

## *Good News for People Who Love Bad News*

*Good News for People Who Love Bad News* is the title of the fourth studio album by Modest Mouse, released in 2004. The album's lyrics, when not digressing into the abyss of adolescent interpersonal psychology, form an ironic diatribe on the state of media-inspired fear in today's society. Even though I 'discovered' this band when they were already past their prime, or as a friend of mine intimated, 'has-beens', I found great pleasure in listening to their energetic and experimental post-punk melodies. Modest Mouse, who had formed at the height of the American Grunge movement in the late 1990s, took their name from a line in Virginia Wolf's short story, "A Mark on the Wall", wherein the protagonist, while fixated on a spot on her ceiling, muses over the complex notion of self-praise. "...for those are the pleasantest thoughts, and very frequent even in the minds of modest mouse-coloured people." This circuitous train of rather strained associations brings us to the work of Heidi Voet, which among its plethora of charms, and seemingly saccharine take on life, confounds those nihilists among us who prefer bad news to good.

Heidi Voet's fervent appropriation of song lyrics for the titles of her artworks tends to veer away from the grungy indie rock fare of the aforementioned Modest Mouse, in favor of more refined European electro-pop for inspiration. While her artworks and the titles they assume are quite up to date, there is also, like my late arrival to a band that was past its prime, a skewed notion of timing and irony about them. My intention here is not to compare musical tastes, but to lead us towards Voet's sensibilities, which appear not only in her titles, but also in her materials and forms, reflective as they are of the rhetorical and complex web of quotations that help define our contemporary condition.

'Contemporaneity', defined by a heightened state of pluralism, conversely sees the globalized culture it mirrors as increasingly claustrophobic and self-referential. Irit Rogoff refers to contemporaneity "not as a historical period, not as an explicit body of materials, not as a mode of proximity or relevance... but

rather as a conjunction”.<sup>1</sup> This conjunction, whether it is found in the persuasive nature of popular culture or our shared identity as consumers, is the force that condenses the world and makes Heidi Voet’s work a significant reflection of it. The quotidian referents employed in Voet’s multimedia works are charged with associations that, like the song lyric that gets stuck in your head, disrupt any form of logic, and instead allow us, whether we like it or not, to “inhabit terrains that may not have previously made us welcome or, more importantly, which we would not have known how to inhabit productively.”<sup>2</sup>

If the contemporary era is defined by its conjunctions, as Rogoff suggests, they are conjunctions born at an unequivocally accelerating pace. Paul Virilio’s dromology, or science of speed, tells us “the speed of light becomes the world, globalization is the speed of light.” As communication technology and the multiplying conduits of global exchange have hastened the pace of reality today in a transformative way, the electro-pop tunes, whose snappy lyrics serve as titles to Heidi Voet’s magical readymade works, have become the soundtrack.

Time becomes the main focus of Voet’s *Is six afraid of seven/ ‘cause seven eight nine/ I’m about to lose the pieces I find*, an extravagant installation composed of thousands of candy-colored, plastic digital watches that have been woven together in the form of a patterned carpet. Most immediately we grasp the confluence of forms – a familiar physical adornment that measures daily time on the wrists of people worldwide – multiplied and transformed into a home decoration that lies at our feet and chimes in unison every hour, on the hour. It is a twenty-first century cuckoo clock, flattened and distributed horizontally, signaling the fusion of cheap material, cheap labor, and rapid consumption. The choice and scope of material for this piece reflect Heidi Voet’s many years spent living in China, a country whose manufacturing prowess has transformed today’s global economy. These colorful digital watches, which will eventually fill dollar stores worldwide, before soon thereafter filling garbage dumps, reflect the speed

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<sup>1</sup> Irit Rogoff, “Academy as Potentiality,” in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, ed. Angelika Nollert and Irit Rogoff (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006); This book was published as part of an international series of exhibitions and projects initiated by the Siemens Arts Program in cooperation with the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Goldsmiths College in London, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp, and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

at which the cycle of production, consumption, and waste has shortened. Yet the work is not simply a critique of consumer society, but instead an inquiry into the psychology of everyday objects and the subconscious terrain they inhabit within us as consumers.

Voet's works, using simple, common, ready-made materials, often elicit an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*. Both patterned carpets and plastic digital watches have occupied a similar plane of human experience – one as a grounded and permanent home fixture, the other as a mechanism affixed to the transitory body – but both domestic and completely ordinary. Yet the lack of obvious rationale in combining *this* material to *that* form is displaced by the unconscious faith we assign these objects to cushion our lives with meaning. The convoluted aesthetic and period references – such as the carpet being 'Oriental', but having become a middle-class tradition in Euro-America, or the digital watch being a product of Japan's economic revolution in the 1970s – degenerate, like time itself, into a cacophony. The batteries in the watches fade, the alarm synchronicity fails, and the logic of the modern world is rendered unreliable, lying defunct and wailing at our feet.

