



## RETAIL VALUE

CHRISTINE HILL, BEVERLY MOJENA, A. LAURIE PALMER, WILLIAM POPE.L,  
J. MORGAN PUETT, MICHAEL RAKOWITZ, SLOP ART, MARION WILSON

Curated by Patricia C. Phillips  
February 3 – April 13, 2008

Opening reception: Sunday, February 3, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

“Shopping is not therefore best understood as an individualistic or indivisualizing act related to the subjectivity of the shopper. Shopping is an active praxis that intervenes and constitutes as well as referring back to relationships.”<sup>1</sup>  
— Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*

In spite of the chronically contested character of the United States-Mexico border, Mexican citizens commonly are granted one-day passes to enter the United States specifically to shop. In addition to the wide availability of products at favorable prices, a growing number of women acquire the retail-sanctioned day passes when they go into labor ensuring that their baby is born in the United States. In a cagey bait and switch, shopping is frequently a ploy to satisfy an entirely different and decidedly more consequential transaction. These calculated shopping trips offer a striking metaphor for an exhibition that explores how artists use the conventions, codes, and commodities of retail as lures and decoys to produce other desired transactions.

“To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like in-between, relates and separates at the same time....The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from this midst, so that the two people sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.”

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*<sup>2</sup>

Shopping is one of our most ubiquitous encounters with things that relate and connect us to each other and a world in common. A paradoxical “world of things” that stands between, while annealing, relationships confirms an imminent or implied activity of material exchange that is both an impetus and objective of some artists’ practices. *Retail Value* considers the work of artists who work imaginatively and opportunistically, if ironically and subversively, with the familiar habits and dynamic conditions of shopping. (As curator, I feel compelled to share a confession and make a disclaimer. Attracted by the promotional and predatory dimensions of retail as a subject of research (if not desire), I hate to shop and have disappointed friends and family with my phobia for, and general abstinence of, shopping.)

In the vast *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, Rem Koolhaas and his co-editors claim that “shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity.”<sup>3</sup> The blunt and debatable assertion, however, does conveniently position and support the work of artists who tactically engage the ubiquity and sociability of shopping, retail transactions, browsing, and exchange to advertise and advance often pressing and urgent issues of the public realm.

Let us “proceed with the assumption that artistic practice in general is a series of negotiations between and through interior desires and exterior spaces.”<sup>4</sup> An expression of desire in public space is the foundational premise of shopping, retail, the pitch, and the bargain—and constitute the negotiations, transactions,

and enactments of the artists in *Retail Value*. Unquestionably, there has been significant critical analysis of the relationship of art, production, and labor. Helen Molesworth’s brilliant exhibition and book, *Work Ethic*, examines the transitions from industrial to service-based economies with the shifting conditions and configurations of the work—and products—of contemporary artists. Without reiterating the insights of this and other projects, *Retail Value* presents artists whose practices use public space, retail activities, and consumer behavior to raise striking and unsettling questions about the role of artists and the development and distribution of ideas through (art) work and



William Pope.L *Sum Film*, 2007



William Pope.L *Sum Film*, 2007

(art) products. These discursive, dispersive, and open-ended works represent a “critical entrepreneurialism” which mimics or annexes commercial models of production and distribution. Both playful and serious (like shopping itself), the assembled work deploys the logic of shopping to expand the marketplace of public ideas and issues.

An iconic inspiration for this exhibition is David Hammons’ *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983). It was performed, as weather permitted, in Cooper Square next to other sidewalk vendors displaying and selling their wares. Hammons’ seasonal products were carefully formed and fashioned snowballs arranged on a blanket for sale in appropriately priced sizes and shapes. (This may be apocryphal, but I have been told that some intrepid consumers/collectors have Hammons’ snowballs in their home refrigerators.) Perhaps encouraged by the success of his earlier sidewalk retail project, two years later *Doll Shoe Salesman* presented for sale an even more eccentric, if less ephemeral, form of merchandise than snowballs. Hammons said that “selling the shoes and other things on the street I think is my personal best...it’s like having an opening for me when I do that piece, because I interact with people...if you have an item between you and other people, then they can relate to you. If you don’t have an item, you’re enemy number one. But if you have an item between you, then it cools them out and then they can deal with you.”<sup>5</sup>

