



NIGHT SHIFT

EMILY ROSAMOND



THE JUNK WE INHABIT

A RESPONSE BY
Ali Jones

NIGHT SHIFT

I'm reading an invite and flyer to Emily Rosamond's *Night Shift*. The artist has posed herself a question, has instigated a process which will determine her actions, and set rules for what she can create for the audience of **aceartinc**. Having established a relationship with a local removal company, one tonne of 'junk' will be delivered to the gallery for her temporary use; they will return to collect it all at the show's end. Each night, during the first two weeks of the show Emily will rework the tonne, humbly hosting the material for its short stay.

And so the show begins...

During this period the gallery has an energy no doubt. The space morphs slowly, a time-lapse procession for the Zen observer, throughout the fortnight. The installation takes the form of salon-style wall hangings and a diorama-like floor display, a showroom, a Home Depot store, the objects not quite liberated from their market function, their status as commodities of utility, and yet also hinting toward some anthology of an era, a museum archive, a spectacle of curiosities.

One might ponder that museums contain death. Does *Night Shift* contain the same silent voice of the recently passed away or the brash discards of the busy, moving, transient?

Archive-culture is today accelerated by the sheer amount of material being produced and given meaning by the weight of voices. Culture, it



seems, is in a constant process of re evaluation. Heritage tourism flourishes amidst the recycling of stories and meaning, the dancing rhizome of history. The tumbleweed of property.

SNOWBALLS OF ACCUMULATED DETRITUS

I visit *Night Shift* on June 23rd in the project's sedimentation. The strange, nightly happenings have passed, and with only the ghost of a myth of the artist remaining, the exhibition takes a very different form. The gallery entrance contains a mish mash of stuff including a grandfather radio clock, shelving, faux marble, bed frames, cupboard units, a tea trolley, desk lamp, chest of drawers, plastic storage containers. This primal scene seeps around a stud wall, behind the titular vinyl lettering and into the main gallery space where certain stuff has been dismembered,



disembodied by material, form, age, shape, process, until it begins to realise a more sculpted form, an articulation of commentary, desire.

The exhibition appears as a readymade intervention. We recognise these items from the home place. Some of the sculptures consist of component pieces of some 'thing'—abstracted to the extent that we need to do a little work, its form a distant memory; willingly we play along. The wall hangings are gone, the materials fallen to the floor limp, placid, abandoned. Now appearing as a millennial excavation, they sit sorry and halted. Snowballs of accumulated detritus. There is, however, a sense of agency to the sculptures, some narrative of movement through the gallery. Where are the objects from and where do they belong? Do they represent an epoch, a chapter of civilization?



While we are used to ironic kitsch in the gallery (superartist Jeff Koons springs to mind), I don't feel Emily's treatment of the material is kitsch, at-a-distance consumer snubbing. Equally, the work doesn't reveal a curiosity or interest in the individual stories of each item, but rather a fascination for the omnipotence of stuff, the hidden banalities of the throw away, the laziness of ownership, of short-term investment.

THE WASTE RETURNS!

Given the ongoing tragedy of the '(British Petroleum, Transocean, Halliburton) Deep Water Horizon' explosion, the artist/activist group *Liberate Tate* felt it appropriate to punctuate a V.I.P party celebrating

20 years of BP sponsorship of the Tate Britain Art Gallery. An online video¹ shows their action: pouring crude oil down the grand entrance to the institution. Tens of thousands of barrels of oil a day pour into the Gulf of Mexico. But the stunned guests do not understand this symbolic return of their British Petroleum patron. While one of the guests opines her empathy for the director of BP who "has had a dreadful week", the online viewing audience perhaps understand what it means to bring the violence of overseas investments home. This was a slogan of western street activism of the 1970s, represented in art perhaps most famously in Martha Rosler's, *Bringing The War Home*, which montaged Vietnamese burns victims with happy, American, domestic interiors.