The first time that Heidi Voet's watch carpets were shown at Kasteel Beauvoorde in Belgium, the brash material and colors of the watches stood out in high contrast to the gallant, but dark setting of the European castle. One of her largest carpet works to date is permanently installed at the subway entrance to an upscale Shopping Plaza in central Shanghai. The carpet is displayed as 'high art', but its lowbrow materials once again contrast with the ritzy, international luxury stores of the mall. Positioned under glass at the mall entrance, so that visitors walk above the carpet as they enter, not only accentuates the threshold of high and low, or in and out, but also the speed at which society has advanced. Situated along one of the main subway hubs in one of the busiest areas of this futuristic city, a non-stop flow of people traverse over the carpet all day, everyday, with the clocks below long since unable to keep up with them.

The conjunctions that Heidi Voet flaunts in her work are inspired in part by her trans-cultural experience of residing both in Europe and China. This

schizophrenic sharing of cultural space and logic is most explicit in her works that employ soft-core porn material. Voet amassed a small collection of nudie magazines, touted as ‘art anatomy publications’, that she found on newsstands in Shanghai, which became fodder for several bodies of works. In *A whole new world a go-go*, pages from these books are cut out and folded, like Japanese origami, to form bouquets of flowers. In modern China, where ‘spiritual pollution’ monitors are on constant alert in public places and online, it is curious how these ‘indecent’ images slipped by the authorities. For a society where women are purported to “hold up half the sky”, the issue of representation is one of the first readings one might have had of these works, especially since these women’s subservient position as objects, whether sexual or anatomical, is further accentuated by being folded into flowers. Certainly, there is a surfeit of meanings that bind *flowers* and *girls*: flower girls at weddings; to de-flower; “she’s a flower”; as pretty as a flower, etc. In Voet’s work, the status of these nude women as symbols of desire is reassigned as their symbolic equivalent: flowers. The concrete vessel in which the flowers are displayed further confounds this collapse of metaphors. Heidi Voet’s flowers get mounted onto wire stems and then placed into hand-sculpted cinder blocks that act as ‘vases’ for her ‘flowers’. The cinder block, a masculine material emblematic of China’s massive urbanization efforts, is feminized both by the flowers that inhabit it, and the sleek, Rubenesque forms that Voet shapes them into. The arrangement becomes a sly critique on the incongruity of Chinese policy today, with macho construction campaigns on one side and prudish media on the other, “highlighting”, as Maya Kramer states, “persistent gender perceptions of fragility”.<sup>3</sup>

These magazine girls also become the inspiration for another series of work, *Fruits & Vegetables*. In the process of folding the flowers, many cut or cropped images of the naked women have been left behind. Heidi Voet then juxtaposes these leftover picture fragments with pieces of fruits or vegetables and re-photographs the assemblage in a miniature studio constructed of the same

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<sup>3</sup> Maya Kramer, *Beautiful because it is brief*, Exhibition catalog, Shanghai Gallery of Art, 2011.

aforementioned concrete block. While Voet's set of ingredients is consistent for these works, the resulting product is quite different. If in the flower vase works, photography becomes sculpture; in these works, the strategy of re-photography is used to negotiate the divide between sculpture, photography, and the readymade. Heidi Voet poses her models against the granite backdrop and, like her own exquisite corpse in the making, she fits fresh vegetables in for missing limbs. It is child's play, conjuring up the image of a young girl making sense and nonsense of her body and the world around her. Voet, after all, is only following her intuition, or as Jasper Johns ruminated about his artistic process: "Do something, do something to that, and then do something to that."<sup>4</sup> The merger of items and imagery in Heidi Voet's pieces add up to no logical sum, but in the end, vegetables are equated with women and both are equated as objects in a still life. Many of the fruits and vegetables in these images are specific to Chinese cuisine, and so match the Asian women depicted in the photographs. They also heighten a sense of exoticism or patronization of the *other* – we are, after all, what we eat. But any minor offense to political correctness or feminism that these images may provoke is tamed by their absurdity, playfulness and simplicity. Once again, it is time that becomes Voet's subject. While the photograph stops time in its track, the vegetable is organic and will disintegrate with the march of time, as will the model's youth also fade. Nothing is permanent.

If Virilio's claims that our interconnectedness can inspire a "synchronicity of emotions on a global scale", or a "community of emotions,"<sup>5</sup> Voet's work perhaps sheds light on what is universal, and yet at the same time on the distance that still remains between different cultures and ideologies. For a solo show at the Shanghai Gallery of Art, a ritzy venue located along the city's famous waterfront Bund, Heidi Voet chose to reproduce a work that was first shown in an abandoned hospital in Belgium. The two venues could not be more diametrically opposed. The dilapidated hospital space was covered with graffiti, which inspired Voet to mirror the fierce, urban terrain of the site with a graffiti work of her own. Hers was not spray-painted onto the wall, but instead made from

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<sup>4</sup> Jasper Johns, *source of his artist quotes on color paintings, art & life: the photo-exhibition 'Cy Twombly'*, Museum Marseille Amsterdam, Autumn 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Administration Of Fear*, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 2012, p. 30

gingerbread slices and meringue that she painstakingly applied to the wall with glue. It was a laborious, time-consuming task, one that, like much of Heidi Voet's work, especially in tandem with her chosen materials, had implicit attributes of domestic or so-called 'women's work'. The artist's tedious and delicate process manifested itself as a feminized and edible graffiti blow-up. It was an uncanny, site-specific response to an environment whose history of nurses comforting the ill had nearly been obliterated by vandalism and degeneration.

