

CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMODITIES: CONSUMABLE BODIES IN MELINDA BUFTON'S "CONVERSATIONS WITH CHRISTOPHER LANGTON'S *I LUV YOU* SCULPTURE, 1993"

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1. Gérard Genette draws on Kant and Panofsky to divide aesthetic objects into categories of everyday objects, artworks, and natural objects as predicated by their creators' intentions. However, the terms of the aesthetic relation are inconsistent for each category, with considerations of genre applied to natural objects but historical context applied to artworks. Genette argues for a distinction between "simple, everyday aesthetic commentary" and "professional critical discourse," disavowing aesthetic criticism of everyday or natural objects. See Genette, *The Aesthetic Relation*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 73, 126, 132.

Introduction

A KEY PREMISE in classic aesthetic theory is the distinction between events, artworks, and phenomena, as determined by the presence or absence of an aesthetic response in a viewing subject.¹ Classical aesthetic categories like the beautiful or the sublime are bound up with the distinction between high and low art, which has plagued critical theory across disciplines for decades. However, the high/low dichotomy was irreparably destabilised by postwar Western visual art movements, such as Dada and Pop Art, which coincided with a rapidly growing consumer culture that turned art into commodity, and vice versa. With the Western world moving into late-stage capitalism, there appears to be a new evolution in the destabilisation of the

aesthetic distinctions between subject and object, the consumer and the consumed. Melinda Bufton's poem "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you* sculpture, 1993," presents the possibility of a new aesthetic relation, the end of the line for capitalist objectification: a consumable subject.

Melinda Bufton's second poetry collection, *Superette* (2018), uses the language and aesthetics of internet and contemporary culture to integrate popular culture into academic analysis of consumption and capitalistic (self-) branding. The references unite the realms of typically visual mediums like fashion and film with literary techniques and allusions to create multidimensional and multisensorial commentary on the experience of the modern world and modern media. In her high-energy and self-referential poetic worlds, commodification and capitalisation are the norm as her speakers navigate the body as the brand, and the brand as the commodity.

In Bufton's poem, "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you* sculpture, 1993," a culture of consumption has skewed the distinction between art and reality, turning both the body subject and art object into commodities. This blurring of boundaries alters the aesthetic relation in artistic and bodily terms. In the encounter, alternate bodily aesthetics confront and converse with each other: animate and inanimate, natural and constructed, consumer and art object. Bufton layers the influence of commodity culture with the mixed art/commodity setting of an art gallery, an affective experience that collapses the distance between subject and art object. In Bufton's poetry, commodification and consumption not only infiltrate the university and art gallery space, but further seep into the bodies that populate these spaces.

This article will examine the layers of consumer culture represented in "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you* sculpture, 1993" in order to demonstrate the movement

from space to body produced by an intensification of consumer culture. It will also explore this movement's destabilising influence on aesthetic relations. Beginning with an introduction to Bufton's position within the tradition of poetic kitsch and the intention of her work's aesthetic, the article will break down the university and art gallery as consumer spaces in line with the collapse of art/commodity distinctions. Then, focusing on the bodily encounter between the speaker and Langton's *I luv you* sculpture, the article will unpick the complex aesthetic and affective relations at work to uncover the possibilities of a merged subject/object. These layers will show how Bufton's poem represents and negotiates the unstable subject/object distinction at work in a contemporary aesthetics under consumer culture.

The Scene

While the poem is structured around a conversation with a specific sculpture, the scenes incorporate many intertextual references that invite dialogue between Melbourne landmarks ("University of Melbourne" and the "Art Fair"), Australian writers ("Elizabeth Jolley"), consumer brands ("Levis," "Bonds," and "Marlboroughs"), as well as popular culture television shows ("Wyatt Earp" and "Miami Vice"). The conversation between the speaker and the sculpture is intertwined with the myriad of conversations and symbols signalling simultaneously within the two scenes. Bufton explains in an interview with Trisha Pender that the saturation of her work with pop cultural specificity is an attempt to construct a literary montage: "When I use public figures, or characters from film, TV, books, it's because they are in the public domain and they already come layered with imagery, grotesquery, myth; they are already beyond any kind of stable site."² With these intertextual allusions and real-world references, Bufton injects the University of Melbourne with a

2. Trisha Pender, "That is Some Crafty Bite": Trisha Pender Interviews Melinda Bufton," *Cordite Poetry Review*, May 1, 2019, <http://cordite.org.au/interviews/pender-bufton/>.

popular culture that destabilises the connotations of elitism and intellectual independence that underpin the institution.