In '*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*', Slavoj Žižek discusses the Francis Ford Coppola film, 'The Conversation'. After suspecting that a murder has taken place in the hotel room, Gene Hackman, our surveillance expert, enters the bathroom, and carefully inspects everything. Having found nothing he flushes the toilet, seemingly as a parting gesture, causing the pristine white toilet bowl to fill with blood:

"and then the terrible thing happens. In our most elementary experience, when we flush the toilet, excrements simply disappear out of our reality into another space, which we phenomenologically perceive as a kind of a nether-world, another reality, a chaotic, primordial reality. And the ultimate horror, of course, is if the flushing doesn't work, if objects return, if remainders, excremental remainders, return from that dimension." ²

One could view Emily's excavations into the waste of Winnipeg as a similarly punctuating symbolic return. Indeed, off the erect neutrality of the white gallery wall and now haphazard heaps of stuff, the exhibition does also look like, well, common, messy, unwanted junk. Art plays itself and the media riff with delight on another spectacle of the emperor's

clothes. It's just junk! Some visitors walk into the gallery, then apologise for entering when there is nothing to see. 'Oh no, you're welcome! This is an exhibition by the artist Emily Rosamond and the concept is...' Well, it underlines what is evinced by the recognition of the objects as being junk; that perhaps there is some ecological or political story in the work—that there is so much ugly, outmoded, carcinogenic looking 'stuff' in the world today.

MASS DISPOSABILITY

*'Between 1850 and 1860, more than 150,000 square kilometres of North American Forest was liquidated. In 1867, one of the first inventions specifically designed for mass disposability arrived in the form of the paper bag.'*³

Western societies are drenched in waste. The relationship between the supposed supremacy of consumer gratification and the oversaturated market attest to this. Fashion designs desire, technology contrives proprietary obsolescence, and the acceleration principle propagates all sorts of codes for what lies within temporal safety.

ALCHEMY

Being a British school kid in the 1980s, I grew up with the new meta narrative of ecology (far more wide-reaching than the soon-to-be-old Cold War narrative, but one that would develop alongside the new ahistorical future of endless capitalist progress and profit-fuelled expansion). It affected me massively; my life today, directed by notions of sustainability—favouring non-consumption—is still bamboozled by that amorphous word 'recycling', which appears to just be the current psychological imperative that enables the gentler of us to continue spending money on things.

Recycling, or waste management is the alchemy of our age, yet it doesn't reveal itself in a culture of tinkerers, in a culture of patience, investment,



reclamation, knowledge. Supposed to be a mass desire for ecological harmony, we are redirected down cul-de-sacs of greenwash capital. While the more progressive, liberal, first world cities may be bluffed into thinking they are 'green', anyone who lives in regions where waste is not accelerated away from their porches by bloated councils, where people aren't fooled into separating their waste once a week, know what waste looks like and live with it, bursting out of garbage cans, rotting on the land. It is in these places that one can read most plainly the ecological economy of desire and redundancy.

Night Shift provides a brief respite to the haste of consumption and junking. In her performative role, Emily acts as priest of transformation conducting a séance of sorts. Gallery visitors waltz around the discarded—sharing collective memories, reigniting the culture they have breathed since they were young—their parent's skin, their grandparent's lives.

DECLUTTER

Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*⁴ is a powerful documentary about the social aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that draws me to tears. Images of detritus, *no*, of everything everyone ever had. Laid out everywhere.

Clutter.

Clutter of the violently ransacked, lifted, thrown. Clutter of the raging fire licked, breathed and tossed. Clutter pitched, levelled with the gush of oceans. All becomes clutter (in chaos—ashes to ashes). The home, the street, natural, unnatural, division-cum-unity. Clutter. To a non-American observer, the response to Katrina

was utterly bewildering. Three years on and as the US economy continued its spiral into sub-prime chaos creating 'Bushville' tent cities, we were reminded of those at the bottom; of the enduring images of the 1930s depression; people picking themselves up with all the belongings they can carry, leaving their home, their community to the storm, to the government response, to the privately contracted bailiffs.

This is my parting and opening emotional response to *Night Shift*. All that stuff passing through us, given meaning by fashion, behavioural norms, social bonds, need or survival. Stuff we own, stuff that we dream of. Value is transient but this *stuff* is buoyant, and when the meaning is gone and the discards tossed, it *will* return—symbolically, or tragically.

Notes

- 1 *Licence to Spill – FULL REPORT*, <http://www.youandifilms.com/2010/06/licence-to-spill-full-report/> (July 2010)
- 2 Sophie Fiennes, Director, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006.
- 3 John Vaillant, *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2005), 87.
- 4 Spike Lee, Director, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, 2006.



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Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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Alli Jones is an agent and actor who curates events, creates spectacles and makes things using various media. He is currently based between the city and the sea on the west coast of Canada. See: <http://www.participatoryspectacle.info/>

