

## M a s k i n g , P a s s i n g

That modern, anti-modern and post-modern art, as well as whatever we mean by contemporary art, is mainly a middle class invention should surprise no one, and yet it does – now more than ever, perhaps. No doubt, this has something to do with the steadily declining status of the class itself in the years following its “heroic stage,” which roughly leads from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, through the period of the “Great Wars” and up to the present. As we know, advanced art emerges side by side with this class, to lend it a voice and an image at the moment of its own emergence, when it is still novel and can thereby provide art with novelty as well. This novelty takes shape as a Realism dedicated to the experience of the average, the mean, the middle, but right from the outset, this experience is already being described from the margins. To represent the middle as a class precisely, one that defines its identity in measures of separation from and aspiration toward the classes below and above it, is to betray its principal cause of overcoming class altogether. Here, then, is the origin of the pejorative assessment of the bourgeois as utterly lacking in class-consciousness; it issues from the advanced artist who is no less implicated in this dilemma.

Having forsaken his class, or having been ousted from it, the artist swings freely between the lowest and highest echelons of society. As a consequence of his chosen profession, that is, the artist experiences “pauperization” while also grasping for what Clement Greenberg has termed “the umbilical chord of gold,” and this may well gain him a wider perspective on social matters. However, bohemia does not qualify as an authentic alternative to the class left behind, but rather appears to exaggerate its features. In his radically de-centered, precarious state, the advanced artist is effectively a bourgeois caricature.

This point has been made countless times before, and so I propose it only by way of introduction to the following discussion of masking, which is a theme more germane to the exhibition at hand. It is easy enough to imagine the artist in disguise, dressing down or up as the occasion demands, for this is still seen as a necessary sacrifice on the part of the person to the truth-telling mandate of their work. That the work is not only a product of such deception, but in itself deceptive, is perhaps harder to imagine, but this is exactly what this show asks us to do. For instance, what if we were to consider abstraction in the most general sense as a mask? What if, in art’s historical drive toward the zero-degree, the tabula rasa, all that has been revealed is the fact of occlusion? And likewise every attempt to start from scratch, to found a “new mythology,” a “new language,” a “new pictorial order,” etc. – what if these too had more to do with evasion than with transcendence? The artist who has evaded his social origins will remain evasive to the end, and the work that served as the way out might open some doors, but without ever quite showing one in.

As if by way of demonstration, two photographs by Lisa Lapinski present the same still-life set up – a conical bottle bearing the face of a clown poised atop flowers and grasses on a wide rustic chair – against different wallpaper backdrops. One is comprised of a Vasarely-like pattern of zig-zag stripes, and the other, of flowers subjected to the friendly sort of stylization one finds in greeting cards. As in a design exercise by Joseph Albers to demonstrate the relativity of color perception, the central motif is transformed by its context, passing from oblivious kitsch (against the flowers) to knowing kitsch (against the stripes), and thereby also from one social station to another. That artists are sometimes compared to clowns certainly has to do with their simultaneous distance from and proximity to the seat of power, and in this sense Lapinski gives us a decoy with well-established credentials. Like everything else in these pictures, the clown is a cliché, but one that is by no means fixed or stable, as socially affective currents are passed between its painted-on face and the papered-up wall.

Fred Lonidier's photographs of migrant workers wearing masks, while they are not necessarily meant to reflect back on the figure of the artist, take on a recursive reading by association with other works in this show. The subjects are masked to protect their identities, but one has to assume that the mask affords the artist some protection as well, for here again we are dealing with a transaction between social stations and their respective occupations. The mask suggests that certain kinds of work are invisible, while simultaneously insisting on their presence, and in this way it also serves to reveal what has been concealed. A particular grievance is here being aired, but the politics of it must also be factored into the aesthetic work and the conditions of its making, these being no less insistent in their invisibility.

When the artist appears in disguise within the frame of the work, as in the case of Amy Laughlin who films herself out and about dressed up as a sailor, it is to make evident what is always ongoing outside the frame. The work as a document corroborates the artist's transition to another station and occupation, allowing her to pass for what she is not – a member of the US military – while simultaneously exposing the artifice involved in such passing. What is generally concealed is here again revealed: that the occupation artist is itself a role to be played. But this is not to suggest that it is somehow frivolous or trivial, since the role-playing artist is by no means an exception. Their operations are exemplary, both within art world and the world at large. Openly declaring the fact of her own hidden-ness, the artist highlights the hidden element in all that surrounds her. Masking is the shared quality that collapses the dialectic of inside and outside.