This sense of the poem as operating within a popular culture cacophony evokes the aesthetic of kitsch, an aesthetic that is a product of and response to contemporary mass media's proliferation of visual overabundance. The kitsch aesthetic, as Jean Baudrillard explains, comes from a culture of mass media and consumerism:

[Kitsch] can best be defined as a *pseudo-object* or, in other words, as a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations, as a glorification of the detail and a saturation by details.³

For Baudrillard, the rise of kitsch and the aesthetics of simulation grew out of a logic of reproducibility, coming from the mass production of objects as well as the popularity of the department store at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Specific to poetry, Daniel Tiffany understands kitsch as an aesthetic of deliberate disruption, tracing its beginning to the use of vernacular language in poetic writing. Tiffany summarises the kitsch in poetry as representing “tensions (and transactions) between elite and popular cultures,” manifest in the use of everyday English in an exclusive literary form.⁵ Poetry was said to be “kitsch” if it appealed too much to the average reader and appeared to lose reverence for the grand literary tradition of poetry. In this sense, poetic kitsch encapsulates the collapse between high and low culture.

For Bufton, the kitsch aesthetic is both a product and reproduction of consumer culture. This logic allows for a reflexive critique of consumerism from within itself. At the same time, the destabilising relation of both kitsch and consumer culture to the classical distinction between high and low art is shown to reach past the surrounding art object and event space and into the body.

3. Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 110.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Daniel Tiffany, *My Silver Planet: A Secret History of Poetry and Kitsch* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.

The Space

Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you Sculpture*, 1993

'At the University of Melbourne'

You go to the Art Fair after a quick Office Hour of
Elizabeth Jolley, who is In Residence at U of M in that preppy
summer of your anxious hopes. You slip out a little short story for her to
look at. That's enough for you to feel cocksure and right.

Super unfolded,

You were wearing a tweed jacket and levis.

Idol of the Real! A Clementine of men yet o so modern

Wyatt Earp. Just in. With your

black Bonds t-shirts with soft-pack Marlboroughs tucked in the sleeve

don't think this went unnoticed

(undergraduate chicas, haha!)

In the corridors Miami Vice modernists swore ecru linen

but that's another story.⁶

The kitsch aesthetic does not merely illuminate the poem's complicated relationship to and within consumer culture. Bufton further uses these cluttered references to centre consumer culture on the body. The space of "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you sculpture*, 1993" is clearly delineated within the University of Melbourne and the gallery of the Art Fair, setting the scene of kitsch reproduction in these identifiable real-world locations of high culture. Using the commodifying gaze of the speaker and their repeated employment of brands and visual references from the fashion industry, Bufton remaps these sites of artistic and intellectual elitism as consumer spaces. Within these spaces, the body becomes a product signalling to surrounding bodies.

At the university, the speaker addresses a "you" who wears "a tweed jacket and levis" with a "black Bonds t-shirt" and "soft-pack Marlboroughs tucked in the sleeve." He is described as an "o so modern / Wyatt Earp" with an Americanised bad-boy edge that catches the eye of the speaker and other "undergraduate chicas." The scene of the academy is set up as a

6. Melinda Bufton, "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you Sculpture*, 1993," in *Superette* (Glebe: Puncher & Wattmann, 2018), 17, lines 1-14.

kind of cinematic backdrop, a backstory to the identity of the bad boy, which is most accurately described in fashion styles: a body literally branded by capitalist signifiers. The speaker consumes the poetic “him” with the gaze of a savvy consumer but does not let the bad boy’s consumptive choices pass without remark. The speaker teases: “*don’t think this went unnoticed*.” In this configuration, the speaker observes the “Wyatt Earp” lookalike and interprets his body and bodily adornment. There is an understanding that the “look” is intentional and that the speaker recognises this constructed façade as one of ease and nonchalance.

