



## FLAT FORMS AND READY-MADE CONTENTS

SARA MAMENI ON JILLIAN PRITCHARD

Jillian Pritchard, *White Ribbon* (production still detail), 2006.

Jillian Pritchard's exhibition at Artspeak consists of five video works; four are shown on black television monitors and one is projected onto the white gallery wall. I'll begin at the surface level: *Blacks* is the title of the first video presented on a black television monitor. Several pieces of black fabric, varied in shade and texture, appear on the screen in short intervals, sustaining the viewer's attention on the surface of the screen. At its darkest, the moving image becomes the continuation of its container (the monitor) creating an opaque object on the plinth. As an object the black box is an ideal stage for the play of light and shadow while I pace the gallery and observe my own reflection illuminated on the backlit screen of the black monitor. *Blacks'* formalist exploration brings to mind László Moholy-Nagy's description of Kazimir Malevich's 1918 painting, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. He wrote:

The plain white surface constitutes an ideal plane for kinetic light and shadow effects which, originating in the surroundings, would fall upon it. In this way Malevich's picture represented a miniature cinema screen.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, Pritchard's *Blacks* is a video in reverse. It is at once a projection and a site of projection; it is a "miniature cinema screen."

Such phenomenological formulations are often undermined in the context of video practices. It may be argued that a painting reduced to its flat surface is not conceptually comparable with the fixation of a video camera on plain pieces of fabric. *Blacks* is not a self-referential or reductive work of art in the modernist sense. Its intrigue is its capacity to subvert normal habits of television viewing. As a representational technology, the video camera (similar to the photographic camera) conceals its own presence on the scene. Instead it presents itself as a transparent technology through which a reality is revealed. *Blacks* on the other hand, reveals the process of its own making. Videos (here understood as moving images displayed on a screen) are deep spaces behind glass designed to portray actions and events. However, Pritchard's video stresses the flatness of the television screen. The lack of spatial exploration by Pritchard's camera and its fixed gaze on the black pieces of fabric traps the viewer, mitigating the sense of "freedom" expected from the hand held camera. Pritchard's camera does not pan, zoom, or move to reveal the context for the depicted objects.

This sense of entrapment is heightened in Pritchard's second video in the exhibition, *Landscape*. Also shown on a television monitor, this video is a close-up of a floral pattern on a ceramic bowl. While the title of the video

evokes images of a vast scenic wilderness, it is in actuality a closely cropped and static picture of loosely rendered leaves on a mass-produced Japanese decanter. As with *Blacks*, whose flatness originates a new sense of spatiality, the surface of the ceramic bowl pushed against the lens of the camera also enacts the double role of a projected image and a surface for projection: reflected on the "miniature cinema screen" of the bowl is a yellow circle created by the light of Pritchard's camera. The yellow circle signals the materiality of the ceramic bowl and the artist's own presence in the picture.

Pritchard's "I", her denoted presence behind the camera, rolls into the picture plane in her last three videos in the exhibition. The two videos shown on monitors are titled *Red Ribbon* and *White Ribbon*. *Streamers* is a wall projection. All three videos depict symbolic objects crafted by the artist from mass-produced ribbons. *Red Ribbon* features a red second-place prize ribbon on a black background. The forked tail of the ribbon flutters as the video loops. *White Ribbon* documents the studio light panning across a white awareness ribbon pinned to a black background. *Streamers* depicts three loose ribbons—white, blue and red—moving across a plain black background. As with the ceramic decanter, ribbons are produced on a mass scale to be used as markers of individuality. Awareness ribbons are symbols of

personal identification with a social cause. Prize ribbons symbolize personal achievements. Streamers are familiar signs of the specificity of a celebration. Mass-produced objects are devoid of semantic content. Their logic is to allow the consumer to project his or her own particular meaning onto them and to lavish them with sentimental and fetishistic significations. Pritchard's close-ups impart this dual aspect of the commodity: on the one hand, the tight focus creates an intimate relationship with the depicted objects and ease personal identification; on the other, the centralization of the objects removes them from their surroundings obfuscating contextual meaning. The ribbons in these videos are empty sites for semantic projections. Their ready-made content (signifying the winning of a contest or supporting a cause), remain incomplete without personal narratives. As such, these three videos resemble the first two: they maintain blank "miniature cinema screens" for diverse projections.

<sup>1</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision [1928] and Abstract of an Artist*, trans. D.M. Hoffman, (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947): 39.

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