

Other Ways of Viewing

by LISA WAINWRIGHT

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Lynne Heller and Paul Butler are post-disciplinary artists. One might not immediately get this from the rich photographic work on display at Gallery 44, but it is the case, and it is relevant. Post-disciplinary is a term, coined in the recent past, for artists who work in myriad forms, balancing a multitude of ideas, in an age when art can be an idea-based proposition taking any and every shape. Both Heller and Butler exceptionally maneuver materials, images, and actions in the service of conceptual leaps, and in the case of the series at Gallery 44, the photographic

medium serves as their most appropriate means of delivery. For what is at stake in both artists' series is the layered complexity of a venue that has come to shape contemporary art, that is, the commercial art gallery. And photography, with its allusions to truth, as the camera "mechanically" fixes an otherwise transitory reality, is a fine medium for testing the "truths" and constructions of the art gallery's economic and social condition. These artists question what is on offer in a gallery, outside of the ostensible display and business of selling works of art. In photograph after photograph

LYNNE HELLER, *Chelsea Girls #14*,
76 x 51 cm archival inkjet print, 2007

of gallery spaces that peculiarly obscure, divert, or erase the actual works of art in the space, Heller and Butler explore the meta-issues that obtain from the ubiquitous gallery scene that we know so well. Neither clearly condemning nor condoning the global art market to which these images ultimately refer, Heller and Butler offer canny reflections through astute visual plays.

But Heller and Butler are also consummate post-minimalists—another art nomenclature teaser. For while the multilayered meanings that come from beholding art in commercial galleries



remain significant, so are the objects' formal language compelling and rich. Post-minimalism takes the project of minimalism from the sixties and gives it a more eccentric edge. The pared-down geometric abstractions of a Donald Judd or a Frank Stella, for example, work that was intended to make viewers consider only their physical, phenomenological presence is now not so ascetic and reduced, but marked by an array of symbolic references. A minimalist vocabulary of rectangles plays out in both Heller's and Butler's works, echoing the physical site of the gallery space in which they are displayed. Heller hangs her thirteen photographs at eye level, letting the viewer's average height into the composition, while Butler cuts out the art in the photographs leaving gaps in the prints through which the actual gallery wall behind can be seen. Despite these minimalist references to physical bodies and space, the works are much messier than their sixties prototypes, more complicated, and redolent of a humanism that post-minimalism seeks to reclaim. Heller and Butler draw viewers in through the play of shape and line, shadow and form, color and value. These are works to

linger in front of and savor, but they are also ruminations on the nature of our relationship to art objects. As Walter Benjamin famously outlined in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"¹ as the magic and ritual of art shifted to a politics of representation under capitalism and its manner of industrial reproduction, works of art, became contoured by the authority of their setting. For Heller's and Butler's immediate work this context is the commercial art gallery and its endless reproduction needs. And so it is the rich combination of significant form and thoughtful content that makes Heller's and Butler's pairing in the Gallery 44 exhibition extraordinarily satisfying.

Lynne Heller's *Chelsea Girls*, a riff on Andy Warhol's 1960s film of the same name, and an acknowledgement of the ostensible subject matter: the seemingly endless gallery assistants who sit anonymously behind their cubicle desks at the entrance to art galleries, is a series of photographs shot by the artist over the span of a year, each time she toured the art galleries in Chelsea. The minimalist play of interior walls and spaces is coyly punctuated by the tops of heads, plants,

portions of wall texts, stacked gallery guides and announcements, umbrella holders, piles of catalogues, registry books, etc. In *Chelsea Girls #10*, for example, the photograph offers a series of rectangular forms: the gallery floor's mottled gray squares are countered by the white perpendicular wall, whose space is cut into by the opening of the assistant's station where a hard-edged black line, created by the counter top, moves the eye laterally across the composition. To the right, a series of neutral rectangles makes up the glass entranceway, and to the left, the darker recess of the exit area with its swinging doors provides another visual counterpoint. Heller has cropped the photograph just so. It is nearly a classical composition, a tight arrangement of rectangles and lines, almost reminiscent of a Mondrian painting where the Dutch modernist's "dynamic equilibrium" of abstract parts was intended as a utopic rejoinder to the idea that art could affect one's sense of harmony and balance. But Heller undercuts the promise of a tasteful interlude with the evident riff-raff of the gallery space: a common exit sign posted on the back door, the etched text on the entrance, a solitary leaf on the floor dragged

in by someone's shoe, and the top half of the assistant's head, among other telltale signs. And then of course, at this vantage point, Heller structures the shot so that no art be seen.

