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RARY

Ghislaine Leung

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Compared to Europe, where art history heavyweights such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Marcel Broodthaers provide a distinguished pedigree, or in the United States, where Michael Asher is celebrated for his thoughtful shuffling of the gallery decks, the category of institutional critique, art that takes the conditions of art's production and exhibition as its form, is altogether baggier in a British context.

On the one hand, we can turn to the decidedly odd Artist Placement Group, a loosely assembled group of artists who kept one foot in the exacting conceptual art scene of the 1970s, while planting another in society at large to take up 'placements', a kind of creative consultancy role, in industry and the civil service. At the other extreme, it is perhaps artworld everyman Grayson Perry, who cast a quizzical eye over art's absurdities in service of *The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!* and turns the act of institutional criticism into an affable pantomime.¹



FIG. 1 Installation view of *CONSTITUTION*, by Ghislaine Leung at Chisenhale Gallery, London. 2019. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

In comparison, *Constitution*, the work of Swedish-born London resident Ghislaine Leung, and the first in a season of commissions to be presented this year at Chisenhale that aim to 'contribute new discourses on institutional-critique', presents a much more matter-of-fact concern with the spaces in

which work and audience meet. The show even comes with a recommended reading list that includes an entry by the Health and Safety Executive regarding building regulations in the United Kingdom. Physically cold, the gallery has been set up like a mobile home salesroom, with a selection of exterior wall panels bolted to the floor around the perimeter of the space. A pair of these, *Lovers* (2019), boasts security lights, one on each panel, both controlled by sensors: one is sensitive to light, the other motion **FIG. 1**. The result, of course, is that one comes on only at night, when no one is around, and the other only if someone is near during the day, like a couple living separate lives. But it is only by getting up close that you can see a tiny gemstone stuck to one of the walls. Disney-pink and shaped like a love heart, it looks like an enchanted snail.

Another double act, *Parents* (2019), occupies another corner. Two wall panels with four plug sockets, three of them covered with safety plugs that protect little fingers. The fourth connects to a monitor attached to the rear of one panel playing a professional training video on how to stuff a balloon. The 'Stuff-A-Loons'-produced film, played here without sound, demonstrates how to entomb a toy bunny in order to celebrate the birth of a baby: *It's a girl* repeats across the balloon's surface **FIG. 2**. The balloon neck is stretched to accommodate the mangled rabbit before being filled with smaller balloons and dressed with ribbons and yet more balloons, one in the shape of a teddy bear. Finally, a white gel is sprayed across the top of the dome and buffed till it shines by a *Certified Balloon Artist*, a cheerful woman wearing white cotton gloves. Once finished, the primed plastic pagoda stands tall. A sacred offering to the goddess of girly.



FIG. 2 Detail of *Parents*, by Ghislaine Leung. 2019. Installation (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

Gift wrapping is also a feature of *Bosses* **FIG. 3**, a gift set that comes in multiples of twenty. Each consists of a pair of oversized mugs with 'THE BOSS' printed on them and wrapped in heart-covered plastic, tied with a curl of ribbon to allow a crown of cellophane to gather at the top. Taken together they look like a puckered seam running down the gallery's centre. The theme of reciprocity also runs through *Children* **FIG. 4**, a wall-mounted heater attached to a portable battery generator independent

from gallery energy systems. Plugged into the generator is a nightlight – that talisman of childhood sleep – a Lilliputian house the colour of marzipan.



FIG. 3 Bosses II, by Ghislaine Leung. 2019. Installation (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

Loads, a grey metal security box decorated with another pink sticker and holding a tablet loaded with a PDF file, is likewise a celebration of confectionary coloured tat **FIG. 5**. Visitors are invited to scroll through photos taken by the artist since she moved back to the United Kingdom a couple of years ago. Images taken inside discount shops prevail: baby pink strollers, plastic flowers, heart-shaped photo frames and glossy gift bags. Sugary little things, cute-as-a-button, that skirt between the feminine and the infantile.

The literary critic Sianne Ngai has argued that the label of cute always carries a latent aggression towards the vulnerable object it describes.² The dumb bunny, small and helpless, yet built to withstand the aggression of a toddler, stands, therefore, for both cuddles and control. And the inclusion here of so many conspicuously cute images, objects and names, each one inherently passive-aggressive rather than overtly combative, hints at what can happen to art practices that set out to expose institutional secrets but end up absorbed by amorphous curatorial discourse. If it is the case that the 'more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes',³ then what could be 'cuter', in a contemporary art context, than the claims made in the name of squishy and ubiquitous institutional critique, its definition by now elastic enough to mean all things to all curators? Leung's adoption of this kind of imagery, however, seems largely restricted to an interest in scale and texture of the gallery's physical supports. *Toons* (2019), for example, 'consists of all internal walls being painted gloss white', a match for Mickey's gloves, so that the gallery becomes a cartoon strip animated by visitors navigating the space.



FIG. 4 *Flags and Children*, by Ghislaine Leung. Both 2019. Installation (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

The interview with the artist published in the booklet that accompanies the exhibition includes a discussion about technologies of noise cancellation as a mode of resistance, an idea put to the test in sound work *Kiss Magic Heart* (2019). The title is taken from the names of three UK radio stations, while the sound itself is modelled on the sinusoidal waves generated from a twenty-minute broadcast clock, a graphic representation of a show's format in the guise of a clock face – song | ad. | song | ad. | news | ad. – used to organise commercial shows. The sound file is then made up of six channels split into pairs, with the left channel in each phase inverted. In a standard closed system, the wavelengths align and cancel one another out. However, in *Kiss Magic Heart* the distance between the speakers has been calculated to avoid cutting out the sound entirely. The noise that does sound crackles and gasps in time with the human bodies that share its space.



FIG. 5 Detail of *Loads*, by Ghislaine Leung. 2019. Installation (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

While noise cancelling headphones can be a godsend in a city where noise pollution can feel like physical attack, the use of the technology here comes across as a refusal to relate, and *Kiss Magic Heart* feels out of step with the rest of the show's strange back and forth between colourful cutesy and the gallery's determinedly unlovely structural supports. There's something to be said for thinking about how the two might come together in the spaces of contemporary art, but in the end, like a Bluetooth connection going in and out of range, *Constitution* fails to make its point.

Footnotes

- 1
Grayson Perry: The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever! Serpentine Gallery, London, 8th June–10th September 2017
- 2
S. Ngai: 'The cuteness of the avant-garde', *Critical Inquiry* 31, no.4 (Summer 2005), pp.811–47.
- 3
Ibid., p.815