Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Annetta Kapon

**The Measure of Value**

Presented at Las Cienegas Projects
2045 South La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90034
September 4 - October 2, 2010

*Laundry, 2009, silkscreen on linen, clothesline and clothespins, dimensions variable*

*Inside cover: Naturalization 2, 2005, digital inkjet print, 24x36 inches*
The words “measure” and “value” are fraught with economic, political, ideological and ethical valence for a 21st century global culture molded by the forces of late capitalism. Such a world culture, the nature of its meaning-making, its shared or contested boundaries of identity, territory, resources and information, its digital contraction of time and space, all have roots in the Enlightenment, the rise of science and the related philosophy of positivism, which projected an authorial faith in measuring and valuing. As this picture goes, if learned men looked closely enough at the world, gazed as knowing subjects at all its objects, measured with objective precision, subjected data to the indisputable syllogisms of math and logic, out would pop “truth, knowledge.” Such knowing would be tantamount to controlling nature and those “less evolved.”

Like Karl Marx and the epistemes his insights and discourses have given rise to, Annetta Kapon re-examines the italicized absolutes in this formula. *The Measure of Value* might be summarized as Kapon’s on-going dialogue with the presumptions of the rational. In dead serious and playful ways, her work asserts that value and measurement, sign and symbol, logic and progress are terms that are socially negotiated, scaffolded and naturalized in ways that occlude vested interests. As Marx first envisioned it, this negotiation of meaning took place along exclusively economic lines—those with economic power make meaning. Kapon’s work broadens this limited determinism to expose more subtly and even poetically the tricky space between a priori value and the manner in which ideology directs representations of worth—economic, sexual, intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic. Her slant necessarily

*Naturalization 1*, 2005, digital inkjet print, image size 24x36 inches
and immediately implicates constructs like labor and earning, ownership and power, image and word codes, as well as what types of bodies and genders are ideologically situated at the centers and margins of our measures of value. Kapon is interested in the ideological engine driving symbolic value, how and why it is such a trenchant illusion, its ramifications for that unique form of labor we call artwork, its gender and class connections.

The artist comes at this matrix of content in the video piece called 405 North 405 South, not in this show but worth discussing here for its formal and thematic richness. First off, the numeric/directional title, 405 North 405 South (the name of a notoriously crowded freeway in LA) triggers a semiotic of order, math, assessment, grids, reason, and directionality. As against this, the visual itself is a playful, seductive, mesmerizing video of two wayward lines of sparking lights moving continuously in opposing directions. These ‘lights’ represent but do not depict (that is the point) the river of evening headlights—white approaching, red receding—that define Los Angeles as a car culture and urban metropolis. Kapon traveled hundreds of miles a week on the 405 freeway to teach at multiple colleges and make ends meet (the ends never meet, in her massive Workers of the World). Intrigued by the headlights, the artist decided to construct a simulation of this with clusters of strongly lit beads, pulled in opposing strands across a black table to make a sparkling flow of slow night ‘traffic’ in two directions. The result is this at once sublime yet strangely terrifying vision.

405 North 405 South, 2003, digital video still, 30x44 inches
The night and day flow of cars and headlights have become in LA and elsewhere our new techno horizon line, replacing for better or worse the one in nature to which we have oriented our millennial migrations, our body clocks, our maps and our dwellings. In LA, we look to new ‘lines’ of navigation where we locate our coordinates based upon the symbolic value of two places: job and real estate (home) navigated by an object (the car). Urban citizens become dutifully indebted to acquire the best-constructed box on the block, the best-wheeled metal box to travel in. Hence the grand narrative of the American dream (dead in the water as millions lose their real estate and confront the un-realness of estate.)

Kapon alludes to this as well in Naturalization 3, a digital photo in which a vague geometry the artist fashioned out of feta cheese is instantly, automatically read as “postcard-from-exotic-vacation” in which “home” sits under a perfect and sultry sky. It should be said at the onset that socially engaged work like Kapon’s does not preclude the aesthetic enterprise, nor does it exclude the possibility of all of the art mysteries that we cannot fully theorize such as intuition, accident, fascination, wonderment, and most of all, spontaneous creative play.

Amy Mullin in her article Feminist Art talks about the particular issues faced by women who engage in art with social content; they are either dismissed for their illegitimate combination of aesthetics and politics or become chiefly ‘political,’ and lacking in formal rigor. Kapon’s way of negotiating the issue of art and social content is to employ a deliberate flat-footedness that can seem related to informel’s Naturalization 3, 2005, digital inkjet print, image size 24x36 inches.
celebration of junk, or censure of the refined. That is not what informs this work as I see it. She makes careful artistic decisions using objects, toys, chains, linen towels, cardboard, simple acts of labor, deadpan photos that echo the message. Theory and practice, form and content operate in philosophic coincidence.

