From the Stock Room to the Hospitality Suite: Notes on the Work of Annetta Kapon

By Allan Sekula

If one were to trace a lineage for the philosophical objects of Annetta Kapon, the thread would lead back to Duchamp’s play with language and everyday items, passing on its course through the realms of Arte Povera and Fluxus, winding further for a knowing moment around the mordant petty-bourgeois surrealism of Claes Oldenburg’s Store Days and then entwining briefly the hoods of Magritte’s lovers.

Exhibit A: A blue-grey couch (or sofa, to use the more polite term), three cushions wide, with the middle cushion multiplied upward in a fashion fit for the princess and the pea, such that the stacked cushions form a mortarless classical pillar, and the couch itself a dubious but nonetheless comforting architectural support. Any lounger seeking the comfort of the right or left cushion is thus cushioned as well by a soft throne that places any immediately adjacent companion beyond the ceiling of the room, somewhere up among the air-conditioning and heating ducts. And the other empty cushion is now walled off, so that the divan for three has become an impossible love seat for two isolated souls, suffering the presence of an invisible chaperone.

This enthroned presence is not Aphrodite, as one might suspect, but rather Athena. Or so we are led to believe by Kapon’s title: Owls to Athens (1997). Eros submits to the guidance of wisdom. Love is shadowed by justice, by the law, which can be both protective and prohibitive.

Or is something else in play here, another sort of proposition entirely? Owls to Athens recalls another urban saying: “coals to Newcastle.” As lumps of coal are (or rather were) to Newcastle, so are owls to Athens. Athena has all the owls she needs. A surfeit of owls, a surfeit of cushions filled with whatever soft synthetic has replaced the ur-comfort of goose down, gleaned from the bodies of birds presumed by humans to be deeply silly (“as a goose”) rather than profoundly wise. The couch itself (and since this is a language game, we must remember that in English “to couch” is both to “lay down flat” and to “express obscurely.”) is grey in color. This leads us to a famous passage from Hegel:

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old.
By philosophy’s grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood.
The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk. (1)

Hegel’s allegory of a philosophy unable to rejuvenate (that is, change) but able only to retrospectively understand (that is, contemplate) the world is of course reversed by Marx (whose alternate verbs I have placed here in parentheses) in an equally famous call for a revolutionary materialist philosophical praxis, the “Theses on Feuerbach.” (2) Kapon, as an activist socialist and feminist in the post-dictatorship Greece of the last half of the 1970s, would have known well this clash of ideas even before her first serious projects as an artist in the 1980s.

The couch of philosophy, horizontal bed of contemplation and sleep, metastasizes upward in a vertical proliferation of component units, in a overflow from the stock room, driving a wedge between two hypothetical human subjects, conversants, comrades, lovers. Beyond being a statement about a world fraught with division, aggression and fatalism, is this also a more narrow and disembodied portrait of the art-world as the “hospitality-suite” of theory? “Something big” is in the way, impeding the possibilities of more modest experiments in communication, ordinary-language games.

Kapon, whose resume includes long stints of teaching both Greek and Latin as well as guiding art students through the showrooms of theory, would perhaps relish the quadruple sense inherited from Latin by the English word “host,” which threads back etymologically both to hospes (host, guest, stranger) and to hostis (stranger, enemy). In Latin, it is “the stranger” who provides the shared mediating term between friend and enemy, never to be entirely trusted, always the outsider.

One does not have to read Georg Simmel’s essay of the same title to know that the stranger might have particular resonance for the great-granddaughter of the chief rabbi of Thesaloniki, home to a community of Jews set in exilic motion by the Spanish Inquisition and then, seventeen generations later, more than decimated by the journey to Auschwitz.

Thus we come to exhibit B, which follows on the observation that the column of cushions is both vaguely threatening and somewhat comforting, and that what has been built up here is wildly provisional, easily brought down in a tumble with the least individual or shared bodily exertion, and just as easily and perhaps hilariously rebuilt in what amounts to a child’s rumpus room exercise.
Now we are looking at two cameras, of the same type, non-identical mid-1970’s single lens reflexes, pawnshop refugees. The work—Untitled Cameras (1992/1995) exists in two forms, as an actual pair of cameras, and as a photograph of the pair, seen, of course, by a third camera, our surrogate witness at this primal scene.

The two machines face one another, lens to lens, in what amounts to a kiss. Some viewers like to imagine a lustier genital encounter, but I prefer the suggestion of more tentative erotic contact. Sometimes a kiss is... just a kiss. Imagine that the cameras themselves are “faces,” with the lens as extended lips and the prism–housing as a brow over hidden eyes. What do these lightly–touching lips see? Is it the lightless interior of the opposite camera body? No, each camera sees the unfocused light that pours through the eyepiece at the back of the opposite camera, that is, the infinity behind the other object, the anterior world from which it has emerged. Only at a moment of simultaneous shutter–activation would the two cameras exchange the infinite blackness of their own interiors. Anyone able to round up two such cameras can perform a simple replication of Kapon’s experiment. (Whether for the fans of genital metaphors simultaneous activation is tantamount to shared orgasm is anyone’s guess, but if so, one would hope that it could occur at the slowest possible shutter speed.)

With this simple act of postioning of two ready–made manufactured objects Kapon evokes two different notions of the eros and the sublime, one based on light and openness and exteriority, and another on darkness, closure and interiority.

This leads us to an elsewhere well–articulated aspect of her work, a sculptor’s poetics of love and reparation. (Exhibits C–G) She turns guns into pillows for infants, hopefully preventing their need for guns under their pillows later in life (Stuffed Guns, 1993) She painstakingly re–pieces the fragments of a smashed car windshield into a bowl in a gesture that counters the feverish thanatos of automobile carnage in J.G. Ballard’s novel Crash (Ford Mustang, 1996). She combines wooden serving dishes in larger wall–mounted assemblages, literally enlarging upon and memorializing and making–crazy the baroque craft of hospitality (Large Wood, 1999). She “restores” fallen and lumberized trees by edging circular jigsaw puzzles of parquet pieces with a ring of bark, giving us back at least a slice of life (Floorshow, 1999) (Note that both these last works transform the horizontal into the vertical.) And finally, in what amounts to a wonderful travesty of Christian forgiveness, she gives as an assemblage of the kindly and euphemistic stock phrases of bureaucratic rejection, crafting a video–poem from missives that lesser souls would shred in a rage and consign to the circular file of personal history.
(Verbatim, 2000). Herein lies an operative aesthetic principle: the path from the stock room to the hospitality suite always passes by the trash.
