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Permutations of the Prop

When I first encountered Celine Condorelli's *Additional*s, they were on screen, playing the part of props in Beatrice Gibson's film *The Tiger's Mind*. Occupying a prominent place in the mise-en-scène, these five objects lingered in my mind long after the film had ended. Later, while researching their production, I learned both that Condorelli's sculptures were developed within the context of a dialogue around the work of avant-garde composer Cornelius Cardew¹ and that they continue to enjoy another on-screen life. *Additional*s appear in an ongoing series of videos, characterised by Condorelli as 'screen tests', produced both on the set of *The Tiger's Mind* and in subsequent situations of use and display. Significantly – and in contrast to Gibson's film – the screen tests are shot by Condorelli in 4:3 ratio, dissociating them from the conventions of much contemporary cinema.

Comparing two videos, both of which capture the sculptures in use during *The Tiger's Mind*, gives a sense of the form and variability of the screen tests. In one, *Additional*s (*Structure for Speaking in Public*) is positioned in a wooden area beside a human actor. The crew move around, setting up and rehearsing a shot, with the steadicam operator making several approaches toward the object, which remains static yet central to the action. Another screen test, this time featuring *Additional*s (*Structure For Reading*), also positions the sculpture in the centre of the frame. Here, however, it is largely ignored by the film's crew members and director, all of whom are busily framing and shooting some undisclosed action taking place to the left of the screen.

Condorelli's *Additional*s also have a rich and active life beyond the moving image; they can be apprehended as still photographs, framed either as sculptures or prop object. They exist too as a series of 'character descriptions' written by Will Holder (in the guise of Amy, one of the six characters adopted in dialogue with Cardew's score), and as material things that can be observed at close quarters and, in some circumstances, physically manipulated by exhibition-goers. Even within the context of a specific exhibition, such as their presentation in the gallery of Project Arts Centre, *Additional*s are set in motion and animated as performers in two scenes guided by Cardew's score; Daypiece and Nightpiece. The transition from 'Day' to 'Night' is manifest through changes in the room's environment: the gallery lights dim and brighten, sound emanates

at times from the stack of speakers constituting *Structure for Listening*, and the electric fan poised behind the *Structure for Communicating with Wind* switches on and off, causing the delicate metallic curtain to billow and recede

At Project Arts Centre, *Additional*s responded to the gallery's specific location within an institution that is home to multiple artforms. In one manifestation of this responsiveness, Condorelli's collaborative process opened to include The Company, a Dublin-based theatre collective who were invited to work with the five *Structures* as their cast. The exhibition of *Additional*s also physically extended beyond the gallery's white cube space, spilling over into the reception and box-office area where a bank of small monitors displayed the screen test videos. This was in keeping with earlier presentations of the work: at a disused TV studio in Leeds, where the former control room was used to house the screen tests; and at CAC Bretigny, where the video monitors were installed in an equipment storage area above the exhibition space.²

Evidently, Condorelli's *Additional*s are more than props; their very development and ongoing operation is premised upon an engagement with mutable (and multiple) forms and functions. Nonetheless, these structures offer a vantage point from which to define and explore both the cultural status of the prop and its particular significance for contemporary artists.³ Perhaps surprisingly, given long-standing debates around 'theatricality'⁴ in art, the prop has been somewhat overlooked within art discourse. An important exception can be found in Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward's discussion of the 'prop-relic' in relation to the history of performance and the work of Matthew Barney.⁵ They begin by considering the role and meaning of the 'prop' at the intersection of minimalist sculpture and post-minimalist performance and draw, in particular, on an unpublished interview with Vito Acconci. They state:

For Acconci, minimalism was "the father art," and for him to find his own voice in the face of this work that meant so much to him, he had to find and overcome the flaw in its nature. The flaw was that it "appeared as if it was there, forever—where did it come from? So, okay, could I go to the source?". The source was the body. Acconci credits Serra with helping him recognize this: in Serra's "prop" pieces of the late 1960s, the work of the artist's body was implicit, "because, obviously, if something is propped, someone propped it."⁶

In this instance, Serra's series of propped sculptures are read by Acconci as the outcome and evidence of an action – the result of 'propping' – and important primarily because they function as traces of the artist's bodily presence and labour.

