

Kaleidoscope, Issue #26 Winter 2016

KALEIDOSCOPE

Pioneers: Sylvie Fleury

by Fredi Fischli & Niels Olsen



The Pioneers series aims to shed new light on artists who have created truly innovative work, trailblazers whose legacy lives and reverberates in the current generation. For this issue, Fredi Fischli & Niels Olsen talk to Sylvie Fleury.

You recently opened an exhibition at the Bass Museum as part of Art Basel Miami. The main work is a newly produced neon sign on the museum's facade.

Actually, the museum is closed due to construction, so I just did a piece on the rooftop—a neon sign that says “Eternity Now”. The first time I went to the Bass, I was on a plane, checking out the tax-free magazine, when I noticed that Calvin Klein had a new perfume called Eternity Now. I had used “Eternity” for my works in the past, but I thought “Eternity Now” was even better. It matched so well with the event, the art fair, the craziness of Miami and of the world in general, I guess. It’s also a very contradictory phrase, so it suits me.

The other nice thing about the project is that I only worked with the building’s exterior, which is so beautiful, a very special architecture typical of Miami. In a way, the museum became the pedestal for my piece. I loved it! It was an easy project in a way, but sometimes when it comes easy, that means it’s alright. It shouldn’t be too much of a pain in the neck to organize anything.

Kaleidoscope, Issue #26 Winter 2016

That piece has such an interesting architectural quality; it fits in well with the Miami strip and its Art Deco hotels along the beach. But we're also struck by this very direct approach of appropriation in your practice.

I've been appropriating perfume brand names and so many other things since the early '90s, ranging from popular and iconic slogans to the most meaningless and obscure activities. An early work that relies on this strategy was in the Venice Biennale 1993, when I showed monitors all shuffled upside down with aerobic videos playing all together. This collection of aerobic videos showed many famous actress, such as Jane Fonda, Cindy Crawford and Raquel Welch, revealing their fitness secrets. I think this piece was called A Journey to Fitness or How To Lose 30 Pounds In Under Three Weeks. Behind this scattered installation, I installed on the wall my first Egoist sign. Later on I did various wall paintings carrying perfume names: Obsession, Egoiste, Opium, Angel, Poison, Envy, C'est La Vie, to name a few.



Your work is often read as a reflection of the economical evolution of the art market over the last three decades.

Maybe art is somehow always a reflection of the art market—can one escape it? In the late '80s, following the economic crash, it was very difficult for young artists to show their works. But interestingly, as it's not usually the case, it was an opportunity for women. As the art market was dead, the galleries empty, they suddenly decided to show women for a change. It really became a trend: I did so many "women-only" group shows during those years. It allowed a lot of woman artists to emerge at this time, myself included. I was immediately in great demand. It was a new beginning, in a way.

It's interesting, because people always think that your work is a fetishization and a celebration of the boom and the market. But actually, when you started, you came out of an art world in crisis.

Kaleidoscope, Issue #26 Winter 2016

Absolutely. My first piece ever—*C'est La Vie*, one of the “Shopping Bag” pieces—came out of talking not about fashion, but about how the art world functions. When I was using bags from the cool places to shop at that time, I was also referring to the galleries—how they’d only show artists from the same list of names that you would see in *Artforum*. In a way, you can see it much more clearly in art than in fashion. But the fashion world is also very powerful, and when it takes you over, you get kind of swept along. So I had this experience where suddenly, because the fashion world was becoming interested in art but didn’t have many references, when they saw my work, they said, “Wow, she’s doing things we understand!” Suddenly they were quoting me, saying things like, “This artist is a shopping addict” or whatever (which I don’t deny). But it allowed me to observe the system and how it works—the displays and techniques of commercializing things.



It was funny to me, because in the beginning, I had a lot of shops asking me to do their windows, which I never wanted to do. I thought, “This is stupid—my work is about placing these items in a different context.” It was a very minimal gesture: I didn’t do much to the things themselves, so if I’d put them back in the windows, the comment would have been totally lost. But what was interesting is that it evolved so much, this link between fashion and art, that they started doing windows that looked like art theses. In fact, I used a lot of displays from fashion stores in my early work, but eventually I had to stop—it’d become too common. I’m still interested in that, though. I’m always fascinated when it doesn’t work—how it looks cheap and uninteresting because it’s fashion, but if someone would take it and put it somewhere else, it would look totally different. Actually, a funny thing happened last night: I went on Instagram, and people were pointing out to me that this shoe brand had done a Christmas video with a woman in high heels smashing ornaments, which is exactly what I did. It was a cheap rip-off, but to me, it was interesting, precisely because it didn’t work. It still had a lot of likes, though. That’s the way it goes. Everyone is allowed to break ornaments.

All my work is a never-ending performance, collaborating with whoever wants to play.

Did you have any specific influences in doing the first “Shopping Bag” works?

In the beginning, I was interested in the so-called Scatter Art movement, for instance I admired the process oriented works of Lynda Benglis and Barry Le Va. But because I was a woman and a bit of a punk feminist in disguise, I wanted to appropriate the formal aspects of art and inject them with luxury and gloss. My strategy



Kaleidoscope, Issue #26 Winter 2016

followed contradictions: hard sculptures dripping, angular squares changing into circles or cosmetic colors used for formal monochromes. I wanted to walk all over Carl Andre with the most exquisite high heels of the season. When I was 16 years old, I was a Trotskyist, and even today, I think you can do it all. It's also part of what I liked about fashion: they could change their minds, say something completely different from what they said earlier; and it would still be OK. To try and be consistent in that—that is another thing. But this is my practice: Yes to All!



