

Penelope Umbrico: Signs Within the Inventory

Penelope Umbrico's current work, entitled *From Catalogs*, functions between media. While she consistently deploys the camera as a means of representation, her blurred images have a close affinity with the processes of abstraction. Yet her thinking in art and about art gravitates more toward conceptualism than toward formalism. When photography (and painting) turned toward appropriation in the late seventies, it became conceptual to the extent that the idea was considered more important than the formal aspect of the image. One could argue that these appropriation strategies enabled the representation of objects on a surrogate level, on the level of the hyperreal. The borrowing or appropriation of images from other sources was a kind of displacement that became highly contingent on the context in which they were seen.

Many of the images appropriated as paintings or drawings throughout the eighties were initially photographs that had already been reproduced as printed matter. (I am thinking specifically of Douglas Crimp's "Pictures" exhibition at Artists Space in 1977.) Depending on which works one chooses to cite, these second-hand images possessed a certain bite, an irony, even a cynical posture. If successful (which, in retrospect, was rarely the case), these appropriated images retained the ability to function like advertising by making one space deflect or contradict another within the same frame, thereby inciting a lack of resolution and a concomitant frustration about the nature of representation.

When Umbrico "takes" a picture, it is less about the direct representation of an object and more about the abstraction of an image -- a phantasm that has been given the status of commodity. It is about the process of "re-photography" (a term, I believe, credited to Richard Prince) that involves the surrogate world of merchandise. Umbrico's method is essentially about how objects are transformed through the camera's manipulation. The artist's "out of focus" technique, deployed in relation to commodities found in mail order catalogs deposited regularly at her door, is relatively unique within the context of appropriation art.

Her photographs are a type of object representation that embody certain historical antecedents both from Pop Art and Neo-Conceptualism. The blurring of these catalog images through the lens of the camera is a type of conceptual distancing where the recognizability of the object is held in perceptual abeyance. Far from secure within the domain of cognition, the indeterminate image suggests a fleeting moment, an instability. The subject who perceives this series of abstract signs may become frustrated while attempting to focus the image, to give the image visual certainty that will not disappear or vanish and thereby neglect or fulfill the desire to possess the object.

In this sense, Umbrico's approach in photographing these commodities has a curious affinity with Jacques Lacan's theory of the "imaginary" and the "symbolic" as these terms relate to the construction of identity through language. Lacan's "imaginary" phase, made evident in childhood's formative years, involves a pronounced self-absorption, an illusory image of the self that precedes a more developed awareness of the "symbolic" world of language. If, for some

reason, the "imaginary" phase persists into adulthood as a result of early emotional trauma, the subject may become predisposed to the seduction of certain objects with which a transitory identity is established. This identity carries a certain fixation based on a solipsistic lack: the desire to maintain an illusion of the self through the presence of the object. The longing to identify with the object is persistent until another object is found to replace it.

In her catalog photographs, Umbrico blurs the objects -- the gadgets, the furniture, the appliances, the clothing, the cosmetics -- so that we cannot tell what they are. Each image becomes a vortex inside a compartment which is then placed within the format of a grid. Yet, as consumers, our sense of identity with the objects on display is contingent upon seeing them clearly. When they are abstracted, we relinquish our "imaginary" attachment to them and receive instead a physiological sensation through color and shape.

Umbrico has transformed the inventory of commodities sold through catalogs into a system of abstract signs. The physiological sensation that may follow becomes a necessary conduit to pass through the "imaginary" to a "symbolic" language. It is here that we begin to speak of her work in conceptual terms. Instead of retreating into an "imaginary" identity, as the omnipresence of advertising imagery often impels us to do, Umbrico insists upon a semiotic relationship to the object -- a deconstruction of the inventory -- based on the subtle evidence of color, shape, and texture. One may begin by addressing these blurred images with a certain visual frustration in hopes that eventually this frustration will give way to the "symbolic" world of communication and ideas.

Robert C. Morgan

