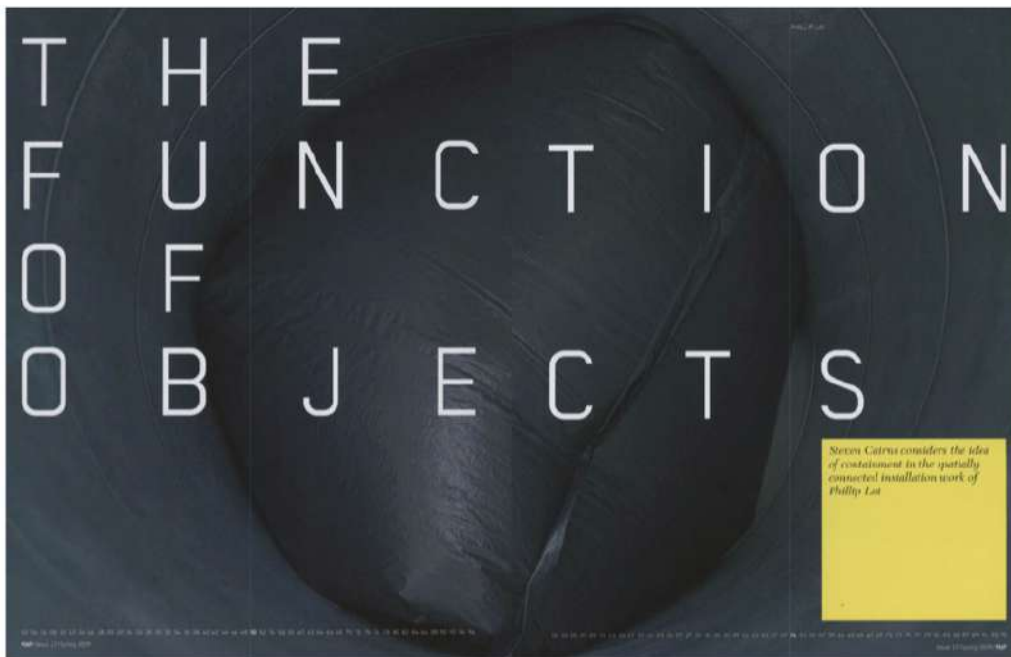


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"The Function of Objects: Phillip Lai."

MAP



An understanding, at some level, of the parameters within which art is displayed, is fundamental to our engagement with artwork. The artist's understanding of a gallery's reflexive formal and social functions is a liberty, one that branches London-based Phillip Lai's practice in multiple directions, all of which fold back on each other to form the weave of his practice, positioning it within the context of the gallery, home to a counter culture that oscillates between the social critique of a distilled mass culture and litmus test to independent value systems.

So the title of his most recent show, *Open Container*, (a reference to the social restrictions of consuming alcohol in public) at Giti Nourbakhsh in Berlin, is perhaps a fitting analogy for his relationship with the complex network of personal and public values of the 'white cube'. Within these structures his works are cohesive and highly considered compositions that explore not only the potentials of the materials he uses, but also the constructs and social functions of the social space that forms the container for his work.

The titling of recent solo shows in London, Turin and Berlin provide a dichotomous wrap-around that emphasises the wholeness of these groupings of works, singularising them, but also emphasising the importance of each in interrelation with the other.

His composition of works within shows is precise; engagement with the installation space is meticulous. His use of materials and their composition can be potentially misconstrued as arbitrary, but this is the point where initial dialogue is established between the viewer and his intentions; Lai's materials are woven with the social fabric of not only the space and its function, former and preconceived, but his own personal relationships with the social formers that make up society at large.

It is significant then to recognise the transition of the exhibition space. The private aristocratic dwelling was once the preferred venue to view artworks, progressively replaced by the 'white cube', a model particularly suited in its application to post-industrial spaces. The social fabrics intrinsic to both types of exhibition format create a succession of relationships, contexts and dialogues that effect a viewer's engagement with the space and the preconceptions they bring to the work. These changes are social in their making and implication, thus the interpretation of what is viewed is informed greatly by the 'container' within which it is shown; what was once engaged with 'at home' in the domestic realm is now encountered in an environment haunted by a not too distant, workplace of the masses.