Chelsea Girls #2 and *Chelsea Girls #3* are Heller's most sparse arrangements. In *Chelsea Girls #2*, white on white (like Kasimir Malevich) dominates the field with various rectangles of walls, doorways, and counters in perfect compositional pitch. Heller allows a glimpse of a small bit of ceiling at the upper left, a triangle that complements the darker triangular shape opposite: the top of a gallery assistant's head. And then the counter holds the requisite disarray of paraphernalia, a flutter in an otherwise static scene. *Chelsea Girls #3* is similarly abstract with a small painting in counterpoise to a service window within which we are privy to the upper torso of an anonymous gallery attendant. Light and shadow play against these surfaces, adding more pictorial shapes, as they do in so many of the works. At the other end of Heller's aesthetic scale is the pink interior of *Chelsea Girls #14*. Within this pink array, the top of a young women's head appears haloed by her lit computer screen.

Once again, there is no art in evidence, only a blinding hallway light as a kind of beacon in a sea of pink.

Such alluring visual properties are part of Heller's oeuvre. Her history of art making runs the gamut from the analog to the digital, with recent endeavors mixing up the two in a truly multimedia way. Heller explores sculpture and a range of interactive video installation, web, and sound work. *The Adventures of Nar Duell* appearing in comic book form, in video, and in the virtual world of *Second Life*², is a hilarious series of stories about an avatar protagonist examining the art world. Indeed *Chelsea Girls #1* and *#11* debut as the backdrops for several scenes in the *Nar Duell* story.

Heller demonstrates a spectacular command of the formal demands each medium requires. *Chelsea Girls* so clearly participates in this aesthetic delight that momentarily, just momentarily, viewers suspend their recognition of the subject. But quickly, the subject comes into focus. For who hasn't made note of the austere gallery assistant upon entering such "privileged spaces"? Who hasn't felt intimidated by the guardians of the sacred goods, the elegant

bouncers at the threshold of entry, those who protect the majesty of the mythic dealers sequestered deep inside the gallery space? Heller's humorous rendering of the assistant as synecdoche (a small part standing for the whole), her version of a figure/ground strategy, not only toys with the social relations of the gallery experience, but does so in a poignantly comical fashion.

There is also something amusing about Paul Butler's ten foot by six foot prints, which conjure the scale and subject of the twenty-first century's massive gallery space, but in Butler's case, such showcase behemoths are startlingly devoid of any works of art. The artist has cut out all the images where once there hung works of art, and left gaping rectangular holes through which the wall behind can be seen. A precedent in Robert Rauschenberg's cut-out space in the middle of *Gloria* of 1956, that literalized his famous dictum of "working in the gap between art and life" is pertinent to Butler's endeavors.³ Indeed, Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning*

LYNNE HELLER, *Chelsea Girls #10*,
51 x 76 cm archival inkjet print, 2007





LYNNE HELLER,
Chelsea Girls #5, 51 x 76 cm
archival inkjet print, 2007

of 1953 also set the ground for Butler's, as well as Heller's, conceptual eradication of the centre of the activity (the art itself) in favor of what happens at the margins (the viewer, the space, and the supposed ancillary figures that hover around the production and dissemination of the work). In past work, Butler appropriated gallery advertisements from art magazines, reducing the image to a series of abstract forms by what he describes as "obliterating the image with tape." These were small, delicate pieces, with a lot of evident handwork belying the mass media reproductions underneath. But in the newer work, Butler cuts away material, rather than adding to the image. The cutting is cleaner, more precise, like a drawn line, Butler explains.⁴ And, curiously, there are

still images to be found, as the enlarged prints reveal ghostly reflections of the once present pictures on the wall, now evident in the polished floor below (like De Kooning's stubborn residue in the Rauschenberg). Any vestige of aura is condemned to a mild glow on the floor. The scale remains sublime, however, with the ten foot long by six foot high prints dominating the space and so altering perception. And the reverse trompe l'oeil, with the real wall behind imitating the absent representation (that which is cutaway) is wonderful to consider.

