PATRICIA L. BOYD

VICTORIAN TRADES HALL
(Meeting Room 2)

35888, 2018
Unique silver gelatin photograms
181 × 412 cm

and

225 QUEENSBERRY STREET
(1st floor kitchen)

Untitled (Aeron), 2018
Used restaurant grease, beeswax, damar resin
13.5 × 31 cm

31 August – 28 September, 2018;
1856 at the Victorian Trades Hall
Curated by Nicholas Tammens

An exhibition of commissioned work made in Melbourne by Patricia L. Boyd, presented across two sites: Victorian Trades Hall, and a coworking creative office space at 225 Queensberry Street, Carlton.

The placement of Patricia L. Boyd's work within Victorian Trades Hall suggests that the social responsibility of art is not necessarily at war with the formal intelligence through which artworks operate. Her work is perceptive to context, process, and the broader dynamics that influence, affirm, undermine, and even absolve the claims made by art with regards to its social position, especially at this site where our social roles are foregrounded.

The everyday function of this building, a civic space, overrides the claim that art only addresses a detached spectatorship. This context places certain demands on the artist, on both her labour and the product of her work; for the viewer, it elicits the long practiced historical debates on art's purposiveness in society, its political import, and utilitarian value. These demands are in part symptomatic of the associations, real and imagined, that are made in such a building. And perhaps, whatever is left of the artworld's wishes for art to have an effect beyond its own discourses, is magnified by this setting.

The second site is another place of work, a small former-warehouse privately rented by a team of "creatives". Their studio upstairs is offset by a cafe at street level, where a convivial setting invites use of the space from others participating in "gig" economies without a fixed place of work. But principally, web and print are designed here (including this pamphlet) for a host of clientele on a contractual basis. It is a place where matters of form are mandated, and subsequently produced in service of communicating to a broad range of the public. It is a site of non-unionised, independent labour and entrepreneurial enterprise—if it is a civic space at all, it is only in the limited extent to which a cafe becomes a place of social exchange over the purchase of a cup of coffee. But if there is a dichotomy between these two sites, it is not by equating Trades Hall as a symbol of manual labour, and this studio as emblematic of another kind of work—one that is technologised, precarious, cognitive, and "creative".

While maintaining an emblematic relationship with manual labour, trade union halls are primarily sites of organising—a labour of communication, management, politicking, analysis, and legal work. The truth is that, as a part of this, the trade union sees much of the same kinds of labour as a design studio or advertising agency. Now with trade unions increasingly driving campaigns through targeted advertising (for example with the recent media campaigns #WageTheft, and "Change the Rules"), and representing a workforce gradually more casualised and less secure in their employment (i.e., gig economies, and precarious labour), the operative position of labour activism is ever more reflective of the skills of the "creative class".

In both contexts, Boyd has installed works of art that speak to broader circulations (of energy, bodies, resources) and the places in which they intersect. These economies and their corresponding sites are inferred by residue, impressions, surplus effects and waste. Although appearing abstract in their language, these pieces are specific documents that work by index. What is central to their position is a collective human experience, mediated first by the body of the viewer. It is from the body, with its own circulations and systems (be it social or digestive), that Boyd's work begins.

Notes

1 Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, and Power" in Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture, University of California Press, 1992.

2 [Written and distributed by railway workers for our fellow workers] The Railways and Capitalism (pamphlet), Melbourne, 1974

3 Joe Moran, "Defining Moment: Adshel starts the bus shelter revolution, 1969", Financial Times, September 9, 2009, https://www.ft.com/content/c6b7ca00-a0f9-11de-a88d-00144feabdc0 (last accessed August 22, 2018).

4 "Contract - PRDAR21809", Tenders Vic, https://www.tenders.vic.gov.au/tenders/contract/view.do?id=13559&returnUrl=%2Fcontract%2Flist.do%3F%24%7Brequest.queryString%7D (last accessed August 22, 2018).

1.

