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THE SUBMERGED SIDE OF THE ART ICEBERG

That so many twentieth-century artists should have manipulated themselves into this particular position of paradox – where they are condemned to repeating as if by compulsion, the logically fraudulent original – is truly compelling. (Krauss, 1981)

In Krauss's comment on the appropriation of 'the grid' in contemporary art she discovers what seems a compulsive activity that artists are 'condemned to', that of repetition. Such an artist was Sol LeWitt, who stated in one of his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*:

Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means. (LeWitt, S. 1967)

While this statement holds much truth for understanding an initial incentive towards using repetition, it is only a small part of the role repetition takes within the work presented in this exhibition.

Unlike work of the minimalist era, these works wear the labour, and the time taken to produce them, on the outside; it is very difficult to observe each piece without admiring a dedication to labour. The simple processes; such as stacking sugar cubes or cleaning fish skins, and the number of repetitions of that process (through labour) are interdependent, needing both aspects to exist in the form that is so distinctive here. Each small action gathers importance through repetition presenting a persistent tenacity. Louise Bourgeois valued this expression in her own work. Referring to her use of marble she said:

It permits one to say certain things that cannot obviously be said in other materials... Persistence, repetition, the things that drive you towards tenacity, that force you to be tenacious. (Bourgeois, L. 1988)

The quantity of repetitions, coupled with the mundane process as singular, means that a critique of the process is necessary in order to engage with any of the wider concepts to which this work alludes. Reading the process, alongside usual critical indicators; the 'object' and the 'subject', is perhaps an unusual and under employed approach to interpreting art. Robert Morris corroborates this idea:

Much attention has been focused on the analysis of the content of art making – its end images – but there has been little attention focused on the significance of the means... I believe there are 'forms' to be found within the activity of making as much as within the end products. These are forms of behaviour aimed at testing the limits and possibilities involved in that particular interaction between one's actions and the materials of the environment. This amounts to the submerged side of the art iceberg. (Morris, R. 1970)

This statement operated alongside Morris's work, where process became an end in itself. The work in this exhibition does not however, languish under the label 'process art'. Neither are its labours, the precision labour of craft, it is not necessarily skilled labour, and in fact, it is perhaps purposefully unskilled. The resulting artworks celebrate the mundane labour of the everyday: the repetitive, boring, undervalued and usually low remuneration labour, necessary to the survival of today's culture.

Each action is mindfully repeated, this labour is reminiscent of factory production, though utterly different in its purpose and consequent expression. It runs counter to today's push button culture, where objects and situations are dialled up at a distance – offering only a trace of human touch.

Walter Benjamin famously commentated on the form of repetition found in the mechanical replication of an art object, particularly the image printing technology of the 1930s. He laments that artwork, in reproduction, is devoid of artistic 'touch', missing what he coined the 'aura' of the work, while simultaneously offering us an egalitarian access to an artwork:

...that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. (Benjamin, 1936)

Contemporary art operates in an era where work is often made only under the direction of the artist, by craftsmen operating outside of the studio environment. In light of this, the work in this exhibition could be described as a return to 'aura'. The hand of the artist is so essentially present; it is impossible to overlook its influence on the making process.

Kate Armstrong argues that there are essentially two types of repetition in the process of art production: 1 – 'apathetic reiteration' which artists such as Andy Warhol employ to act as a 'functional distancing', and 2 – 'the project of abstraction' which severs links with representation and finds through repetition a closeness with the 'unrepresentable other' (Armstrong, 2002).

The second definition is most relevant to the work in this exhibition. The type of processes employed, combined with the labour (the action of making), which then undergo a lengthy sequence of repetition, is the vehicle for producing work that may connect with the type of abstraction Armstrong refers; art that may bring us closer to what she coins the 'unrepresentable other'. The artworks do not deal directly with a repeated image or form, Warhol-like, but hold repetition within the labour of art production, a labour organised and initiated through process.

The knowledge and control that is possible through repeated labours, can concentrate the mind in order to reveal new boundaries of experience, implying a repetition that may offer a form of enlightenment.

Like Sisyphus in the Greek myth, punished by Zeus to an eternity of frustration through repetition. Condemned to rolling a rock up a hill, a rock that just before reaching the top would always roll back down again. Beyond expectation, Sisyphus found quality and enlightenment through the repetitive labour of his work:

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. (Camus, 1942)

Here too repetition is so much more than a means to an end or a quota of actions defined when a definitive mass is obtained. It is even more than a commitment or dedication to a cause or ritual. Repetition can allude to something other, or in the words of Soren Kierkegaard:

Repetition – that is actuality and the earnestness of existence.
(Kierkegaard, 1843)

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