

KALEIDOSCOPE

WEB SPECIALS (13 Jan 2011)

MATT SHERIDAN SMITH interview by Chris Sharp



Matt Sheridan Smith, installation view at kaufmann repetto 2011, Milan
Photography by Roberto Marossi
Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan

The work of Matt Sheridan Smith is no less full of language and a sense of absence, silence, and loss. Such melancholic motifs are largely the byproduct of an interest in the erosion of the self and agency in an increasingly administrative, template-based culture, in which identity is organized according to models such as Facebook and LinkedIn. These concerns are played out in a practice that comes to resemble kits, which are conceptually and formally predicated on the readymade. Here, however, the readymade functions not as an end in itself, but rather as a hypothetical point of departure, which, like all kits, comes replete with a set of (implicit) instructions. Consider for example *Neon Sculpture (unbent)*, 2009. Aggressively banal, the work consists of a collection of unbent neon tubes, partially sticking out of a box lying on the ground. The fact that one of them is illuminated signals their general anxiety to quite literally get bent— to be relieved of their muteness and conform to language, any language, regardless of content. A stark and risible sense of surrogacy is foregrounded in other works such as in Smith's collaboration with Nikolas Gambaroff. Titled, *Nowhere for Nothing (New York Stoop)*, 2007–10, this makeshift, portable wooden stoop speaks to the disappearance of neutral urban spaces ungoverned by protocols of consumption. Its facsimile presence outside an exhibition space is always complemented by a sculptural element inside the

exhibition and a photocopied booklet, which documents the history of the interstitial project and each of the stoop's iterations.

Referencing materials (no more incandescent friends), 2009, fulfills a more discreetly elegiac function. Composed of a neatly organized collection of packaged 75-watt incandescent light bulbs placed on a rectangular sheet of black velvet. It refers to the European ban on incandescent light bulbs (fully effective as of 2012), and the threat this poses to exhibiting art like that of Felix Gonzales-Torres. Here, in an administrative twist of logic, legislation quite literally and indiscriminately proscribes artistic expression. And yet this piece is deeply affecting. Packaged and unused like this, the indifference of these bulbs to the art they will soon be forbidden to represent becomes incontestable, and a whole human drama seems to be unceremoniously trivialized, thus encapsulating a pathos and harried sense of agency lodged deep within Smith's practice.



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Chris Sharp: Let's start with *The Melbourne Shuffle*. Ever since you shared with me your interest in this singular, although no doubt symptomatic urban phenomenon, it has continued to haunt me in a rather dull peripheral way. It is at once fascinating and disturbing— something, in the end, I would prefer to forget. Revisiting it on Youtube, I am struck by how little variation it seems to admit— at least to the untrained eye— and how it essentially precludes dancing together.

Matt Sheridan Smith: Yeah, well the *Melbourne Shuffle* beautiful. It's something missing. I think it's interesting you say it haunts you peripherally, because that's where it always resides, on the periphery. In every video I've seen they're always somewhere in between, in interstitial spaces: parking lots, empty malls, train stations, often (I'd deduce) at home alone in the hours after school but before the parents get home. I've never seen a video of it in a club, the "original" context you might expect, since the soundtrack is always hard club music. It's true also that there's no real variation, only inflection. They look like they're dancing themselves into a box, or on top of a box — delineating some box. I think more interesting for me is there's no real beginning or end. It just turns on

and off. I've been thinking a lot about the orientation of past-present-future as a paradigm and whether that paradigm isn't somehow obsolete, somehow shifting into something else as a consequence of the rise of information. There's that line in *The Coming Insurrection*: "There exists a youth to which no political reality corresponds, good only for destroying the bicycles society has so conscientiously laid out for them" 1 (sic). Replace "political reality" with "temporal reality" and there's my fascination with the shufflers. They seem out of time. It has all these contextual indications that it's part of a history I recognize (club culture, rave dancing, running man) but I don't think it could care any less. It's got no memory. There's no real forward or external gesture, or even a clear catharsis. It's just spending time, filling time, in these in-between spaces. Logging time. "No future" is a cliché by now but "no past" and "no present" seem to be just as appropriate here. There's just on – and off.

