

Ruth Beer: An Installation In Three Parts

Candice Hopkins

PART 1:

Each vignette begins with stillness. From a video camera’s fixed-perspective we see three offices—each in varying states of disorder—a long white hallway, a windowless room filled with looped cables and electrical cords, and a stark studio.

Next is the sound of footsteps—not hurried, but deliberate and purposeful. In each vignette a woman, 20ish and casually dressed, enters. Without acknowledging the camera, she surveys the room. In one scene, after negotiating a toolbox, piles of paper and a collection of used coffee mugs, she perches beside a bookcase and proceeds to cover herself with crumpled paper (not unlike the kind you would use to cushion a box of dishes) until she is completely hidden from view. Another captures her walking down a long hallway where she undoes a cabinet door under a sink and after fitting herself inside, pulls the door closed behind her. In another room, with walls draped with cords and cables, she walks to the end, pulls over a trolley, stands beside it, and carefully places cables until they completely obscure her body. After she conceals herself, each scene is still once again.

PART 2:

Simple, slightly battered, black plastic chairs—the kind you would find in office buildings rather than in homes—are balanced precariously one atop the other. With backs, legs and seats jutting out at odd angles and wrapped with layers of translucent industrial film, they are at once disarmingly beautiful

and markedly banal. Angled to the side is a tall upright wooden panel fixed with fluorescent tubes, which cast a stark light on the tower of chairs.

PART 3:

A single large-scale framed photograph documents a still from a cluttered office. A sleeping bag is seen slumped in the background along with a couch, an empty frame, a filing cabinet with partially open drawers, and a bulletin board pinned with papers. In the foreground is a bucket, a computer monitor and milk crates filled with binders and books with titles including “Artist Beware” and “The New Cook Book.” The middle is occupied with CDs, a day timer, and partially filled wooden boxes.



Ruth Beer approaches her work with the sensibility of a sculptor. In the past, meaning in her work was generated not so much in the objects or images themselves but in the relationship between them. A photograph of a tree ready to be planted with a bag over its roots is juxtaposed with a solid panel of Arborite. (A Canadian invention, the relationship between Arborite and photography are closer than what might first appear, as those woodgrain laminates and fake marble tiles are really digital images embedded within plastic. In this sense, Arborite, in its very materiality, points to the ability of photography to stand in for the real). In an even earlier body of work

she juxtaposed paintings of objects with their photographs, further drawing out the relationship between the referent, sign, and signifier through the ways in which objects are documented and recorded.

In the planning of the exhibition she showed me photographs she had taken of storage rooms stacked with furniture (a gesture, in both the repetition and the industrial manufacturing of the objects, that she aligned with minimalism) and anthropomorphic portraits of institutional furniture: a metal chair resting on a small table with a coiled electrical cord and a meeting room filled with a circle of mismatched stuffed chairs and a flip chart on which an empty pad of paper hangs. Gaining inspiration from the compositions created when the industrial orange of an electrical cord rests against the dark brown of a laminated particleboard table and when the light turquoise of a vinyl chair is seen against cool white of an empty wall, over time what becomes characteristic of the photographs of storage rooms, portraits of chairs, and the fixed-perspective videos is their stillness—their almost pregnant pause.

This installation marks the third time that she has worked in video. The videos (of which there are six) loop endlessly on two projectors in the corner of the room. Their timing is slightly off, and when one is showing a room, the other might be showing the performer covering herself with a coat just before she slips out of view. While they play, the videos, like

the photographs that proceed them, begin to reveal the character of the objects and the rooms, of the banal furniture, metal shelves, and coiled cables, and in a sense the performances, with their subtle gestures of subversion, reveal that they are not so much part of a narrative as they are existing within a situation. Boris Groys once stated that it’s only possible to speak of film as a memory—after the lights have gone on in the cinema¹. Perhaps this means that video, in this context, with its different sense of time (it loops endlessly with no clear beginning or end) and space (a gallery rather than a cinema) can only be considered in its invariable present-ness.

1. Boris Groys, quoted from his presentation at the symposium, *Where art worlds meet: multiple modernities and the global salon*, December 9-12, 2005, Venice, Italy.



The Western Front gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the British Columbia Arts Council through the Government of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, and our members and volunteers. The Western Front is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres (PAARC).