

Enmeshed

The installations of Caroline Phillips navigate a zone between art, craft and design to explore the role of cultural artifacts in the social construction of the viewer. Minimalism, with its use of simple forms, industrial fabrication, everyday objects and seriality, is a primary point of reference and critique. In foregrounding viewers' physical relationship to the art object and exhibition environment, Minimalism disrupted late modernism's promotion of a pure, self-referential aesthetic, but Hal Foster argues that in treating phenomenological experience as a general condition it overlooked the viewer's situation 'as a sexed body positioned in a symbolic order', denying the gallery's ideological role in codifying the viewer as a subject of patriarchy.¹

Through a set of formal and thematic tensions, Phillips explores shifting relations between cultural practices, symbolic classifications and subjecthood. Consumer society has had a primary influence here, exposing cultural boundaries to constant blurring while raising the value of residual differences between fields of cultural practice. Minimal art, for example, leveraged everyday objects for critical ends while advancing the aesthetics of inconspicuous consumption as a consciously coded form of exclusivity. At the same time, the focus on critical concepts works to differentiate advanced art from craft and design and their ascribed role as sources of sensuous pleasure. Phillips' installations contest any such simple complementarity. Using elaborate patterning, suggestive pink and black colour schemes, and the hybrid social meanings attached to objects and materials they destabilize the positioning of minimal art. As zones of sensual integration, they accentuate the object/subject entanglements that govern our encounters with aesthetic artifacts and environments. This is particularly evident in *Enmeshed*, the web of octopus straps directing attention to specific features of the gallery space to highlight the exhibition environment's incorporation of the viewer and its function in endowing activities and things with meaning.

Enmeshed addresses us as political subjects, challenging us to consider the gendered ideologies invested in cultural practices. As a fundamental measure of social differentiation, gender inflects all practices. The historical division of labour between the genders has contributed to perceptions that art, craft and design represent distinct ways of thinking and working, particular practice contexts and narrow practitioner identities. Phillips adopts a lo-tech approach to the act of making. The aesthetics and materials she uses evoke the domains of decorative arts and everyday life to address the norms and assumptions that have often limited women to specific creative pursuits linked to non-professional applications on the basis of perceived gender-specific capacities and proclivities such as manual dexterity, patience, care for others and a flair for decoration. Pierre Bourdieu, moreover, argues that gender profoundly influences bodily experience.² Phillips' installations investigate embodiment through the frameworks of gender and sexuality to highlight their range of potentialities and the ways in which cultural experiences feed our self-conception and sense of the world.

¹ Hal Foster, 'The Crux of Minimalism', in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century*, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 1996, p. 43.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001.

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