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CONTEXT

MAP
Keith Farquhar

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essays, Thomas Crow forcefully suggests that, far from ever having abandoned his early fascination with religion, Smithson's continuing anti-visual bias was based on his "refusal of secularised culture." Crow may be simplifying matters. Smithson himself dismissed Marcel Duchamp's 'priestly' stance as "a kind of religion-in-drag" but then Kuming himself rocked romanticism as 'spirit religion'. The problem in either case, perhaps, is less with religion than with its habit of getting into the wrong place or the wrong clothes. But as an analogue of Frederic Law Giesel, Smithson took himself as promoting a democratic spirit in opposition to Eliot's 'aristocratic stance'.

For Smithson, the scale of geological time and the inevitability of entropy, which underwrite in his work something like a revised version of the romantic cult of ruins, overturned the ossified stance of the reactionary modernists he admired. But it is as hard to reconcile Smithson's essentially pessimistic obsession with entropy with any sort of progressivism as it is, indeed, as it is with Eliot's love of stable hierarchy. The real problem may be that while Smithson is an artist we know through words more than through artifacts, his statements always sound more definitive than they really were, representing passionately-held contradictions.

As a person, Smithson seems to have been opaque, contrary, bushy, caustic and grandiose – his art is much the same. Although more and more people seem to be making pilgrimages to 'The Spiral Jetty', at present his most patient work might well not be any of his earthworks – so distant and formal in their own dishevelled way – but rather the 1983 slide lecture 'Hotel Palenque', which he may not even have considered a work. This piece takes the oridic voice and eye of such phantasmagoric fiction as 'The Moteurists of Roussis' into the real time of listening.

The collaborative 1977 film 'Swamp' was shot by Smithson's wife Nancy Holt as the pair pushed their way through a forest of tall weeds, but more vivid than the imagery is Smithson's controlling voice as it determines the camera's movements: "Go slow ... watch it ... make an about-face ... go back the way you came ... watch the stalks ... shout into the density of it ...". One remembers that this is the person who wrote, "A great artist can make art simply by casting a glance." He should have said, by making others cast his glance.

Smithson's power is in imposing on us others his own 'art of looking', as he put it. This comprehensive exhibition shows that the somewhat masochistic condition of reciprocity Smithson's work imposes is, to a great extent, its own reward.

Barry Schwabsky is London editor of MAP



New York
Keith Farquhar
SHOWING SEP - 6 OCT
SUBJECTS: ART, TECHNOLOGY, SEX & WAR

This is Keith Farquhar's first New York solo exhibition. Tim Nye's Nyehaus gallery is housed in the National Arts Club, an institution founded in the 19th century by New York Times art critic Charles de Kay to promote the arts in America. Like a temporal Russian doll, the building recalls the past, the gallery the present, while Farquhar's show imagines a future.

The historic atmosphere of the National Arts Club should serve as a perfect counterpoint to Farquhar's installation, which envisions a future where femininity is dominant and revered above all. But in fact, the club admitted women artists from its inception. It is only in Farquhar's version of the future that we find inequality.

He takes inspiration from the French author, Michel Houellebecq, whose novels are concerned with sexuality and science. Houellebecq's novel Atomised, describes a world where science has made the male obsolete in the process of reproduction. The end of sexuality as a reproductive function

REVIEW

LEFT
Keith Farquhar, 'Vagina' (Flesh Tone), 2005, neon

would not signify the end of sexuality, but rather its evolution to pure pleasure.

Farquhar has a different idea, for him it seems to signify the separation of the female into the sacred and the male into the profane. In his installation, the genders are detached, spatially and emotionally. In 'Wombed' (2005) his creatures, constructed from jeans and white hoodies, crouch along candy yellow walls. These figures are soulless, drab and uniform, but clearly masculine. Towards the centre of the room, a latrine pile of the same innocuous white hoodies suggests the ordinariness of male DNA; it has lost its magic along with its purpose.

Seven neon 'vagina' (2005), picked out in primary colour permutations, along with one in flesh tone, fill a separate gallery. They recall a similar installation by Jason Rhoades, 'Untitled (Chandeliers)' 2004, which comprises an exhaustive list of words for vagina writ in neon. Farquhar's combination of elemental shapes and colours is particularly striking. It illustrates the idea of woman as exceptional, a truly evolutionary being, who is past, present and future – timeless, functional, and asexual.

Houellebecq's pure pleasure is impossible in Farquhar's interpretation. The separation of the genders into sacred and profane does not allow it. According to the French Sociologist Emile Durkheim, author of the theory, this separation as opposing categories is the basis of their existence as categories. If they were to meet they would dissolve. That Farquhar has exalted woman to the status of sacred means that she is now unobtainable. This inequality is dissatisfying for both genders – so, perhaps the inequality of this speculative future speaks for equality after all.

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