Another significant touchstone of the prospect of shopping in the service of art is Martha Rosler’s *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973). Alexander Alberro writes of the artist’s work: “Garage sales are a prototypical form of social relations...The event was simultaneously advertised in flyers and the local “shopper” as an ordinary garage sale and in local newspapers as an art event, offering a further instance of Rosler’s overlapping of categories—in this case garage sales and art galleries, mundane objects and art works,

everyday life and high art—as a strategy for widening the audience for art.”<sup>6</sup>

The display of products with the potential to shop mobilizes William Pope.L’s peripatetic *Black Factory*. Installed in an altered truck, the *Black Factory* has crossed the United States visiting museums, universities, and other public sites. On “check days” people bring objects to the factory that represent ideas of blackness. These racialized objects are either documented and returned, or continue to tour with the *Black Factory* as part of the display (permanent collection). Alternatively, objects are pulverized and reconstituted as benign merchandise for the factory’s gift shop. Its migratory status, production of mundane commodities, and conventions of display subversively and humorously use the habits of merchandising to create a forum to discuss difference and enhance opportunity.

Two other artists in *Retail Value* also utilize prospective



Marlon Wilson *When You Sleep on the Street*, 2005

and symbolic ideas of exchange value and mobility to expand “the market” for their work. **Marion Wilson’s** *This Store Too* is a conceptual project originally sponsored by the New Museum for its new location on the Bowery in New York. Wilson’s colorful, navigable pushcart, inspired by vehicles used in the 19th century in the Lower Eastside, shared and sold items created in collaboration with homeless men and addicts from the Bowery Mission. The “products” included Wilson’s small, idiosyncratic sculptures referencing the stories of her retail collaborators. At once a commonplace vending cart and idiosyncratic boutique, the ambiguous status of Wilson’s project makes it a vivid site of symbolic, economic, and emotional exchange and value.

**A. Laurie Palmer’s** *Oxygen Bar* is both a transient breathing machine and a striking physical symbol of the relationship of use-value and “natural” resources. The oxygen, produced through the photosynthesis of green plants (originally from Hays Woods, Pittsburgh, a wooded site designated for a major, controversial development project), is distributed as “free samples” on a first-come, first-serve basis. The “free sample” and “trial offer” generally are promotional incentives to stimulate interest in and desire for a new or improved product. Palmer shrewdly commodifies oxygen to examine issues of social justice and the growing privatization of once “natural” and public resources. Purchasing power, access, and privilege (just who will be able to afford and consume fresh air?) becomes a sobering prospect.

**Beverly Mojena** lives and works in Havana, Cuba. Stimulated by her observations of Cuban inventiveness during economic crisis, she has developed and designed a line of clothing, footwear, and other products made from plastic shopping bags. *Beverly Top Plastics* is an art fashion line that uses a ubiquitous by-product of retail to create seductive consumer products that are strategically and artfully recycled into the distributive world of commerce. Exploiting a banal glamour, her signature collection is for sale, blurring the boundaries of artwork and commercial products, desire and availability. As Mojena suggests, it is the buyer who determines what has been acquired.

In the 1990s, **Christine Hill** opened *Volksboutique* in Berlin. Exercising an ulterior entrepreneurial motive,



A. Laurie Palmer *Oxygen Bar*, 2005/2008

her under-the-radar consignment shop became a place where visitors and shoppers browsed, drank tea, and talked at length about various topics with Hill, the resourceful proprietor and accommodating salesperson. Like any successful commercial enterprise, *Volksboutique* continues to develop and diversify. Hill’s franchises have occurred at Documenta X (1997) and, more recently, at the Venice Biennale (2007). This ongoing preoccupation with the conceptual potential of shopping questions ideas of value and access, art and life, income and occupation, and the fascinating and unsettled relationship of art, commerce, and retail.

**J. Morgan Puett** has examined and participated in the lively, discursive world of material culture through an independently fashioned and situated practice. Her work agiliely and intelligently moves along the shifting borders of art, design, fashion, and the market. Frequently engaged in the design, production, and sale of clothing, she tactically uses the codes and conventions of fashion to critically examine the social sphere of retail transaction and quotidian economics. An avid historian, her work frequently invokes the histories of clothing, objects, and accessories to reveal the present and speculate on the future. With the other artists in this exhibition, the relationship of art, life, labor, and distribution is assiduously integrative.

Placing art and the marketplace on a brash and boisterous crash-course, **Slop Art** is a team of opportunistic artists/entrepreneurs who market art products,

artists' resources, professional development services, and other opportunities for consumers and artists. Like other successful catalog merchandisers, they promote the browsing, shopping, and purchasing their products as a life-style decision. Fully embracing the obvious and unseemly aspects of a rapacious market and aggressive retail strategies to promote, authenticate (the real thing!) and sell art products and services, Slop Art makes shopping—and art—a hilariously disquieting spectacle.

