

BABAK GOLKAR: EXPERIMENTS WITH DISCONTINUITY

By Sara Raza

Babak Golkar is an artist who creates artistic 'experiments' that deconstruct the semiotics of social and cultural spaces and simultaneously, investigates the concepts of the public, spatiality and time. Within these 'experiments' he constructs a variety of different performative scenarios that seek to hypothesize hidden systems of value and meaning, which he articulates through an array of different materials and forms, ranging from ceramics, installation, sculpture and photography. Born in the US, raised in Iran, and now residing in Vancouver, Canada, Golkar has been situated between disparate geographic, linguistic, systematic and historical spaces. These sometimes convoluted and sliding zones have been acutely filtered back into the artist's practice to create lines of inquiry that meditate on territories of interruptions, gaps and discontinuity.

These inquiries serve as the basis for the following discussion upon Golkar's recent body of work 'The Return Project' (2014). This project takes the central theme of 'discontinuity' as a critique into power dynamics in art and history, within both a local and globalised context. Through skillfully crafted satirical gestures Golkar's study explores the practice and performance of usage and consumption that exists within the common marketplace. Here through the purchase, modification and eventual return of select products Golkar attempts to manipulate economic order and expose a flawed consumerist culture defined by excess and consumption, colonial ambitions and dominance.

'The Return Project' was established over an extended period, which first began in 2003 and took over a decade to come to fruition. Functioning as part of long term practice, Golkar returned to refine and establish the project following the birth of his daughter earlier in 2014. During this period he revisited his local neighbourhood in Vancouver undertaking frequent daily walks to soothe the newborn infant in her stroller. Traversing the city by foot, he encountered shops and commercial arcades, which he had previously overlooked, and adopted the persona of a 21st century flaneur, wandering and marveling at the excess and oddities available for mass consumption. Eventually these walks developed into something more ritualistic and became a creative activity, whereby Golkar morphed his everyday walking ritual into his art by returning to certain stores he encountered to make a series of purchases. However, rather than operating with compulsive obsessive shopper tendencies, Golkar exercised restraint and instead opted to take on the role of a 'considered' consumer. His purchases ranged from an artificial plant, prints, wax candles, indigenous masks and a model airplane among others, each sale was made in cash and recorded by a customer receipt, then taken back to Golkar's studio to be re-appropriated as part of an investigation into post Duchampian/ post objecthood and the wider problematics of the globalized market place.

Within his studio Golkar set to work physically modifying each object, dating and signing it and photographing it to scale, first in its original state then in its reconstructed condition, adjacent to a new modified work abstracted from the remnants of the original object. He then returned each original product back to the store with its original receipt. Bizarrely, these modified objects were accepted and his money was returned with store workers completely oblivious to the fact that any modifications had actually taken place. However, the fate of these returned objects remains unknown as Golkar has not been able to verify whether or not the returned goods were re-presented on the shop floor for resale or disregarded as 'defected' goods despite being given their new 'artwork' status. Ironically, the entire construct of 'The Return Project,' betrays verification as one is never really sure if it is a hoax, since

there is no archival documentation on Golkar's activities other than the photographic works. This uncertainty echoes the position of many early 1960s EuroAmerican performance works, in which it was also unclear if the actual enactments ever took place. This was largely due to the fact that so many performance artists from that period recorded their performances within the confines of their studio. The very absence of hard 'evidence' in Golkar's project serves to make apparent the slippages that exist within the act of re-appropriation and cultural translation, and, therefore, subscribes to a critical commentary on fleeting encounters.

Issues of autonomy peppered with art historical references are heavily explored within 'The Return Project,' which are reflective of an art-world pandemic of mass produced and 'borrowed' concepts, which are heavily recycled and have trickled down into the common market. Golkar asserts that above all 'The Return Project' is an art project that explores variable conditions that reside in art and society. This is perhaps best evidenced within 'Tearless,' (2014) a scented wax candle, from which Golkar removed 5cms, off the bottom and 'Never Forgetting Richter,' (2014), a new candle cast from a mold of the artist's own hand. This later work refers to the idea of the 'hand of the artist,' and is extracted from the poetic core of renowned German Abstract Expressionist artist Gerhard Richter's oil painting 'Two Candles,' (1982) which adopted photorealism and featured two candles alluding to temporality, ritual and hope. Concurrently, the still life compositional element within Richter's painting, also draws parallels with the concepts within Golkar's 'The Return Project' running through its entirety and teasing out static ideas concerning the human condition. It is important to point out that within 'The Return Project' Golkar takes up the position of both a consumer and a producer, which can be considered as essentially being two phases of the same operation.

The binary 'bazaar' system that Golkar makes explicit within 'The Return Project' troubles the very notion of what constitutes as 'fair trade' and provides an extended window into globalised consumerist policies beyond the West. One such acute example is the satirical hint into the production and global export of the opium trade from Afghanistan, which Golkar's appropriately also titled "Fair Trade," (2014). The work is an original printed image of a paeonia moutan flower inside a ready made frame, which he replaced with a water colour botanical painting featuring the anatomy of an opium plant. This work is further punctuated by a mixed media makeshift opium pipe entitled 'Assisted Reconstruction,' (2014), which features a plastic bottle and a paeonia cut out from the original shop bought print. Both works refer to an 'addiction industry' and draw light to the rapid growth and export of opium, which has greatly increased in its operations since the start of the US led 'War on Terror,' in Afghanistan following 9/11. At the same time billions of dollars have been poured into Afghanistan to boost expenditure towards rebuilding the country's infrastructure, though huge amounts of social disparity would seemingly argue otherwise.

Another work developed in a similar vein is 'Backyard Wars,' (2014) a decorative outdoor metal model airplane, which Golkar reconstructed by removing its tail wing and bombs and commenced to blow torch and then treat its base with a gold paint. The end result was akin to an iconic trophy that reads as a loose analogy into the West's 'questionable' foreign and economic policy in the developing world. This idea was further expressed within 'A Monument to the Cold War,' (2014) a sculpture created using the left over parts from the original model airplane that echoes, both recent and current histories. This work bears an uncanny liking to another botched up trophy, an apt 'prize' awarded to the egos of the world's superpowers as they compete for the role of headline sponsor for global capitalism.

Parallel to 'Backyard Wars' one can further explore 'From Africa to the Americas,' and 'To Cubism' (both 2014) as references to the colonial implications that are inherent within trade and consumerism. The former work is a hand carved African mask re-carved by a Canadian First Nations souvenir carver into an indigenous Canadian mask. The later is a sculpture made from the cut off remnants from the African mask. The treatment of the mask is deliberately intended to make apparent the common absurdities concerning the colonial classification of objects and their subjects, which tend to lump everything together irrespective of historical or cultural differences. Simultaneously, Golkar reverts this matter back to the artworld referencing Cubism's re-appropriation of African sculpture, which can also relate back to Picasso's seminal 'Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)' (1911-12) widely considered one of the first and most important works of modern art. Picasso's iconic painting depicted a group of 5 nude prostitutes two of whom wore African inspired masks, which can be read here as opening up wider registers of classification of immorality and virtue, value and deprivation and high and low culture in art and society, ultimately, unpacking the ideas presented within Golkar's project.

Golkar's wry sense of humour and sympathies with humanity are dexterously delivered to an accelerated level within the 'The Return Project.' Through the interweaving of histories and colonial tendencies Golkar highlights the imposition of the language of the 'elite,' on the 'object' to reveal that it has been subjected to manipulation by its 'users' and not its 'makers.'

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