Lately, new difficulties have arisen in the distinction between public and private. Whether this is symptomatic of the ever more indiscernible limits of work; the privatisation and neo-colonialist erosion of public resources, spaces, and infrastructure; technology's rule of law (from the way we communicate, and at what rate, to all corners of our lives); the gradual incapacitation of unions and other civil associations; or the corporate world's ongoing attack on what is left of social democracy and the welfare state—evidently, how we distinguish between public and private has changed.

The problem of distinguishing between public and private takes place, at least in part, at the level of appearances. civic life is predicated on what it is to be, or to make something, public. Which is to say that taking part in civic life is underwritten by a social contract in which visibility is pledged to a public world. For the individual, the body becomes a kind of legal tender in exchange for access to civic space. Thinking through these dichotomies—public and private, visible and invisible, inside and outside—quickly work an architectural metaphor into the imagination. At the level of etymology, both public and private derive from architectural analogies that gave ground to the Western legal frameworks that grew out of them. The "private" recalls the domain of the home, the enclosure of its architecture and the Roman legalese that came from the functioning of the Roman patriarchal home; contrasted with "public", which arose from the civic world where the individual (civilian) operated under the law of the state when outside of the law of the home.

Today, when we call for transparency from corporations or our institutions, it is a demand for a certain disclosure, or publication of information, so that civic society can form judgements on the ethics of what remains invisible to public scrutiny. This form of transparency acts as a kind of a moral assurance against charges of collusion, corruption, conspiracy, or exploitation, and in many ways, has become synonymous with a kind of access to information. What remains in question for us, like any question of representation, is who and what delineates (or frames) this information (even, what is legible in its picture). Again, a window is brought to mind: indeed what lies perceptible within it and what falls outside of its aperture. Remembering what Craig Owens has written on the effect of representation, "Representation, then, is not—nor can it be—neutral; it is an act—indeed the founding act—of power in our culture."[3]

2.

The use of glass, as a material subject to the designs of architecture and industry, reifies ideas surrounding the limits between the public and private, as thresholds open to transparency and visibility. It has found its place erecting the monuments of the free market, and as the discreet, personal interface of the technology carried in our pockets.

Becoming the focal point of European architecture in the late 1800s, the use of glass as an architectural motif increased in accordance with the growth of capitalist economies, their consumer markets and appropriation of resources through colonisation. Emblematic of this growth was the construction of arcades throughout the West and its colonies, these forms were made possible by the technical innovations of industry, and their reliance on the accumulation of resources to fuel their growth. In Europe, arcades were built for a burgeoning consumer culture born from Western economic expansion. At the edges of this expansion, in places like here in Australia, arcades were erected to serve consumer bases educated to reflect the genteel tastes of the Coloniser, reproducing the hegemony of a white middle-class culture (see the Royal Arcade on Bourke street). Now on the other side of Modernity, we can see that what began as an architectural germ grew into the department store, shopping mall, and the totality of inner-city consumerism.The habits that came with this architecture are now commonplace: individuals positioned on one side of a pane of glass and the object of consumption on the other. This limit, or indeed lens, is the embodiment of an alienation that is as material as it is psychological.

3.

Storefronts bear many names, operating with the same symbolic magic as the products that are sold therein. Writing on the effectiveness of brand names in fashion, Pierre Bourdieu wrote of the transformative power of the fashion designer's signature as a kind of magic. He argued that by ascribing social capital (a certain social cache) to even a simple t-shirt, the garment is elevated to a status where it becomes an object of desire to those that can recognise its value in all the places in which it can be found. (The same argument can be, and has been made about the role of the signature in art.)

On these same storefronts, graffiti-tags accrue on the glass in visual contest with the sheen of branding—operating almost in the same way, the tag functions by signifying its author. The social capital associated with the writer—derived from multiple factors, including style, location, risk, and proliferation—is recognised by those individual "insiders" that form the social network in which the economy of tagging can be recognised, and literally reinscribed.

4.

