

A Certain Distance

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These past few days, I keep thinking about that rug made out of plastic digital watches in Heidi Voet's studio. It was rolled up and packaged in foam. Voet has made several such rugs, and they have ended up in all sorts of places, from white exhibition spaces to the dining hall of a European castle. The watches are synchronized by hand prior to the opening of each exhibition and are set to emit chirp-like electronic alerts every hour. As time passes, the chimes grow further apart as irregularities emerge in the timekeeping capacities of the cheaply made watches. Gradually, the time kept by each watch diverges from that kept by each of the others. Imagine a cacophony of electronic beeps rising and falling from various parts of a massive rug in an exhibition space, each watch using its own miniature speaker to announce its individual marking of the passage of time.

The rolled-up rug in Voet's studio was bound for the United States, where it will be included in an exhibition entitled *Neo Povera*. The title of this exhibition demonstrates how people are in the midst of seeking a means of understanding for the art of today. We presently live in a time in which everybody knows there is something happening around the world, but nobody can say exactly what it is and what the consequence will be. At least in the field of art, looking for connections to the recent past is an effective means for understanding the present variety of art practices.

Certainly, Voet's consistent use of affordable, everyday materials is reminiscent of Arte Povera. That 1970s art movement used commonplace objects to make radical statements about class, but Voet is not using plastic watches, construction materials, fresh produce, or other cheap materials only to protest about consumer society or elitism in the art world. These materials have also stimulated her creativity simply by being near at hand. Although Voet's practice seems to emphasize her materials and the completeness of the artwork, her thinking demonstrates a degree of continuity with the tradition of conceptual art, which runs sharply counter to Arte Povera's emphasis on spontaneity and heterodoxy. She applies her enchanted, but critical eye to these accessible and incidental materials, evincing a highly individual and female way of thinking. In this sense, she is above all a feminist artist.

Of course, rather than debate (any further) why an artist belongs to this or that

school of art, it is better to look directly at the artworks and explore why s/he is the inimitable artist that s/he is. Voet is adept at using straightforward methods to create artworks. The formal language of her works is always direct, but their significance is more opaquely dependent on the viewer's interpretations of the characteristics and contextual environment of the materials. Even the most unappreciative viewer of art cannot help but recognize the visual beauty of Voet's works. She draws on classical models of form (Middle Eastern rugs and ancient Greek sculpture), but also on mainstream visual experience, especially the eye-catching imagery of mass media (print advertising and natural history photography). Her work, *As beautiful as the chance encounter on a gallery wall of a painter and a drill hole*, sees a childlike color scheme emerge as she uses pigmented plaster to fill in the holes and blemishes that have been left behind on the walls of the artist-run space IT Park in Taipei, the "historical scars" of past exhibitions. More recently, with *Stars & Constellations*, she scattered fake Euro coins (made in China) across the concrete floor of an exhibition space, mixed in with real coins from China, America, and various other countries, where they twinkled like stars in the night sky. The use of 'faceless' blank Euros, bearing eleven stars in a crude approximation of the European logo, but with no detail to distinguish their countries of origin, adds to the sense of a work that seeks to explore European identity and global economics. These and other works demonstrate Voet's facility for using simple methods to create poetic tableaux, to the extent that at times I am sure she must be a master alchemist.

Broadly speaking, Voet's works all involve physical objects, and they attain an apt feeling of presence. Unlike many conceptual artists, Voet's works always present a visual beauty without losing their abstract quality and particular rhythm. Yet I find it intriguing that however pleasant they are in their physical dimensions, her works retain an intriguing sense of distance. Without a doubt, these works are all handmade, but unlike many such artworks, they do not emphasize the personality of their maker. Voet's works might have been completed by anyone, and in this way the artist maintains a certain distance from the art. It seems to me that this distance neatly mirrors the actual distance between Voet's artwork and its viewers.

That is not to say that the distance is a great one. On the contrary, Voet's works differ greatly from the art of the spectacle. The materials, scale, and themes of her work are always intimate. The distance is a one-to-one, horizontal kind of distance, not a one-to-many, many-to-many, or – most depressing of all – a one-to-none kind of distance. If the distance between Voet and her works (and the

distance between her works and her audience) might be approximated, then it is certainly near – but not quite close.

This nearness is distance enough to ensure that there is no physical contact, no tactile interaction, and no transfer of body heat. The face-to-face experience of Voet's art convinces me that this distance encourages sober observation, a consensus of culture and experience, and a little imagination to fill in the gaps. In other words, this distance provides just enough space to accommodate all three, leading me to surmise that in a pinch it could be called a "civilized" distance (despite the inevitable problems that come with a word such as "civilized").

I am reminded of a cliché about female artists: that they supposedly use the physicality of creativity and appreciation to express their specific experiences and feelings. The difference with Voet is that she identifies questions within these specific experiences and feelings, and then projects them onto a more universal framework, such as considerations of cultural prejudice, for example. This distance permits a work of art to establish the possibility of dialog, which allows the artist and the viewer (each on their own side of the lens) to avoid the peril of self-absorption in favor of mutual interaction through observation, consensus of culture and experience, and – most importantly – imagination. It is worth mentioning that avoiding self-absorption is an effective method by which today's feminist artists can seek to surpass their predecessors.

It is for precisely this reason that I believe Voet's art to be highly intellectual. Her intelligence is manifest not only in her conceptual methods and her partial inheritance of the Povera standpoint, but also in the space that she creates by exploiting the distance that exists between her artworks and the viewers' bodies. In this space, the sensitivities of the artist and the audience, the consensus of culture and experience, and imagination come together like three dancers on a common stage, each unique, but fully *simpatico*. Sometimes, the real-life divergences between these dancers leads to the establishment of new imaginative frontiers. And sometimes, these dancers attain a moment of reciprocity in the space between the artist who creates a work of art and the audience that beholds it.

Upon reflection, my favorite Voet installations all seem like visual metaphors. They create a painterly space in concert with the physical exhibition space (or they occupy such a space as objects). They employ elements of sound, sight, and taste to express a richly rhythmic tableau. In addition to the carpet of digital

watches, *Is six afraid of seven/ 'cause seven, eight, nine/ I'm about to lose/ the pieces I find*, to which the Povera label has been affixed, I also often think of all those fake and faceless European coins jostling in amongst the thousands of coins from genuine currencies, all scattered across the cement floor of The Pavilion in Beijing. These coins of various sizes reflect and absorb the dim, diffuse light, creating a blend of brightness and darkness. It is visual art, but also like music.