

Objects of Collective Consciousness

By Brian Kuan Wood

Don't trust the lights. Rather, look into to the darkness for what you need. Hassan Khan's video installation *Jewel* (2010, 35 mm film transferred to HD) opens with a cloud of lights flickering to a soundtrack—produced by Khan himself—of hypnotic drones. But one soon discovers that these lights are not stars or a coastal hamlet at night, but a swarm of hideous fang-faced anglerfish—the elegant sparkling being nothing other than the light emitted from the strange growth on their faces: a lure for prey. As a ferocious beat sets in, the image of the anglerfish freezes and shape-shifts, “fossilizing” as a pattern of lights. The camera pulls out, and the fish pattern is shown to be punched into a revolving object—a totemic sort of disco ball surrogate—around which two men, one younger and one older, each perform a strange dance of desperate flailing, drowning, falling, grabbing, and whipping gestures. It is a spare scene of some kind of sinister, yet perfectly viable Arab subculture collectively reveling in a response to total collapse—one in which dancing, limbs flailing in the air, becomes a powerful and resilient performance of futile gestures. Moving with the ambivalence of marionettes commanded by forces that are not theirs, the work draws to a close with the scene slowly receding into darkness in a single continuous tracking shot. What is it that haunts these men and compels them to act, to move?

At Galerie Chantal Crousel from 29 January–5 March, Khan presents “Lust”, a multilayered constellation of recent works that can be seen as focal points in his practice over the past three years. While the included works are highly enigmatic in nature and communicate on a number of registers, it is simultaneously important to consider them in light of a sophisticated line of thinking that has taken place over the course of the artist's 15-year career. Key to this thinking has been a dynamic centered on private consciousness and public address—a way of dealing with the movements of ideological forces and social constructions of value as they pass from the crowd in the street into the psyche and back. In this sense we can then address his oeuvre as a means of confronting the spectral nature of these movements throughout a flowing cultural subconscious of a “public mind.”

Key to this is Khan's particular approach to the way ideological thinking and spectrality function in relation to physical material. In an attempt to revisit the quasi-religious and messianic thinking latent in Marx's writing on commodity fetishism, Jacques Derrida has used the term “hauntology” to describe a spectral ontology functioning within Marx's materialist critique of the commodity. As a subtle play on “ontology,” the term allows room for a phantasmatic form of being to precede the material commodity as the ghostly desire for such a commodity to emerge (or be produced) in the first place. Derrida goes on to propose Marx's very materialist critique to be an exorcism of this already existing auratic, ghostly presence that surrounds an object, expelling the ghosts that would possess a piece of material such as wood to think of itself as not only a chair, but even a diamond, or a Ferrari. But, following from the “hauntological,” for Khan these apparitions are of the utmost importance, as they are themselves another form of material. It is from here that Khan's work as an artist finds its materiality: as compressions of social desires.

If we then suppose that these collective desires, as a form of hidden consensus, also carry ideo-

logical content, then the obvious question becomes: What other errant, spectral products are floating around, and how can we perceive them? From this perspective, we have already entered another state of being—one that requires a shift in the understanding of how objects behave, and how they reflect and accommodate collective desires (or a lack thereof). With *Banque Bannister* (2010), the centerpiece of the exhibition at Chantal Crousel, one finds a brass handrail trying to find its purpose—leaning on something that is missing and leading to something that is not there. Hovering in space, it assumes the shape of ordinary piping or a “stairway to heaven”—leaping forward to find stairs to rest itself on.

In a twisting of an orthodox Duchampian move, similar to that of *Banque Bannister*, Khan’s *Evidence of Evidence II* (2010) is an enormous (3.5 x 3 meter) scan of a discarded flower painting, printed on vinyl, that reverses the premises of a *Fountain* (1917) or *Bottle Rack* (1914). Like Duchamp’s readymades, it assumes another character when it enters the exhibition, but, contra Duchamp, it does not gain auratic value or become formally abstracted—in fact, on a formal level, *Evidence of Evidence II* is barely aware of the exhibition format at all, and it arrives without suspicion or preconceived notions. As its title suggests, the aura does not lie in the context (the exhibition format, with its loaded implications), but came before it, in the flower painting’s domestic origin in the home. As a zoomed-in, scientific extraction of collective meaning latent in a staple bourgeois decorative motif, the artist has described *Evidence of Evidence II* as “a set of values and socio-economic facts being transformed or translated into aesthetic facts.” This is how Khan positions the objects furnishing the generally-accepted and the already-existing to make them speak about both what they are and what they are about. It is not a Duchampian sleight of hand that recontextualizes the object to introduce potential other readings, but the opposite: a fundamentally subtractive process of obliterating the potential for an already-auratic, already-inflated flower painting to say anything about the person who owns it. Blasting it back down to literal material, it becomes unrecognizable even to itself.