Like Heller, Butler's works are about absence, but an absence that is loaded with rife possibilities. Butler is a gallerist and an artist, whose alternative gallery practices inform the work at hand. His ambition is one of "institutional critique," (a strategy, popular over the last decade, of exposing the commercial gallery system's hegemonic power), both in his practice as an artist and in the kind of curatorial engagements he develops. Beginning in 1997, he hosted a series of "Collage Parties," a touring experimental studio established for artists and non-artists to come together and make readily accessible collages. He also

initiated the experimental school "Reverse Pedagogy Project" that began at The Banff Centre for the Arts in 2008, and travelled to Venice during the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, where he invited a collective of people to share equally in determining the nature of the production of the art and its dissemination with no institutional hierarchy (in Venice this included ten canoes). Butler also directs operations for The Other Gallery, a nomadic commercial gallery that pops up at art fairs and other traditional venues focusing on "overlooked artists' practices," and he founded the UpperTradingPost.com, a website that facilitates artist trading. These alternative models of curatorial practice constitute Butler's work, and so the prints at Gallery 44 can be seen as a kind of *tabula rasa*, a depiction of starting over, of eliminating the generic protocol for showing and selling works of art. These are visual attempts to herald new paradigms for the gallery system—a kind of pictorial voodoo—shown in the gallery setting, yes, but intended to upset that very condition. Images of galleries do reoccur throughout the history of modern art. From Honoré Daumier's caricatures to Louise Lawler's photographs, the subject has

preoccupied those artists concerned with the larger dynamic of the art market system. Butler belongs to this trajectory, as does Heller.

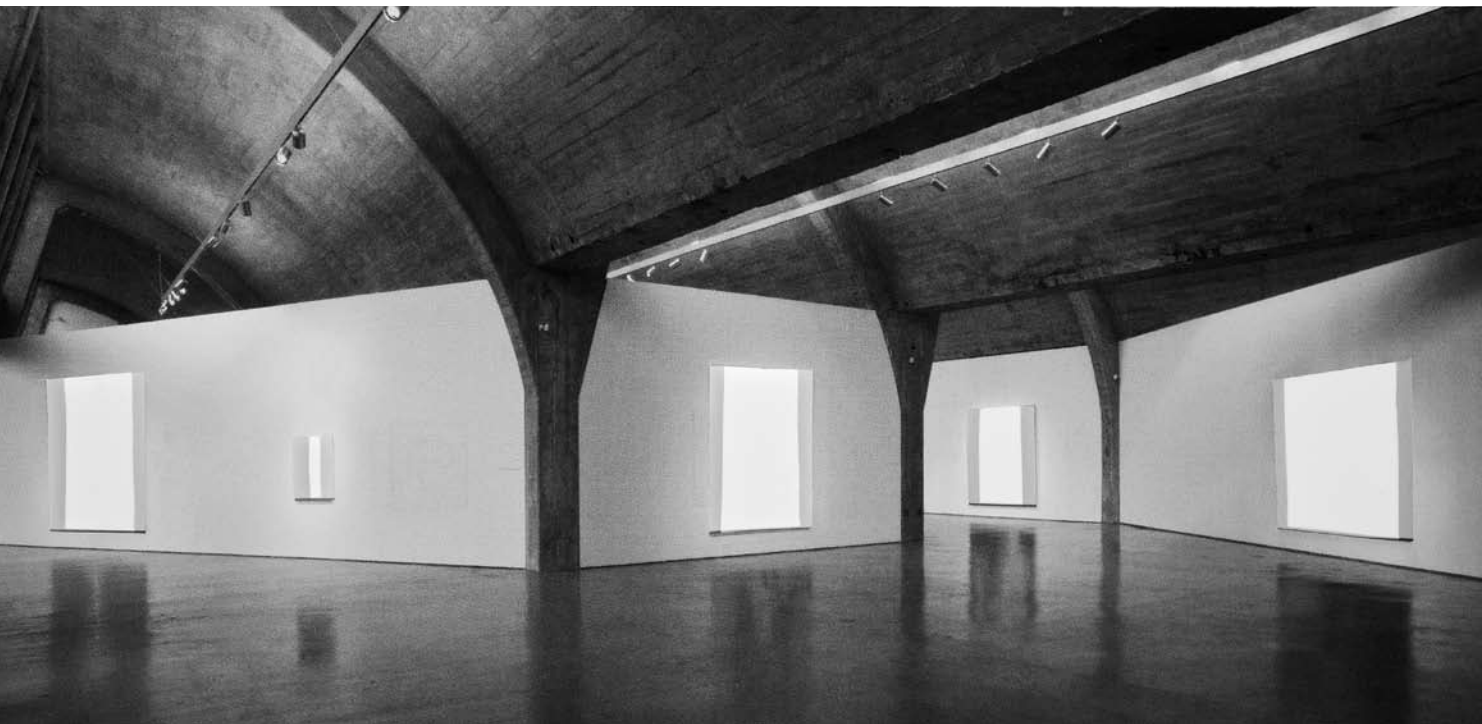
If works of art in the current gallery system have become less and less distinguishable from the sale of luxury goods, Heller and Butler remind us of the potential to critique this phenomenon from the inside. For Heller and Butler make beautiful, flawed objects. Flawed, in that there is no art to be viewed and so the register of value shifts from the market to someplace else. Their pictures allude to art's monetary worth, but undercut the proposition, relinquish this demand, and instead engage viewers with the singularity of ideas. Art's sheer uselessness (represented by total absence in Heller's viewing angle and Butler's excisions) allows a kind of reverie before the imaginative life that works of art must continue to underscore.

