

ALLEN TOPOLSKI'S *MILIEUS OF MEMORY*

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Allen Topolski, *Once Familiar*, 2007, Found Objects/Video, H36" W28" D21"

What is compelling about Allen Topolski's mixed media, site-specific installations is their hinting at familiarity and incitement of curiosity. Uncanny and enigmatic, the found fragments and detritus of industrial culture, which he collects and modifies for his works summon the *milieu*, the virtual space and time of personal and public memory. Their former fabrication and mechanized functions as household items, long since rendered

redundant and obsolete, remain ambiguous suggesting only traces of past associations. Hidden and imbedded within the machinic topography of memory, their potential for reclamation and renewal through Topolski's reconstituted "appliances" is too easily forestalled and impeded by any forced concentration and effort. Instead, what is necessary is a delay of immediate judgment to allow for a lingering on juxtapositions, his toolbox of disparate yet contiguous images, ideas, and objects, a lingering that enables associating and playing with and being played by the contingent circumstances and materiality, the milieu of his work.

By situating incongruous images, ideas, and objects side-by-side, Topolski initiates relational to-and-fro processes of exploration, experimentation and improvisation in-between viewer and his installations; affective and conceptual interactions that stir and enable remembering any past associations with the artifactual elements in his artworks by initiating an archeological loosening and untangling of forgotten experiences and memories. As the force of exacted attention is destabilized, shifted, and allowed to flow through multiple lines of flight in random transversal trajectories, complexities and contradictions of memory and cultural history are revealed and reconstituted as a dynamic field of action; a bricoleur's incongruous assemblage in which space and time are experienced out-of-joint; and, where affective and conceptual events, occurrences in the body generate and emerge from in-between what has happened in its past and what is potentially possible and about to happen in the future.

It is indeed through space and time gone awry in Topolski's artworks that the body's seeing and understanding differently than what was socially and historically constructed, and is assumed about the past, gains immanence; where the extractions and

contingencies of memory's contiguous fragments reconfigure into a dynamic assemblage that recalls the past from the manifold experiences and understandings of contemporary life. To experience the differential, machinic associations in and through his work in this way constitutes a critical engagement with history, which emancipates and releases memory's mutable and dynamic force, its creative potential rather than a nostalgic obsession with the past. In doing so, Topolski's works activate the transformative and paradoxical discourse of parody through which conventional representations are simultaneously imitated, repeated, then upended; that is, flipped in order to mock the convention. It is through the repetition and flipping of representation through parody that discourse is differentiated and opened rather than restricted and shut down; a differentiation that challenges convention while renovating and renewing discourse.

Like with all of his artworks, Topolski's *Once Familiar* (2007) is sufficiently ambiguous as to the previous functionality of its constituent parts each of which dare any immediate recognition or association. While this installation's grotesque can easily repulse and repel viewers who adhere to conventional codes of culture, it nevertheless attracts and appeals to those who are curious about its incongruous, uncanny associations. In doing so, the eager are drawn in, they embody the work by exploring, experimenting, and improvising ways of seeing and thinking differently through its entangled and intersecting associations. It is through such open and diverse encounters between viewers and the milieu associated with the artwork that they are mutually constructed.

Unable to exact its past identity and purpose, the largest feature of *Once Familiar* consists of what appears to be some sort of component from a factory manufactured household item, an off-white metallic appliance with a baked enamel surface. The upper

portion of the appliance consists of a large box, a rectilinear container, the lower portion of which rests on a matching stand with an attached electrical cord that dangles and reaches out and away from the appliance. Whether or not it is a refrigerator, or washing machine, or freezer, or sewing machine, or...remains a mystery. What is evident, however, is that Topolski's evocative installation parodies the utopian sensibility of living with electricity by way of an unplugged, dystopian assemblage.

Inserted on center in the upper front side of the appliance is a miniature, black and white monitor on which a video of churning liquid, water perhaps, is continuously looping as if to suggest what is going on inside its concealed interior space. It is unclear as to whether the top of the container can be lifted to access its interior compartment or whether it was merely intended by its manufacturer as a tabletop to accommodate other appliances. With the supposed container's top closed and its interior concealed, the churning liquid video offers further inferences about the appliance's prior function: perhaps a portable washing machine, or bathroom sink, or...

Apropos parody, the inserted video monitor harkens back while at the same time mocking the console style television sets of the past. Moreover, as the repetition of the looped video mocks the frozen positioning of the console, its fluid, moving image mimics its "fluid" passage through time as a cultural artifact. However, such conjectures notwithstanding, to suggest that Topolski's artworks constitute mere guessing games only alleviates and trivializes their more compelling affective and conceptual facilitations; ways of seeing and thinking that resist metaphoric closure and absolute certainty about past identities and functions. As such, *uncertainty*, the yet unknown and imperceptible,

and *curiosity*, the desire to inquire, to go beyond what is seen and known, constitute the reciprocal forces in his artworks that generate manifold insights and understandings.



Allen Topolski, *A Tool for the Making of a Happy Home*, (Date??),

Found materials, H15" x W23" x D12"

The playful ambiguities of parody in Topolski's work are also evident in an installation entitled *A Tool for the Making of a Happy Home* (Date??). A horizontal vacuum-formed pink plastic object stands on what resembles the four grey legs of an old TV console and framed similar to the rounded screen of a cathode ray tube (CRT). That framing is then repeated in the upper center of the pink plastic form around a cutout suggesting an empty space where a CRT may have once been housed. The plastic's

saccharine, Pepto-Bismol color and shiny cold surface is complemented yet contrasted by a soft and supple pink, padded fabric, resembling part of a woman's undergarment, which is suspended hammock-like from a metal rack, an armature of sorts that extends the hanging fabric out toward the viewer. The installation's milieu, its erotic hard and soft materiality, its sensuous, fleshy pink coloration, and its seductive corporeal reach parodies the sexual insinuations of television ads, sitcoms, and other programming that tease and cajole the public to tune-in and boost the networks' Nielsen ratings.

Topolski's *A Tool for the Making of a Happy Home* is not television, but *not-not* television in the paradoxical sense that the installation constitutes a virtual space from which multiple ways of seeing and thinking can emerge and generate. Such an understanding of virtuality should not be confused with the virtuality of electronic and televisual media in that the former has to do with the body's felt experience and potential for exploration, experimentation, and improvisation as compared with the artificial systemization and simulation of the latter.

It is the virtual, creative space and time of the body that Topolski's works activate, where the complexities and contradictions of human experience play and are played by the body; and, where such virtual playing critiques the continuous televisual programming and re-programming of the body's consumption of mass mediated culture by way of parody. In doing so, works like *A Tool for the Making of a Happy Home* and *Once Familiar* mock modernism's utopian promise of "happiness" that it failed to deliver through mechanized living. Contrary to the trivial entertainments of televisual culture that perpetuate the myth of "the good life," Topolski's provocative installations incite creative

impulses and felicity in the body as it takes pleasure in researching and rethinking the past in relation to what is immanent in the future.