

Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program

Brooke Babington



Too Much of Everything, 2008, installation view with, from left: **_fabrics interseason, Dominant design, 2008**, various handwoven materials, dimensions variable; **Heinz Peter Knes, New Mexico, 2009**, screenprint on cotton, 200 x 165 cm; **Bless, Mirror curtain, 2009**, wallscape print and vertical mirrored blind; **Sibling, Y3K door, 2009**, pine, polycarbonate sheeting, plywood and existing door structure; **Christopher L. G. Hill, Temporary colour/pattern dissolve, step beyond geometry, 2009**, various mediums and dimensions; courtesy the artists and Y3K, Melbourne.



There is a great, silent resistance mounting against categorisation; a collective, unspoken imperative of non-compliance with rigid systems of any kind. And it was clear, looking around the works in 'Too Much of Everything', that they eschewed coercion within traditional bounds of art. Like early twentieth-century Bauhaus experiments, here were local and international designers and artists once more engaged in discursive exchange across a levelled field of creative production. But if the Bauhaus perfected the modernist ideals of technological progress in design efficiency – form follows function, truth to materials, and so on – 'Too Much of Everything' offered a perspective on the relationship between art, 'the product' and consumption that was distinctly contemporary.

'Desire is the desire of the Other', Jacques Lacan famously remarked. Which is to say, among other things, that we want what 'the Joneses' want. In our society, luxury or prestige goods – sports cars and designer handbags – serve as symbolic reminders of social standing. In 'Too Much of Everything', James Deutscher paid improvised homage to Shiro Kuramata's iconic glass chair by grafting Perspex and found materials to an IKEA base, stripping the symbol of all status. Buying luxury goods for their status was identified as 'conspicuous consumption'¹ by Jarrod Rawlins in his catalogue response to the exhibition, drawing a corollary with the sale and 'packaging' of art.

In 'Too Much of Everything', one could perhaps take this one step further. According to Pierre Bourdieu, conspicuous consumption is not restricted to economic dealings, but extends to every value, opinion and taste we acquire. For Bourdieu, each and every consumption, then, is conspicuous. It was the exhibition's grasp of this point that made it so insightful a reflection of our times. The show addressed and reflected the values, attitudes and aesthetic preferences of a specific market: young, middle-class, politically left-wing and art-initiated. Many works resonated ecological concerns of overabundance and waste. The works of Sibling, Christopher L. G. Hill, and Pat Foster and Jen Berean existed simultaneously as artworks and permanent, functional fixtures – design solutions for the fledgling gallery – almost as

though they were uncomfortable with the wasteful extravagance of an art that doesn't actually *do* anything.

There was also a common focus on readymade, found or recycled objects and a stylistic exaggeration of the handcrafted elements of construction, a kind of heavy-handed, cottage-industry aesthetic which mocked slick overproduction. But the reverse was also true – conceptual clothing label Slow and Steady Wins the Race reproduced the look of iconic designer handbags in basic materials which worked as quiet subversive incursions into the market under the veneer of mass production. Works like these disrupted the tacitly accepted role of the passive consumer, renegotiating relations of production and consumption to broadcast their affiliation with the values of a different lifestyle market.

If too much of anything is a bad thing, too much of everything threatens to glut and overwhelm us. And yet, in contrast to the critical stance this logic anticipates, the show indicated that our contemporary relationship to the product is far more nuanced and complex than such a position allows. Significantly, none of the works were overtly critical. They didn't condemn the market, they just created their own. By simultaneously *reflecting on and staging* conspicuous consumption within the gallery space, the show reproduced and played out the self-same dynamics of social interaction that surround us in the outside world. A feedback loop was created; a revolving door into the cyclical nature of the market and fashion.

In this way 'Too Much of Everything' posed a makeshift articulation of the flux-and-flow drag of the market relations that govern contemporary life – and that we continue to enact with each passing transaction.

¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Macmillan, New York, 1899.

For this sixth Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program review, Brooke Babington was mentored by Charlotte Day, Associate Curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, and co-curator of the 2010 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. **Too Much of Everything**, Y3K, Melbourne, 18 July – 8 August 2009.