Keller and Ward also identify postminimalist sculpture as a significant reference point in Chris Burden's staging of his own body as object. In *Sculpture in Three Parts* (1974), they note, Burden played the role of a sculpture 'constantly attended by photographers'. He was seated on a chair on top of a pedestal for forty-three hours, until he fell off, at which point 'he was photographed [and] a chalk outline was drawn around his body'.⁷ Keller and Ward go on to discuss Burden's use of the term 'relics' to describe leftovers of his performances, such as the glass he crawled over in *Through the Night Softly* (1973) and the nails hammered through his hands in *Trans-Fixed* (1974). They emphasise that Burden sought to preserve the status of these leftovers as 'evidence' while also making sure they were 'not to be seen as valuable in and of themselves'.⁸ So while these relics, like Serra's propped objects, are evidence of the work of the artist's body, they do not claim the status of art objects.

A different operation occurs in Barney's work, because his objects are both manufactured and assembled specifically for use in filmed performance as well as being designed to persist beyond this context. As Keller and Ward point out, the objects produced during the course of making the *Cremaster Cycle* films are 'not, technically, props and set [but] they nonetheless function as traces, analogs for the relics of performance art'.⁹ Underscoring this dual relation to action and evidence, Keller and Ward describe Barney's filmed sculptural objects as 'prop-relics'. They also characterise the prop-relic as lacking in 'use-value', representing 'the utter and ostentatious waste of surplus capital'. They argue that this non-functionality is exemplified by 'the pink spare tire from *Cremaster 4*, which cannot turn because there is a scrotal attachment, and the stiletto heels from *Cremaster 1*, which cannot be used for walking because one of them has a spout where dancing grapes come out'.¹⁰

For Keller and Ward, Barney's prop-relics are indebted to the merchandising economy that links spectacular 'blockbuster' exhibitions with Hollywood cinema. 'The *Cremaster* franchise – and it is a franchise', they write, 'exists at some level to produce the objects necessary to the films' articulation: *Cremaster* motorcycles, high heels, honeycombs and caber-tossing bars that are exhibited and sold. The model for this behaviour is twofold: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *King Tut* exhibit and *Star Wars*, both from 1977.¹¹ It would seem that they are especially

critical of film prop objects that are *designed* to circulate beyond the set, either in its ‘original’ form (as in the case of *Star Wars* themed exhibitions) or as the model for a mass-produced model or toy such as a light sabre. According to this logic, Barney’s objects constitute inauthentic relics of performed action both because they lack functionality and because they are conceived as commodities for circulation and display beyond the film set.

This insistence upon functionality – and a contained arena of use and operation such as the set, stage or page – is also apparent in theatre and literature studies. Andrew Sofer defines the theatrical prop as a ‘staged object’ which is manipulated and set in motion by actors in the course of performance.¹² Similarly, within the context of literature, the prop is defined in terms of functionality as ‘an object indispensable to perform a certain function; serving a particular purpose’.¹³ Yet even in its most apparently conventional usages, the prop is often marked as an imitation, even a fake. As Sofer points out elsewhere, ‘Ever since Plato, the suspicion that theatre passes off imitations [...] as reality has been alive and well within our own discipline’.¹⁴ Within the history of television, the prop is even more explicitly bound up with trickery, even before the pervasive use of product placement in addition to direct advertising.¹⁵ In the early 1960s, TV advertisers were criticised for their use of ‘props or mock-ups’ – objects standing in for the actual product – on the basis that this could potentially mislead consumers. Yet stand-in objects were sometimes used specifically to combat the undesirable effects of television technology, which were equally misleading. As one legal commentator noted in 1962, ‘Blue shirts, for example, look white on television [...]. To compensate, television advertisers successfully have used props and mock-ups, designed to appear on television as their products do in real life.’¹⁶ So the prop, it seems, can be both authentically functional and intentionally misleading in terms of the action it is used to represent.

