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Modus Operandi: Aesthetics and Practice

"Modus Operandi" brings together a group of seven artists around a single point of commonality. It is not strictly a thematic exhibition, but a coming together of seven independent and diverse practices which, in the fabrication of art, intersect at on the point of aesthetic concern. This commonality does not so much represent a *position*, as a shared generational perception resulting from the naturalisation of the postmodern paradigm into art practice. To an emerging generation of artists there is not the strict delineation of *the conceptual* and *the aesthetic* that had existed as a matter of necessity in rejecting Modernism in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is not the express concern of most artists in "Modus Operandi" to deliberately attempt to redress notions of aesthetics in the postmodern context. Nevertheless, in producing work that contains an element of visual seduction, each of us put into practice the aesthetic values which operate in the mass culture which we encounter every day. This is the point of departure from the previous generations within postmodernity who largely rejected concerns with aesthetics. However, "Modus Operandi" does not represent a reclamation of Modernism's essentialist ideas of aesthetics. The notions of aesthetics at play in "Modus Operandi" are nevertheless drawn from an historical context of "aesthetics" in art.

Aesthetics in the Modernist context was generally split into a dichotomy of transcendental "pure" form versus kitsch, or decoration. For the Formalists, transcendental form was the result of aesthetics once reduced to its purest state, when stripped of the superfluity of decoration. The underclass of kitsch and decorative was the necessary other with which Formalism created and defined its territory. To claim transcendence it required a critical structure where the *other* was the banal and mass cultural.

In the decades which have seen the naturalisation of concepts of Postmodernity into our understanding of art, there has been a shift from this transcendental model of art, to a culturally-based, semiological understanding. Purity of aesthetic ideals to Greenbergian Formalists were a matter of attempting to evacuate associations of meaning from work. Transcendental form was the quasi-spiritual purity of form based on the precept of the existence of a metaphysical, universally determining authority. Whilst aesthetics in the Postmodern context are rich with the layering of culture, inevitably imbued with the complexities of semiology. The authority is no longer seen to lie with the belief in a universal and unchanging order, but in the more transient dynamics of culture.

Yet to many artists of the 1970s and 1980s, notions of aesthetics were excluded from the critical agenda. To this earlier generation, postmodernity was defined by *its own* necessary other; Modernism. As Formalists had sought to purge art of the kitsch and decorative, so a generation of Postmodernists sought to purge art of aesthetic concerns. Through association with Modernism, and its essentialist concerns with transcendental form, wider notions of aesthetics have been excluded as symbolic of Modernism.

To the generation of artists, to which "Modus Operandi" belong, who have no experiential knowledge of the high Modernist, or early postmodern era, the propositions of postmodernity are an accepted, established paradigm. Modernism, to our generation, is little more than an historical moment, and by no means of any authority. There is no longer the need to delineate ourselves from the necessary other, as the difference from Modernist concerns has been long established. The multitude of notions concerning aesthetics are open for speculation.

In the current context, with respect to both art and culture, aesthetics have a profound role. Thus, in art, aesthetics have a new agenda. In an image-saturated culture, the aesthetic values of mass culture have an unquantifiable impact and influence upon the aesthetic values we employ in the practice of art. The participants in art's discourses do not exist autonomous of mass culture. The simultaneous participation in the mass culture conditions the aesthetic values which are applied in the production of art.

With their infusion of aesthetic concerns into other individual concerns, the works in "Modus Operandi" demonstrate the generational circumstance of the artists they represent. Aesthetics are no longer symbolic of a rejected moment in art, but are an integral part of the work, whether as a semiological tool in visual communication, seductive retinal gratification, or a speculative play.