The role of the artist is always played by way of a proxy: clown, illegal alien, sailor, rock star, vandal, etc. These are not selected at random, but rather for the comfort of their fit, as figures likewise role-playing under-cover. What is hidden underneath the mask is only another mask. The point is made manifest in the graffiti-like marks that Tom Ellis scribbles atop his cavalier-painterly genre scenes, thereby reinforcing our perception of painting as a layered thing, and moreover as a thing that, under each successive layer, becomes more and more occluded in itself. As with Asger Jorn's series of "Modifications," these works testify to a process of making that is partly also destructive, every next brushstroke submerging the last, yet here Jorn's anti-art impulse is inwardly directed. When it is not only painting as a generic category that is being "defaced," but one's own work, then we are no longer contending with a critique so much as an expression of ambivalence.

The opposition between painting and drawing is academic in the extreme, and if it is being reenacted by Ellis – and by Mark Roeder as well, who dubs his works "anti-paintings" – it is only to note the attenuation of a once vigorously contested topic. The attempt to bury painting's essential nature underneath layers of artifice is finally no less irrelevant than the attempt to uncover and expose it. And if, instead, the academic reification of once critical approaches were here being flaunted to acknowledge the avant-garde's failure to rejoin the spheres of art and everyday life, that too would be to repeat what is by now well understood. Accordingly, one has to assume that these artists' stake in the matter lies elsewhere, neither in the demarcation of art as a discrete category nor in its outright liquidation into non-art. The one big idea that underwrites each of these positions has fractured into many smaller ideas, where may art retain (or regain) a measure of autonomy only to serve as a lightning rod for a whole range of outlying contingencies.

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In painting it is the uneasy juxtaposition of line and shape, black and white and color, the representation of The Imaginary and the presentation of The Real, and so on, that opens the way out into a world of equally stressed negotiations. One concrete example of what these might consist of is given in Kevin Hanley’s photograph of a broken and then provisionally repaired jewelry shop window. This relatively banal observation of urban minutiae undergoes an aesthetic conversion within the picture, the flatness of which operates as a reminder that here as well we are dealing with a process of layering, of concealing and revealing, and more specifically of revealing through concealing. In this sense, it is a readymade version of the “anti-painting,” but one that extends that model directly into the real-world fray between the haves and have-nots. That Hanley has labeled the work a “collaboration” between the crime’s perpetrator and its victim is telling, as it is only in art that their antagonistic interaction could ever take on such a potential. It is a “collaboration” because of the artist’s own participation within it as a silent partner that is once again invisible and insistently there. Between the three of them, then, they produce a work that is all about exposing the fiction of the show-window’s transparency, and by extension the availability of the goods behind it, by literally masking it with tape. No longer inclined to take sides, the artist becomes the medium, the go-between, and in effectively passing for one and then the other – jeweler and thief – he renegotiates their stand-off as a productive principle.

The rows upon rows of profile pictures that Brian Mann has culled from the “pages” of Facebook – another window – constitute the virtual fulfillment of just this sort of concealing-revealing. It almost goes without saying that these profiles appear off-the-cuff only because they are so carefully curated by their subjects, but in the way that they are re-curated by one of the designers of this exhibition (the other is Jesse Benson) they are effectively rendered faceless. Arranged into identikit groups, the element of construction is thrown into sharp relief as every possible display of quirky individuality is slotted into a series of utterly conventional registers – a coded system that, like any language, pre-exists its usage. And it is not that once free flowing lines of individual expression had suddenly been reformed by digital technology into a tight combinatory matrix of interlocking cables; the internet only lends sharper definition to a condition always ongoing. Transparency worn as a protective mask: it is a condition that increasingly extends beyond the middle, but that will always remain its point of origin.

In place of a differential formulation of society, the bourgeois once sought to impose the rule of the same. The utopia of classlessness is secured by way of domination, but what happens when this class loses its idealistic “edge”? This is a condition that art speaks to today, and not from a position that could any longer be construed as either pro or con. Here, instead, what is being asserted is the hiding in plain sight, the moving between stations, the masking and passing. The middle has always had an unfixing identity, and in the person of the artist who only becomes reconciled with his station in its most precarious moment, this constitutes an increasingly rare expertise.