Nuria Fuster, Julia Varela, and William Mackrell: Planned Obsolescence

In societies dominated by modern conditions of production,
life is presented as an immense
accumulation of spectacles.
Everything that was directly lived
has receded into a representation.
Guy Debord

Next year, Guy Debord's essay *The Society of Spectacle* will celebrate its 50th anniversary. Published in Paris in 1967, on the cusp of the student revolt of May 68, the seminal Situationist text explores a world in which reality has been substituted with representation. An idea, which, in our social media-dominated landscape, sounds chillingly prescient.

"Planned Obsolescence"—which refers to the 1930s-born policy of designing objects with a limited lifespan in order to perpetuate production—is the first in a series of exhibitions and events curated by the collective SCAN, with the aim of highlighting the enduring relevance of Debord's masterpiece today.

Yet, although the aforementioned idea of representation or simulacra—subsequently explored in depth by Jean Baudrillard in 1981—is key to Debord's treatise, the curators of this exhibition have to chosen to focus instead on the question of time, of enforced perishability, which is also of paramount importance in the text.

As Debord, quoting Marx, says:

In this social domination by commodity-time, "time is everything, man is nothing: he is at most the carcass of time". This is time devalued, the complete inversion of time as "the filed of human development".

To explore this confused and antagonistic relationship between human bodies, material culture, immaterial labour and capitalist production, the curators have staged a dialogue between the works of two Spanish artists, Nuria Fuster (1978) and Julia Varela (1986) —young female artists working, mainly, in the sculptural realm, via the appropriation, distortion, combination, and reconfiguration of mass-produced objects—and the young British artist, William Mackrell (1983).

The idea of inviting three artists—object-makers at the end of day—to explore the idea of planned obsolescence is beguiling. Art, after all, is supposed to be very antidote of the concept of shelf life, with artists expected to create objects that will transcend time and enter the realm of the eternal.

But are they, still?

Fuster and Varela's works are pointing at the ever-increasing velocity in the cycles of production, but not just of perishable products, like food, clothes, and

other consumer goods, but also of art, with artists pitted against the demands of the art market and its endless stream of gallery shows and art fairs.

In our current world, a photo of an artwork, either on Instagram or on dealer's iPhone, ready to be sent remotely to a collector, is just as valuable as the world itself, which takes us back to the idea of simulacra that we started with.

These two artists employ the devices of mass production, simulacra and fragmentation as Trojan horses. They create beguiling, recognizable objects whose instant familiarity will lure the viewers in, but whose strange reconfigurations will jolt them out of their comfort zone.

Yet, it's clear to see that both Fuster and Varela are seduced by materiality itself. Their play with shapes, textures, and deconstructed object betray a fascination with object-based art, even if it is infused with a self-questioning criticality.

Berlin-based Fuster, who's defined her work as "constant search for what's 'real' in 'reality'", seeks to extend the life of discarded industrial objects, a gesture that is as poetic as infused with a certain sustainability ethic.

London-based Varela, on the other hand, wants to explore how social conflict has ultimately been commodified though mass and social media. According to her, in her works, "this awaiting, neutral material has to deny itself and ultimately question its own existence and reason of *not being, being*."

Although rather different in their approaches, there is something both Fuster and Varela share: it is in the irresoluble paradox between material fascination and commodity criticality that the strength of their puzzling works lie.

Meanwhile, the practice of London-based Mackrell understand objects rather as markers of both space and time. In his 2010 piece *Three Points of View*, on view in this exhibition, two defective neon lights flicker stubbornly until they plunge the space into darkness. A DVD playfully projected on the wall, like a trompe l'oeil of sorts, is it flat sculpture or is a moving image work?

It's difficult to tell, but what's evident is Mackrell's quotation of American minimalism legend Dan Flavin, who famously proclaimed of his neon works: "The lamps will go out as they should, no doubt," thus infusing his signature pieces with the planned obsolescence previously only inbuilt in "lesser items" like cars or TVs.

Whether in jest or in earnest, whether a liberation from the tyranny of its coeval dematerialised art practices, or a renewed enslavement to the demands of the market, Flavin set a dilemma to the art object, a forked path which we are still staring at. Come have a look.

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