The poem uses fashion terms to further mark bodies, both in poetic space and within a lexicon of consumer culture. The speaker writes of the “Miami Vice modernists [who] swore ecru linen,” identifying a kind of sartorial regret or cultural cringe, remembering how “the tweed jackets were too boxy for / our legs.” As Anne Hollander writes about meaning-making in fashion,

All methods and degrees of expressing formality and casualness, and all varieties of sexual emphasis, make oblique references to the groups, subgroups, current ideologies, movies, movements, historical periods, or individuals with which they are associated.⁷

The people in this poem, while attempting to construct and exhibit an idealised image, are literally “fashioning” themselves through the vocabulary of the fashion industry.

The speaker is equally embroiled in the complex social system of fashion, acknowledging their role as the intended receiver of “Wyatt Earp’s” signals. This behaviour of performance and reading mirrors the behaviour of shoppers found in sociological studies. In his ethnographic study of consumer culture in Singaporean shopping centres, sociologist Chua Beng Huat shows how the consumptive space may become an arena for observation, a space where shoppers look at commodity objects and other shoppers, expecting their gaze to be returned.⁸ Huat explains that

7. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 345–346.

8. Chua Beng Huat, *Life is Not Complete Without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 42–43.

one function of the shopping experience is to be seen shopping by other shoppers. What is peculiar about the scene in Bufton's poem, however, is that the university has become a shopping centre, an environment known for the same behaviour of performance and observation. Consumerism, and the symbolism of fashion commodities, have been carried beyond the shopping centre and into the university, where that symbolism is visible on the bodies of the consumers who move and inhabit all spaces. In characterising the figures in her poem by their brand identities, Bufton acknowledges this process of performance and consumption, identifying a collapse in the ideological distance between the high-culture space of the sandstone university and the low-culture, consumer space of commercial fashion.

This collapse, brought on by a permeation of commodity culture into the poetic and intellectual space, follows the speaker into the Art Fair gallery. In the study on shopping centres cited above, Huat discusses how space is a defining characteristic that hierarchises consumer capital. The greater volume of space that is afforded to a product, the greater the imputation of luxury and social capital. The consumer cannot touch objects endowed with such luxury freely; contact is mediated by a shop assistant while the shopper is encouraged merely to look and imagine.⁹ In Bufton's mixed-art product space as gallery, the Art Fair may be viewed as the ultimate space of social commodity capital in that it produces the greatest distance between object and product, subject and consumer. Conceptualising the gallery as a luxury shopping centre redefines the terms of the encounter between bodies, introducing concerns of consumption, objecthood, and the social signals of objects.

Completely prohibited from physical contact with the *I luv you* sculpture, the speaker is limited to consumption through sight: specifically, the signals of the sculpture. However,

9. Ibid., 53.

the sculpture's status as an inanimate body complicates its place in the social system of fashion commodities, changing the relationship between viewer body and art-object body. Hollander observes the importance of artistic representations of bodies, which hinge on their distinction as "natural": the "'natural' beauty of cloth and the 'natural' beauty of bodies have been taught to the eye by art."¹⁰ In this sense, the depiction of clothed bodies in Western art demonstrates what artists and viewers believed bodies looked like based on normative styles and fashions. Hollander concludes: "Thus Western clothing is not a sequence of direct social and aesthetic *messages* cast in a language of fabric but, rather, a form of self-perpetuating visual fiction, like figurative art itself."¹¹ Understood in these terms, the encounter between the speaker and the sculpture becomes less a meeting of animate and inanimate bodies than an encounter in which the speaker meets a representational self, a figure viewing the figurative.