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

² *Second Life (SL)* is a virtual world developed by Linden Lab that launched on June 23, 2003, and is accessible on the Internet.

³ Robert Rauschenberg, ed. Walter Hopps (Washington: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1976).

⁴ Paul Butler in conversation with the author, June 18, 2010.



PAUL BUTLER

Paul Butler is an artist with an interest in multidisciplinary, social and alternative pedagogical practices. His practice includes: hosting the Collage Party, a touring experimental studio; and directing the operations of The Other Gallery, a nomadic commercial gallery focused on overlooked artists' practices. In 2007, he founded the UpperTradingPost.com, a website that facilitates artist trading. He also initiated the experimental school Reverse Pedagogy that began at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 2008, and has since travelled to Venice, Italy and Sligo, Ireland. He has exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto; White Columns, New York City; Creative Growth Art Centre, Oakland; and Sparwasser HQ, Berlin. His curatorial projects have included works by Matthew Higgs, Mitzi Pederson, Harrell Fletcher, and Guy Maddin. He has contributed writings to the book *Decentre: Concerning Artist-run Culture* and to the magazines *Canadian Art*, *Bad Day*, and *Hunter and Cook*.

LYNNE HELLER

Lynne Heller is a Canadian artist who works in a variety of disciplines including fibre, sound, new media, websites and installations. Her work has been shown in Canada, Australia, United States, England, Ireland, Mexico, Italy, Japan and Cuba. Recent solo exhibitions include the Australian National University, Canberra; School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; the Red Head Gallery, Toronto. She has been the recipient of numerous awards from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council. Reviews and publications include *Art Papers*, and *Fiberarts*, United States; *The Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, and the *Hamilton Spectator*, Canada.

PAUL BUTLER, *Artforum Gallery Ad Triptych*,
12.7 x 25.4 cm cutout magazine page, 2008
Courtesy of the Gilles and Julia Ouellette Collection

LISA WAINWRIGHT

Lisa Wainwright is the Dean of Faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism. She received her BA (1982), cum laude, from Vanderbilt University, and her MA (1986) and PhD (1993) from the University of Illinois. Selected publications include: *Things of Nature/The Nature of Things: John Wilde*, University of Wisconsin Press; "Practicing Rauschenberg," in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*; and "Raymond Pettibon's High/Low High Jinx," in *A History of The Renaissance Society 1990-2000*. Her writings have been included in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Fiberarts*, *Le Petit Canard*, *Art Papers*, *Art International*, *New Art Examiner*, and in the publication *Three Decades of Contemporary Art: The Dr. John and Rose M. Shuey Collection*. She has curated the following exhibitions: *Ah...Decadence!*; *From Steel to Flesh*; 2001 *Spaced Oddities*; *At Home in the Museum*; *Pink*; and 1968.