Repurposing the work in Shanghai, a city characterized by its glossy facades and financial might, had its own set of conversion problems. Not only was graffiti a recently imported phenomenon – one whose essence of bad boy, urban cool was often commandeered for commercial real estate purposes – but gingerbread and meringue was a foreign treat whose subtle attributes and inward references were more than likely concealed to most Chinese. In Shanghai, Voet decided to appropriate a work of graffiti from one of the city's designated tagging walls. The piece she chose was a blur of zigzag lines that formed the word *Ersatz*, meaning substitute products, usually inferior in nature. This word takes on magnified significance in modern China, where forgery, intellectual property infringement, and piracy are so prominent that *shanzhai* or knock-off manufacturing is now being examined as an innovative global strategy by intellectual circles. In the Shanghai gallery, Voet enlarged this abstracted word and, just like at the hospital, rendered it in gingerbread and meringue dots. The artist further heightened the piece's site-specificity by installing it with two ends of the word bridged by a window that peered out across the Huangpu River onto the skyline of Pudong. The glimmering, hyper-modern city of Pudong, barely twenty years old, and with a population of seven million embodies China's miraculous economic growth of the past thirty-five years. Flanked by Voet's aromatic gingerbread wall, a grab bag of incongruous associations are conjured up: Hansel and Gretel's gingerbread houses and China's urbanization; fairy tales and economic miracles; the alienation of the urban and our comfort in the domestic; human scale vs. global scale; territory vs. movement.

While the sociopolitical content of Heidi Voet's works is unavoidable, a larger psychological inquiry of the quotidian is also at play. Sometimes this inquiry is

enforced by a sense of regionalism or folk tradition, as in *Ersatz*, with her choice of materials; the pattern of the clock carpet; or simply in her ironic sense of humor which is constant throughout her creations. For an exhibition that celebrated Shanghai MoCA's eighth anniversary, Heidi Voet enlisted the ritual of throwing confetti for *The Party Has Started*. This ancient practice, which originates in Pagan rituals intended to symbolize good fortune at births and fertility at weddings, has since come to denote public and private victories and other milestones around the world. For this occasion, Voet extracted millions of tiny paper circles, two centimeters in diameter, from the pages of used newspapers and massed the circles together in a pile. The transformation of the rectangular Broadsheet format of the newspapers into a rounded pile of small circular slivers was formally arresting. However, Voet's mountain of newspaper flakes was not a sculptural work so much as it was a performative one, whereby museum volunteers would toss a handful of the flakes from the mezzanine level to the main level below at forty-five minute intervals. The flat, circular shape enabled the slivers to waft down slowly, spinning 360 degrees in all directions, like snowflakes or leaves falling from trees. It was a majestic sight that would eventually transport the pile from the floor above to the ground floor below.

Recalling both the scatter work of Barry Leva and the happenings of the nineteen-sixties, Voet's work was a tremendous hit at the exhibition's opening reception, and one that literally got the party started. The throwing of the paper, originally limited to designated volunteers, was quickly hijacked by the audience who started tossing it over the atrium ledge themselves, before throwing it at each other, and eventually the situation degenerated into full blown revelry, with people lying on, swimming in, and spreading around the paper circles throughout the entire museum.

Yet besides the celebratory reaction that it elicited in viewers, the work had other more serious connotations. Confetti is usually made from colored or white paper. Here, Voet deliberately chose newspaper, which is not only black and white, but laden with news of yesterday's natural disasters, economic crises, and social dilemmas. In Voet's piece, this recent history becomes reshuffled, dispersed and fragmented. *The Party Has Started* is both a cynical nod to an

information-spewing society's collective amnesia, but a gentle reminder that in China there is only one party; it is the party that controls just about everything, especially what is printed in the newspapers. Like the eclectic world that it reflects, Heidi Voet's rather circuitous train of associations and offbeat sense of humor lead us back to the enigma of the quotidian.

*...But if the party's over, if the fun has to end  
Could you do this for me my friend?*

*Would you just please bury me with it?  
Please bury me with it*

*Good news for people, who love bad news  
We've lost the plot and we just can't choose  
We are hummingbirds who are just not willing to move  
And that's good news for people who love bad news<sup>6</sup>*

Mathieu Borysevicz

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<sup>6</sup> Isaac Brock; Eric Judy; Dann Gallucci. *Please Bury Me With it*, Modest Mouse, Good News for People that Like Bad News, 2001 Sony ATV Music Publishing Company