In 2006, **Michael Rakowitz** reopened Davisons & Co., an import/export business operated by his family in Baghdad until his grandfather fled Iraq in 1946 and re-established the business in New York. Rakowitz's Brooklyn store provided free shipping to Iraq for patrons including the New York Iraqi community, as well as United States families with military personnel serving in Iraq. Another enterprise involved the negotiation of a contract to import of one ton of Iraqi dates to New York—a venture that was both a great disappointment and partial success. Most of the ordered dates were “detained” on the Iraq/Jordan border and only ten boxes successfully arrived in New York. The first to be shipped to the United States in more than 30



**Michael Rakowitz** *Return*, 2006



**Michael Rakowitz** *Return*, 2006

years, the succulent, legendary dates became surrogates for diaspora and displacement.

Seeking intellectual alliances in independent practices, the work represented in *Retail Value* paradoxically enacts or annexes the commonly accepted parameters of retail to draw clients and customers, patrons and people into complex intellectual and emotional transactions. Why do artists choose to deploy and exploit retail and commercial forms and behaviors? What are the opportunities and risks when the prospect of shopping is the ploy? Animated by these and other questions, these enterprising artists engage in an intimate entrepreneurship of exchange, expectation, risk, and desire to explore the complex entanglements of the human condition. □

— Patricia C. Phillips  
New York, NY  
January 2008

#### NOTES

1. Daniel Miller. *A Theory of Shopping*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 12, 147.
2. Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 152.
3. Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, and Sze Tsung Leong. *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, (Köln: Taschen, 2001) p. 1.
4. Ken Ehrlich and Brandon LaBelle. *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site*, (Errant Body Press, 2003) p. 9.
5. Alanna Heiss, Kellie Jones, Steve Cannon, and Tom Finkelpearl. *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble*, (New York: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1991) p. 32.
6. Catherine de Zegher. *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), Alexander Alberro, “The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy”, p. 132-133

#### BIOGRAPHY

**Patricia C. Phillips** writes and organizes exhibitions on contemporary art, public art, architecture, and landscape and the intersection of these fields. She is the author of *It Is Difficult: Alfredo Jaar* (Barcelona: Actar Press, 1998) and editor of *City Speculations* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996). She was editor-in-chief of *Art Journal*, a quarterly on modern and contemporary art published by the College Art Association (2002-2007). She is a professor and chair of the Department of Art at Cornell University.

## CHECKLIST

### CHRISTINE HILL

*UNTITLED*  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie  
EIGEN+ART

### BEVERLY MOJENA

*BEVERLY TOP PLASTIC*, 2000  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### A. LAURIE PALMER

*OXYGEN BAR*, 2005/2008  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### WILLIAM POPE.L

*SUM FILM*, 2007  
DVD  
8 hours  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Kenny Schachter Rove Gallery

### J. MORGAN PUETT

*UNTITLED*, 2007  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of Alexander Gray  
Associates, New York

### MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

*RETURN*, 2006  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### SLOP ART

*FREE SLOP ART SALE  
CATALOGS*, 2003 (debut)  
Color, offset lithography,  
staples (catalog)  
24 pages, 11 x 11 in.  
Metal, plastic, plexiglas  
(dispenser)  
20 x 35 x 18 in.  
Courtesy of Slop Art  
International

*PAINTING SIMULATOR  
PRODUCT DISPLAY*,  
2002/2006-7  
Inkjet on rag with perforations,  
shrinkwrap, cardboard (print)  
14 x 14 in. unfolded;  
8 x 10 x 1 in. folded  
Foam rubber starbursts, metal  
peghook, wooden easel (display)  
24 x 35 x 25 in.  
Courtesy Slop Art International

### MARION WILSON

*THIS STORE TOO*,  
2004-2008  
Mixed media: items that are  
bought, bartered, and sold  
with people living on the street  
including but not limited to:  
T-shirts, hair, words, coconut,  
wood, steel, fabric, paper, resin,  
toys, umbrellas and hand-crafted  
cart/table, bronze cash register.  
Dimensions variable @  
6 x 8 x 4 ft.  
Courtesy of the artist

*WHEN YOU SLEEP ON  
THE STREET*, 2005  
Paper, stamped ink  
7 x 7 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

Cover: *Marlon Wilson, This Store Too, 2004-2008*

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