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Céline Condorelli: Permutations of the Prop, Part 1

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What does it mean to designate a functional object as a prop rather than a sculpture? Do such distinctions persist when sculptural objects can be choreographed and staged, inviting and enabling many forms of interaction and use? What role do cultures of production and reception play in the designation of a thing as prop or as sculpture? These are some of the questions prompted by Céline Condorelli's *Additional*s, a group of objects that first came to my attention when they appeared in Beatrice Gibson's film *The Tiger's Mind* (2012, 23 min.). The film is one outcome of a collective experiment undertaken by Gibson, Will Holder, Condorelli, and three other collaborators, developed in response to the work of the avant-garde composer Cornelius Cardew.¹ Consisting of a curtain, an assemblage of speakers, two seating systems, and a lectern, Condorelli's *Additional*s operate in the screen world of *The Tiger's Mind* as usable objects that both invite and enable interaction. But their functionality perhaps exceeds that of the conventional prop, and they seem at times to compete for attention with Gibson's human actors.

My second meeting with Condorelli's prop-objects took place at Project Arts Centre in Dublin, where the *Additional*s were installed in the gallery and animated by choreographed actions and environmental changes, loosely in accordance with the "Daypiece" and "Nightpiece" scenarios that are specified in Cardew's score.² So, for example, a motorized fan was activated at various intervals, causing the metalized space-

¹ Gibson and Holder invited a group of practitioners to work together using Cardew's 1967 score *The Tiger's Mind*, which consists of two paragraphs, subtitled "Daypiece" and "Nightpiece," followed by three pages outlining possible approaches to interpretation. Each practitioner adopted a character from the score, with Jesse Ash as "Wind," Condorelli as "Tiger," Gibson as "Circle," Holder as "Amy," John Tilbury as "Mind," and Alex Waterman as "Tree."

² *Additional*s: *Celine Condorelli, Featuring The Company*, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, November 7, 2013–January 18, 2014. I was commissioned to write an essay in response to Condorelli's exhibition for Project Arts Centre's ongoing publication series *Forms of Imagining*, ed. Tessa Giblin and Emer Lynch (forthcoming, 2016) and some elements of the essay have been incorporated and reconfigured in this text.

blanket curtain that constitutes *Structure for Communicating with Wind* (2012) to billow upward and outward, as though levitating. At other moments, a composition by John Tilbury became audible in the gallery via the ten-channel speaker system designated as *Structure for Listening* (2012). This choreography coexisted with a parallel staging of *Additional*s as a series of “screen tests” conducted both on the set of Gibson’s film and in subsequent situations of display, presented on an array of small video monitors installed in the foyer of Project Arts Centre.

Encountered in these disparate manifestations, on screen and in the gallery, at rest and in use, Condorelli’s *Additional*s prompted me to think about the prop both as a category of sculptural object and as a type of action that calls attention to actions and infrastructures of support. More than a year after the show at Project Arts Centre, I visited Condorelli’s eponymous solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery in London, which consisted of sculptural works and interventions collectively described by the artist as “Intentional Objects in Accidentally Specific Appearances.”³ Although not explicitly framed as props, many of the works presented at Chisenhale (including curtains and seating structures) suggested continuity with the concerns explored in *Additional*s.

In an interview that accompanied the exhibition, Condorelli described these works as “more related to the cinematic, or the theatrical, or even TV, than . . . to conventional art objects. They have this prop-like quality. They have double or treble lives. . . . I try to really work with their functionality rather than their form.”⁴ It seems that, for Condorelli, the prop signifies multiplicity as well as functionality; it is an object that can have many different lives. Within the contexts of film, television, and theater, however, props tend to be produced for a particular production, so their multiplicity is circumscribed and they will live only in relation to a specific choreography of action, even if the action might be performed again and again.

Before considering the difference between the (stage) prop and conventional art object more closely, it should be noted that Condorelli’s Chisenhale show also advanced, at

³ Celine Condorelli, Chisenhale Gallery, May 2–June 22, 2014.

⁴ Celine Condorelli interviewed by Katie Guggenheim in the “artist sheet”: <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/images/Celine-Condorelli-Artist-Sheet.pdf>.

least implicitly, other conceptions of the prop as object and action. The first work to be experienced by any visitor to the gallery during the show, titled *Alterations to Existing Conditions (to Simon Popper)* (2014), was described as “an adaption, a customisation of the existing architecture, putting in an extraction fan, removing a door, uncovering the window, propping open the office door with a wedge . . .” There were several consequences to this customization: air moved through the building from the street entrance to the gallery offices, the houses behind the gallery became visible, and the canal below could be seen by those confident enough to climb the steps of Condorelli’s sculptural installation *The Double and the Half (to Avery Gordon)* (2014).

It is perhaps already evident that Condorelli’s Chisenhale show was replete with citations of earlier moments in histories of art and exhibition making, while also involving gestures of dedication that were intended to foreground friendship. *Alterations to Existing Conditions*, for instance, was titled to evoke an exhibition made by Christopher D’Arcangelo and Peter Nadin in the late 1970s, which accumulated over a year and began with the building of the gallery.⁵ Condorelli’s version of *Alterations to Existing Conditions* also alluded to another building, one much closer to the contemporary context and site of Chisenhale. This is because the gallery door was propped open by a wooden object gifted to the artist by her friend Simon Popper—an object originally used (along with many others like it) to support the roof of London’s Spitalfields Market.

Transposed from a market roof to the door of a gallery office via a complex of networks and processes, including friendship, the wooden wedge conjoined multiple senses of the prop as object and as action. *Alterations to Existing Conditions* also introduced a new sense of the prop, one perhaps bound more closely to written and spoken language than to physical gesture. Here I am referring to the fact that, through its titular evocation of both art historical and social reference points, *Alterations to Existing Conditions* also performed the continual acknowledgment of precedents, which might also be understood as “props” in the (colloquial) sense of “proper recognition.” In this way, Condorelli’s work quite literally opens the door to further permutations of the prop, both art historical

⁵ This description is drawn from the Chisenhale “artist sheet,” in which Condorelli notes that she was first told about this exhibition by the artist-curator Gavin Wade, with whom she has collaborated on various projects, including *Support Structure* (2003–9). See <http://www.supportstructure.org/>.

and theatrical. In the second part of this exploration, I will consider how the prop has been defined in art history and theater studies, drawing upon these theorizations to investigate its operations in the work of Condorelli and her collaborators, and its particular role in the staging of dialogues between different moments and fields of practice.