On the glass panes of bus shelters, the dialectics of graffiti and maintenance work collapse into expressionist formalism. The performative gesture of tagging, a kind of reduction of the artist's signature to a nominal form, awaits the imminence of its erasure. The labour of maintenance work in the public sphere—of window cleaning, graffiti removal, etc.—upholds the simple and wholly loaded sentiment that the uncleanliness of a glass surface equates to social ills, crime, economic disparity, and bad hygiene. Meanwhile, in museums, the same attention to surface is given in maintaining the cleanliness of sculptures made by Minimalist and Conceptual artists, for instance Dan Graham's glass pavilions, Hans Haacke's Condensation Cube, or perhaps the entirety of Donald Judd's work. Considering the museum's maintenance staff as an audience, we might think that this reifies Michael Fried's charge that Minimalism resisted the viewers absorption into the work, resulting in a theatricality between the viewer (or cleaner) and the work. But this would miss the fact that all works of art require maintenance as an extension of conservation for their presentation. These artworks merely highlight that maintenance work preserves the authority of the original work of art by keeping it in an idealised state, or as close to it as possible. Naturally this has to do with the optics of art, where we chose not to perceive the passage of time on the material fabric of a work, instead wishing for it to be in a certain state of arrest. The same can be said of the authority of the public object, which graffiti continually undermines.

5.

In matters of transportation, the car is marketed as an embodiment of private space—reflecting the comfort of the home, the individual owner's aspirations, control and taste. It sets off against a perceived lack of autonomy on public transport, its social environment, navigation, and timetable. Operated from behind a screen of glass, perceptually enclosed, illusorily private: the autonomy of the car has been sold as an ideal. Anxiety about being visible in public space is tempered by the optional add-on of tinted windows. Elsewhere, advertising decals wrap public buses encasing passengers in adverts for banks, cars, and insurance companies. The advertising which wraps the fleets of buses is often again displayed and back-lit at the bus shelter, the location from which we say that we 'catch' the bus (a metaphor that makes public transportation sound as if it is fleeting, fleeing, and almost wild). So, in a city where some of the infrastructure for public transportation has been outsourced to a private company, when you're waiting for a bus, you're not only waiting for a bus—you're being sold the dream of a car.

Public transportation systems originated with a need to increase the circulation and punctuality of the labour force. Like any commodity, capital understood the need for its circulation:

> "Just like workers in other industries, workers in the transport industry take part in the production of commodities. We produce what Marx calls a 'useful effect'. The 'useful effect' of the transport industry is the actual moving of goods and people from one place to another. Raw materials move from the mines to the ports and factories, finished products are transported to and from the markets, workers are brought from their homes to the work-places."[4]

The car commodifies fantasies of flexibility and autonomy, sold by corporations back to a working public. Currently these ideals are being repossessed by ride-share apps, where the flexibility of the car has become the means to a new, hyper-casualised form of work as drivers "set their own schedule" (Uber). Operating in the liminal zones of labour legislation, these apps distribute grey-market wages in the guise of fairness to a workforce with little bargaining power. Meanwhile, they allow users to commute to work, or travel for leisure, without relying on the rigidity of a public transit that is increasingly underfunded, and therefore increasingly expensive and unreliable. As a result, those that no longer have the need to wait, no longer participate in this public space.

LIST OF WORKS

VICTORIAN TRADES HALL (Meeting Room 2)

35888, 2018
Unique silver gelatin photogram
181 × 412 cm

35888 records an instance in public space. For its making, photographic paper was pressed against the glass of a bus shelter at night, exposed to ambient light, and then immediately processed in an improvised darkroom nearby. 35888 is composed of photograms: light hitting the paper has recorded the dirt, graffiti, scratches, grime and traffic that were evident on the surface of the glass. Although photographic, as photograms they are original singular prints without a negative. As dimensional pictures, their materiality asks to be accounted for just as much as their images.

