

Vikky Alexander

Nordic Rock

Curator: Caroline Andrieux
Main Hall

NORDIC ROCK

Vincent Bonin

During a trip to Chamonix, France, in the mid-1980s, Vikky Alexander found two postcards depicting the ice grotto in the Mer de Glace glacier of Mont Blanc. The first depicts an utterly banal winter landscape. The other shows an incongruous scene: a room with sofas, coffee table, and fireplace sculpted in ice. Every year, the village residents dig a tunnel allowing tourists to penetrate within this body of water that has been frozen for several centuries, while at the same time carving again an architecture of comfort at the core of the glacier's indifferent matter. Alexander has joked that after she discovered these images, she wanted to make this furniture herself again, in ice. In the end, inspired by the generic forms of the furniture inside the grotto, she made axonometric drawings keeping only the bare shapes of these odd elements to conceive sculptures that she would later produce by assembling glass panels. When the objects were first exhibited in 1988, entitled *Glass Bed with Tables*, they were installed on *ad hoc* pedestals or against backgrounds that were theatrically lit. As they were presented among works by other artists, these similar elements emphasized, through their limited variation, the arbitrary co-existence of objects in group exhibitions. Paradoxically, their near invisibility echoed the motif of the empty gallery that so many conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s took up as a radical refusal of an expressivity whose articulation had become a motif over time nonetheless, finding residual forms of pathos and added value—a degree zero of

anthropomorphism—against the screen of nothing to see. When documented against neutral backgrounds without any references to the exhibition space, as was the case in 1988, the sculptures lose some of their veneer as art objects and in their literality, they come closer to the iconography of furniture sale catalogues. Yet they also make present—through its absence—the fetish of the commodity itself, as the surfaces of the chairs, tables, and beds indicate the “uninhabitable,” the impossibility of sitting down or to find one’s place, rather than the functionality of design.

The appearance of these three-dimensional forms in the late 1980s marked the end of Alexander’s investigation of media representation of the body, which she had been pursuing since the beginning of that decade. The transition towards quasi-abstract led the artist to delve into a series of case studies in the 1990s—and still ongoing—that focused on heterotopic places or entertainment enclosures (the West Edmonton Mall, Disneyland, Las Vegas, Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, and Versailles, among other sites). Before this shift, Alexander mainly rephotographed pages from fashion magazines with a 35-mm camera, fitted with a macro lens and set on an adjustable copy stand. The process, which involved reframing the images by removing the captions and brand logos, allowed her to undo the essentialism of the models’ poses, mostly female subjects absorbed in feigned pleasure offered solely to the male gaze.¹ Furthermore, Alexander did not wish to impose an understanding of her work through the hermeneutics of the then current theoretical discourse

(feminism influenced by psychoanalysis and semiotics). Therefore, she created an open interpretative framework, expanding the possibility of ambivalent readings of the media fragments once removed from their original contexts, accentuating the fact that viewers should take responsibility over their unconscious. Although the 1988 sculptures dispense with the human figure, the permutation of their components nonetheless metonymically give shape to a “couple form” *in absentia* by sketching the outline of a bourgeois interior. As such, the residual presence of the subject in these sculptures brings us back to previous “appropriation” work, specifically the series titled *Between Living and Dreaming* (1985). Alexander superimposed 35 mm slides of stereotypical but nonetheless moving scenes of men and women embracing onto those of idyllic landscapes. To unify the surface of the representation, she mounted the prints under coloured panes of Plexiglas. It could be argued that the 1988 glass objects became a kind of holographic extension of the screens placed over these photographs, emphasizing transparency instead of opacity.

It should also be noted that Alexander manifested her interest in subverting the category of the decorative well before this shift to more spatial concerns. In the late 1970s, she began attempting to blur the divide between functionality in design, integrated into the principle of supply and demand, and the supposed intellectual autonomy of conceptualism. Between 1979 and 1980, she collaborated with Kim Gordon in New York to create Design Office, a firm that offered services to peers, often without them having expressed an explicit need. The work undertaken by Alexander and Gordon (mending clothes, illegally painting a facade, designing business cards) humorously referred to the phantom value of the invisible labour of certain protagonists of the art field. In *Lake in the Woods* (1986), Alexander pursued the strategy of making hybrid objects and producing floating

signifiers by covering one wall of the Cash/Newhouse Gallery in New York with wallpaper bought in a hardware store, depicting an exotic landscape similar to those found in medical waiting rooms or banks. On the opposite wall, she placed strips of imitation wood with small inlaid mirrors. This generated situation of making the viewer aware of his own looking which brakes the fascinating power of spectacle through the use of adjacent reflective surfaces, had already appeared in certain works in the series of rephotographed magazine pages of the early 1980s. The repeated or reframed images often included dark areas reiterating the institutional space as well as the bodies. This time, in *Lake in the Woods*, viewers could single out a section of the landscape and eliminate all contextual cues, as though transported elsewhere. Along with shifting the logic of design to the field of art, the artist also contributed to a conversation of the period about space and the commodity by critically exploiting the stylistic characteristics of generic commercial architecture that Modernism had purged and replaced with a fetishism for the building’s support structure.² Alexander did not valorize and ennoble these so-called vernacular attributes by integrating them into already established vocabularies after they became neutralized. Instead, she showed how the corporate language of managing spaces and bodies—under the guise of providing access to a fantasmatic realm—controls how we conceptualize the purpose of these transit or entertainment sites and defines the social ties, especially transactional ones, that we weave there.³

Over the last decade, Alexander has been reviving past works. For example, she has produced new series of her photographs of magazine pages from the 1980s. Yet beyond this fairly common practice of reprinting, she is also interested in the possibility of adding meaning to the afterlives of earlier work. In some instances, she has chosen to modify their appearance or scale.