While Keller and Ward are justifiably wary of the prop object as commodity, their analysis seems to skirt around the institutional conditions that shape the status and operation of the prop as *property*. Alice Rayner, in contrast, theorises a complex dynamic of exchange between the prop and the stage, while also attending to the backstage life of staged objects. 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’.¹⁷ She notes that when the prop is ‘suspended between worldly and fictional uses’ backstage, this suspension might best be captured by the form of the prop table, upon which the outline of each object is carefully marked. This

image, which evokes the visual culture of the crime scene, also calls to mind the chalk markings around Burden's fallen body, perhaps suggesting that the prop and the relic (as evidence) will always be somehow entangled.¹⁸

Echoing Rayner's journey backstage, several theorists of the filmic prop (or cinematographic object¹⁹) have sought to pursue it off screen, exploring the ambiguities that can surround it *as property*. Vivian Sobchack charts the convoluted histories of a series of bird sculptures supposedly produced for the 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon*. Taking a self-reflexively investigative approach to the ontology of the prop, she cites its dictionary definition, both as 'any portable article' used 'in acting a play' and as 'a rigid support used to sustain', 'to hold up' or 'to support' something else. In this latter guise, the prop itself, however substantial, is merely 'auxiliary' and not 'a structural part of the thing supported'.²⁰ Both Sobchack and Lesley Stern interestingly emphasise qualities and actions of suspension and permutation, both in relation to 'things on film' and filmic things encountered at first hand. According to Stern, things on film 'turn and turn, from moment to moment; as the effect of the real is conjured so it is unraveled. Affect derives its force not merely from the immediacy of touch but from the capacity of the object to elude the voracious grasp of the moment (and the narrative), to reverberate beyond the frame'.²¹ Sobchack also invokes the language of ceaseless turning, describing the 'ever-widening circle' of the Falcon's aura as kind of 'gyre'²² and noting her own willing suspension of disbelief when confronted with an object that purports to be the 'real thing'.

Filmic props are compelling both for their auratic and affective properties but also because they can offer a tangible connection to the institutional architecture of cinema at a particular historical moment. When confronted with the outsized scissors used in the dream sequence of Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) which were delivered to his desk in a research archive, Paul Gansky is struck by the 'ungainliness and ephemerality' of an object that is surprisingly crude and makeshift in form. Nonetheless, its size and weight prompts him to think about human and material resources; 'the studio stages and storage warehouses that must be large and versatile enough to support these myriad items; and the number of hands needed to corral such objects.'²³ Gansky also makes the point that props rarely enjoy a 'continued life once their role concludes onscreen and the credits roll'.²⁴ But even if the logic of industrial film and television production seems to dictate material excess and waste, this does not necessarily mean that props are prevented from an industrial afterlife. Thomas Elsaesser alludes to the potential repurposing of scenic film objects in television shows such as *Fantasy Island* (1977-84).²⁵ Contemporary art practice also functions as a

setting in which to imagine, and even extend, the history of the prop as filmed object. Clemens von Wedemeyer's video installation *Afterimage* (2013), produced in Rome, uses 3D technology to map a storehouse of film props and scenic objects that were used in biblical and classical epics so it too implies an economy of potential re-use.²⁶

What do these permutations of the prop – on stage, on screen and in the gallery – mean for Celine Condorelli's *Additional*s? In one sense, her sculptural assemblages seem open to categorisation as prop-relics, since they were produced to be filmed and clearly persist beyond the moment of filming. The five objects she presented at Project Arts Centre have already been deployed, and displayed, in multiple contexts and will continue to circulate – as screen tests, character descriptions, filmed props and still photographs. Yet, in sharp contrast to Barney's refusal of functionality, *Additional*s are explicitly intended for interaction and use. In addition, while Barney tends to radically separate the filmed and staged lives of his objects (through, for example, the theatrical exhibition of the *Cremaster Cycle*), Condorelli establishes a close relation between these modes of operation and their institutional contexts, most obviously by displaying the screen tests in spaces such as foyers, storage areas and studio control rooms. Through these disparate yet interconnected strategies, which involve both setting things in motion and fixing them in place for support, her work complicates and contests the hierarchies and categorisations that have limited analysis of filmed and staged objects, enabling new conceptualisations and permutations of the prop.

