

REAR WINDOW

The New Museum of Contemporary Art

VIKKY ALEXANDER

September 20 - November 10, 1985

VIEW

The world is no longer informed by direct experience, but through two-dimensional media presentations in the form of billboards, television, newspapers, and magazines. I use these forms of information as if they are the only resources available to the public or the artist.

My current project at The New Museum involves an installation in the rear window bay that faces east onto Mercer Street. The prominent features of this site are: (1) fenestration elevated well above the street level, requiring a special effort on the part of passersby to look up and notice the windows (as opposed to the easy visual access of a street-level store window); and (2) five windows that are divided unequally by either brick pilasters or green, cast-iron mullions (as opposed to the visual continuity of a picture window). Moreover, the rear window faces Soho, a prime shopping and tourist area, featuring commercial art galleries, boutiques, and restaurants.

Given these conditions, my installation required a graphic design which was visually aggressive enough to hold up to neighboring signage and, at the same time, one that proposed a dialectic between the commercial aspects of the neighborhood and the functions of the museum. As an example of such a "dualistic" approach, I would cite the work of the architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Their dialectic is the competition between two different orders: the architectural and the commercial. In both their writings and their architectural practice, they emphasize learning from the popular cultural vernacular, utilizing its "signs" while being aware of its complexities.

The "NEW" signs now installed in the rear window of The New Museum function in a variety of ways. Obviously they could be taken as an advertisement for The New Museum itself, in which case they would be read as essentially affirmative and self-promotional. On the other hand, a certain ambiguity arises from the fact that the word "new" appears in eight different typefaces; this makes it difficult to pinpoint the intended connotation of the word "new" as an adjective. Finally, while the commercial character of the signs remains consistent with the marketing necessities of the area and even with the vaunted quest for the "new" in art, these signs may appear contradictory to (or at least unsettling in light of) the perceived function of a "museum."

In his early writings and architectural projects, Robert Venturi outlined what appeared to be a radical, new program for architecture: the critical analysis of commercial or popular architectural forms. Venturi's position suggested not only a new way to look at common or crass buildings and signage, but it also delineated particular formal conventions and positive aesthetic contributions of oversized graphics, strip development, neon signage, and roadside culture in general. In retrospect, however, the euphoria with which Venturi and company embraced commercial architecture seems like a mixed blessing at best. For, although their near-parodic enfranchisement of "vulgar" design thoroughly undercut the psycho-moralist idealism of modernist architecture, their equally flippant disinterest in the economic motivations, the spectacular manipulations, the fraudulent populism—in short, the ideology—of commercial architecture undercut their own criticality, making their work seem conservative and complicit. Venturi's ideas were concerned with style and aesthetics and never really confronted the deeper, more complex social, political, and economic issues which lie behind the functions of advertising as a representational system.

In picking up some of these undeveloped issues in the work of Venturi and others, Vikky Alexander's work examines how the formal codes of photography, architecture, and graphic design map out certain stereotypes or patterns of behavior. In her photographic work, for example, she frequently takes images directly from fashion magazines, simply rephotographing the image, recropping it, reframing it, and repeating it. Through dramatic juxtapositions, symmetrical formats, or repeated alternation of these photos Alexander accentuates the ways in which individual models or individual emotional states are conventionalized and commodified. Occasionally, she alternates these images with textual inscriptions or captions, often a single word such as "Entertainment," "Family," or—in the case of an Elvis Presley grouping—"Grace." These abstract concepts are equated with the abstract, fragmented forms of the models' photos so that both image and word are emptied of meaning and reified, in an exaggerated version of advertising technique.

Her most recent work, the Rear Window of The New Museum of Contemporary Art, constitutes an extension of this photographic work and a linking-up with earlier interests in architectural installation, deriving in part from the theories of Robert Venturi. The work is simply described: in a billboard-like shop window overlooking a commercial street, the artist has placed six typographic enlargements, in six typefaces, of the word "new." Given the pedestrian context, the work immediately establishes an interface between the passersby and the museum interior, as well as rhyming with adjacent advertising signs. On a purely visual level the work is completely consonant with its environment; only the eccentricity of the typefaces, the redundant repetition of the word "new," and the absence of a product compel our awareness of the code itself, rather than the content of the advertising. Alexander's work points to the psychological and systematic use of words rather than their adjectival function.

Her choice of the word "new" is, of course, not capricious, nor is it merely a play on the name of the institution. Rather it points up how signs function as nearly invisible representations, discrete bearers of ideology. Theodor Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), says that the New is the central driving force of modernism, the idea that demarcates a radical break from tradition in which all previous artistic forms are invalidated. The extremity of this concept in modernism (in comparison to earlier uses of the New as style change, faddishness, or formal innovation), Adorno attributes specifically to the contemporaneous development of commodity culture, in which each product was superseded by a newer one and in which "new" served as a mask for lack of difference between products. As a label, "new" came to be identified with the consumer product, more important (though no less arbitrary) than the brand name itself.

So Alexander's installation echoes Venturi's original theories in utilizing generic and commercial sign techniques to attract the viewer and provide immediate identification. But, through a rather simple critical operation—the abstraction of one word from the title of the institution—Vikky Alexander's work at The New Museum opens up a range of significations which illuminate not only the iconography of the sign, but also the economic and aesthetic system in which that sign participates.

The New Museum

OF CONTEMPORARY ART

VIKKY ALEXANDER was born in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1959. She attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, and now lives and works in New York City.

Individual Exhibitions

"Vikky Alexander," CASH/Newhouse Gallery, New York, N.Y., May 15-June 16, 1985.

"Metro Bus Show: Vikky Alexander," sponsored by CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., February 1-February 29, 1984.

"Obsession," A & M Artworks, New York, N.Y., November 9-December 24, 1983.

"Vikky Alexander," CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., September 23-October 1, 1983.

"Obsession," Coburg Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., September 7-October 1, 1983.

"Family Entertainment," A & M Artworks, New York, N.Y., May 4-June 18, 1983.

"Viewing Space" (installation), Toronto Dominion Bank Building, Halifax, N.S., July 31, 1978.

Group Exhibitions (selected)

"Group Show," 303 Gallery, New York, N.Y., September 18-October 18, 1985.

"Persona Non Grata," Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York, N.Y., September 11-October 5, 1985.

"Seduction: Working Photographs," White Columns, New York, N.Y., February 6-March 8, 1985.

"The New Capital," White Columns, New York, N.Y., December 4, 1984-January 5, 1985.

"Rediscovering Romanticism in New York," New Math Gallery, New York, N.Y., October 16-November 14, 1984.

"Appearing," Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, N.S., November 17-December 11, 1983.

"The Stolen Image and its Uses," Light Work/Community Darkrooms, Syracuse, N.Y., February 15-March 15, 1983.

"Fashion Fictions: Absence and the Fast Heartbeat," White Columns, New York, N.Y., January 19-February 6, 1983.

"Trouble in Paradise," A & M Artworks, New York, N.Y., November 10-December 18, 1982.

Bibliography

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Grundberg, Andy. "In Today's Photography, Imitation Isn't Always Flattery," *New York Times*, November 24, 1982, pp. 31, 39.

Lichtenstein, Therese. "Trouble in Paradise." *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 6 (February 1983): 33.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism," *New Mexico Studies in the Fine Arts* 7 (1983): 5-13. Reprinted in *Screen* 25, no. 6 (November-December 1984).

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