

[Parts & Labor]

In the new economy, the public is often led to believe that true democracy is having a multiplicity of consumer products from which to choose. Some would argue that, after all, corporations cater to public demand, and moreover, that today's consumers are sophisticated enough to know how to assert their own agency. Others believe that we, as a society, are being manipulated by the market, and even more alarming, by an ever-smaller group of multi-national corporate giants. In his most recent book, *One Market Under God*, Thomas Frank spends an entire chapter discussing how proponents of the first philosophy (backed up by scholarship that has emerged from the field of Cultural Studies) fail to fully grapple with the mechanisms of production within the burgeoning corporatization of American culture. Frank argues that the "talk back" tactics consumers employ to construct and shape their lives by using and manipulating the products they buy is, at best, a passive form of subversion. I would argue that the truth lies somewhere in between these two views, and cite as evidence the growing number of "artists-as-culture-jammers."

In a climate of commercialization, artists often struggle to reclaim a cultural realm that is not entirely informed by economic exchange. Young artists, like Yumi Roth, acknowledge their hyper-consumerist condition by both embracing and transforming it. In her current exhibition, *Parts and Labor*, Roth displays work that fuses both product and process. She begins by choosing from the variety of patterns and textures available in Formica at home improvement super-stores. As a prefabricated material she can choose from hundreds of available laminates. In works such as *Tawny Legacy with Mincemeat*, she superimposes ornamental designs that she has garnered from a variety of sources including academic-style ornament catalogs, thrift store dishes, and vintage contact paper onto an oversized Formica sample chip. This process fuses fine craftsmanship with mass production and imposes the hand-made onto the machine-made. In *Kit 4182-3B* (a collaborative work with Jennifer Crupi) both hand-made and machine-made metal hardware pieces are mounted with twist-ties to a Formica stand that looks like something you might see at a trade show. Roth explains that she takes the mundane to a ridiculous level so that the viewer is forced to decide what is "valuable in art and in everyday life."

Roth's work not only reflects her environment but it builds upon earlier efforts by 20th century artists to comment upon the relationship between art and everyday life. Duchamp's "Readymades" became unique objects because he signed them. While this act ques-

tioned authorship, originality, and the hierarchy inherent in art, it did not necessarily comment upon the mechanisms of mass production. In the 1950s, photography, film, television, and magazines began to influence and to push the boundaries of high art. Andy Warhol and other Pop artists began to use the techniques of mass media and advertising to transform the everyday. But they were still interested in the business of art. Artists in the 1980s were influenced to a higher degree by advertising and an ever-increasing hyper-visual environment. Motivated by postmodern theory and by the Duchampian inquiry into authorship and originality these artists began to appropriate imagery from the greater culture into their work while incorporating commercial techniques. But while they were using the tools of the media industries, and often conveying messages through everyday objects such as t-shirts and tote bags, they were not necessarily using common, prefab materials. Following in the footsteps of 20th century movements, including the politically correct 1990s, artists in the 21st century have become incredibly media and popular culture savvy. Like previous generations of artists they are using techniques they've learned from the dominant culture to subvert and comment upon their surroundings. They are learning to "talk back," however, by both grappling with and accepting their consumer identities.

Artists, like Roth, are learning how to maneuver in a world of elusive and fluid boundaries. They are re-defining art as, at once, rarified object and populist construct. Roth states that she "uses common materials and familiar formats" in order to "identify and explore the details of daily life that we have come to accept through routine living."

In his essay *The Generation Game* (in *Echoes*, 1996), Jeffrey Rian writes:

Artists operate like probes, searching for means and materials to communicate feelings or ideas. They echo their environment and seek ways to step outside it in order to discover different perceptions about it. Generally, they attempt to unify and encompass; often they seek a different order of understanding, which is engendered by some kind of recognition they have intuited and are attempting to communicate. (p. 42)

Roth does just that. By combining elements of art history, design, popular culture, and traditional craftsmanship, she makes a strong statement about our contemporary condition and the ways in which we can reclaim our identities and our everyday lives.

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