Kapon comes at many of these inquiries in Laundry, which consists of a number of rectangular linen panels measuring 30x15 inches, hand silk-screened with images of international currency: dollars, Euros, yen, Yuen, pounds, Swiss francs. The pieces are hung on laundry lines with wooden clothespins in the gallery. This art laundry reclaims and re-inscribes—or as Kapon says domesticates—the traditionally masculinist white cube, in much the same way that sculpted breasts and tampons reclaimed the suburban house in Hollywood that Judy Chicago and her feminist students refurbished fusing manual and aesthetic labor as a living installation about women’s work.² Moreover, Laundry forefronts the hands-on work Kapon actually put in, it calls attention to the tangible value of the fine linen she used, and at once depicts ‘laundered’ money, encoding the artist’s feelings about the corporate hoodlums who most gain from inventing value.

When Mierle Laderman Ukeles contracted with a museum to do all the things she does in her house that go unnoticed, unpaid, unrecognized as creatively or socially significant—dust, wash, sweep—she
demonstrated that by simply transforming the arena from private to public, by casting housework as art work, she could radically alter both the cultural value and polemical potential of the exact same labor.³

Kapon is invoking just this condition when she deliberately occludes her artistic labor, hides her sleight of hand just enough to make one more aware of its presence. This she does in Jet Set with its careful staging of model planes used to produce an illusion of ‘real’ flight in a crowded sky. Conversely, when she goes out of her way to starkly bracket artisanal or manual labor, calling our attention to the fact and relative value of her own time and handiwork (as she does in Laundry), we are invited to regard critically that condition which separates the producer from the product with such vast distances—geographic and cyber—as to render buyers functionally, ethically and ideologically oblivious to their role in the conditions of production.

The five works in this exhibition confront the viewer with contrasts of toil (Workers of the World, Laundry) as against luxury and leisure (φ Phi, Naturalization, Jet Set). This trajectory from labor to luxury goods and the often-invisible distance between them came to mind when I visited the artist’s studio and saw she had lined up actual gold necklaces end-to-end in a line that seemed to go forever. This line—of luxury, of production, of history, of axes of Euclidian geometry and of access to halls of power—gets summed up as the mesmerizing digital golden mean cascading in continuous vertical motion in the video work φ phi.

Laundry, 2009, silkscreen on linen, 30x15 inches, total dimensions variable
Installation at Boston Harbor Shipyard
The sculpture *Workers of the World* is also built on the tiered metaphors of a kind of line. It is a ten-foot, heavy gauge metal chain—ponderous, clunky—displayed fully extended across the gallery wall and finished off at both ends with dainty, high karat, solid gold clasps of the sort one would find on a luxury bracelet. This assemblage is suspended on the wall via a small shelf designed to be as innocuous as possible. To a quick read the piece looks like jewelry for a bun-busting Amazon, or like a hardware store display on steroids. Super spare, the ensemble is too quiet and far too inviting of further contemplation to be called neo Dada; one could argue it draws from that tradition in its absurdist scale and displacement of function, but Kapon puts these formal strategies to more complex uses.

In its formal austerity and in the way it forcefully demands engagement with a viewer’s senses/perception, *Workers of the World* relates visually to Minimal art. Kapon is cautious of any automatic authority deeded by compliant believers to overly rationalized systems of judgment and thought. Though her work utilizes as process, content and critique a mechanism or category she refers to as ‘linearity,’ (there is in the work a variety of references to lines, grids, the golden mean, platonic solids), all culturally and summarily valorized operations like measurement, record keeping, and data collection are deployed with skepticism for the entire Enlightenment/positivist mythology of a brave new world wrought by reason.
φ phi, 2010, digital video loop, 6:28 minutes, color, silent
Minimal art celebrated a measured, austere, controlled, industrially manufactured, distinctly masculinist sort of product, whose apprehension was intended to be a logical conclusion—this is what I made, this is what you see. One can easily imagine Kapon reclaiming Minimalism for women and workers in the guise of her super visceral, jumbo scale chain; it is quite fun to see Kapon fill this Minimal tradition with messy metaphors of real work and low culture. The 18 karat gold clasp Kapon purchased for Workers of the World was quite costly; the artist said she wanted to ‘live’ the idea of relative value by forking out an uncomfortably large sum for the relatively small gold clasps and next to nothing for the dense, massive iron links. The gold’s luster is oddly dwarfed and alternatively highlighted by the crude presence of the massive chain, the weight of which this clasp could never actually support. You feel this fact in your body.

