

KARYN OLIVIER

WINTER HUNG TO DRY



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JUNE 30 - JULY 30, 2005

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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Winter Hung to Dry

In "The Ecstasy of Communication," an essay that might be better described as a diatribe, Jean Baudrillard railed against the disappearance of a "whole intimate universe—projective, imaginary and symbolic" that corresponded to "the object's status as mirror of the subject, and that in turn to the imaginary depths of the mirror and 'scene'...a domestic scene, a scene of interiority, a private space-time."¹ Put more simply, he perceived that by the early 1980s when this essay was published, binaries like subject/object and public/private had ceased to be meaningful, the mirror and scene having been replaced by the screen and network or, in his formulation, by the "smooth operational surface of communication." This is now a familiar way of describing one aspect of postmodernism, but it nevertheless continues to provoke responses that, like Baudrillard's, might be considered nostalgic. Karyn Olivier's work, while not related to a critique of the simulacrum or the hyperreal, exhibits a similar nostalgia for the depths of the mirror and scene; and it is precisely in relation to Baudrillard's terms—subject/object and

public/private—that her practice is situated. Rather than lamenting the breakdown of the boundary between the components of these binaries, however, Olivier might be said to complicate it in various ways, not in order to transcend this nostalgia but to explore a continuing susceptibility to it.

In some cases Olivier makes the spectator's participation integral to the work, confusing the roles of subject and object. Her 2003 installation, *Bench (Seating for One)* consists of a sturdy, freestanding brick wall with a shelf-like metal seat sticking out of the center. Placed at a forty-five degree angle to the walls of the gallery, its monolithic presence recalls the forms of minimalism. But sitting on the cold metal bench produces an acute awareness that this piece only functions when one's back is turned to it: the sculptural object disappears as the viewer becomes a figure to the wall's ground. From this vantage point, it's not the brick wall that's now correcting our posture but the bare walls of the gallery that become the focus of attention. By effectively turning the space of the gallery into the object of contemplation, the work transforms the proverbial white cube into the mirror of the subject. At the same time, the act of

sitting quietly in a public place (and, more specifically, in a gallery or museum) with "nothing" to look at returns us, momentarily, to the private space-time of Baudrillard's intimate universe since this situation lends itself to introspection. Refusing to be categorized solely as either sculpture or architecture, the brick wall is also not quite furniture; oscillating between subject and object, the viewer's identity seems similarly ambiguous. And as the

agent of this alternating shift in perspective, we can't help but become aware of it.

Like *Bench*, *It's not over 'til it's over* (2004) isolates the viewer, this time in the even more public setting of Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York. A formally austere, unadorned replica of an old-fashioned carousel sits somewhat forlornly in the middle of an empty field, its perpetually revolving platform occupied by a single chair. Absent the crowds and the sensory overload of its usual context, and rotating clockwise (that is, in reverse), this now defamiliarized structure engenders a sense of solitude rather than amusement or conviviality. Instead of offering a tableau to contemplate, this installation involves us in a kind of plotless scenario—a word that, not coincidentally, is redolent of Baudrillard's scene. Without the bells and whistles or the habitually frenetic environment, the carousel is revealed as the banal, low-tech diversion that it is, especially in comparison with the fastpaced thrill of, say, Microsoft's XboxTM. In contrast to *Bench*, this work reminds us that it's not the thrill of the ride but the social encounter provided by this type of entertainment that has been superseded along with the mirror and scene. It's not nostalgia for an edenic paradise that is manifested by *It's not over*, it's the dim memory of ordinary, relatively uncomplicated social interactions that makes the replacement of this outmoded form of entertainment by the ecstasy of the "smooth operational surface of communication" all the more conspicuous.

