

# Mary Mary

Gritz, Anna; Nowiswere, Issue 9, April 2011

## **Dress and Armor:**

### **Aleana Egan at the Drawing Room**

**3 February - 13 March 2011**

The clicking of pumps on the asphalt and the polished marble floors, the ruffling sounds of knee-length skirts, well ironed blouses and neatly folded handkerchiefs tied in knots around necks, mark the uniform of the working women. The fashion of women at work carries its very own iconography that is, although slowly petering out, still very recognisable. It is an iconography that can be traced back from the shoulder pads and starched collars of Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*, 1988, to the pumps and pleated skirts of the secretaries in the U.S. TV series *Mad Men*, to the corsets and white gloves of the sales women in the department stores of nineteenth century Paris. The dress code of working women is an ambiguous subject, always leaning towards androgyny yet never quite letting go of traditional indicators of femininity. The material nature of such fashion is based on a similar dialectic of strength and softness – shoulder pads, starched shirts, padded bras and boned corsets contrasting with cashmere sweaters and silky blouses, obscuring the principles of dependence and autonomy. There seems to be a continuous tension between support and independence of armour and décor at play, which goes hand in hand with the double standards of early the professionalisation of women.

#### TIE

Aleana Egan's works relate strongly to fashion. Like clothes, her works respond in shape to their supporting architectural structure. Her sculptures are hung from walls and ceilings, like coats from a hanger, partly taking up the shape that is suggested by the conditions of their display, partly rejecting it. The works lean against, or rest upon walls and floors, constructed in the vein of a corset – both resting and probing their material consistencies against the forces of gravity, implying that the forming process has not yet been completed. Egan's work mimics the architecture of commerce and its modes of display such as drawers, class cabinets, hangers and hooks. Her recent work at the Drawing Room finds itself inspired by the ideology of the French department store of the late nineteenth century, particularly the one described by Emile Zola.<sup>i</sup> It is the choreography of the gaze and the framing of the commercial experience that fascinate Egan. Department stores at that time functioned very similarly to art galleries as sites for people from a variety of social backgrounds to observe and study each other and their surroundings allowing for a range of levels and access points. The architectural challenge of the time was how to best facilitate this process of seeing and being seen.

Detailed observation is key to the process of many of Egan's works. Habitually Egan keeps notes on the physical appearance of people she encounters, jotting down obscurities in appearance and fancies of fashion in neat little descriptions inscribed with the date and location of the encounter.<sup>ii</sup> At the Drawing Room Egan included a slide-show/film titled *town and terrain 2008 – 2010* featuring a series of stills of a female figure in an assortment of every day outfits. These 'editorial shots', which never disclose the head of the model, are interspersed with images of vernacular architecture and photographs from the artist's studio, capturing works and material studies. The selected outfits feel like the everyday work and leisure time wear of a mixture of different characters, as if selected to match her collection of descriptions. Egan's observations relate to Gaston Bachelard's concept of the *suspended reading*,<sup>iii</sup> the moment when the eyes of the reader get seduced of the page or subject and comprehension and interpretation meet. As a result, the reality of the reader becomes the backdrop for a narrative that moves between the story on the written pages and the occurrences that encircle him. Here in Egan's case her detailed observations and her literary inspirations meet in her sculptural practise.

#### CAMOUFLAGE

Egan masters skillfully the play between the revelation of constructional detail and the camouflage of materiality. Some of her works such as *Opinion*, 2010, conceal the true nature of their material profoundly.

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The cardboard triptych could be cast in iron or woven fabric, but only a very close observation reveals the cardboard armature that is joint and moulded with tape and filler and painted in a muted palette. The choice of colours inherent to many of Egan's materials works here as some kind of decoy to disguise the composite nature of the piece. Reminiscent of conveyer belts or the fabric works of Franz Erhard Walther the triptych is hung from the wall on two iron hooks like the wooden panels of an altarpiece. Similar to a crucified body the material is in suspension, caught in a temporal pause – an equilibrium of tension, of a push and pull that is constantly threatening to give in to gravity and to cave in on itself. The image of the corset comes to mind, although here the material ambiguity discloses which elements support, which carry, and which rest upon.

## STRAP

A similar play of forces is at stake in *clarity afforded*, 2010, a fragile steel object at once suspended from the ceiling and propped up on the floor in a precarious balance impossible to sustain without being strapped into the architecture of the gallery space. The steel structure made of a selection of interlocking parts, which mimics architecture without being of architecture. The object resembles an iron balcony or the steel skeleton of a modernist building, like options from a catalogue of versatile building solutions, intrinsically modern yet ultimately without clear purpose. There is something unsettling about the way Egan's works persistently articulate their need of assistance by the architecture of the host space, despite the wellkept appearance that they are able to support themselves. *Binet's addition*, 2010, named after architect René Binet, designer of the iron-framed elevator extensions for the French department stores, is constructed from a similar steel framework. The design of the cylindrical steel structure is based on a photograph of Binet's elaborate elevator extensions. Reminiscent of a freestanding tree planter the maquette is freed from its former function and abstracted from the original design through a series of drawings that Egan made of the photograph.

