

Collaborate or collapse
Miriam Laura Leonardi

FORDE: Our collaboration started with an experimental proposition we wanted to try with you. We invited you as an artist with a “carte blanche” to build a group show around your work. We had in mind something that would include some of your pieces, bring in works which are important for you or some that would create a different context for the reading of yours. We started with a lot of hope and did our best, but for some logistical reasons we realized together the impossibility for us to build this exhibition. In the end, this led us to a solo proposition with –as you said– less “real pieces”. Do you want to tell us about this unexisting exhibition?

MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI: I got very excited about your proposition and wanted to think this exhibition rather as a piece in itself than as a traditional group show. I started with a sentence that had come to my mind this summer after reading a press release that said that *found objects, assemblage and appropriation had been cunningly adopted and integrated into the mechanisms of taste, robbed of their subversive function and aestheticized into a polite paradigm.* (303 Gallery Press Release for Valentin Carron’s exhibition “Sing Loud and Walk Fast”) I was really interested in that observation and later came up with this sentence *Your Concept became Their Decoration* which sounds like a joke or an exclamation but wouldn’t it be the logical consequence of what I had been reading? So I began to explore its meaning in different directions. First I considered authorship to be prey for appropriation as well and then started matching works that transform linguistic, art historical or real events into artworks. I wanted those pieces to hide under a relatively cute or pleasant surface something potentially aggressive which could be activated through intellect, physical interaction or personal memory. I started with the collage *Tonsure (Omaggio a Marcel Duchamp)* that Carol Rama made in 2002 and which I had partly transformed into a sculpture sporting headbands last year. Second to it was the pink painting *Sue Me* by Sue Tompkins from 2013 that has various little slits and reads in bold letters “sue me”. She uses her own name as a verb on a slit open canvas, appropriating a gesture and simultaneously pointing to prosecution. Thirdly

I wanted to recreate a mirror piece by Bunny Rogers that I had seen at the Marciano Foundation in Los Angeles. She put some stickers on dancing studio mirrors at the exit of the show that read “BY: BUNNY ROGERS”. I liked how easily she made the spectator belong to her work as well as to her past as a dancer. I wanted to stick my sentence “Your Concept became Their Decoration” mirror-inverted on the wall vis-à-vis to these mirrors.



Carol Rama, *Tonsure (Omaggio a Marcel Duchamp)*, 2002. Mix technique and Oil on canvas.

Sue Tompkins, *Sue Me*, 2013



Bunny Rogers, *Innattention*, Marciano Foundation, Los Angeles, 2018,

FORDE: We had lots of twists and turns, what about the process?

MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI: To make this exhibition happen I went to visit Carol Rama's former studio in Torino and met people who could introduce me to the private owners of the work I was searching. They most kindly agreed to a loan but it quickly presented itself extremely expensive to not only properly transport the piece from Milano to Geneva but also to present documents of a first class insurance company to the owners one week before pick up which was requested to be sent by traditional mail, knowing that the holiday season was just around the corner. In the meantime we located the owner of Sue Tompkins' work in Miami and he also kindly agreed to lend us the piece even though I could foretell that the entire budget of the show would already have been swallowed by the logistics for Rama's artwork. While we kept nonetheless hoping and working on those two works I was informed that I couldn't recreate the mirror piece by Bunny Rogers in Geneva because it was an unique piece.

FORDE: And while looking for solutions for those impossible pieces, we considered re-doing some works. You felt not comfortable and at the same time you're working a lot with appropriation. What is your relation to authorship, what's important for you during the process of layering authorship?

MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI: I realised that I had already re-done the work by Rama with my sculpture *Tonsure Nuova*. Maybe instead of appropriation I'd call that process evocation (as defined by Jan Verwoert in his text *Living with Ghosts*) because I rather tried to find the work's contemporary character than to traditionally copy parts of it. I often do this and whenever I reuse parts of artworks I change from two dimensions to three and timely or literally extend them. To redo Bunny's piece would make it lose all interest for this show because part of its concept was being mirrored in somebody else's context. I didn't want to mirror my own work in my own work. Now the mirrors in front of my sentence just serve as a prop or a reading device which include the reader/interpreter in the image, in the game. With Sue's piece I also first felt uncomfortable because I didn't see any appropriation which wouldn't just be a copy without meaning because I am not called Sue. Then I remembered Carol's work of homage to Duchamp which I had wanted to show and realised that there might be an interesting way to question copying as such by simultaneously honoring the artist. If I write "Sue Me" the same way she does, it could mean "sue me for copying your work". I can change the reading by using the same words. I admire Sue Tompkins and to insist on this homage instead of a copy I decided to make the piece smaller and paint it in its complementary color.