Ridgewood Line (2004) thematizes the human absence that acts to solicit the viewer's participation in *Bench* and *It's not over*. In this case, however, it's a mechanical body that's missing. Trolley tracks embedded in the floor pass through an arched passageway, mirrored overhead by



Bench (seating for one), 2003. Installation view from above.
Bricks, mortar, steel, plywood and studs. 7' x 14' x 34" (including seat)



Singletwin. 2003

Sheetrock, studs, paint, molding, electrical outlets, thermostats. 12' x 50' x 50'

the parallel cables from which the trolley's electrical conduit is suspended. The work's site specificity isn't explicit but might easily be intuited: the piece was installed in the basement of what is now SculptureCenter (also in Long Island City), which was formerly a trolley repair shop. *Ridgewood Line* conjures up the absent train through its framing of the space, much as we reflexively fill in the missing body in Robert Morris's 1964 *Untitled (Hand and Foot Hold)* in which a lead bar with a cast of Morris's hands hangs on the wall about five feet above another bar with a cast of his feet, giving the impression that an invisible figure inhabits the space in between.

In some ways *Ridgewood Line* can be seen as the counterpart to *Singletwin*, a 2003 installation that involved the duplication of various structural elements found in the exhibition space—a thermostat, a column, an illuminated "Exit" sign, etc.—which we routinely encounter in any number of public places. Like the haunting presence of the trolley, *Singletwin's*

doppelgangers make for an uncanny effect; and the uncanny is a defining feature of the nostalgia that emerged in the modern era, according to Anthony Vidler. "Linked by Freud... to the impossible desire to return to the womb," he writes, "the uncanny has been interpreted as a dominant constituent of modern nostalgia, with a corresponding spatiality that touches all aspects of social life."² The correspondence between nostalgia and spatiality is nowhere more evident than in Olivier's altered architectural spaces, but the prosaic cast of their uncanniness goes a long way toward stripping this nostalgia of sentimentality. As with *Ridgewood Line*, the uncanny has a human rather than supernatural dimension in *Singletwin*—a result of the deadpan inclusion of a misplaced sewer grate in the former and non-functioning electrical devices in the latter. *Singletwin's* wry comment on how utterly unremarkable and relentlessly functional our public spaces have become reminds us that we've ceased to notice their—and our own— anonymity.

Nostalgia is emptied of pathos in *Winter Hung to Dry* in which a very long, very thick clothesline traverses the entire length of the gallery. The clothesline's absurd expanse is rendered even more preposterous by a large pile of unseasonable apparel (at least for a clothesline) loaded in the middle. The stack of woolen sweaters and heavy winter coats, which contrasts sharply with the weightlessness of clothes hung out to dry, parodies the simple technology of this outdated device. Even more significantly, the dense mass of clothes acts as a surrogate for the body. Inverting the terms of *Ridgewood Line*, the presence of the body is felt where it is usually absent and the pile of clothes becomes a seemingly embodied mirror of the subject. Experiencing the prop pieces that Richard Serra produced in the late 1960s, we tend to gauge their weight in relation to our own. Here, the weight is not only physical, it's psychological: it isn't just a factor of the gravitational pull of the material (lead in Serra's case) but of our associations with this particular object. Another increasingly rare sight, the clothesline is now the stuff of memory rather than an everyday encounter. And yet it's not the heaviness of our encounter with this work but the lightness of its tongue-in-cheek inversions that prevents us from allowing nostalgia to have the last laugh.

Mary Leclère

¹ Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Bay Press, 1983), 126. All Baudrillard quotations are from this source.

² Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), x.

KARYN OLIVIER
Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago
Resides in Houston, TX

EDUCATION

2001 M.F.A. Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI
1997-1999 Post-Baccalaureate Program, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
1989 B.A. in Psychology Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH

RESIDENCIES

2004-2005 The Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation Space Program, New York, NY
2001-2003 The Core Program, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
2000 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine
1988 Art History Abroad Program, Dartmouth College, Florence, Italy

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2005 **Untitled Exhibit**, Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas, TX
Winter Hung to Dry, Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX
2004 **Billboard Project**, Dupree Sculpture Park at Project Row Houses, Houston, TX
2003 **Bench (seating for one)**, Feldman Gallery, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, OR
2002 **Round 16**, Project Row Houses, Houston, TX

