* is featured, vignettes from television shows screened at breakneck speed. We are placed in this space, a comfortable familiar environment, but without access to the remote control. We watch as the screen bombards us with an endless flow of deadening imagery and simulations – the ultimate anaesthetic experience. The wedding pictures are photographs that Mark has taken of various brides and grooms, who were posing for their wedding photographs, but for another photographer. Mark, like Acconci, acts as a voyeur, entering another's time and space. This buildup and density, characteristic of all of Mark's work, is consistent. The presentation of the seamless, all-encompassing production of images pushes us toward a qualitatively new society in which the distinction between reality and image is effaced and everyday life becomes aestheticized.

In Mark's world, art ceases to be a separate enclaved reality, but enters into production and reproduction so that everything, including the everyday and banal, falls under the rubric of art. The investigation of the beauty in banality exists in specific locations for Mark – on the streets, on parking meters, on newspaper stands, or in telephone booths. Conversations and impressions that flow past us are caught by Mark and become her subjects. Capturing them reflects her capacity to view these objects differently than we would and immerse us in a new experience.

Process, duration, repetition, seriality – all these characteristics of Mark's art were also fundamental to Minimalist and post-Minimalist art. In Minimalist art, the reduction of the object to an essential form or tendency towards abstraction was important. In Mark's work, there is form, but it is never the overriding principle. For example, *In and Out*, an ongoing project by Mark whereby she punches in and out of her studio on a daily basis, takes on a formal minimalist abstract façade. The work, however, is directly related to life and draws attention to task-like procedures. *In and Out* is situated with other conceptual artists such as Gerald Ferguson and Eric Cameron who approach their life and art in a similar manner. Cameron, for example, made his *Thick Paintings* a life-time project. Since 1979, Cameron has been painting ordinary objects lying around his house – shoe, lettuce, cup and saucer, egg, - with layer upon layer of white paint. A new object emerged and the original receded. To this day, he continues to document every coat by marking it down in his journal. Mark, like Cameron, brings forward personal and collective experience and meanings where time is measured and the space of repetition experienced.

Beyond the various formal solutions, the laconic and literal titles of mark's work serve to underline a constant feature of her intent – to show us the act of showing, the ways in which our daily world is put on view, displayed, positioned, classified, ordered in accordance with its meaning and functions, or else jumbled together, like – *Loose Change*. Neatly placed on shelves, four glass jars contain quarters, dimes and pennies, corresponding to their allocated expenditures – cat food, Paris, cigs, and bus/subway fare.

Mark successfully presents to us the very nature of our daily social dynamics such as what we leave behind like traces in the world marking our passage whether it be garbage, conversations, or messages. An object, inasmuch as it forms part of our daily lives and is used for certain actions or to satisfy certain needs, becomes vital to the construction of our identity. *Origami Transfers* are an excellent example of this. Although made from TTC bus transfers – mass produced cloned paper objects – Mark personalizes the objects by moulding them into shapes with her own hands, then placing them neatly and reverently on rows of steel shelves.

The experience of repetition resonates in the video work *9 to 5*, where Kelly herself, Tyler, Chris and Herbie are four short-order cooks who have been taped for a day at a restaurant. The video projects with a Zen-like hypnotic effect, with the rhythmic chopping of vegetables and food documented alongside bodily movements of the cooks going about their work. Paralleling mass production, with wry wit and intellectual humour, these works are the product of an individual who brings to form the very meaning of our daily existence.

There is a persistent aesthetic questioning and message about everyday creativity in Kelly Mark's mind. A great deal of what has gone on in modern art

may be understood as an attempt to replace the notion of art as a mirror of reality with a new compelling idea – art as its own reality – a desire to close what is felt as a gap between art and life. It is here that Mark's work is situated.