

FLICKER

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FLICKER

The gallery is unlit save for 30 tiny spotlights lining the walls. Under each one sits a faintly glowing object hovering on a small transparent shelf. Wire runs up the wall from each lamp, crosses above head level and then drops down to the floor where it is attached to an interconnected series of 40 ripe lemons. Under close inspection the objects on display can be identified as colourless miniatures of various household appliances, each one bearing a limply hanging cord: blender, vacuum cleaner, computer, toaster, stereo, etc. Their composition is unclear as they look both plastic and waxy. The room is filled with the sharp scent of citrus.

The Semiotics of Everyday Life

To study everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking, unable to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not explicitly for the purpose of transforming everyday life. (Debord, 1961, p.68)

In the early 1950's, the Situationist International published their first magazine laying out the newly conceptualized discipline of psycho-geography and several tools that could be used to practice it. As a self-proclaimed avant-garde of artists and activists, they proposed the study of everyday life as a method for transforming what they perceived as the "bourgeois" cityscape of Paris. Defined in Situationist literature as "the study of the precise effects of geographical setting, consciously managed or not, acting directly on the mood and behaviour of the individual," psycho-geography was aimed at the daunting task of erasing the distinction between art and life and re-vitalizing the urban experience. ("Definitions," 1958) This new discipline made explicit the effect environment can have on an individual and, more radically, implied that people tangibly impact their surroundings in return. The Situationist notion of psycho-geography allows for places to have both physical and emotional characteristics, drawing on architecture, design, history and usage.¹

The Situationist project was, in part, a response to the changes occurring in public spaces in the 1950's and 1960's. Shared outdoor sites like town squares, parks and streets were systematically being appropriated for use as venues for profit making. (Incipient in the mid 1900's, this process has escalated to the point where our "town square" is the shopping mall.) (Gladwell, 2004). Now, fifty years later, a similar colonization of space is taking place in the

private sphere.² Internet providers collect information about online spending habits so that ads can be tailored to specific interests (or weaknesses). More sinisterly, some products are now being implanted with “radio frequency ID” chips which, some people believe will soon be used to track all purchases and identify in-home advertising opportunities (Reuters, 2004). (This could mean that when your car tires wear out, you will see a disproportionate number of tire ads on the internet or receive text messages about tire sales in your city.) Insinuating advertising into homes is not a new venture – consider television, radio or telemarketing, for example³ – but its intrusions are becoming increasingly difficult to avoid or even to detect.

Partly through the use of the psycho-geographical tool of *détournement*, (roughly translated as the rerouting or hijacking of meaning), *Flicker* is humbly suggesting sans manifesto that it is not only the masculinised public sphere with which individuals are in conversation but also the personal domestic arena of ordinary tasks and objects.⁴ At a time when domestic space is being colonized by capitalism, *Flicker's* domestic psycho-geography extends Situationist ideas to the private sphere, household objects, and interior spaces.

Each material used in *Flicker* is overflowing with social context and historical meaning. Through a seemingly random selection of objects – appliances, wire, and lemons – we are invited to deduce that all ordinary objects carry a similar kind of complexity and intelligence. This area of enquiry could be thought of as a semiotics of the material.

Appliances

We expect a lot of our appliances. They toast, brew, blend, grind, clean, heat, boil, dry, exercise, curl, entertain, compute, chill and educate, all at the flick of a switch. Everyday we take these little miracles for granted. Why are we not amazed that electric kettles boil water without fire? Does the abstract knowledge that electricity is created at the power station and travels down wires to the post outside the house, through the wall and into the socket, then heats up the element to boil the water (which also miraculously appears at the turn of a knob) make this occurrence any less surprising? In all likelihood, thinking through these steps will make pouring a cup of hot water – not to mention drinking a cup of tea – seem all the more uncanny.⁵

It is this moment of astonishment that is on display in *Flicker*. The eerily lit domestic machines have been stripped of their functionality, revealing the naked physical objects. They are small, finger-sized forms of hardened plastic, and they retain some of the marks of their squishy beginnings. Because of their scale and ghostly appearance, they are afforded imaginary instead of utilitarian existences. These most boring of everyday objects take on bodily characteristics, their cords becoming tails or entrails. Unclothed of function, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Appropriately, appliances are made predominantly of plastic. In 1957, Roland Barthes wrote about the “mythology” of this new material:

Despite having the names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene), plastic is in essence the stuff of alchemy . . . More than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, its ubiquity is made

visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than a trace of movement. (Barthes, 1973, p.97)

Like their source material, appliances are at once entirely banal and the sites of magical transformations. The transition from chemical to plastic to appliance is alchemic in its improbability. Like the ancient wizards, some of whom claimed to have transformed lead into gold, appliance manufacturers change the arrangement of common molecules to create value. Their products may not be precious metals, but toasters and computers are, in Marx's terms, objects of consumer fetishism (Cummings, 2000, p.138). In other words, they are imbued with meaning and supernatural power. Appliances are often bought to make our lives more leisurely, raise our social status, or make us better looking. Bits of plastic and metal don't have the power to do these things; it is the idea of the dishwasher, the idea of the espresso maker, the idea of the stairmaster that work magic.⁶

Our emotional co-dependence with machines has not come about by accident. In the early 1960's, when home comfort was being aggressively marketed, Ernst Dichter, a motivational psychologist famous for developing marketing strategies based on Freudian principles, had this advice for businesses:

Since buying is only the climax of a complicated relationship, based to a large extent on the woman's [sic] yearning to know how to be a more attractive woman, a better housewife, a superior mother, etc., use this motivation in all of your promotion and advertising (Lupton, 1993, p.10)

In the forty years that have followed Dichter's insight into consumer motivation, companies have of course realised that it is not only middle-class women who have money to spend and insecurities that can be exploited for profit. We are all targets of consumer fetishism, and for the most part we are happy to be used by our appliances.

Wires

Appliances are associated with another potentially magical material. The transfer of electricity from power station to socket is entirely dependent on wires. Despite the current hype of "wireless technology," we live and work amidst huge tangles of extension cords, phone lines, and TV cables. Wires snake through walls and beneath floors. They extend from buildings either suspended from poles or buried underground. We are all physically linked by this complex system. Unlike cell phones that broadcast our voices into radio space, wired technology requires us to be physical bodies and at least distantly, to touch each other. Although we seldom think of the transfer of electricity or the web of wires that tie us together, they are demonstrably real.

Yet as Steven Conner notes in his BBC radio lecture series *Rough Magic*, "Wires effect their actions very largely invisibly, like our veins and nerves" (Conner, 2000). Like the biomass of our own bodies, they are capable of doing things to us we cannot directly perceive. And to make them even more disconcerting, they remind us of some of our most common phobias: slithering snakes, writhing worms, squirming maggots. "If wires suggest a simplified,

abstracted, rationalized world, a world arranged in clean lines and squares, it is in their nature to betray that into complexity; for wires breed on themselves; they seem to touch themselves up, and touch each other off. They are all middle, heads and tails obscenely muddled" (Conner, 2000).

Hundreds of strands of wire in *Flicker* reach from lemon-cell to lemon-cell and lemon-generator to light. The wires are small and fragile. Where their ends have been stripped, they look exposed and dangerous. Like the appliances, they are naked, but this time their unsettling complexities are not masked. Instead, they have been left out in the open.

Lemons

Seemingly uncomplex, lemons are determinedly domestic fruits. We use them to make lemonade and like to think of our great grandparents doing the same. Like them, we drink hot honey-and-lemon concoctions when we are sick. We clean our clothes, dishes and bodies with lemon-scented everything. Nonetheless, lemons are exotic produce and have to be imported into the temperate zone, including places like Canada. Native to parts of Asia, lemons were marketed aggressively for the first time in North America in the early 1930's (Morton, 1897, p.160). Pamphlets were produced to introduce consumers to the new fruit and give tips on how to cook with them. One Kerr Home Canning leaflet muses about sugared lemons:

. . . softer in flavour but just as intense, sweeter of course, and suitable for a wide variety of dishes. If more were necessary to recommend them, more is available: they are beautiful as they wait in their jar, and they make wonderful gifts. It's strange how they

manage to be both exotic and super-American (Crumpacker, 1998, p.72).