The Sculpture

'At the Art Fair'

This love device so canny
 when unwound but fleeting in its
 desperate lengths to stay inflated. I only live when I pump, it says
 , so softly only I hear. It was a vending machine for my future patterns.
 It makes grace like an external liver
 cleanser. It will return you to silkier
 plots,
 disengaging character refs and all of your pert demands
 Mainly the tweed jackets were too boxy for
 our legs. The proportions now make me
 quiver, when I think how wrong. We had not dealt with the waists.¹²

10. Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, xii–xiii.

11. *Ibid.*, xv.

12. Bufton, "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you Sculpture*, 1993," in *Superette*, 17, lines 15–26.

Within the Art Fair gallery, the key encounter takes place between a mechanical sculpture assemblage and a "natural" human body, altering the terms of the poem's bodily aesthetics by imagining a



Figure 1. Christopher Langton, *I luv you* (1993). Image courtesy of artist.

categorical merging of the object/subject and art/commodity/
body. In physical synchronicity, the two beings attempt a merging
of bodies, unsettling their subject/object positions.

Christopher Langton's sculpture (figure 1), with which the speaker is conversing, appears as a large rectangular case with metal framing and glass plate sides that allow a clear view into the case. Illuminated inside are seven inflatable cartoon hearts, their white hands and arms extending outwards, beckoning for the viewer's desire and affection. The stack of toy-like objects encased in this way is reminiscent of a carnival or arcade game whose prizes, on full display but out of reach, entice players to compete for their possession.

While this appears to be an encounter between a viewing subject and an art object, the terms of the sculpture and viewer's relationship are complicated by the invocation of cuteness and the language of a complicated power dynamic between the two beings in the scene. While the sculpture communicates with the viewer, there is a tone of pleading desperation, indicating bodily weakness. The speaker identifies *I luv you* as "fleeting in its / desperate lengths to stay inflated," an identification that establishes the viewer as subjective witness to the object's helplessness. This relationship is categorised within a cute aesthetic, which Sianne Ngai has explained as follows: "Cute things evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them."¹³ The speaker wants both to encompass the sculpture with love and to save it from some unidentified harm that may prevent it from breathing.

The inflating balloon hearts of *I luv you* fit the cute aesthetic with their plump cartoon bodies and semi-personified arms. They comprise just enough limbs to embrace in a cuddle, but not enough to move or demonstrate autonomy. They do not have mouths but still speak, with the words "I LUV YOU SOOO MUCH!" emblazoned across their fronts in bubble lettering. This is the only message they need to convey, and the only response they will ever make, regardless of how one treats

13. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.

them. There is a power imbalance between the object and the viewer, not only because the object is unable to autonomously fulfil its own needs but because its predicament evokes a desirous and protective response in the viewing subject.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), Ngai argues for new aesthetic terms to identify the changing landscape of the modern world where aesthetic relations can no longer be compartmentalised between the beautiful or sublime. Ngai names “cuteness” as the aesthetic that captures the current consumerist climate, one in which mass production and capitalism have redefined the art object as commodity. As she writes, cuteness is

an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbour toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities.¹⁴

Bound up in cuteness, and particularly in Bufton’s use of cuteness in this poetic encounter, are the processes of production and consumption proliferating in postwar capitalism. Further, commodity fetishism, the desire to possess an object at the centre of the cute aesthetic, is perversely circular. The powerlessness of the cute object operates alongside a powerful demand to be chosen; or, as Ngai suggests, the cute object “flatteringly seems to want us” at the same as it sees the consumer subject as an “adoptive ‘guardian.’”¹⁵ The mirroring of desire between the consuming subject and the cute object is a unique power dynamic, more complex than a commodity aesthetic might initially seem. It is as though the cute object is able to manipulate the subject and infiltrate their autonomous desiring position.

Now we return to the construction of the sculpture. Atop the case are a series of pumps, which operate to inflate the internal hearts—up and down, in and out—much like the natural systems of the body (the breath and heartbeat).