Miriam Laura Leonardi,
Tonsure Nuova, 2018.
12 headbands, plexi-
glass, acrylic paint.

FORDE: Tell us more about the title. How do one go from "Your Concept Became Their Decoration" to "collaborate or collapse" and what does it say?

MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI: I thought that Your Concept became Their Decoration as an exhibition title would only be interesting for a group show where the You and the They is inherently unclear. And even if

very small, the verbal correlation with Harald Szeemann's exhibition title "When Attitudes Become Form" from 1969 seemed missing its point if I was to title a solo exhibition today. So after the failure of my initial concept I started thinking more broadly about collaboration, but not between artists, more in an economical sense. Collaboration is always a fact and not a concept. My concept didn't work out and so I decided to rename the whole show "Collaborate or Collapse" and use a horror font on top of the jet d'eau. I then felt like staring into an empty white space again and so I went back to the beginning to make the same sentence intelligible in a different way, with less "real art" but by making the spectator a potential author and by thinking of conceptual works that by their formal limitations could seem decorative and thus functional. Can decorative art become a concept or has it already become one?



We talked about...

Annika Ström,
The Inept Five (no3),
2016.

FORDE: We had several interesting discussion about the New Jersey scene. Can you explain us a bit why do you choose to bring it in this show and why?



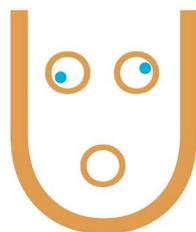
We talked about...

Laure Marville,
Pay Attention, 2019.

MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI: In regards to scene it's an example of authorship of first a scene with space to a scene without space. When I moved back to Switzerland from Paris, the first show I saw there was also already one of their last ones. But my first years of studying and living in Zurich felt still partly ruled by their group authorship. And its ghost is kept alive until today in interviews, dinner talks and articles. Less by fans who cry after it - if I compare it to the music scene and broken up boy bands - but mainly by the people who were actively part of it.

Your Concept became Their Decoration is written in past tense and the Y is partly ripped off because I think that there isn't much You in the artworld but mainly I and Them and a bit of We to protect the I. So the They could potentially be the collectors' or museums' walls but it could also just be The others. A scene can only be defined as such when there is others who aren't part of it. So I made this note on my phone "Go Home New Jersey". Like what you yell to an opposing team when they enter the stadium.

Because this work relates to the past it is hanging askew, as if nobody had seen it falling or as if nobody was overly motivated to keep it straight. I wanted it to have both an advertising as well as a decorative aspect so now it has a similar effect than a t-shirt that you buy for its look even if you don't understand its slogan. I continued this thinking for the two other small works on pvc which are unfinished sentences missing question marks. In English and German there is no must for articles in front of adjective+noun and thus it depletes their declarations even more of pinpointable subjects but it actually emphasizes its demand. The general demand for importance.



UH OH PERIOD

Kay Rosen © 2017

We talked about...

Kay Rosen,
Uh Oh Period, 2017.

FORDE: When you received this canvas from the mailpost, you send us a picture and wrote something like “c’est bien ridicule en vrai”. That’s something I find both singular and essential in your work. There’s this latent humour, this relationship to ridicule, it’s always very deep but very funny. Is humour or irony something you consciously use as a tool (or a weapon) or is it just part of your personality?

MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI: Of course the physical object occupies nothing, no space on the wall but also no terrain and it is executed with the same ridiculous aesthetic codes that restrict it at the same time. It looks so contradictory to the space it could have occupied in my or others real lives. Art is so unbalanced with reality and this is why I wanted to get rid of it artistically to make peace with it mentally. I never start a work with a funny thought but I believe that irony means taking the criticized object or subject seriously and not just making profit out of it.

This discussion has been conducted by Roxane Bovet and Yoan Mudry at the occasion of Miriam Laura Leonardi’s solo exhibition “Collaborate or Collapse”. Forde, Geneva. January 10 - February 16 2020.