Lemonade is simple, but the history of lemons is perhaps less transparent than the pure taste suggests.⁷

The 1,200 lemons in *Flicker* are not behaving as we expect them to. For one thing they are resting on the floor, and for another, metallic implants have pierced their skins. It is almost beyond belief that they are doing what they are doing: powering the spotlights above the miniature appliance-creatures. An admittedly outrageous proposition, lemon power is nevertheless infinitely more low-tech and ordinary than the power we take for granted when we make toast. In fact, archaeologists have found evidence that ancient Babylonians and Egyptians may have used similar batteries, probably powered by tart grapes. (They worked, like the lemons do, because charged ions passed between two dissimilar metals in an acidic substance now known as electrolyte.) (Frood, 2003)

Flicker's bio-batteries appear sinisterly cyborgian. Over several days, the area of contact between rind and metal discolours and shrivels, becoming a wound, making this most homey and comforting of fruits unnervingly taboo and obscene. And over several weeks, the potency of the batteries begins to decrease, again making us aware that by using power we are, in fact, using up something. By the end of two weeks, their chemical composition has been altered and the fruits are running out of juice. Are the lemons still lemons, or have they too been alchemically transformed?

Drink While Urinating

In his book, *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*, contemporary French philosopher Roger-Pol Droit suggests ways of achieving wonder at ordinary life. Lessons like “Empty a word of its meaning,” “Drink while urinating” and “See the stars below you” are intended to provoke “tiny moments of awareness.” Droit writes of his project:

Futility can lead to thought, the laughable can become serious and depth can succeed superficiality . . . there exist ordinary situations, everyday gestures, actions we carry out continuously which can each become the starting point for that astonishment which gives rise to philosophy. If we are ready to accept that philosophy is not a matter of pure theory, if we accept that it originates in particular attitudes to existence, in the unusual adventures philosophers have had in the realms of feelings, perceptions, images, beliefs, powers and ideas, then it should not be impossible to imagine experiments to be lived through which may incite further enquiry. (Droit, 2002, ix)

Flicker makes the following additions to Droit’s catalogue of exercises: “think about your toaster,” “follow wires in your mind,” “strip a machine of its function,” and “make organic electricity.” These experiments, though quirky and playful, afford a glimpse of the complexity of everyday life. They make room for analysis of and interest in the world around us.

By distancing materials from their expected functions, sizes and contexts, their meanings are rerouted, transformed and diverted. As a result, the mini-appliances, wire, and lemons in *Flicker* become something more than their usual banal (if useful or tasty) selves. As the Situationist Guy Debord pointed out, the study of the ordinary makes space for changes to occur in the perception of everyday life (Debord, 1961, 68).⁸ Thinking about a lemon’s electrical

capabilities may not seem like a huge change but it is a profound one. There is an important difference between knowing a lemon is sour and knowing that its citrusy sharpness can magically generate light.

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Notes

¹ Situationist Henri Lefebvre wrote about the idea of space in *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991). See also Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: the Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Soja, 1989) and Victor Burgin, *In/different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Burgin, 1996).

² The concept of colonialism and its necessary implication of factors such as race, ethnicity, economics and class is lacking from most studies of everyday life. See Sara Mills' text, "Post Colonial Feminist Theory" (Mills, 1998), Gillian Rose, "Writing, Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies" (Rose, 1999) and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (McClintock, 1995) for discussions of colonialism.

³ See Anne McClintock, "Soft-Soaping Empire" (McClintock, 1998) for discussion of the Eurocentric and imperialist history of advertising.

⁴ There have been many inquiries into the politics of the domestic sphere. See, for example, Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Massey, 1994).

⁵ The word "uncanny" has been used most notably by Freud in his text "The Uncanny" (Freud, 2003) to describe unsettled feelings derived from repressed familiarity.

⁶ For a discussion of media/advertising theory see Hugh Mackay "Consumption and Everyday Life" (Mackay, 1997)

⁷ Citrus produce, like most imported food is part of imperialist history. See Matt Garcia, *A World of its Own: Race, Labor and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Garcia, 2001) and Gilbert G. Gonzalez, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950* (Gonzalez, 1994).

⁸ There is a growing body of work on everyday life. For a useful introduction and compilation, see *The Everyday Life Reader*, edited by Ben Highmore (Highmore, 2002).