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2005 **Greater New York 2005**, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, MOMA affiliate, Long Island City, NY
Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX
2004 **Three Attempts at Longevity**, Triple Candie, New York, NY
Emerging Artists Fellowship Exhibition, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY
In Practice Series, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY
Houston Area Exhibition, Blaffer Gallery, The Art Museum of the University of Houston, curated by Bill Arning, Houston, TX
The 18th Rosen Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition, Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, Boone, NC
African American Art from the Permanent Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
2003 **It's not the end of the world**, Nave Museum, Victoria, TX
Sitting Sculpture, The Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX
Sweet Dreams, No Name Gallery at the Soap Factory, curated by Franklin Sirmans, Minneapolis, MN
Function: Assimilate, Tyler Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Core 2003 Exhibition, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
2002 **Core Samples**, Galveston Arts Center, Galveston, TX
Core 2002 Exhibition, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
2001 **Function: Drop it**, Function Variable Artists' Projects, Houston, TX
Wall Space, Genesis Park, curated by Hiram Butler, Houston, TX
Summer Show, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI
2000 **M.F.A. Thesis Show**, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI
Blue, Forum Gallery, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI
Erotics of Dislike, Forum Gallery, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI
Thesis Exhibition, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2005 *Creative Capital Grant Recipient*
2004 *The 18th Rosen Outdoor Sculpture Competition and Exhibition Award*
2003 *Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award*, (catalogue)
Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County, Individual Artist Grant,
Artadia Fund for Art and Dialogue Grant, Finalist, 2003 and 2004
2002/2003 *Eliza Prize*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
2000/2001 *Jerome Family Merit Scholarship*, Cranbrook Academy of Art
2000 *Camille Hanks Cosby Fellowship*, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
Richard and Jean Coyne Family Foundation Award, World Studio Foundation
Jaycee War Memorial Scholarship, Jaycee War Memorial Fund
1998 *New York City Boroughs' Scholarship*, Dartmouth College
1996 *Work Study Scholarship*, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Saltz, Jerry, "Lesser New York," *Village Voice*, March 28
Greater New York 2005 (exhibition catalogue), *P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center*, MOMA affiliate
Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970 (exhibition catalogue), *Contemporary Arts Museum*, Houston, TX
Heiges, Nathan, "Karyn Olivier in New York City," *Glasstire*: www.glasstire.com, "Cheap Chills," *Time out New York Kids*, Winter 2004/2005
2004 Houston Area Exhibition (exhibition catalogue), *Blaffer Gallery*, *The Art Museum of the University of Houston*, Houston, TX
The 18th Rosen Outdoor Sculpture Competition and Exhibition (exhibition catalogue), *The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts*, Boone, NC
Perreault, John, *Artsjournal*: www.artsjournal.com/artopia, February 1
Johnson, Patricia, "African-American art in focus," *Houston Chronicle*, February 18
Moloney, Tim, "The Accidental Artist," *002 Magazine*, February, p.14
Dollar, Steve, "Putting Innovation into 'Practice'," *Newsday* (Queens Edition), January 4, p. D.27
Harber, John, "Sprawl, In Practice and Keith Sonnier," *www.harberarts.com*, Winter 2003/4
Heinkel-Wolfe, Peggy, "Siting Sculpture," *ArtLies*, Winter 2003/2004, p.78
2003 Pugh, Clifford, "Is Houston Hip? UK mag thinks so," Houston Chronicle, November 23, p.11
Poulson, Alex, "Oil be damned: Houston Art," *Dazed and Confused*, December, p.180
Heinkel-Wolf, Peggy, "Sculpture exhibit offers odd twists at every turn," *Star-Telegram*, Nov. 8
Daniel, Mike, "Siting Sculpture at the Contemporary," *The Dallas Morning News*, October 31, p.59
Klaasmeyer, Kelly, "Party on the Patio," *Houston Press*, April 10, p.50
Core 2003 (exhibition catalogue), The Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
2002 *Core Yearbook* (exhibition catalogue), The Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
Davenport, Bill, "Core 2002 Exhibition at the Glassell School of Art," *Glasstire*: www.glasstire.com, April
2001 Morrison, Gavin, "Wall Space. Wall-works at Genesis Park, Houston," *Glasstire*: www.glasstire.com, April

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX



This Panel: *Ridgewood Line* (BQT Ghost No. 6064), 2004. *Installation Overview*. Steel, cable, cement and wood. 10' x 6'7" x 45'

Cover Panel: *Winter Hung to Dry*, 2005. Artist's winter clothes and cable. 57' Approximate



It's not over 'til it's over, 2004. Steel, wood, fabric, rope, lighting, motor, casters and chair. 14' x 24'

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