Here it is also important to mention the darkness that surrounds these works, for why should it be necessary to obliterate meanings, to subtract possibilities, to reduce agency in such a way—especially when so much of the language used in art contexts is geared towards the production of meaning, the multiplicity of possibilities, the celebration of heterogeneity, and even the potential for art to make positive contributions to the world? With this we can simply look to another common understanding, that “political” content in art is necessarily affirmative for initiating the possibility of political agency. But how can the political be automatically aligned with agency, with “hope,” and potentiality? What about authoritarian regimes, tyranny, the poverty of available options, endemic corruption, botched elections, and all-around collapse—a saturation of a politics that does not include democracy and activism, but point instead to defeat and withdrawal? Are these states of being not equally political, if not radically more so? What is the shape of a political dead-end in which there is no formal expression, no representation—where a political address utterly hollowed of potential might still speak? (And those looking to situate Khan’s work in an Egyptian context may begin by inferring the current political climate and regime in Egypt into the above—it would not be far off.)

All of this is not to introduce geopolitics into the argument, but rather to point out the viability of a formal language for political content that stretches past power structures as such and across specific cultural contexts, to encompass also a means of coming into contact with how an object’s physical form could speak its own language, acting as a dense repository of experience with power. One of the more ephemeral works in the exhibition is a series of fifty framed prints of mobile phone snapshots installed across three walls, entitled *Lust* (2008). Documenting elegiac encounters with strangely haunted objects and moments found throughout everyday

life, *Lust* suggests the particular condition embodied by Khan's work to be a kind of naturally occurring phenomenon, sculpted by circumstances found throughout the many places he has traveled to. In this sense we can also say that this condition is a general one, and that certain "dark forces" that exert pressure on forms to give them their shape—for a balding man, a tree trunk, a splay of parked cars—also surpass being a political condition to become something both psychic and collective, whereby it induces a kind of stillness.

In a similar vein, *Insecure* (2002)—a text work composed of directions intended for an individual to follow—locates a process of identification as the means of shaping one's own consciousness, as well as of identifying certain gaping holes within it. "whisper your name over and over to yourself till you feel like it doesn't make sense." "wonder what you really want from the closest person to you." On the one hand, these are markers of a kind of existential quagmire, the psychic deadlock produced by the unheimlich encounter with one's own limits. Who am I? But they are not simply about artist pathos—look at how each instance is relational. What we find here is in fact an economy, however broken: produced for no reason, this irrational psychic looping of self-doubt constitutes demands and desires that have no voice within the real economy, that cannot be given or received, that arise from nothing and have no value. They are, in some sense, an attempt to exorcise the socially constructed self. It is in this way that the 14-minute video *G.R.A.H.A.M.* (2008) could be viewed as an attempt to turn these specters and errant psychic products back onto a subject—more precisely the subject of the video, a man by the name of Graham—in an attempt to produce another kind of portraiture. Khan has referred to the work as "a portrait of someone dealing with who he is," and indeed this is deliberately done through a process by which Khan asked Graham informed, pointed questions about his personal history, questions to which Graham was asked to respond mutely, using facial expressions and slight gestures. The work deliberately reenacts a kind of exploitative anthropological scenario in which only the man behind the camera can speak, while the subject must "be himself." But, paradoxically, it is Graham's silent intensity that functions as the primary "voice" through which the work communicates. The result is a work about Graham becoming *G.R.A.H.A.M.*: silently confronting his ghosts (or, more likely, his demons), we witness the formation of a stable subject expand and contract before our eyes.

Or the cinematic *Muslimgauze R.I.P.* (2010), an oblique ode to Bryn Jones, the prolific Mancunian electronic musician who produced a number of records as Muslimgauze before passing away due in 1999 at the age of 37. The 8-minute short film depicts a young boy inside an apartment in 1982 Manchester exploring his own material environment with idle curiosity, tracing his hand over the various trinkets on the buffet table, understanding the mechanism of the closet doors, feeling the flesh of his own face, spinning a coin on a table, looking at the ceiling and spacing out. While this child should be none other than the artist, Bryn Jones would have been about 21 years old in 1982, and indeed this was the year that Muslimgauze came into being as an expression of solidarity with the Arab cause following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Khan in fact constructed this scene as a hypothetical scenario taking place next door to Jones's apartment in Manchester—and it is interesting to note that, until his death in 1999, the man who produced hundreds of records, many with titles like *No Human Rights for Arabs in Israel* (1995), *Fatab Guerrilla* (1996), and *Speaking With Hamas* (1999), had never been to the Middle East and was not Muslim, though he sometimes performed in mosques in the UK. How could Jones produce so much work as an explicit show of solidarity with political movements with which he had no direct experience? As this boy in the adjoining apartment grows familiar with the small world of his family's apartment (or, we could say, Thatcherite England), Jones was next door furnishing an entirely different physics of intercultural contact or touch, beaming himself out of Thatcherite England by, in Khan's words, "sublimating the dire conditions of the UK's conservatism at the time into a radical exoticism that spoke, above all, about his own local context."

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One may view the works included in “Lust” as a constellation of entry points into a material world in which the ghostly traces of ideological conditioning literally sculpt not only objects, but subjects—a hidden economy in which collective consciousness is both produced and collapsed. In this sense Khan’s works may be seen as articulating a transitional phase between the projection of such a consciousness and its manifestation—a liminal point where ideologies might still reflect the social forces responsible for producing them. And for some reason, it is at this point that these objects begin to tremble—haunted or compelled by strange forces to speak about themselves. And what is its voice? It is that of the flowing cultural unconscious—the nonhuman designer of protocols, the tastemaker par excellence, the master carver, the architect of accidental perfect symmetries and of self-doubt, of imagined solidarities: the hidden consensus.

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