



## SUBJECTIVITY AS STAND-IN: DISPLAY AND DISPLACEMENT IN ROBERT ARNDT'S *PLACEHOLDER*

Lisa Coulthard on Robert Arndt

Robert Arndt, *Placeholder*, 2011 (installation view) photo: Blaine Campbell

In *Placeholder*, a number of identical grey blocks are touched, dusted, moved and grouped together by human hands into formations that are in constant flux, while two male voices discuss and debate the aesthetic worth and imperfections of the “top class” arrangement. Identical (as one of the voices comments, either “too grey” or perfectly “almost grey”), the blocks become a representation of desire for the unique status of a special object (the paper wrapping, the insistence on replacing one object with another, identical object) in order to interrogate sameness, interchangeability, surface and structure. With this fetishistic attention to the object, *Placeholder* makes emphatic the absurdity and potential irrelevance of aesthetic display. The vocal direction, combined with the object placement and display gestures of the female hand, place the discussion and images within a commercial context as the commodified but empty, worthless object is rendered meaningful, significant or desirable through display. The object becomes a mere placeholder, an arbitrary surface that can be replaced without impact. The very fact that the viewer can recognize the structure of a commercial shoot from the minuscule and fractured details acquired within 8 minutes of video, suggests the extent to which these generic forms are pervasive. We recognize not the particulars of say, a specific referenced commercial, but rather the generic structures of commercial display and desire themselves.

More than just critiquing the commodified object as arbitrary placeholder for desire, the work suggests the potential for cinematic style to become a kind of placeholder. That is, the video is not filmed as a commercial.

Its cinema language is varied, fluid and heterogeneous: the zoom, the track out, the high angle, the handheld camera shot and the freeze frame are all present in this short video, as is the common cinematic trope of an epic musical cue that conveys gravitas, weightiness and import. The duration of the image varies as longer takes of continuous action (the dusting of the blocks at the beginning) transform into a rapid succession of freeze frames at the end of the work. Importantly, these elements of style are not used in ways that suggest a meaningful correlation between style and substance; rather, like the blocks themselves, these stylistic tropes are approached as interchangeable and temporary markers for substance. By including a compendium of cinematic style, *Placeholder* indicates the extent to which style can also function in sometimes arbitrary or tenuous ways: the shifts to handheld zooms do not indicate a moment of narrative import, for instance, but just another moment.

Most crucial in this interrogation of the generic, absurd and irrelevant is the use of vocalicity in the piece: throughout the film two male voices make statements, demands, counterarguments. Visually we see a female hand and portions of a female body dusting, touching, displaying and moving objects and later in the film there is a brief appearance of male hands and a partial lower torso. The female hand gestures fetishistically at the displayed objects, offering a clear visual parody of the use of the female hand as a selling aid in commercial advertisements. Disembodied and emphasizing the absurdity of commercial display, the female hand interacts with the objects in seductive and tactile ways (dusting, stroking, touching, pointing).

These partial bodies in association with the voices lead the viewer to posit a narrative: two male voices argue (one voice is dominant, the other defensive) and the dominant voice gives directions to the female object mover, whose role is to be silent, carry out his orders and display the blocks in the fashion desired.

This narrative is one produced by the viewer's desire for story and is encouraged by the voice-image relationships explored in the video. Working as a parody of artistic and commercial display, the work interrogates the designation of the singularity of interchangeable objects that forms the basis of consumer capitalism: capitalism attempts to convince consumers of the unique status of particular products, intensifying desire and creating fictions of active choice and difference, when in fact there is neither. The same can be said of the filmic object itself, as Hollywood promotes its multitude of identical objects as unique, special and desirable, the absurdity of which *Placeholder* makes clear in the way that the identical grey blocks call to mind the grey blankness of television screens or frames of film.

It is crucial to note that this narrative/parody of a commercial shoot is one constructed by the viewer. There is nothing in fact to indicate a direct relationship between the voices and the images or even a spatial co-presence within the piece itself: the female hand moves objects and sometimes these movements happen to coincide with male vocal directions, but at many points they do not. Further, the male voices lack perspective: they are not located spatially in the same room as the blocks but miked close-

up, a perspective that does not change when we see the male body. This is most apparent when a male figure's hand moves one of the blocks, using the first person to address the action – “I am taking it.” However, the voice feels disconnected from the hand appearing on screen; the actions of the hand are exaggerated, unnatural and too emphatic, while the perspective on the voice does not shift or change. The male voices maintain the same dull, closely miked perspective that places them outside of the space we are seeing. The connections between voices and bodies are equally as arbitrary as the interchangeable grey blocks. Voices – those auditory objects we most clearly associate with individual uniqueness (each person's vocal stamp, the attractive singularity of a loved one's voice) – are here flattened, removed from their close ties to identifiable bodies. The voices stand in for originality, a unique human element that is rendered absurd when placed in correlation with the homogenous greyness of commercial culture.

In his seminal book *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion discusses the spectral and disorienting potentialities that inhere in cinema's disembodied vocality. Neither “entirely inside nor clearly outside” the image, off screen voices “wander the surface of the screen,” moving like ghosts without proper homes.<sup>1</sup> Like the attention to the surface of the blocks themselves (dusting, touching, adjusting the light on the surface), these surface voices skim across the image without ever settling into a firm and rooted location. As Chion notes, voices can never in fact be off screen, only the visual source of those heard voices can. In this work, the voices cannot be described as out of synchronization per se

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because we never see faces or mouths uttering any words. But they are nonetheless at odds with many of the actions presented: at times the voices seem tied to the actions at hand, while at others they seem to have no relation to what is visible. As acousmatic voices (voices without bodies, without any visible source), the male voices do not provide the key to the work but rather dislodge it even further from conventional narrative; the imagined story of directorial voices controlling the displayed action is rendered dubious and tenuous.

This split between image and sound and the search for substance is similarly revealed in the Philip Glass music cue that accompanies a tracking shot of the arrangement of blocks. With militaristic beats and an epic and ostentatious build up, the cue is indicative of a kind of generic marker of splendour or importance. It is the kind of grand, musical gesture we associate with an event of sublime significance and the fact that it is accompanied by a tracking out of the camera to give a wider perspective on the arrangement adds to this effect. Playing with scale (with the music and tracking out, the objects appear large, ominous – an impression that is quickly destroyed by the human hand intervening and offering clear perspective) and generic form (the placement of the music cue), this sequence abruptly ends with the appearance of the voice and human figure.

Through these various stylistic and formal disruptions of the relationship between image and sound, *Placeholder* stresses not only the interchangeability of objects (art, consumer, cultural, banal), but also the shifting nature of knowledge, perception and being.

Those elements of cinematic engagement (voice and face) are dislodged or refused and the bodies, voices and dialogue become as generic as the blocks themselves. They all skim across the surface, without being nailed down into subjectivity or narrative certainty and in this way, the work extends to us as we are asked to question to what extent we are also mere placeholders -- generic, dispensable and replaceable.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 4

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