Bob Nickas told us that for his "Red" exhibition in 1986, you actually conceived the work of John Armleder, who presented a tube of red lipstick.

Yes. At that time, I hadn't yet begun exhibiting, but I was often with John, whom I would follow as he was doing shows and making his work. So, for instance, he did a lot of furniture sculptures where he would paint monochromes behind objects, and I would always suggest the latest shade of cosmetics. I would even say, "Oh no, you have to use pink and red, because I'm wearing a pink suit and red shoes to the opening," things like that. So when Bob Nickas asked John what he would do for the show, I said, "It's easy—just buy some lipstick and show that!" So John probably did my first piece. I still remember looking for the right shade of lipstick: it was Estée Lauder "Jungle Red" in a very shiny gold tube.

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Though works like C'est La Vie are not technically performances, they always imply a performative gesture. Even if they're not smashed or manipulated, the objects come from somewhere and end up somewhere else.

Actually, I have smashed cosmetics in the past. The first time was in 1993, for my first solo show in Geneva at Art & Public. I bought a big American car—a gold '67 Skylark—and drove it inside the gallery. I ended up running over some compact makeup and left it there as it was. In another case (I think it was at the Sculpture Center in Long Island), I hired some guy who drove lowriders, which have hydraulics that let them hop up and down. So here was this car, hopping up and down, smashing all of this makeup. But no one actually saw that process; the piece itself was just the aftermath, the crushed cosmetics on the floor. It would get repetitive to tell how many Christmas balls I crushed with my high heels, I think everybody's got the point... To me, this was always interesting, that there might be a more performative process beforehand that the viewer hasn't

Kaleidoscope, Issue #26 Winter 2016

witnessed. Maybe all my work is a never-ending performance including collaborations with whoever wants to play. Gallerists often played an important part and were engaged in my productions. Once I had Gavin Brown, when he was an assistant to Lisa Spellman, sent out to buy a bra at Frederick's of Hollywood for a group show he curated in an office space in the early '90s.



One of your best-known performances is a woman getting her hair done. Can you tell us about it?

Yeah, there are several. There was one where she's just sitting on a chair under the hairdryer, flipping through magazines. There's one where she has her hair done by her hairdresser during the opening, and another where she's being made up. I've done that one several times—the leftover is just a pedestal-like table with a mass of cosmetics on top. One of my favourites was when I just strew hairpins on the floor—you could actually get a little bag with twenty hairpins and do your own piece. I always like when people can do their own thing with the work. For instance with the "Zylon" paintings, a series of monochromes, I would buy a can of silver paint and spray directly on the wall, so the paint would also go around the painting, a little bit like an aura. But the point was that whoever bought this work could then repaint it in a different colour if they wished. The silver wasn't final.

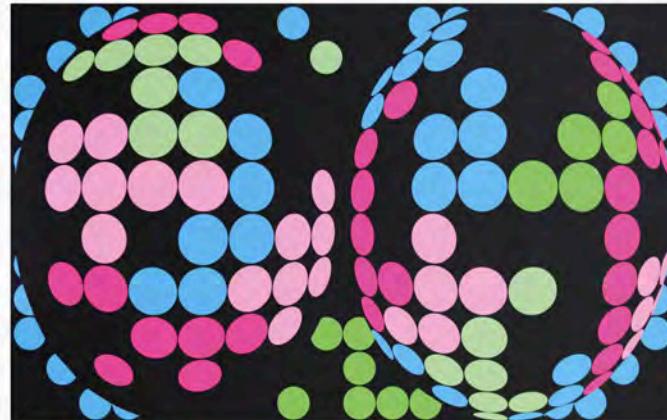
Your work is very scenographic. Sometimes it appears in daily life—at the Blow hairdresser in Zurich or the "Mini Skirts Are Back" party at the Trois Pommes outlet store—where it is hard to distinguish from its surroundings. At the same time, though, it changes its surroundings—it transforms the place into a theatrical stage, just as you once transformed the whole village of Gstaad into a theatrical stage. It turns the setting into a sort of time capsule.

It's true. I'm satisfied when it's easy—I'm satisfied when it's easy—or at least when it looks like it's effortless. There's a point where people say their kids could have done it. I like that. Take the shopping bags: something happens when you just drop these things in the middle of a gallery. I remember doing it recently, not having



Kaleidoscope, Issue #26 Winter 2016

done it for a long time, and I thought, "Shit, it still works!" But it's a matter of the right place and the right moment; you really have to use the surroundings. If the setting doesn't lend it some strength and presence, it doesn't work. So in a way, I always think that architecture is very prominent in my work.



Sylvie Fleury (Swiss, b. 1961) is an artist who lives and works in Geneva, Switzerland. She is represented by Salon 94, New York; Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris; and Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels/Paris/London.

Images: White Gold, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg; Untitled, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg; Strange Fire (Still), 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York; Untitled (Ô), 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg; Serie ELA 75/K (Go Pout), 2000. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York; It Might As Well Rain Until September, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.