

Excrement of Consumption: Lazar Lyutakov's *The Incantation of Empty Events*

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“Almost all articles of consumption can re-enter the production process as excrements of consumption, and so become new means of production.” Karl Marx

In Lazar Lyutakov's exhibition *The Incantation of Empty Events* found objects are put to work, readymades change direction under the artist's hand, and everything is reborn once again, as a commodity. Production-consumption-excrement-production, and so on, in the quasi-vitalist cycle creating surplus-value. In Lyutakov's exhibition (or perhaps better “display”) we meet this endless cycle at its end/beginning, in the shop. Lyutakov thematizes this process by presenting artworks-commodities within their display concept in order to explore the conditions under which art and industry co-exist, the most obvious being that the gallery is a retail space. Lyutakov's work is both curious and critical about this, his work seeking to actualise and explore the ambiguities it presents.

Unsurprisingly then, Lyutakov is most interested in the readymade as a commodity, a product of technological modernism and a part of mass culture, rather than a conceptual challenge to art's epistemological limits, or its democratisation of the artistic act. In this, Lyutakov follows artists such as Claus Oldenburg and Arman, whose work focussed on the presentational devices of the commodity (the vitrine, the display case), shifting the conventions of exhibiting sculpture towards the codes of commercial display. The commodity-readymade did not rupture the line between mass culture and art, but instead explored the possibilities opened up by their immanence. This approach was taken up by appropriation artists of the late 70s such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, who produced “pictures” (ie., reproductions) that blurred the line between mass culture and art, and offered an ambiguous critique of the emerging sign economy, which it often seemed to celebrate as much as condemn. In the 90s this approach was applied to objects under the name Commodity Sculpture (exemplified by Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach). This work, however, tended to uncritically accept the conditions of the fetishized commodity, which it then installed to poetic affect. Commodity Sculpture was therefore a kind of “capitalist realism”, where the inertial tautology commodity=art simply states there is no alternative. Lyutakov's work refuses to offer this tautology as a “critical” act, a gesture only relevant when directed against modernist aesthetics. Instead, his work re-packages appropriated objects in a way that deliberately repeats the conditions and mechanisms of commodity capitalism (its fetishism, its display, and its exploitation), but by literalising these operations within the gallery space Lyutakov creates the opportunity to explore and exploit their ambiguities. If this is truly ‘critical’ or not is debatable, but it provides a kind of cognitive mapping of the various intersections of the commodity and culture. Let us take a closer look at each of the works to see how.

The water-glasses in *Way of the Sand* were made in Vietnam by recycling discarded and broken glass through a basic glass-blowing technique. Due to the cheap labour, materials and industrial method, they are sold for 30 cents, and Lyutakov bought as many as he could bring back. By placing them on perspex shelves he transforms them into high-end artisanal handicrafts, an economic “appropriation”, where unequal exchange (a little money for a lot of work) in the periphery produces big profits in the center via the shift in market: no longer commodities for the poor but art works for the rich. In *Way of the Sand* the art world appears as a commercial mechanism exploiting the imbalances of a globalised market, and the artist as complicit within it. The glasses contain a global memory of modernist design, being a rough imprint of the original, now blurred and degraded. Ironically, this enabled Ikea to instrumentalize the controversy surround-

ding the work's presence in the Bulgarian pavilion at the Venice biennale to launch an advertising campaign telling us we didn't need to go to Venice to get these glasses, because they were available at our local Ikea. This was the perfect conclusion to the works globalized trajectory, from Vietnam to Venice to Bulgaria, a journey moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, but no matter because both are just as effective in moving product. In this way the work knowingly embodies (perhaps we could say "exploits") its capitalist conditions inside the gallery-shop, showing us precisely what art fetishizes, while providing a partial map of its participation in the vast network of globalised capitalism. As a result, *Way of the Sand* doesn't simply simulate a shop, but incorporates the social conditions of its production as both commodity *and* artwork into its own compositional logic.

The Incantation of Empty Events provides another approach to the same problem, appropriating metal parts that did not survive their production process. Intended as "caps" on water boilers, they failed to withstand the pressures required to make them, their tops exploding. Lyutakov presents this excrement of the production line on foam display-heads placed on top of carefully made cardboard boxes that double as the object's packaging. Once more, Lyutakov uses commercial display techniques to turn an industrial object into an art-commodity, but here he performs the move with his tongue in his cheek, turning it towards the ridiculous. The tops fly off the "caps" like laughing tongues, while their metal weight denies their projected function. It nevertheless remains ambiguous as to which way the joke is turned, is it on us, the ever gullible consumer prepared to pay for anything packaged nicely, or is it on the snake oil of the art world, operating on the economic model of fashion?

The works shown from the *Lamp Series* seem to be exactly that: lamps. But although they are assembled from old plastic bowls, containers or other objects, their logic is closer to collage than to the readymade. Unlike the other works, which can never be anything other than art, the lamps' functionality places them in a more liminal position to the art world, emphasising instead their design heritage. Perhaps in this work the metaphorical aspect of the commodity=art tautology is exhausted, and we leave the realm of conceptual critique to go shopping for real. But this too has a twist, as these works are highly "crafted", up-cycling mass-produced commodities via hand work to the status of a unique designer object. While the work asks the question "is this art?", its inevitably affirmative answer ripples outward to interrogate commodity fetishism (the artist's work must be obvious to add value) and the often unclear distinction between design and fine art.

Lyutakov's exhibition *The Incantation of Empty Events* presents us with three works that exploit design and display aesthetics to interrogate aspects of the commodity-artwork, and the various networks of production and exchange in which it exists. Added to this, at times ambiguous, critique, Lyutakov's use of the excremental off-casts of production and consumption develops a shattered and quite raw aesthetic. His works often involve a violent genesis, evoking perhaps, the violence of the production process, while also exploiting what the artist calls the "ripped jeans" logic of artisanal added-value. These decorative wounds are found in the rough and broken moments of Lyutakov's work, tactile details that suggest that velocity is the true creative force in human and mechanical production. Returning to the quote from Marx with which we began, perhaps consumption is another aspect of this force, digesting and excreting products that then return as a new means of production, as art? But now, instead of the socialist worker rising from the ashes of capitalism to revolutionize their conditions, we have the artist sifting those ashes for remnants that can be remade and then sold, again.