CS: Right– the absence of catharsis is spot on. But, as you allude to when mention "spending time," there is a question of exhaustion, of sheer, undirected expenditure, which is at once frantic and methodical. I think it's also interesting that you quote that particular passage in *The Coming Insurrection*, which, referring largely to a political reality in France (burning Velibs– municipally provided bicycles), is about lack of political representation, whereby a completely marginalized social group/underclass radically seeks to enact– to recklessly indulge in a Rancièrism– a kind of re-distribution of the sensible ("Try ignoring us now!"). Meanwhile, the Melbourne shufflers, withdrawn not only into peripheral spaces, but also into themselves (they are often wearing a hood, a baseball cap, their heads down, and therefore faceless), are not invested in any such representation or redistribution. They seem perfectly resigned if not to their non- status, then their ineluctable future status as consumers, and as such, willingly participate in a cultural pantomime, whose only refusal could be said to be a(n unconscious) refusal of pseudo-countercultural refusal itself. What is more, your "on and off" characterization aptly likens them to video games. However, on and off, for me, ultimately, merely correspond to consuming and not consuming, for which the Melbourne shuffle is a but a premonitory rite. Or another even darker way to think about it is to see the consumer as a zombie– my thinking here is obviously influenced by Lars Bang Larsen's essay "Zombies of Immaterial Labor"– and the Melbourne shuffle as the (systematized?) death-throes that typically precede the state of being undead.

What you bring up about a lack of past, present and future seems inextricably linked to immaterial labor, or what Franco Berardi has named semiocapitalism, a regime which seems self-explanatory. For me, one of the more trenchant parts of *The Coming Insurrection* regarded what they describe as "the ethos of mobility." They write, "To be mobilized is to relate to work not as an activity but as a possibility." 2 This in turn, I think, ushers in a permanent psychic state of deferral, which is, needless to say, a negative condition of possibility. Strong echoes of this can be found in your practice, for instance, in its melancholic preoccupation with a kind of readymade kit.

MSS: I like that last quote a lot as well. Much of my work, and especially the "kit" pieces you mention, sits in some sort of apparently permanent state of possibility. I think deferral is more of a reading...but one that I'm interested in. Deferral assumes however that an artwork has an absolute arrival point, a state of "done" in the sense of finished. I don't think I intend to defer that as much as complicate it. I'm definitely fascinated by these moments where one has to decide to act or not to act, and also when something is done, or can be said to "be done" (again in the sense of "finished"). That said I definitely try and defer or deflect authorship. I've been thinking a lot about real and imaginary "life spans" of an art object, and am especially fascinated by the idea of an art object that is ambiguous about where, or at what point, in it's life span it is at the point of exhibition or reception by a viewer. I'm also always asking myself a silly question that keeps me kind of centered in all this: what do objects want?

But back to the Melbourne Shuffle...I think – and I'm just reading the videos I keep watching on and projecting a lot here – well, I'm not entirely sure about that they are acting as consumers here, or that the dance is a rehearsal for consumption as you put it. It's definitely true that the Velib burners are more active in a sense, insofar as they "consume" the bikes in an act of very visible destruction, it's a sort of mis-consumption, whereas shufflers do withdraw – they withdraw their presence, their appearance, and also their personal/subjective signifiers, the basic currency of the Facebook age. They're unreadable beyond that hat, the crew they're associated with, and the

inflections that make a style, and not even a necessarily legible one from the outside. It doesn't seem to refer back, or look back, or want in at all.

The peripheral sites to me are a pretty sure evasion of that consumer role you speak of, or deferral if you like, because it is true they will inevitably consume at some point, like anyone. I think the social has become so intertwined with consumption at this point there's something really interesting in where they choose to do this, or where they can. Especially going back to the fact that the videos never seem to take place in a club, the kind of natural consumptive interstice for this activity. But, when I imagine it, there's definitely a rupture happening when you're a bystander standing on a train platform and that dance breaks out. It's surreal, like a bubble.