Kapon’s intent here is to remind us that gold is soft, pliable, has little structural rationale for its unprecedented mystique. There is no reason for its exaggerated value on functional terms, yet from the earliest evidence of organized Late Neolithic cultures, gold is hoarded, battled for, used as booty and strong inducement. In the first Judeo-Christian art and artifacts, the divine is conceived as gilded. In the economies of most ‘world powers’ paper currency is only real money when it is backed by an equivalent ‘gold standard.’ Who sets this measure of value, or better, why?
The artist chose two opposing materials (steel, gold) with such vast non-equivalences of weight, size, cost, utility and appeal precisely to underscore yet again that value is in her eyes wholly and entirely symbolic; she’d have us reflect on the ready sanctity we are so willing to confer on pseudo-scientific, historicized givens like gold being the most precious metal.

Kapon’s practice raises rather than answers questions—existential to socio-political. When I looked at this work from within the context of other pieces on view, I read the horizontal “line” of this chain not as an object but as a visual metaphor for the linear view of social history canonized by organized religion, by the Enlightenment, positivism and of course, Hegel. Hegel, who influenced Marx greatly, imagined social progress as expressed in the symbolic and enacted relationship of politics, arts and letters to move spontaneously toward some unitary and gilded Geist. Oddly enough, Kapon’s “chain” invites us formally and viscerally to enter at the center and to track perceptually out in both directions equally, as the shiny clasps mitigate a left-to-right linear reading.

Rather than address these very abstract ideas of universalized vs. negotiated meanings in illustrative ways, Workers of the World does its work, which is to say generates both connection and understanding, via what Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁴ called phenomenological empathy. The piece is heavy, mounted to show the pull of gravity, it all but screams labor, work, effort to make, to move, to wear. Although there is that strong reference to a precious thing—something proffered as a gift, to seduce—in the final

Workers of the World, 2010, steel, 18k gold, 122x1½x1½ inches (detail)

-19-
analysis it feels dangerous and oppressive. Apprehending it kinesthetically one senses a ubiquitous, non-specific fettering.

Though the work seems very literal, in fact Kapon does not guide us here. She does not let the work close the narrative, or decide for us whether it is cruel capitalism or the tyranny of utopian conformity that oppresses us. I am still not sure if the chain is a lover’s gift, a tool or a weapon. The conceptual and performative ambiguities Kapon is able to generate tell a story, or better yet, prevent one single story. *Workers of the World* offers an embodied experience of the slippage of signs, of Derrida’s ‘ever deferred’ metaphor and decentered artist/genius, and an enacted proof that representation is not a fixed record of a fixed world.

*Meow*, 2005, 32x11x3 inches, fabric and wire
The idea that our postmodern world is quintessentially unfixed becomes one subtext in the thematically complicated and visually intriguing digital print entitled Jet Set. As an indication of the sophistication with which Kapon’s ideas reverberate from work to work and issue to issue, on its surface the image of Jet Set offers no immediately apparent reference to the contested paradigms of the Enlightenment. What there is, however, is a nuanced challenge to logic’s and patriarchy’s most powerful and venerated visual tools—one point perspective. When the classical world and later Brunelleschi used one-point perspective as the apogee of ordered composition in the arts/sciences, they were also imposing a system—now fully naturalized—that basically stipulates a single position of viewing (and, more ideologically significant, of being). Classical one-point perspective systematizes visually the ultimate God’s view, ‘you are (placed) here.’ The modern and postmodern processes of collage and pastiche, with their discursive entry points and simultaneous centers of attention challenged the one view inherent in the construct (for it is no more than a construct) of mathematical perspective. More complex than mere collage is Kapon’s Jet Set riff on these ideas.

The artist arranged two real desktop models of airplanes—one level of reality—and then mixed in with this 3-D mise-en-scène a 2-D cardboard photo of a plane—another level of reality. The staged ensemble of models and cardboard planes is on a phenomenologically brilliant blue sky. The photo was digitally worked so that the images repeated to create an impossibly crowded grouping of seven ‘real’ planes ‘in flight.’ The final work is a conceptual photo both visually compelling and intentionally kitschy
(we are barely aware but pretty sure these are not real planes). The planes are too dangerously close to be real, they are labeled with national logos of distant locales yet appear to be headed in one insistent direction. The distractingly ‘real’ image uproots venerated Albertian pictorial conventions and relies on the habits of seeing and believing that media-users bring automatically to bear when looking at ‘travel’ photos. Here Kapon pits believe against don’t believe, as she seams together from the perception of real things—models and cardboard—a convincing, even alluring perception of flight that is obviously faux (in the same way that ads showing airborne pristine planes at heights no one could record are utterly implausible).

This is a travel picture that does not deliver to a fixed point but actually displaces us. (Nevertheless, at the lower right of the photo is a barely visible treetop that “anchors” the camera on the ground.) To my take, this photograph is the perfect visual analogue of the postmodern ontological condition Jameson discusses: the disruption of old singular loci of being and power—one God, one Author, one Narrative, one perspective. This disruption by the conditions of globalized media and markets leaves us slightly unanchored, dispersed, unhinged in time and space yet oddly free to negotiate our existential, perceptual and semiotic centers out of “choice,” rather than systematic or imposed habit.

