

[Published online, *The Exhibitionist Blog*, 1 March, 2016]

Céline Condorelli: Permutations of the Prop, Part 2

Maeve Connolly

In my first exploration of the prop's permutations, focusing on Céline Condorelli's exhibitions at Project Arts Centre and Chisenhale Gallery, I suggested that there might be an infrastructural aspect to the relationship between prop and sculptural object. The significance of infrastructure is apparent in the functionality of Condorelli's curtains, door wedges, plant holders, seats, and steps, all put to use in organizing and supporting actions, spaces, bodies, and objects. Her engagement with infrastructure is, at the same time, fundamentally social, and many of the works presented at Chisenhale Gallery were dedicated to named individuals (such as Avery Gordon, Amalia Pica, and John Tilbury). Condorelli situates these acts of naming within the context of friendship,¹ yet her titles also operate clearly as citations—giving “props” or proper recognition.²

Even though Condorelli is by no means the first artist to engage with the category of the prop, relatively little critical attention has been paid to the boundaries between filmed, staged, and exhibited objects. A notable exception can be found in Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward's consideration of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*, which positions the prop at the intersection of minimalist sculpture and postminimalist performance.³ At one point, Keller and Ward cite an interview with Vito Acconci that highlights the significance of Richard Serra's prop pieces of the late 1960s. For Acconci, these works are important primarily as traces of the (artist's) body, “because, obviously, if something is propped, someone propped it.”⁴ Serra's prop pieces are characterized by provisionality and what Thomas Crow terms “a temporary stasis.”⁵ Crow notes that in subsequent works devised for permanent installation in public spaces, Serra consciously sought to mimic the “provisional appearance”⁶ of the earlier works, an observation that narrows the distance between Serra's sculptural practice and the work of illusion performed by film and stage props.

Condorelli herself emphasizes that the prop must operate through *appearance*; she notes that the prop fabrication process “requires a focus on how something appears (and not what it is), and there is a need to be very economical about how to achieve it.”⁷ So while permanent sculptures such as Serra's may aspire to provisionality by evoking the bodily action of “propping,” comparatively flimsy theatrical objects must at times suggest substance, even permanence, in spite of economic limitations. To my knowledge, Serra's work doesn't figure in Condorelli's extensive citation of historical precedents; she is much more interested in the practices of modernist artists, exhibition makers, designers, and architects. These practices typically find expression not just in finished objects but also in manifestos, models, and diagrams, which are marked by provisionality rather than permanence. It is also worth remembering that material traces of these modernist practices are often inaccessible, even in such constrained forms as (authorized) facsimiles, drawings, and photographs.

If Condorelli's 2009 *Support Structures* approaches the physical book as a “manual for what bears, sustains, props, and holds up,” addressing art's expansive—if sometimes overlooked—practices, requirements, and techniques of support, then her recent curatorial collaboration concerns display as support. Co-curated with James Langdon and Gavin Wade, *Display Show* was conceived in three planned iterations. The first

presentation, at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin, in 2015, included works by Condorelli, Andrew Lacon, Eilis McDonald, Flore Nové-Josserand, Yelena Popova, Gavin Wade, and Christopher Williams, and a further list of participants, framed in the press release as follows: “After: (Herbert Bayer) (Frederick Kiesler) (Lina Bo Bardi) (Eileen Gray) (Adolf Krischanitz) (El Lissitzky) (Carlo Scarpa) (Franco Albini).”⁸ The second presentation of *Display Show* occurred in late 2015 at Eastside Projects, Birmingham, England, an organization directed by Gavin Wade with the long-standing involvement of Simon Bloor, Tom Bloor, Ruth Claxton, Condorelli, and James Langdon. This iteration of the exhibition featured a greatly expanded list of contemporary artists, including Goshka Maçuga, Rita McBride, Amalia Pica, Haim Steinbach, and Christopher Williams, alongside the same eight historical references cited at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios.⁹

Many of the newer works in *Display Show* fuse contemporary and historical reference points, drawing these different moments into proximity. So, for example, Condorelli’s audio soundtrack *Sound of the Swindelier* (2015), a twenty-minute loop playing in the gallery, was described in the exhibition notes accompanying the first iteration as “the sound of studio work, with all the windows open, ‘to let the city in’ as Kiesler insisted was important for exhibition contexts.” Condorelli and Wade frame this conjunction of disparate historical moments and cultural contexts as a deliberate and pragmatic tactic that addresses absence and inaccessibility. In an exchange with Wade published in *Cura* magazine, Condorelli states, pragmatically: “*The Afters* were borne out of the need, the desire to include voices and objects that might not be physically accessible, into not just our research, but our exhibition-making too. And there are different ways of doing that, we are trying them all out; through the quote, the reference; we also conjure the ‘missing’ with copies, mirrors, ghosts, repetitions, incantations.”¹¹ So *The Afters* function both as ‘citational objects,’ conjuring that which is missing, and as a source of continuity in an iterative process of exhibition making and research.

