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Take It or Leave It: Deconstructing Perceptions of Art as an Institution

A sensory overload of various media, colors, shapes, and text overwhelm the space of *Take It or Leave It*, each gallery filled with information in many guises. Upon first encounter, the space has a tendency to consume the viewer in a way that can be difficult to interpret, but upon multiple encounters with the exhibition, the themes in each room begin to take shape as a larger unit of meaning. While the exhibition is one which is variable in "meaning" as it emphasizes the importance of the audience as a receiver and interpreter, it is useful and helpful to be aware of the events that were ongoing and prevalent in society and politics at the time. The 1980s and 1990s were a time during which America faced economic turmoil, the AIDS crisis surfaced, and socio-political issues like feminism were topics of debate. These notions strayed away from the traditionalist, normative structures that shaped social dynamics and challenged the paradigms in which American society functioned. In complement to the social and political arenas, this was also a time that "postmodernism" rose in the art world when artists began to see institutions like the art market and museums from a more critical eye, questioning the motives and drivers of such institutions among other tendencies. Institutions that propelled the art world were challenged, in part, by appropriation art during the post-modern era in which artists adopted images and concepts from past, often "modernist" modes of creating art, and reframed them to become relevant to the contemporary issues that were prevalent during this time. In this way, institutional critique and appropriation are two major components of postmodernism explored through the exhibition *Take It or Leave It.*

Much of the post-modern movement was surrounding the idea that the value of art is determined by its reception, and moved away from the traditional idea of the "lonely" or "tormented" Artist that alienates the public. Rather, a more inclusionary perception of art came about in which it was not an individualist and elitist realm but one that strove for integration into daily life outside of the institutions of the "Art World." Art began to incorporate alternative forms such as text, and appropriation of familiar images for new contexts. In this way, *Take It or Leave It* does well to include artists who perpetuate such ideas in their work, but by curating the art in a

way that bombards the galleries with its busy arrangement, the exhibition actually reverses this inclusionary intention and is alienating to the artistically illiterate eye. It makes many esoteric references within the "Art World" that may be necessary tools in understanding the functions of the work. Audiences may find the wide range and number of pieces to be perplexing, especially upon first encounter. If much of contemporary art acts to discredit the ideology of the authoritative, master "Artist," this exhibition can alienate those unfamiliar with the work through the overwrought nature of curation. However, the curators also chose to include wall-text that explains the themes of each room as well as the text that accompanies each individual piece work to counteract the denseness of the exhibition. The themes are not only broad titles for each room, but are substantiated by an explanation of the theme's relevance to the issues that faced the time frame that the art works were created in. There is also text that accompanies each piece that serves as an extension of the other wall text to help in counteracting the denseness of the exhibition. The text serves as a directive tool for the untrained eye to search and decode complex critiques of societal institutions.

Each theme is essential in contextualizing the works in each room and in unpacking the interpretations of not only the works themselves, but their placement. In the room titled, "America," Zoe Leonard's *Survey* (2012) is placed strategically among works of various mediums that all contribute to this theme in various ways. While the piece thoroughly explores the overarching concepts that dictate the entire exhibition, it is essential to understand the ways in which the work delineates "America" as well. The theme is an exploration of the elements that created America's national identity surrounding the time of Ronald Reagan's presidency. It seems that the works question the icons, practices, and media-perpetuated imagery that were prevalent in their validity as reflections of reality. Rather, it seems that the images that were associated with America, such as the "backyard barbecue" in Haim Steinbach's *Backyard Story* (1997) or the American flag accompanied by "Native American feathers"as shown in Jimmie Durham's *Bedia Stirring Wheel* (1985), are posed as simulacra. These are images that don't evoke a specific original image, but make the viewer feel a certain sense of nostalgia that is tied to American culture. There is something familiar and comforting about seeing clothes on a clothesline above barbecue

grills. However, when we turn to organization within each piece, we can glean that the artists are commenting on the commercial industry forming these emotional ties with images that they are trying to sell. This can be seen in the blatant appropriation of store shelves in Steinbach's piece or with the image of Niagara Falls in repetition in Leonard's piece.

Zoe Leonard's *Survey* (2012) is placed in a corner, a wooden work-table with over six-thousand vintage postcards of Niagara Falls stacked in curious arrangements. The room questions ideas surrounding individual identity as constructed by national identity and sentiment. From afar, the piece looks to be an architectural model of buildings or perhaps even a factory. Leonard displays a sort of obsessive collection, organization, and presentation in her piece. The stacks are uneven and seem random at first, but upon closer observation, it can be learned that the artist stacked the postcards according to the specific type of postcard so that the same kind appear in the same vertical pile. But the arrangement on the table is much like a topographic map in that they are organized by vantage point. The angle from which each image portrays the falls matches the placement of the postcard stack on the table so that it emulates the way a viewer would walk around and look at the actual falls. In the production of this work, Leonard defies the traditional modes of creating an artwork by using raw materials that are pre-made, the raw materials being the postcards that she collected from various sources such as flea markets and online sales.

