

ETC



Anima Mundi

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Number 10, Winter 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36316ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

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Cite this review

Kunard, A. (1989). Review of [*Anima Mundi*]. *ETC*, (10), 62–63.

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Keith Arnatt, *Pictures from a Rubbish Tip*, 1988. Color print; 58,2 x 72,1 cm.
 Courtesy Musée canadien de la photographie contemporaine/Musées nationaux du Canada

Anima Mundi : Still Life in Britain,
 Maison de la Culture Parc-Frontenac, Montréal,
 September 16 to October 14, 1989 —

Anima Mundi brings together nine British photographers (of whom only seven are discussed here due to space limitations) under the genre of still life photography. Still life presents a selection and ordering of objects, a *tableau* of images, which was previously associated with a display of personal wealth. The modern representation of this idea in photography, as depicted through the practice of collage and investigation in postmodern theory, displays personal choice as caught up in the complexity of political and social systems. In this case, the wealth is one of reciprocal concerns constructed by both a viewer and an artist of similar social context.

Images of wealth and reward are still portrayed through advertising and media. The photographs of Don McAllester attempt, with partial success, to disrupt that process of seeing/desiring/owning. Once part of the advertising industry, McAllester is sensitive to the manipulation of the image and its appeal to the consumer. He bifurcates his images with mirrors, splitting or confounding the photographed object(s) with

the intention of leaving the viewer disoriented. However, his own images appeal through his attention to textures and the remnants of the works' geometric basis. The photograph itself as object enters consumer culture, albeit by the back door. The curator, Martha Langford, further complicates matters when, in the catalogue accompanying the show, she notes McAllester's "work reminds us of the vulgarization of the still life" through its participation in sales and advertising. She refers to the genre as if it were a pure art form, in effect isolating it. Moreover, it is difficult for an art object both to disrupt our desire to possess and to maintain an aesthetically crafted and pleasing appearance.

Keith Arnatt's photographs display another approach to this issue. Arnatt photographs garbage: soup tins, chicken bones, chunks of raw meat — all in full Fuji colour. Arnatt has stated that he is not explicitly making an environmental statement (he once described garbage bags in a dump as "glittering like jewels in a landscape!"). His photographs, rather, are concerned with art history and artistic practices. He is an interdisciplinarian who condemns the categorization of artistic media.

Arnatt's work is polemical. His slick photographs of garbage question the criteria of suitable subjects for photography. Further, Arnatt references

his genre to historically validated painters such as Caspar David Freidrich, Samuel Palmer, and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. Arnatt's emphasis on the found garbage object in the landscape also contends with our idea of nature as pastoral. By not politically "soap boxing" his subject matter, he frees the viewer to examine issues normally taken for granted.

Ron O'Donnell also wishes to avoid political reductionism. He uses the same subject matter as Arnatt, but in a more theatrical manner. His installation work for the show was a garbage waterfall: cascading water depicted by rows of discarded 'natural springs' water jugs; the surrounding banks a heap of painted cardboard, tin cans, and the like. The humour and staginess of his work ("nature" represented by plastic frogs and chickens) is surrealist in its sensibility.

The installation, however, demonstrates the problem of using garbage itself as a medium in the pristine gallery space. The installation was too neat. Why not fill the whole art gallery with garbage²? This question leads us to another aspect of both Arnatt's and O'Donnell's work — its commodity value. Although their work is well crafted, their subject matter is not appealing and so does not easily enter the art market system.

The sorting and choosing of what is important to us, and its placement within focus (of the camera lens, or perhaps a theoretical grid) is also seen in the works of Verdi Yahooda and Oladélé Bamgboye. In a series of photographs Yahooda gathered small, "unimportant" articles from her mother's home into a container such as a milk jug. In the next photograph they are spilt onto a tray, and then arranged into groups in a third. Above this sequence is another of seeds spilt onto a plate (located on the same type of tray as below). The seeds are shifted to cover, or reveal, the painted scene on the plate.

Again, this scene appears "unimportant" and mass produced. The relationship of Yahooda to her mother's home is not examined in a documentary style. Usual methods of interpretation specific and limited to the personal presence of an individual are absent. Yahooda's relationships are much more tenuous, searching and inconclusive.

The subjective investment in objects found in the home is used by Bamgboye to represent the fragmentation of the individual between cultures. His work deals with his separation from his native country, Nigeria, and his relationship to his new one, Scotland. His photographs, which display objects such as carved ivory African heads and figurines of Scottish pipers, reveal their uncertain status: souvenir, personal memento, gewgaw, or art object?

The theme of loss, and its association with death, is also present in the works of Mari Mahr. Her series *Near to Nice I was Reminded of Death* deals with the emotional content of memory and dream and its

intrusion into other experience. In the first photograph of one group, a sculpted head lies on stone stairs. The next photograph includes a row of dice in the corner. The third shows the head, more dice and a bottle of poison.

There is a staged quality to Mahr's work. However, unlike O'Donnell, Mahr does not seek to entertain. Rather, her works, concern both the artist and the viewer's construction of knowledge through images. The associations are multiple and expansive, pitting "artificial" against "true" photographic representation.

Cultures and their ideologies prescribe the context for an object's use. This idea also extends to the process of gender differentiation and all the societal myths, images and language constructions, that support this process. Sharon Kivland's installation piece *Ergasterion* is a theatre constructed to allow various culturally defined representations of gender in art to interact.

The small, rectangular room contains eight large photographs, one placed at either end and three on each opposing wall. On the floor are approximately fifty black ceramic scallops arranged in a central rectangular group which is diagonally cut by a blue neon tube. The photographs are lit from above by theatre spotlights and the entire room is painted a deep purple.

The photograph of a woman at one end faces a photograph of a man at the other. Between them are reproductions of various 16th century drawings of the Madonna and Child. However, Kivland crops the photograph, enlarging the section where Mary holds the infant. The repetition of these images, the emphasis on the touching, holding, and protecting of the child reveal anew the intimacy of such gestures. The placement of these gestures within art history informs our appreciation of the works. This reciprocity is also evident in the use of scallops. They are usually associated with fertility (Botticelli's *Venus*) and in that sense are thematically consistent with the Madonna. However, the placement of the shells on the floor, because of their fragility, reminds the viewer of his or her own body and its ability to act or to be acted upon. These experiences precede verbal associations and again effect a reappraisal of the images.

Kivland, like the other artists in this show, is not insistent on specific interpretations and therefore allows the viewer a rich associative experience. As the title puns, photography for these British artists is a spirited world of still(s) lives.

Andrea Kunard

NOTES

1. Susan Butler, *Aperture*, Winter 1988, p. 34
2. As did British colleague John Gingel in Vancouver in the summer of 1983