The Afters clearly share something of the character of filmic and theatrical props, functioning primarily by “appearance.” But how do these strategies of citation and conjuring intersect with the various understandings of the prop already explored, whether as functional objects, actions, or colloquial expressions of (proper) recognition? Perhaps a final observation on the term “prop” is needed, this time from the realm of theater studies. Attending to the backstage life of staged objects, and implicitly to their status as *property*, Alice Rayner theorizes a complex dynamic of exchange between the prop and the stage. She argues that “stage props, as paradigmatic objects, constitute the worldliness of the stage and in a sense are owned by the stage; properties in all senses, they give their material attributes to an otherwise empty space and in turn populate that space, dominate it, ‘own’ it.”¹² Rayner also suggests that, when the prop is poised *between* its worldly and fictional uses, this quality of suspension finds material expression in the prop table, upon which the outline of each object is carefully marked.

Condorelli’s *Additional*s, developed as part of a collaborative response to a score and discussed in part one of this text, necessarily occupy a similar state of suspension when not being exhibited, since (like most artworks) their physical circulation is likely to be managed through standard practices of registration. But the *Additional*s—like the work presented at Condorelli’s Chisenhale Gallery show—also dramatize the artwork’s status as *property* in the sense suggested by Rayner. Condorelli’s sculptural objects, typically incorporating familiar and functional components such as chairs, tables, and curtains,

lend their worldliness to the gallery and in turn they “own” and populate it with a complex network of conceptual, social, and institutional affiliations and citations.

Ultimately, *Display Show* is perhaps best understood as part of a larger program of institutional experimentation, enacted primarily through the curatorial and organizational work of Eastside Projects. Within this experimental process, *The Afters* perform a strategic circumvention of economic, institutional, and material limits that tend to result from the solidification of provisional actions into permanent forms, whether as sculptural objects or their material remnants. So, while many of the artworks featured in *Display Show* might lack the overt functionality that tends to characterize Condorelli’s own sculptures, they are nonetheless deployed pragmatically and polemically in each iteration of the exhibition. Operating through appearance rather than ontology, these “copies, mirrors, ghosts” bring histories of architecture, design, and exhibition making to bear upon each other, so that it becomes possible to stage and support an ongoing conversation.

Maeve Connolly is a lecturer in the faculty of Film, Art, and Creative Technologies at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dublin, Ireland, where she teaches on the BA in art and codirects the MA in Art & Research Collaboration. Her books include TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television (Intellect, 2014) and The Place of Artists’ Cinema: Space, Site and Screen (Intellect, 2009).

Notes

1. Condorelli’s interest in friendship is further articulated in her book *The Company She Keeps*, copublished by Book Works, Chisenhale Gallery, and the Van Abbemuseum in 2014.
2. The exhibition also draws attention to a more specifically institutional economy of friendship, mutual support, and professional recognition, since it was realized and promoted as part of *How to Work Together*, a shared program of commissioning and research organized by Chisenhale Gallery, The Showroom, and Studio Voltaire.
3. Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, “Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster,” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 3–16. I discuss this text, and related theorizations of filmed and staged objects, more fully in a contribution to *Forms of Imagining*, no. 3, edited by Tessa Giblin and Emer Lynch, forthcoming from Project Arts Centre in 2016.
4. Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, “Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster,” 5. The reference here is to an unpublished interview with Vito Acconci at Acconci’s studio in Brooklyn in April 1997.
5. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 144.
6. Ibid.
7. Céline Condorelli in conversation with Gavin Wade, “You Display, I Display, We Display,” *Cura*, no. 20 (Fall 2015): 82.

8. For further information on this exhibition, see
<http://www.templebargallery.com/gallery/exhibition/display-show>.

9. For extensive documentation of this show, see
<http://www.eastsideprojects.org/exhibitions/display-show/>.

10. Céline Condorelli in conversation with Gavin Wade, 81.

11. Alice Rayner, "Presenting Objects, Presenting Things," in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, ed. David Krasner and David Z. Saltz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 181.