It is important to note that the objects in Leonard's work are not simply photographs or drawings, but are postcards that have been used. The postcards not only represent the Niagara Falls, but they are also objects that are personal for the sender and receiver. Though the markings cannot be seen, many of the postcards are indeed written on. This is also a noteworthy characteristic of the work in that the use of these postcards is what turns them from a commodity into a personal object. In many ways, a postcard encapsulates capitalism, commodification, as well as commercialization. The Niagara Falls are a natural wonder that seems to exist independently of any institution, but in reality, postcards that are mass produced and circulated all over the world are a manifestation of its institutionalization by the tourism industry. Before modern media existed, postcards were an effective way in which the image of the Niagara falls and other tourist at-

tractions were perpetuated. While some of the older postcards are hand-colored and painted over, and the newer ones seem more detailed and oriented towards brighter coloring and contrast, there remains the consistent element of the Falls being delineated in a way that makes them seem attractive, impressive, and relatively unchanged. The Falls being portrayed as this fairly standard representation shows that the image of Niagara Falls is created through cultural schemas such as national pride and the importance placed on tourism rather than through an accurately representative lens. It gives people an image to hold on to and associate with this site. This mass-production of the postcards not only commodifies and commercializes a natural wonder, but it also commodifies the person who is sending the postcard. In a way, the writing on the postcard, and thus the postcard itself, is an indexical symbol of the person who went to the Falls and is thus sending it to prove that they were present.

This commodification of human subjects is also present in a piece that is not surprisingly placed nearby to Leonard's piece. Sherrie Levine's *After Edward Curtis: 1-5* (2005) is an appropriation of images taken by Edward Curtis during his commission to document Native American tribes. In her piece, Levine exposes the commodification of these Native Americans in seemingly "authentic" and traditional gear that creates a familiar image of Native Americans that most people are familiar with. It exoticizes these human beings, somewhat like Leonard does through the symbol of postcards in her piece as representations of human subjects. Levine, too, emphasizes the commodification through a structured organization of the photographs that makes them appear as though they are documents. This theme of obsessive organization and documentation is present in many areas throughout the exhibition, but none parallel Leonard's piece better than Mike Kelley's *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991*).* His piece is a collection of dolls and toys organized on simple tables throughout the room near the end of the exhibition under the thematic term "Archive". He, too, takes mass produced objects that have been used, personalized, and even loved by their respective owners, and arranges them in a methodic way. The toys are indexes of the children who played with them, but put in a removed, institutional setting the way that Leonard does with her postcards. Though this piece is in a a different part of the exhibition that Leonard's and Levine's, it does well to call attention to the fact that these objects that have such

tender and often nostalgic emotions tied to them are also mass produced in a commercial institution.

Take It or Leave It is an impressive assemblage of stimulating artworks from the 1980s and 1990s that are thought provoking and deeply critical of institutions even far beyond the art world. Instead of displaying recognizable and marketable art that may be done in a modernist mode of curating an exhibition, *Take It or Leave It* is not masturbatory in the "authenticity" or brilliance of any particular artist in the show. It is a conscious effort to include such a large number of artists who are and were contemporaries in one show to deem post-modernism as a collective artistic and socio-political movement. The inclusion of so many artists and artworks mirrors the message that these artists worked to deliver at this time—that art is a mode of reflecting the culture it is made in, and that it is not simply an expression of the individual, but should work to critique society and its components. While *Take It or Leave It* is effective in achieving a cohesive critique, perhaps it is too many concepts and works for an audience to process. Yet, each piece has a purpose for being present in the exhibition, as does each artist. Though the works themselves challenge notions of institutional critique and appropriation, the curators expresses that it was also important that the artists included continued to make work that challenged these ideas. *Take It or Leave It* presents art and artists that use appropriation in various methods to critique the institutions that perpetuate production of art. The exhibition may include an overwhelming number of works that give it the potential of driving the inexperienced viewer further into the illusion that art is inaccessible, however the large volume of works is still effective in creating the non-chronological and unconventional experience of the exhibition. Though *Take It or Leave It* risks "preaching to the choir," to the educated viewer, it is a self-reflexive exhibition that works to bind the fissures that appear to exist between society and art.