## COAT

The process of simplification through drawing is for Egan a process of stripping down layers and complexities of language. The entire series on view at the Drawing Room relies heavily on its ability to be verbally descriptive. Meaning that the works can be described in simple words and in the relationships the individual shapes take with each other. Something like: *There are two steel tubes, 10mm, interlocked at the ends, hanging from the ceiling on rounded metal hooks, etc.*, reads like a step-by-step manufacturing instruction one would call in at a factory.

Here the relationship of her work with the tradition of minimal and post-minimal sculpture becomes apparent especially in relation to the post-minimal use of language. Similar to sculptors like Eva Hesse, Egan's works find their final form in language, the words for titles that Hesse would find in the study of the thesaurus Egan finds in her fascination with literature. Language, although it may be marginal on first sight, takes on a vital role in Egan's creative process that reaches further than just the literal meaning of the individual words. Language goes beyond its descriptive qualities and becomes one of the materials in the sculptural process. The words and sentences Egan uses to entitle the works and the language that can be used to describe and understand its aesthetic qualities are carefully chosen and take on their own shape and weight in the minds and mouths of the viewer. Language as a physical object and a material strategy becomes at this point a central point in the process; it can be layered and chopped apart, reconfigured and rearranged like a dada poem or a collage.

For Hesse working in this manner was a strategy to get away from art as it was known: "I wanted to get to non art, non connotive, non anthropomorphic, non geometric, non, nothing, everything, but of another kind, vision, sort." Egan positions herself clearly in that tradition considering that her work carries traits of architecture, design, painting, and writing yet conforms to none of them. A similar relationship of language and sculpture becomes apparent in works such as Mel Bochner's series of portraits made of words made in 1966. In *Wrap, Portrait of Eva Hesse*, 1966, Bochner used language to build up a shape, compiling concentric circles of words that describe Hesse's strategy of material manipulation. "wrap up. secrete. cloak. bury. obscure. vanish. ensconce. disguise. conceal, ...etc." a set of terms that could also be used to describe Egan's process. Language

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is used here simultaneously as a means to create sculpture whilst describing it, as well as the person making it. Language becomes objectified, heavy and material.

The terminology suggests a strong physical manipulation and a heavy-handed engagement from the side of the artist. Bochner's work stands in clear juxtaposition to other language-based works of the time such as Dan Graham's poem *Schema*, from 1967 that gladly gives up on the concept of material autonomy and accepts its dependency on a supporting structure, in this case the pages of the magazine or book that it is published in. *Schema* is a generic arrangement of sentences outlining an inventory of its own features – dependent on the format in which the work is published, it is therefore synonymous with its mode of display. The work that first appeared on the pages of magazines like *Aspen* in 1967 is entirely solipsistic and condemned to mirror the details of its backdrop like a chameleon. I would Mel Bochner, *Wrap, Portrait of Eva Hesse*, 1966 like to position Egan's work between these two examples from 1960s conceptualism. It shares with Graham's work the tendency to let go, to give up control and to give in to the formal suggestions outlined by the materials and the architectural framework. And yet Egan shares with Bochner and in that sense also with Hesse the lust for words and the acceptance of the materiality that is inscribed in them. Consequently Egan's works relate strongly to this tradition of written materiality.

## HULL

*I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue. – Silvia Plath<sup>vi</sup>*

Unlike Graham or Bochner Egan's works do not give in one way or the other but choose the ambivalence between formal dependence and material autonomy, playing with the precarious tension that the attempt to balance the two attains. As if not quite comfortable in their material and formal state her works seem to be holding their breath waiting for something to happen that could sway them one way or another.

i Zola, Emile, *Au Bonheur des Dames. (The Ladies' Delight or The Ladies' Paradise)* 1883.

ii Aleanna Egan in Conversation with Dr. Sarah Lowndes at the Drawing Room Thursday 17th of February, 2011.

iii Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston 1969.

iv Egan often cites authors like Iris Murdoch, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf in the titles of her works.

v Eva Hesse, quoted by Catherine de Zegher, "Drawing as Binding/ Bandage/Bondage: Or Eva Hesse Caught in the Triangle of Process/ Content/Materiality", in: "Eva Hesse Drawing", The Drawing Center, New York 2006.

vi Plath, Silvia, *The Bell Jar*. 1963.