'Untitled (prism)', a component of *Open Container*, relinquishes these definitions, acting as a broad example of what can be used to discuss Lai's method of working. This is the most imposing work in both its size and conceptual scale; a plinth, equal in height

Previous page: 'Untitled (spiral)', 2008, aluminium tube, spiral duct, clamps, plastic bag, tubing, air
Below: 'Untitled (prism)', 2008, wood, acrylic, fabric, plastic, metal, mixed media



to the windows of the gallery, hosts a collection of clothing, interspersed with personal items; inhaler, Carmex, paper, a number of pieces of cut upholsterers foam, two small cellophane bags filled with what is presumably the artist's exhalation. It is partitioned with clear acrylic panels similarly sized to the panes of the adjacent window.

Lai brings together these objects in a composition that becomes part of the gallery's structure. The collection of belongings takes on the significance of the transient; they are familiar yet unfamiliar in these surroundings. In this move, Lai harnesses preconceived functions of the gallery and uses them as a material. He folds together our own preconceptions of the domestic objects with the exhibition space they occupy; they are at once personal, shopped, discarded, abandoned and purposefully placed.

This is not a simple case of the ready-made, although our understanding of the ready-made's function in the history of art is held in context and ultimately effects how we look at the work. Lai applies these histories, working with them as a base coat onto which he layers manipulations of combination and colour. The histories of the post-industrial environs of the Nourbakhsh space hold significance too, when contrasted with the domicile, however temporary, themes that over arch his practice.

This contrast is accepted by Lai and dealt with in a particularly subtle manner that addresses the transient nature of his work, literally and

philosophically. The works seem temporary in aesthetic, in particular 'Untitled (square crash)', a square black, synthetically upholstered furniture-like mass, which is neither in nor out of its box, arriving or leaving, while at the same time existing as a momentary aesthetic choice.

The domestic object and the emergence of foam as a motif of habitation is most explicit in the collection of works shown together in *Free to Meet for Coffee Sometime Soon*, 2007, at Modern Art, London. In this exhibition Lai emptied out one of the offices of the gallery, putting the contents into storage and in their place installing cast mattress-like foam slabs and blankets in the empty room. Titled 'Living/Sleeping', this simple configuration implies memories of both the squatting counter-culture of the 1960s, and of the same period, the establishment of minimalism as a market viable art form. The cancellation of the gallery's office is conceptually significant as it defunctionalises its intended use, a room of business and commerce, suggesting Lai's awareness of the complex relationship between art and the business of art dealing, and the significance of the elite space that contains them.

The idea of 'suppression' or 'dampening' as Lai refers to it, is predominant in another major 2007 work, 'Keynote'. Here, a simple scaffold construction, its joints padded with foam, denim and felt, is twinned with an undisplayed film of the same title. In this case a significant aspect of the piece is withheld, silently looping on the monitors of Galleria Franco

Below: front 'Untitled (spiral)', 2008, aluminium tube, spiral duct, clamps, plastic bag, tubing, air; rear 'Untitled (prism)', 2008, wood, acrylic, fabric, plastic, metal, mixed media



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Noero's office computers. As in *Free to Meet for Coffee Sometime Soon*, Lai subtly subverts the economy of the gallery and infiltrates its workings by situating part of a significant work where few will see it.

The implications of this manoeuvre are considered and effect the balance of the exhibition as a whole. This 'dampening' becomes a dominant factor that affects the aesthetic elements of the part of the 'Keynote' work situated in the main gallery space. The undisplayed video captures a man suspended upside-down from a structure that implies a similarity to that of the scaffold construction in the gallery. In the video the use function of the structure is to some extent explained, but minus the videos display the viewer looks for counterparts to the scaffold elsewhere in the exhibition. These can be found in the foam and metal strips comprising an adjacent untitled work; in 'Find Random Places': a metal eyelet screwed into the concrete floor, sand and wood panels and/or on the wall in a simple collection of felt-like circular discs that hang inconspicuously.

