Half a Millennium of Progress Carried Home

Kit Hammonds

The heraldic patterns of woven flags, not immediately locatable in the world order; Tribal masks with a lurid plastic skin. Still lives of fruit sitting in a blinding light. All familiar artefacts one might find in a museum, but without the patina of age, they have a surreal air, an unsettling presentness.

Museums are usually rather dark, stuffy and somber places, where their acquisitions are preserved for all time, frozen in the narrative of historical progress. Plastic bags, on the other hand, lie at the opposite end of cultural, or any other, value. Temporary containers for transient goods, they are disposed of at will on a daily basis. It is not only the bags' themselves that we overlook, but also our own responsibility over their permanence. Each is destined to outlive us multi-fold, persisting in the environment for half a millennium, or thereabouts. Heidi Voet's exhibition *500 years* brings these two distinct containers, in a ludic turn transforms the mutable plastic bag, a "vessel for an ever-changing content", into the carrier of history. Cast backwards, the life of a plastic bag defines a period of significant transformations that have shaped the present. Voet employs them as a medium through which to consider the incongruities a globalized, contemporary world carries with it.

Woven out of thousands of polyethylene bags, the flags in *A Young Man in a Young Man's World* each represent a nation that once asserted independence only to have met dissolution. The ever-changing geo-political landscape plays out on the slower geological time of the land. Therefore any country, new or old, is to some extent an arbitrary container, despite being a predominant factor in a sense of identity. The plastic bags, meanwhile, tend not to respect such borders and divisions, bringing with it displaced ecological problems. Their use here becomes a material metaphor for one of the most significant forces that divided the world and partitioned cultures over the past five centuries of "progress", colonialism.

In *Oh No, Not Me* thousands more of these plastic bags are used to recreate masks based on ethnographic artefacts in European museums. Masks such as these are commonly ritualistic, and so carry values beyond their material form as social objects. Like the flags they bind people together through tradition and rites of passage that connect to a sense of home and kinship, in their own context that is. As museum pieces, however, they are displayed outside of time and place, representing a "primitive" time and a cultural "other". Frequently they made their way to Europe by being torn away from their own cultures by missionaries and colonialists as trophies that demonstrated the dominance of modernity. And while the ethical questions that this raises are apparent today, there is still a tendency to turn away from its deeper historical implications that might undermine a Western centrism that persists. As Sieglinde Lemke brings to light: "the collective self-fashioning of a modern identity was predicated on a break with Victorian moral conventions and aesthetic values. However… the negation of the received genteel code of nineteenth-century culture was sometimes concomitant with an embrace of that which their predecessors most despised —'the primitive.'"[1]

It is, somewhat ironically, in the mask's supports that Heidi Voet brings her own light to bear on this destabilised cultural identity. Sections of a reconstructed, and then deconstructed, modern Rietveld chair is used as the raw material for the display stands. Rooted in its own particular lineage of radical, rational modernism, the design now lies out of copyright and available for appropriation today.

John Rajchman writes the contemporary "involves a time (and sense of time) that complicates or undoes the grand divisions between modernity and tradition in terms of which European thought, and art, was so pleased to define itself."[2] Heidi Voet's remade flags and masks address the inherent contradictions that attempts to reconcile these grand divisions that not only played out in thought and art, but in other aspects of a globalized world in which the threads of colonialism may still be

---

[1] Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, Oxford University Press, 1998. P146

[2] John Rajchman, "The Contemporary, A New Idea?" in Aesthetics and Contemporary Art, Sternberg, 2011. p126

traced. Paradoxically weaving becomes an act of undoing, unmasking, or unclothing.

In *Peer Pressure*, a series of photographs of fruit which have exchanged their skins, continues this chain of associations. Once a seasonal, local product, global trade saw different varieties transported and sold over continental distances. Exotic fruits such as pineapples were such oddities in Europe even as late as the 19th century they were displayed as curios and status symbols at dinner parties rather than eaten. Today supermarket shelves, and the carrier bags, are filled with non-native fruits that are often grown in equally alien environments.

As photographs they fall close to a particular tradition of still-life painting, that has special relevance. The still-lives of Flemish painting during the Dutch Golden Age, its empire built on trade, included in their details allusions to decay. Flies, mould, and other 'memento mori', or allegories for mortality. The dark interiors in which these historic still lives were set is transposed in *Peer Pressure* into the contemporary bright, sterile white light that pervades the contemporary gallery, supermarket or operating theatre. Placing Voet's fruit in a network of associations to cultures of material, commodity and even the plastic surgery, in which identity is constructed. Just as national flags clothe identity in one sense, and masks act as social skins, in another, the skins of fruits confound their identity, while, perhaps seeking to identify with their peers to which the title playfully alludes. We might find further analogies in Marc Augé's description that "it is only now, in the rather blinding light of a generalized situation of cultural circulation, that we can become aware of what the eruption of the outside world into their societies has meant for certain peoples." [3]

Here lies the heart of Heidi Voet's project to address today's quandaries in identifying both the self and other as coeval, that is as equal in time. "Globalization, not just as an economic phenomenon, but also as the generalized sharing of time, as the growing *contemporanization* of diversity", as Pedro Erber puts it, "brings with it the germ of a thorough questioning of the very cultural and historical identity of the

[3] Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, Stanford Press, 1999. p50

West."[4] The myriad connections that have emerged between peoples can, therefore, only be addressed in the unpicking some of the foundations on which the objects that represent, mediate and even nourish us might be inherently contradictory.

The quandaries this presents are the warp of Heidi Voet's work in *500 years*, the high density polyethylene bags the weft that binds them together. The struggle to connect or construct a shared sense of time and place is acutely articulated in Voet's work with ludic sensibilities, that carries cultural legacies home.

[4] Pedro Erber, "Contemporaneity and its Discontents" in *Diacritics*, John Hopkins University Press, 2013. P36