

The Imitation Ray : Brad Tinmouth's Appropriation Aesthetics

by Lucas Soi

They decided without us. Let us advance without them.

- Slogan of Greek political party Syriza

The global financial crises that began in 2008 caused the world's leading societies to reassess their influence on, and participation in, the global economy.¹ The implication that unimpeded growth of the most powerful nations was not a surety caused its citizens to reevaluate their personal stake in society. Activists whose causes included corporate responsibility, government reform and environmental sustainability embraced the moment in popular culture and gained support on a greater level. Their distinction as a minority or a fringe movement was dispelled as a larger segment of the population began to voice their concerns in the public and in the media.

In the United States a common but assumed outdated concept of 'preparedness' began to be re-popularized. Dating back to the rationing measures of World War II, when domestic vegetable gardens were maintained in every backyard and basements were stockpiled with supplies, to the building of fallout shelters to survive a nuclear attack during the Cold War, citizens took personal responsibility for their own wellbeing and safety in times of crises. In a similar fashion, 21st century 'preppers' worked towards the goal of self-sustainability and sought to lessen their reliance on systems that were outside of their direct control. They became producers instead of consumers. Their neighbours, however, did the opposite, forming tighter around one another in urban city centers. They relied on retail industries like food, home hardware and safety to service their lives and their self-reliance ceded to the idea of convenience, that anything they needed could be picked up from the local big box store.

Toronto-based artist Brad Tinmouth's new exhibition *If Times Get Tough Or Even If They Don't* explores this social separation. According to French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, being anti-social and social were the two ways in which an individual could act in society.² Society, Tarde explained, is comprised of "what escapes it and what it absorbs" and that "socially, everything is either invention or imitation."³ Anti-

¹ Mazower, Mark. "Europe raises the spectre of an ungovernable world." *Financial Times*. 26 May 2012: 9.

² Tarde, Gabriel. *The Laws Of Imitation*. Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1962.

³ Ibid. 3

social actions were made by citizens who escaped society, only to be re-absorbed back into it by those who imitated their progressive “inventions.” The positive contributions of the anti-social citizen were described by Tarde as “the re-inspiring initiatives which bring new wants, together with new satisfactions, into the world.” According to Tinmouth, ‘preppers’ fell into this category. Inevitably their acts would be co-opted by the greater public “through spontaneous and unconscious or artificial and deliberate imitation.”⁴ Like a focused laser beam, society’s imitation ray would bring the anti-social member back into society, strengthening it as a whole.

In the art world, one society that practices imitation is the one working with appropriation, or imagery that is derived from existing and identifiable sources. For “artists working within the history of art,” writes Canadian curator Elke Town, “choosing images as sources and inspiration is an acceptable convention.” But to “step outside their own history of images [and] move from originator to examiner, from individual creator to assimilator and interpreter”⁵ is a genuine way to engage with mainstream society. The appropriation artist uses their imitation ray to capture popular culture and integrate it into contemporary art. The most famous practitioner of appropriation, American artist Richard Prince, declared that it was when he looked outside the art world that he began his *Cowboy* series based on Marlboro advertisements. “That’s when I stole it. I suppose it was an anti-social act. No one was looking.”⁶ His anti-social act was eventually accepted by his fellow artists and he successfully used his imitation ray to integrate mainstream popular culture into art history.

It is in this context that Brad Tinmouth’s art practice flourishes. Building on his work *Pro Click Dot Biz* (2011), a video montage of found clips from YouTube exploring the contemporary male’s alienation and self-dispossession, his new site-specific installation *If Times Get Tough Or Even If They Don’t* is comprised of three sculptures appropriated from publicly-available construction plans on the Internet. The three pieces, a hydroponic system, a self-rotating can rack and a hammock and satchel, the contents of which allows the owner to survive in any situation for seventy-two hours, are do-it-yourself innovations that empower their maker to reassert authorship over outsourced manufacturing and take more responsibility for their life. “All resemblance is due to repetition” said Tarde⁷ and repetition is key to Tinmouth’s work. In “Hydroponic Unit” (all works 2012) a ladder-like structure recycles running water through a tiered system of grow beds filled with pebbles that nurture a variety of herbs and vegetables. “Rotating Can Rack” is a large shelving

⁴ Ibid. 2

⁵ Towne, Elke. *Subjects & Subject Matter*. London, ON: London Regional Art Gallery, 1985.

⁶ Wallis, Brian. “A Conversation with Richard Prince.” *Art In America* November 1993: 117.

⁷ Tarde. 14

unit that holds several weeks worth of canned goods in a tiered and dated system. The inclined rear-loading shelves ensure that once a can is removed it is replaced by another, ensuring the supplies are in constant rotation. The third sculpture, "Bug Out Bag," is a knapsack filled with mass-produced survival gear, another repetitive link to greater society. Staged in the basement of Xpace under low-hanging ceiling beams and medieval walls made of hand-piled stones and bricks, the installation is a complete rendering of an off-site, an anti-social white cube.

In times of crises societies tend to recoil from engaging in the larger world, and this is no different in the art world. The effects of globalization, argues Belgian curator Dieter Roelstraete, have led to an "explosive growth of art-about-art and art-about-the-art-world."⁸ Brad Tinmouth's new work reminds us that leaving the mainstream world behind is not productive, as our reliance on it is vital and our engagement with it is inevitable. The artist who leaves the comfort of art history to create positive innovations will be drawn back into their society via the imitation ray. Solidarity with general culture is produced through imitation. One of the art world's "foundational myths," says Roelstraete, is that "art can (and therefore must) change the world, and that art's impact upon the general culture is... a substantively positive one."⁹ When the artist's imitation ray is focused on contemporary society it cannot fail to contribute to it in positive way.

⁸ Roelstraete, Dieter. "The Echo-Chamber: Is today's art too self-referential?" *frieze* Summer 2012: 26-27.

⁹ *Ibid.* 27