

JULIETTE BONNEVIOT

Minimal Jeune Fille

Lower Gallery: 16 January – 23 February 2014

Plastic People

"I want people to be beautiful"

The Young-Girl is the spitting image of the total and sovereign consumer; and that's how she behaves in all realms of existence.

The Young-Girl knows the value of things ever so well. Often, before decomposing too visibly, the Young-Girl gets married.

The Young-Girl is good for nothing but consuming; leisure or work, it makes no difference. Because of its having been put on a level of equivalence with all intimacy in general, the Young-Girl's intimacy has become something anonymous, exterior, and object like.

The Young-Girl never creates anything; she re-creates herself.¹

The film *Safe* (1995) directed by Todd Haynes gave us Julianne Moore playing the role of housewife Carol White; a painfully brilliant Moore spirals out of control, physically and mentally, as her character is diagnosed with “multiple chemical sensitivity” – visibly falling apart, as her body reacts in an extreme way to the toxins and products experienced and used in everyday life of the 1980s. As her condition increasingly worsens, she moves into a new age retreat, in the hope of finding safety from the chemical and industrial world and relief from her symptoms and the anxiety these cause. This ‘allergy’ is not only the physical manifestation of this woman’s psychological reaction to the packaged, wipe-clean, consumable world of the late twentieth century, but also an analogy for her emotional (non)existence and inherent paranoia in her relationship to the outside world.

Artist Juliette Bonneviot created the character Jeune Fille Minimale, as a protagonist to inspire a new body of sculpture and video, exploring what writer Timothy Morton describes as a “dark ecology”, akin to a noir film, in his book *The Ecological Thought*. Yet unlike Moore’s character, Bonneviot’s Jeune Fille is not afraid of what the world will do to her, but instead, develops a neurosis about what her conspicuous consumption and lifestyle will do to the world. However, the anxiety of how we live and consume today is palpable in both characters experiences and their main relationship is not with another person, but with the stuff in the world around them. Bonneviot also likens her character to the figure of The Young-Girl, in the French philosophical collective Tiqqun’s *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, as she is the perfect Young-Girl, a networked body, consuming the consumable, shaping herself and her life, thus becoming the ultimate consumable herself.

Bonneviot’s antagonist is waste, in particular plastic waste. Plastic is a material that is associated with wipe-clean sanitation and also a protective barrier for foods and other goods, to ensure

¹ Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl, Tiqqun, 2012

their 'purity' for the consumer, regardless of how dirty or covered in insecticides or factory residue they actually are. Plastic is *safe* (incidentally, Moore's character zips herself up to hide from the world in a plastic tent in *Safe*) and can keep things clean and fresh. Bonneviot's *Jeune Fille* is presented alongside the objects she uses, in sculptural forms, depicted in videos washing, wiping, shaving, and perfecting the presentation of her own object-hood. Alongside these, the objects are displayed as if museum pieces, or relics, from life today (chosen because they are not disposable) – laid out as if an anthropological display, for us to interpret their use and role, and covered by sheets of plastic to either keep the objects sanitary, or the audience safe from the unsanitary used items. This heightens their uncanny and abject nature. Alongside these are the PET Woman sculptures; torsos of female bodies molded from the same wrinkly plastic sheeting, as if protective layers for Renaissance casts, with transcribed texts from forums on the internet discussing waste.

The places where things are made from plastic are often the most unsanitary places that we inhabit. Toilets, sanitary product disposal bins, showers, wrapped and cling filmed meats, fish and vegetables... they also often involve the body – either to consume, or to clean, or to protect. Plastic, a substance far from our mortal flesh in its composition, that will not often degrade biologically, is the thing that we choose to keep us *safe*. Like the Young-Girl, this is also a symptom and product of late-Capitalism. Akin to the way the Young-Girl's body and beauty is produced by consuming; products clean, buff, shape, remove hair, skin and nails, altering and disinfecting it from its messy human excesses. Fluid, discharge, blood, saliva, spit, shit, urine and semen are all products to be collected, wiped clean and eliminated by our plastic friends.

Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles made the work *Touch Sanitation* between 1977 and 1980 in a New York sanitation centre. Ukeles stated: "I'm not here to watch you, to study you, to analyze you, to judge you. I'm here to be with you: all the shifts, all the seasons, to walk out the whole City with you." I face each worker, shake hands, and say: "Thank you for keeping NYC alive." This performance took place every day and involved 8,500 sanitation workers – Ukeles has explained she was not there to "help" the workers but to be part of the daily routine, to be a part of their network, in order to keep them "alive". Ukeles wrote the text *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in 1969, just after the birth of her first child, in order to create a position for herself in which she could be a mother and artist, making work within the structure and action of everyday life, stating: "I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc.," it reads. "Also, up to now separately I 'do' Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art."

Bonneviot has expressed an interest in Ukeles and her approach and stance to work and life. However, in contrast to Ukeles more Utopian outlook (in that it does not necessarily seem critical of the system, or an attempt to undermine it, rather to state that art cannot be totally dissociated from life, and that one must inform the other) Bonneviot's seems more sharply critical of the way we live now. It also could be described as a kind of end-point to what Alan Kaprow described as the "merging of art and life"; where the reality of life is mirrored and performed, where humans are subject to infinite simulacrum, consuming in order to perform and transform their own object-hood. In turn enabling them to then be consumed by others, in an endless Mobius strip of spectacle.

Kathy Noble