14. *Ibid.*, 949.

15. *Ibid.*, 64.

This external mechanisation turns the carnival display into an iron lung, an organ displaced from the body but still operating. Standing with the sculpture, the rhythms of the pumps match the rhythms of the onlooker's body, creating an affinity between the subject's autonomous life force and the object's mechanisation. Thus, the inanimate status of the sculpture shrinks from the foreground, and the scene becomes an encounter between two bodies, breathing in harmony. The physical mimicry of the sculpture complicates the boundary between inanimate object and animate body by objectifying a bodily process.

Considering the details of the encounter, the speaker directly articulates their conversation with the *I luv you* sculpture, a machine described as a "love device." Not only is this object a mechanised body with animate bodily systems, it evokes an affective response. A "love device" describes either an object which gives the user love (whether through physical affection and comfort or a verbal message like "I LUV YOU SOOO MUCH!"), or an object that receives love. In both cases, "love" is a reciprocated affect, an emotion given and then received. In her examination of contemporary conceptions of love and desire, Lauren Berlant argues that, while desire generates a "reencounter" with the self, "love is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form."¹⁶ In this relationship, the sculpture becomes a part of the viewer, displaced but completing the subject's self-image. The sculpture communicates directly with the speaker: "I only live when I pump, it says /, so softly only I hear." It is as though this encounter, taking place in a public space, is so intimate as to be internalised within a single expanded body.

The speaker further describes the sculpture as "so canny" in a gloss unusually distinct from the more

16. Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2012), 6.

common description of an object as uncanny, in the sense of strangeness or unknowability. In contrast, this object is “so canny,” so unexpectedly familiar and knowable to the viewing subject, who feels they are themselves reflected in the inflatable hearts and their outstretched arms.¹⁷ Further, the descriptor plays on the contemporary meaning of canny as “having or showing shrewdness and good judgement.”¹⁸ The speaker is bestowing on the object the capability of not only making judgements, the domain of the subject, but of making good, valuable judgements. Now, the boundary between the sculpture and the speaker has dissolved into the normative couple form Berlant alludes to, with the speaker’s body and subjectivity expanding into one shared body and subject position through the affective connection of love.

Yet, this merged subject position is not free from the commodifying influence of consumer culture. The affective love relationship of the conjoined subject/object is informed by capitalism. As Berlant summarises,

People learn to identify with love the way they identify with commodities: the notions of personal autonomy, consent, choice, and fulfillment so powerful in love discourse seem to be the same as those promised by national capitalism.¹⁹

17. The etymological origin of “canny” is the Scottish and northern English word “can” in its sense of “know how to”: *Online Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. “canny (adj.),” accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/canny>.

18. *Lexico*, s.v. “canny (adj.),” accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/canny>.

19. Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 109.

The attitude of object possession and object accumulation has impacted the social realisation of love as a process of self-actualisation. Not only has the subject externalised their self-image to the sculpture body through love; the subject is also in a relationship shaped by their ability to purchase back their self-actualisation. Thus, as the object encroaches on the subject position through cuteness and physical mimicry, the subject turns to the object to fulfil their self-image. The subject is reflexively commodified as a consumable product, understood as part of a purchasable whole.

Conclusion

The bodies of Bufton's poetry are the grounds on which the destabilisation of subject/object boundaries play out under consumer culture. In "Conversations with Christopher Langton's *I luv you* sculpture, 1993," bodies carry fashion brands and pop culture into academic and art spaces to confirm the collapse of high and low art, turning the university and the art gallery into consumer spaces. However, in the evolution of postwar capitalism, the distinction between the animate and inanimate body also dissolves. Bound up in the affective relationship of love as both a reciprocation and extension of the self, achievable through the accumulation of commodities, Bufton's sculpture and speaker are able to merge their subject and object positions. In this dialectic, the consumable subject becomes the ultimate possibility of consumer culture for contemporary aesthetic relations.