The bus shelter where this work was made is identified as "35888" in the numerical system used by the global advertising company AdShel, who have led the privatisation of this civic architecture in Australia (purchased in June 2018 by oOh!media Limited), New Zealand, and the United Kingdom:

> "[…]in 1969, two advertising billboard companies, More O'Ferrall and London and Provincial, joined to form a company called Adshel. The idea behind the new firm was simple: Adshel would supply bus shelters to local authorities for nothing, in return for the right to display advertising on them. In the early 1970s it began installing its first shelters in Leeds, which is why the Adshel bus shelters there are still numbered "0001". The ads were displayed in "6-sheet" panels – now universally known as "Adshels", whether they adorn shelters, supermarkets or motorway service stations."[3]

From the 2007 tender contract between Adshel and the Victorian State Government:

> "The Agreement relates to the Metropolitan Melbourne area and covers:
>
> Total Estimated Cost: $193,000,000 over 16 years.
>
> • the supply, installation and maintenance of bus shelters;
> • maintenance of SmartBus totem and pole infrastructure; and
> • arrangements for the selling of media space on bus shelters.
>
> Contract Type: Construction contracts
> Supplier Details
> Supplier: Adshel Street Furniture Pty Limited
> ABN: 77 000 081 872
> Address: 11 The Forum 205 Pacific Highway St Leonards NSW 2065"[4]

Shelter number "35888" is located outside of the Housing Commission flats on Canning Street, North Melbourne. These flats were the first high-rise social housing to be built in Melbourne, designed by Ernest Fooks, an Austrian-Hungarian émigré who had worked with Le Corbusier before resettling in Australia. Fooks took inspiration for the design from Corbusier's influential utopian housing project Unité d'Habitation (Housing Unit), which sought to redesign communal living. Since the 1960s, flats in these towers have been available as affordable housing, owned publicly by the Victorian state government.

Positioned on the other side of Canning Street is the current construction site for Arden Gardens, a housing development by CBD Development Group PTY LTD. This private housing development introduces a retail precinct and large supermarket to the area, while featuring a club, cinema, and communal garden for residents. New apartments are on offer from $403,000 to $1,920,000. So far, none are available on the National Rent Affordability Scheme.

225 QUEENSBERRY STREET (1st floor kitchen)

Untitled (Aeron), 2018
Used restaurant grease, beeswax, damar resin
13.5 × 30 cm

This ongoing series of casts reproduce in negative the form of an extant, mass-produced part of an armrest of an office chair. The "Aeron" chair (also used in the offices in which this work is shown) was manufactured by Herman Miller, the influential furniture manufacturer also credited with the invention of the office cubicle, and is notably associated with the "dot-com bubble" that occurred in the US from 1995-2000. Marketed for its ergonomic properties, it was fetished by a then growing self-tasked cognitive workforce, anxious of the occupational health risks associated with prolonged time at their machines. Emblematic of the desires of these workers, it attests to a disciplining of the body in a bid to prolong time spent at work with computers in efforts to increase productivity.

Boyd acquired this chair from a liquidation auction of a company undergoing intensive restructuring. These liquidation auctions allow companies to re-monetise their assets (furniture, equipment, intellectual property), usually as a means to pay debts before closure. In this case, the chair was purposefully pulled from its circulation in this particular market to be put to another use.

Similarly, the material of the casts is also pulled from circulation. These casts are composed of grease purchased from a refinery company that source their raw material from the oil vats of restaurants across the greater San Francisco area. This material, at a point of stasis—before it is cleaned, refined, and re-commoditised as fuel for cars—is both the result of waste processes, and source of potential energy. As art it remains locked off from its use-value by the static time of conservation, while entering the symbolic and monetary economies of the art system.

Patricia L. Boyd (b. London, UK) lives and works in New York. Solo exhibitions include Operator, 80WSE, New York (2017); Le Bourgeois, 3236RLS, London (2017); 1:1, Jan Kaps, Cologne (2015); and Metrics, Modern Art Oxford (2014). Group exhibitions include Other Mechanisms, Secession, Vienna (2018); Mechanisms, CCA Wattis, San Francisco (2017); Interiors, Front Desk Apparatus, New York (2017); Representative Politics, Steirischer Herbst, Graz (2015); and Meanwhile... Suddenly and Then, 12th Biennale de Lyon (2013). In 2017, she organised AEROSOL, at 500 Capp Street Foundation, San Francisco.

Designed by
Beaziyt Worcou

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1856

1856 is a program of exhibitions and events presented across sites within and around the Victorian Trades Hall. It proceeds from thinking under this roof, with a duty to experiment in thinking about the labour of artists and the many ways in which artists, through their work, address social issues with absolute diversity.

1856.com.au