Matt Sheridan Smith, *Double expired portraits*, 2011

Photography by Roberto Marossi

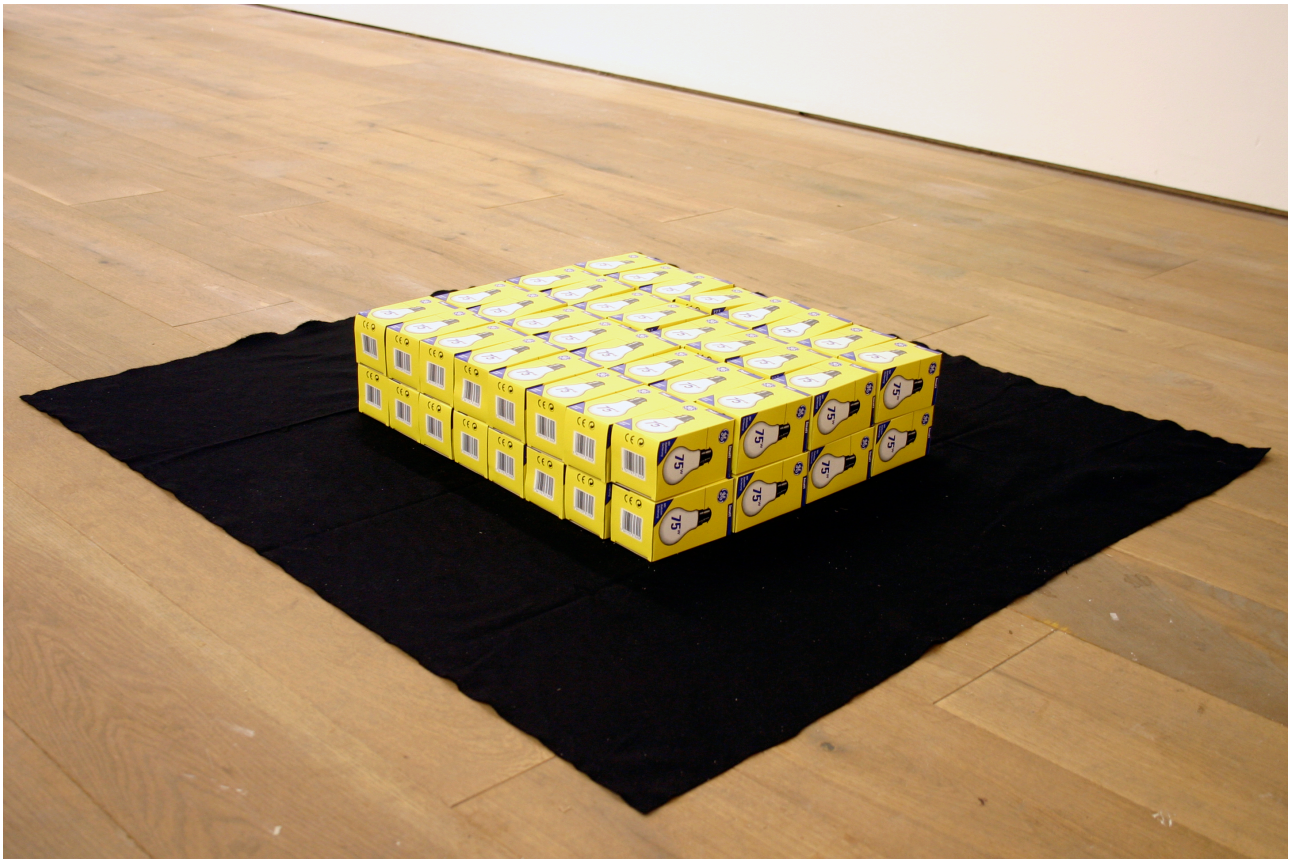
Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan

CS: You are of course right to put down a disclaimer; I should do the same, again, for the simple reason that I could never claim to intimately know what motivates the Melbourne shuffler. However, when I somewhat cynically identify this as a pre-consumer rite, I do so based on two assumptions: one is alienation, in terms of the peripheral, and insuperable aloneness which seems to characterize this activity, and the other is its apparent lack of interest in visibility, and hence political enfranchisement. And yet, I really appreciate your identification of Velib burners as (mis)consumers, even if it's not entirely justifiable— the consumption of Velibs being a consequence of a lack of power to truly consume (in a more traditional sense). I found myself in the heart of Kreuzberg last summer on May 1st (May Day), which is typically the site of cataclysmal clashes between the police and protestors/rioters. Walking down Skalitzerstraße through the mobilizing throngs, the only feeling more disturbing than the dread of impending violent protest was its utter inauthenticity, the overwhelming sense that it was a rehearsal, and a rather self-conscious one at that, and that if any 'real' violence were to take place, it would do so for the sake of desperately trying to recover some bygone sense of authenticity, when something was really at stake. Which meant that it was a violence devoid of any real political purpose. The whole thing felt totally programmed, formulaic, and as such, farcical. It was terrifying. Perhaps, in the end, the withdrawal betokened by

the relatively anonymous Melbourne Shufflers speaks more germanely to current dilemmas of political agency. That said, we seem to have two parallel, totally disparate conversations going here. But there are a few moments here where the two unconsciously link up in terms of being difficult to locate in time and space, not to mention life and death. So I'll bite: what do objects want?