The suppression of function in the case of 'Keynote' is explicit, but it factors into his practice greatly to varying degrees. These conceptual decisions are paired with aesthetics, ones that embrace colour, shape and form, and their combination with the other works within the gallery. To an extent this develops an aesthetic competition born from social and



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PHILLIP LAI

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”



Right both: 'Keynote', 2007, stills, DVD video (from HD original), undisplayed, 4:19 mins
Top left: 'Living/Sleeping', 2007, cast flexible expanding foam, various fabric, blanket
Bottom left: 'Keynote', 2007, aluminium tube, steel clamps, mixed media

philosophical ideas embraced by Lai and simultaneously reused, developed in combination and comparison. In Lai's *Free to Meet for Coffee Sometime Soon* he installed a patchwork blue nylon canopy in the actual gallery space of Modern Art. This work relies greatly on the combination of colour and light and may be the one work where his use of aesthetics is predominant, it does nonetheless provide a direct contrast with the similarly-sized 'office' of the gallery; using aesthetic to highlight concept and visa-versa.

Significantly, Lai's use of video in these three exhibitions frame an aesthetic in a more direct way than his physical works. They establish obvious aesthetic narratives that run throughout his practice. This is dictated in part by the format of video, but is in turn susceptible to equal amounts of investigation.

In *Free to Meet for Coffee Sometime Soon* a monitor was positioned in the entrance to the gallery as if a notice board looping 'Untitled (coffee display)', in which coffee granules wash back and forth across the screen creating landscape-like formations as they shift. In the same exhibition, 'Untitled (flare - interior)', individuals are recorded inhabiting an anonymous white space, sitting on foam mats which reference the cast objects in the gallery, this work bridging the two spaces in the show.

In *A Metal Bar Fell on Someones Head or Something*, at Galleria Franco Noero, the 'Keynote' video references a physical work in the show, and similarly again, in 'Untitled (sparks)' at Giti Nourbakhsh. Installed on a screen at the entrance to the gallery, a black refuse sac, of the same type that is lodged in the duct of 'Untitled (spiral)', lightly expands and contracts, an anthropomorphic rise and fall in time with a human chest; sparks from an angle grinder fly out from behind it. The refuse sac in the video is quite possibly the same one used in 'Untitled

(spiral)', thus linking the two works. In all cases the video works contribute a narrative that suggests previous interaction that is now negated, dampened.

A simple untitled work from 2007 articulates the resulting character that dominates his practice; a modified cast of a domestic Robin Day Polo chair is fixed precisely inside the circular diameter of a section of a severed oil drum, the two fitting perfectly. This container elevates the simple material and its contexts. The seats previous function humanises the combination, while the industrial nature of the drum has parity with the 'white cube' and its contemporary attribution to industrial space. Their relation to each other creates an arbitrary but happenstance aesthetic that makes sense in their installation; the attention and enquiry needed draws in the viewer, making the experience personal and in turn its composition vulnerable.

For Lai, the container is prescient; the idea of containment exists within a set of parameters that are predefined, while his compositional abilities develop a dialogue that influences our preconceptions of these parameters; they silently shift. Lai creates a sequence of conceptual and aesthetic events that vigorously generate further combinations.

This success through detail makes relevant our contemporary engagement with artwork, which is visually accessible to most but only seen by some. Relying on composition and comparison, Lai unravels intuition in the arrangement and positioning of objects. Above all, he reminds us that there are no foreseeable end points and that no definite answers exist.

Steven Cairns is co-editor of MAP
Phillip Lai, Transmission Gallery, Glasgow scheduled May
Phillip Lai, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London scheduled November

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