¹ Cardew's published score, *Sextet – The Tiger's Mind* (1967) consists of two paragraphs, subtitled 'Daypiece' and 'Nightpiece', followed by three pages outlining approaches to interpretation.

² This information was provided by Condorelli in an email exchange, April 2013.

³ Other artworks engaging with props and scenic objects as a focus include *In Repertory* by Gerard Byrne, the first iteration of which took place in the gallery of Project Arts Centre in 2004, *The Cast* (2013) by Clemens von Wedemeyer and *The Audition* by Vaari Claffey, performed in Project's black box cube space in 2014 and featuring an artwork by Isabel Nolan, manipulated as the stand-in for various film props.

⁴ I'm referring here to debates prompted by Michael Fried's essay on 'Art and Objecthood', first published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23.

⁵ Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, 'Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster', *Cinema Journal* 45.2, Winter 2006: 3-16. My discussion of Keller and Ward's text here is (significantly) revised from Maeve Connolly, 'Televisual Objects: Props, Relics and Prosthetics', *Afterall* 33, summer 2013: 66-77.

⁶ Keller and Ward, 5. The reference here is to an unpublished interview with Vito Acconci at Acconci's studio, Brooklyn, New York, April 1997.

⁷ Keller and Ward, 9.

⁸ Keller and Ward, 8.

⁹ Keller and Ward, 8.

¹⁰ Keller and Ward, 9.

¹¹ Keller and Ward, 11.

¹² Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. Sofer's materialist approach to the staged object offers a counterpoint to accounts of theatre as a system of signs, in which the prop is read as image.

¹³ Antoni Smuszkiewicz, 'Props and Their Function in Science', translated by Elizabeth Kwasniewski and R. M. P., *Science Fiction Studies* 14. 2, 1987, 226. This function can be transformative and in science fiction literature, for example, the introduction of a single 'fantastic prop [...] impels the reader to perceive that world as being fantastic in its entirety'.

¹⁴ Andrew Sofer, 'Spectral Readings', *Theatre Journal* 64. 3, October 2012, 323.

¹⁵ For an exploration of the difference between prop placement and product placement in television see Steve Rose, 'As Seen on TV: Why product placement is bigger than ever' *The Guardian*, June 24, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/jun/24/breaking-bad-tv-product-placement> [Accessed June 2014]

¹⁶ Anonymous, 'Illusion or Deception: The Use of "Props" and "Mock-Ups" in Television Advertising', *The Yale Law Journal* 72. 1, 1962: 145. There are parallels here with various stage props, such as weapons used to produce visual rather than physical effects.

¹⁷ Alice Rayner, 'Presenting Objects, Presenting Things' in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, edited by David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, 181.

¹⁸ For a discussion of Burden's work in relation to concepts of evidence in west coast US art, see Ralph Rugoff, 'More than Meets the Eye', in *Scene of the Crime*, by Ralph Rugoff, with contributions from Anthony Vidler and Peter Wollen, Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1997: 58-108.

¹⁹ My discussion of the prop is informed by conversations with participants in the Junior Fellows Research Programme, *Theory & History of Cinematographic Objects*, led by Dr. Volker Pantenburg, Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie (IKKM), Bauhaus University Weimar, 2011-2012.

²⁰ Vivian Sobchack, 'Chasing the Maltese Falcon: On the Fabrications of a Film Prop', *Journal of Visual Culture* 6.2, 2007, 232.

²¹ Lesley Stern, 'Paths That Wind through the Thicket of Things', *Critical Inquiry* 28. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001), 354.

²² Sobchack, 239.

²³ Gansky, 139.

²⁴ Gansky, 139. He is referring specifically to life on screen, as distinct from the public exhibition of props.

²⁵ See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Fantasy Island: Dream Logic as Production Logic', *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann, Amsterdam University Press, 1998) 143-159.

²⁶ This work formed part of von Wedemeyer's solo exhibition *The Cast* at the MAXXI in Rome, 2013.