MSS: No way to know. It's not something I try to figure out, although there's a lot of good work being done in contemporary philosophy, much more sophisticated versions of that question. For me it's more of a refrain. On the one hand I think of it as a sort of fantasy projection, going back to this idea of lifespans. I'm fascinated by the "life" of a Greek bronze that was lost in the bottom of the ocean for thousands of years. Or David's former life as a civic monument. The idea of forgeries living out the life of the lost original. In my work I've been more and more interested in stepping back and opening a space for that kind of narrative. It's a matter of play, I know it never really escapes our own metaphysics, correlationism, all that. I'm sure I'm anthropomorphizing in some weird way. Does post-humanism have a version of anthropomorphism? We could use one with more contemporary contours. I like the idea of working with the readymade but somehow trying to put it outside it's normal gears of selection, framing, context, by imagining a will, or an arc that presents a different ordering of intensities and hierarchies for the "moments" in the life of a work. Maybe it's a way of diminishing my role in the life of the thing. Maybe I have a real fear of things being finished, in all senses of the word. Most of my work has a sort of schizophrenic seriality in it. Someone told me that. That I do seriality, but I do it all wrong. Things get remade and repeated and cannibalized and suite-ed and it's hard to see where the artwork is sometimes once I'm done assembling everything.

I lived in Berlin for a few years, I remember those May Days really well. It really is like a stage play, a performance. That's kind of cool though. The politics (and the "activity" of protest) being referenced are totally lost and farcical but there's also something intrinsically political in that ritualized reenactment as well, in the simple fact that people come together to do that every year. It's a negative demonstration, in that in the end it's a display of the absence rather than presence of the class struggle it claims to represent, and it probably doesn't make for a very positive prognosis on the political terms you're speaking of, but it's something very political nevertheless. It probably has more to do with the running of the bulls than it does with protest. I have a funny story about May Day concessions. That probably used to mean something really different. I was just getting a bratwurst from a cart one year when a huge group of people started running. I had to run or get run over, and as I was running I dropped my keys and somehow managed to go back upstream, bend down and get them, and turn around and run it out. My bratwurst was perfectly intact at the end of it. I do agree with your point about violence. Anything seems possible once the play gathers steam, and if there's a slight moment of reflection, and a break in the illusion, you're exactly right to say that's where they'll probably reach to in order to snap back into it, to snap it back into feeling real again.



Matt Sheridan Smith, *Referencing materials (no more incandescent friends)*, 2009
Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan

CS: The condition you describe, not to mention the way describe it, comes off as very neurotic, schizophrenic even. It seems to at once accept and reject a certain natural order of things— that works of art live and die, are resuscitated, evolve, mutate, become unrecognizable, and throughout this whole unpredictable process become definitively divorced from their original intentions. All of this reminds me of Benjamin and his claim that Baudelaire was writing for posterity, for history, with a certain heretofore (then?) unknown self-conscious historical awareness. His historical consciousness however tended toward a heightened awareness of authorship, while your consciousness could be said to do the exact opposite, embracing authorship (and intention) as essentially provisional. There is an element of Borges to such an attitude. I'm thinking in particular of the Lottery of Babylon, an allegory of reincarnation, in which the unnamed narrator depicts the evolution of an ultimately aleatory logic whereby a man is liable to become anything from one day to another ("Like all men in Babylon," the story begins, "I have been a proconsul; like all, a slave; I have also known omnipotence, opprobrium, jail.") In the universe you seem to describe, any and every object, by virtue of a no less aleatory logic, is destined to eventually be vouchsafed, and likewise deprived, the status of a readymade. But then again, such a Borgesian logic is already there, at least partially, in the readymade from the beginning, integral to its Pandora's box-like gesture. Curiously, this same logic is present in our parallel discussion of rehearsal. However, in a Borgesian universe, there is nothing but rehearsal, rendering the word itself almost redundant.

MSS: But Borges couldn't have expected the state of contemporary information, although he definitely sensed it and scratched at it. It's pretty uncanny. But now it's information, not rehearsal, that makes the world redundant: total, promiscuous information. Information has made rehearsal obsolete. It's all the show, all the time. I guess that's another conversation.