As should be obvious from the above, this is not Kapon rehashing the 80s epiphany that photos lie, but raises questions about photographic truth versus reality at a deeper level of critical inquiry. Jet Set, 2010, digital inkjet print, image size 22.6x30 inches
refers to the long history of the photo as a (shaky) arbiter of the real and a tool whose convincing presence supports other (related) social fictions like class, leisure, the lure of the exotic other. Allan Sekula discussed this in his well-known essay *Dismantling Modernism*, similarly implicating the photo and its easily disseminated representations in inscribing the construct of class as real. From the very first hazy daguerreotype portraits of well-dressed bourgeois fathers proudly displaying what pertained to them—wife, kids, furniture, art, exotic rugs—the myth of photographic truth has been complicitous in institutionalizing ideas of privilege, ownership, territory and terror-of-the-outsider often commingled with ideas of property, breeding and lineage.

We are made privy to these conflations right away in the title *Jet Set* and in the way this work makes us think of some slightly off-kilter travel ad. Which brings us to this: no one since 2001 will look at these benign models without having some reflex to ‘disaster,’ ‘invasion,’ or to a host of also deeply embedded and ideological binaries like East/West, leaving or arriving. Today, Marxist ideological conflicts are not confined to economics, but have taken on a ‘planetary’ dialectic, not predicated only on proposed and real inequities of wealth and power but also on the role of representation in legitimizing the very right of whole cultures to exist.
When the work of thy hand thou enjoy, happy art thou and it is well with thee.
Ancient Hebrew Prayer

The above prayer could be read in strict ideological terms as one of many moral inducements to keep one’s place and do what your lot in life requires; then all will be well in heaven. But what if this means exactly what it says?

In Kapon’s work and scholarship we find—intoned if not articulated—the potentially redemptive power of work and specifically artwork. Though she does let us off the hook about the facile and naturalized symbolic order, deeply imbedded with and underlying privilege—most beautifully called by Marx ‘the hidden abode’—this is not a cynical or even fatalistic body of work. The pieces in the show are super smart and appealing in a playful, humorous way. By making objects of delight that help us think, that enlist our critical and emotional reflections about who and how we are in the world, Kapon aligns herself with a long and venerated history of other artists who may not promise utopia but stand by the curative pleasure—visual, psychic, intellectual, spiritual, personal, collective—of producing, apprehending, using and sharing that which is carefully enterprised, rigorously considered, ethically exchanged; which is, to borrow from Foucault, work that supports and enlivens rather than disciplines and punishes.

Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue, Los Angeles, 2010
Endnotes


3 Molesworth, Helen, ‘Housework and Artwork Author(s),’ *October* vol. 92, Spring, 2000 pp. 71-97.


List of works in the exhibition:

1. *Jet Set*, 2010, digital inkjet print, image size 22.6x30 inches

2. *Naturalization*, 2005, digital inkjet print, image size 24x36 inches


4. *φ phi*, 2010, digital video loop, 6:28 minutes, color, silent

5. *Workers of the World*, 2010, steel, 18k gold, 122x1½x1½ inches

*Venus de Milo*, 1991, corrugated cardboard, 72x24x76 inches
Annetta Kapon
Born in Athens, Greece, Kapon lives in Los Angeles and has exhibited in the United States and abroad since 1982. Her work has been featured at Side Street Projects, Jewish Museum in Greece, the University of Chicago, LACE, Exit Art, RED CAT, Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, and the Biennale of Sydney among others. She has had solo exhibitions at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Armstrong/Schoenheit, Institut Français and Zefxis in Greece, Carnegie Mellon University, U.C. Riverside, Southern Exposure, and the Numismatic Museum in Athens. Kapon received a BFA from Otis College and MFA from UCLA. She is the recipient of numerous artist residency fellowships, as well as WESTAF, Art Matters, Pollock/Krasner and California Community Foundation.

Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue
Doctorczyk-Donohue is the Managing Editor of ArtScene and Co-Managing Editor of Visual Art Source, a national online journal and joint venture of Art Scene and ArtLtd, and has written numerous essays on fine art for exhibition catalogues, art journals and online sites such as 1stdibs, a New York art and design website, and the Huffington Post. Her works include “Fact of the Matter,” about noted Irish artist Patrick Graham, and “When Worlds Dream” a collection of children’s poetry. She is a Professor of Art History at Otis College of Art and Design and is on the advisory board of the Art Historians of Southern California’s web journal, ShockWrite, and a member of the National Association of Art Critics.