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Conrad Bakker's Vernacular Simulation

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Conrad Bakker's art repudiates the commodity form while enjoining its vernacular aspects. It would be materially true to identify his creative production as figurative sculpture, but such a description might infer that he aspires to some kind of mimetic excellence. Since everything Bakker makes resembles a common object of one kind or another, it could be argued that he is concerned with simulation or *trompe l'oeil* effects. The wrongness of this conclusion can be seen in the artist's seeming inability to fabricate sufficiently convincing replicas of the stuff in which he is interested. We can only find our way to Bakker's intentions by paying close attention to the transactional frameworks he invokes through the titles of, and conventions displayed, in his installations.

Here is an artist who has offered his public a *Yard Sale*, 1997, a *Sidewalk Sale*, 2000, and whose current project is entitled *Untitled: Mail Order Catalog*. While there aren't many artists among us who don't yearn to have their work reproduced and praised in an exhibition catalogue, Bakker may be alone in deliberately conflating the prestige of the art world's standard document with the squalor of the sales circular or department store wish book. Turning these pages you will find 32 items offered for sale, mostly small electronic gadgets or fashionable accessories of the sort encountered in such trendy mail order lines as Hammacher-Schlemmer or The Sharper Image. But the printed images in this catalogue don't show us objects in smooth black plastic or polished chrome; instead we encounter arduously handcrafted facsimiles in carved and painted wood. If we're not fooled, then, by Bakker's efforts, in what way are we edified?

Consider for a moment the great early work of Robert Gober, his psychologically loaded sinks and urinals, and later, his cribs, beds, and doors (opening to nowhere). At a time (the mid-1980s) when critical attention in the art world was being lavished on appropriation discourse, sign theory, and virtual reality, Gober made sculptures that clearly resembled mass-produced objects, but also clearly failed to simulate them. Constructed from wire lath, wood, plaster, and paint, Gober's versions of domestic furnishings show evidence of his handiwork, but the imprecision of his labor, readable in the occasional fingerprint, swirl of excess paint, or irregular surface curvature, isn't meant to be read as expressive effect. Gober worked hard at nearly, but not completely, disguising his touch of hand because he wanted the viewer's recognition of that touch to be a sign of human(e) imperfection. The result was a series of eloquently dis-functional objects that reinscribed the industrial in relation to the body.

Bakker employs a similar strategy in his art, but toward a significantly different end. His *LCD Pocket Television* (000113) is roughly the same size as the electronic original, but the

image on its tiny screen is in paint, not pixels, and its excised and painted battery chamber clearly cannot be opened. His *Digital Tire Gauge* (000129) could actually be pressed onto an automobile tire intake valve, but it wouldn't measure anything as the air escaped. So we find disfunctionality here too, but unlike Gober, Bakker's devices of choice aren't anthropomorphically loaded. Indeed, he has exercised great care in delimiting his catalogue selection to a family of gadgets with little utilitarian value or, in the examples of the *Ultra Slim Radar Detector* (000109), *The Sweeper Bug Detector* (000117), and *Digital Alcohol Breath Tester* (000127), mainly criminal value, as means for users to evade the law.

But if nothing in Bakker's catalogue line works as advertized, purchasers aren't equally defrauded in terms of cash outlay. *LCD Pocket Television* is priced at \$299.00 while *Digital Tire Gauge* costs a mere \$40.00. So it is with all of Bakker's products, every one bearing a price tag equivalent to that of the mass-produced item from which its appearance is derived. As art, however, all of Bakker's objects are ostensibly equal in value, comprising the set of elements in his *Untitled: Mail Order Catalog*, an installation in the form of a published document that itemizes 32 separate editioned objects of art.

Marcel Duchamp proposed the enhanced readymade, consisting of artworks employed as common objects and including the example of a painting by Rembrandt used as an ironing board. Duchamp's proposal remains as yet unrealized, but Bakker has found a novel approach to the same idea by attaching the selling price of his craftsmanship to that of the various industrial products he has chosen to represent. The conventional art world price distinctions, of higher prices for larger, more expensively fabricated, or more laboriously worked objects, are thrown over in the service of Bakker's most significant simulation, that of the commodity fetish. It is impossible to say which among Bakker's facsimiles was the most difficult for him to make, but it should be clear to any reader of this catalogue that the prices he has assigned to the 32 different results of his labor are themselves facsimiles, drawn from examples found in other pages.

If Bakker simply offered us artworks resembling ordinary objects, his *Untitled: Mail Order Catalog* would function no differently than any other exhibition document, but the pricing model he has employed appears to be an insult directed against his own talents, an apparent mortification of the value of his production methods. Through his radical gesture Bakker offers us the scandal of art as commodity by means of an equation that forces the values of art and commodity into unexpected confrontation.