The sculptures presented at the Fonderie Darling results from a slight shift of the first configuration created between 1988 and 1990, which bears the fact that it is still located in in the art discourse of that era.⁴ The act of rephotographing pages of magazines was contemporaneous with the images' availability in the media (in contrast to Barbara Kruger and other peer artists, Alexander never used dated iconography). By strategically waning affects, the sculptures also constituted a critical counterexample to the reactionary reinvestment of masculinist subjectivity in Neo-Expressionist painting. When the works reappear today, we perceive the gap between their revival under the present neoliberal regime and the postmodern condition of yesterday. The recent instantiation of this cycle, at the Fonderie Darling, reiterates the first version's entire sequence of permuted elements with the addition of dichroic glass, which makes the ambient light filtering through the immense windows of the Main Hall all the more visible. The amalgam of multiple layers of coloured metal oxides also creates the illusion that the object's appearance changes according to the viewer's movements. Dichroic glass is a relatively new material that appears strange when first encountered. Furthermore, the re-emergence of these sculptures at an interval of many years from their inaugural presentation responds to the possibilities and constraints of the foundry's actual site, as well as the economic context of real estate speculation and urban gentrification of Montreal.

Here, the sculptures also might make us think of the parachuting of Donald Judd's modular "specific objects" in the vast exhibition rooms of Dia Beacon, a former Nabisco box printing factory. Alexander has added other elements to the configuration of the furniture pieces, which further distorts the sublime aspect of converted industrial architecture. All the details integrated into the walls, floor, and

ceiling of the exhibition space that indicate the site's initial function have the same intensity despite their varied dimensions. For example, the immense furnace merges into the rough surface of the bricks. These details are ghosts of a past that has been superficially recovered yet this history remains inaccessible in terms of class struggle. By making rudimentary collages, enlarged on vinyl so as to completely cover the drywall sections of the Main Hall of the Fonderie Darling, Alexander wishes to alter the phenomenology of a readymade virtual reality, itself determined by a simulation of the authentic. Generally, the modulation of cybernetic grids behind the helmet produces a continuous perspective, without any interruption. Here, instead of an immersion, we find composite non-sites where nothing seems to be in the right place. One oversized mural depicts an abstract strip, like a closed curtain or a dizzying lightning flash, while a seascape deceptively carves an escape. A second intervention juxtaposes samples of artificial textures of rock and wood with a fragment of an ocean scene similar to the first one. The transition from these trompe l'œils to the surface area of the architectural enclosure introduces the possibility that the patina of heritage sites can also be a matter of fabrication. It now becomes easy to recreate "the truth to materials" in a precise way. Although highly photogenic, Alexander's glass furniture sticks out in this warm environment by bringing cold and untouchable surfaces into the foreground. Emanating from the translucent windows, the sunlight offers added value as it falls against these iridescent swaths of colour, already ruined yet bearing no signs of wear and tear as though frozen in an eternal present. They stand between our bodies, the foundry, and the outside, creating an imaginary site of speculative complicity.

In a 1970 work, artist Robert Barry installed a quotation by Herbert Marcuse in vinyl lettering on gallery walls: "Some place to which we can come, and for a while 'be

free to think about what we are going to do’.” The statement might seem naive today. Like others of his generation, Barry believed that these places could become a parenthesis of reflexivity and agency. Yet as of the 1980s, it became clear that to believe in such a discourse was no longer tenable. Without being cynical, Alexander has tried to define the perversion of these escapist places that promise us emancipation, an idyll with ourselves, while casting our bodies outside after use. On the one hand, instead of offering us screens on which we could project something—a recovered utopia—she underlines the paradox of our everyday attempts to give up capitalism in architectural enclosures cut off from the social world. On the other hand, her works make us recognize that while living these fantasies, we are entangled with this system of accumulation that produces abstraction by swallowing up a real territory where collective life, rather than the individual dream, could have flourished.

(Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei)

Notes

¹ On Alexander’s rephotographing practice, see Leah Pires, “Double Takes,” in *Vikky Alexander: Extreme Beauty* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Figure.1), 51–64.

² Brian Wallis discusses this contribution and how it transcends the approach used by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour in their 1972 project, *Learning from Las Vegas*. See Brian Wallis, “Vikky Alexander,” in *Vikky Alexander* (Calgary: Stride Gallery, 1998).

³ On Alexander’s work with space and architecture, see Vincent Bonin, “Vikky Alexander: Beyond the Seduction of Enclosures,” in *Vikky Alexander: Extreme Beauty*, 99–118.

⁴ Vikky Alexander produced *Mirror Chair* in 2000, as one element in the series that has been reactualized now in its entirety.