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Experiments in Remix and Worldmaking

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Jesse Firestone

Experiments in Remix and Worldmaking

Photography

College of Art, Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts, Washington University

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Jesse Bandler Firestone
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ABSTRACT

The rate of consumption is at an all time high and cultural attributes are endlessly appropriated in order to make fresh, new products. The market can bring the marginalized into the mainstream and expedite the process of assimilation; however, in the process, cultural symbols/ideas/identities are depoliticized and removed from their origins, leaving only a hollow shell. In Gimme \$helter, Jesse Bandler brings together clothing, posters, blankets, and chackis, effectively turning the Des Lee Gallery into a place of commerce. Gimme \$helter is able to seamlessly occupy two distinct spheres of culture: within the gallery, Gimme \$helter offers an intimate critique of contemporary consumer culture; when stripped of its formal context in Art and placed in a mall (or any commercial district), Gimme \$helter and its contents are reduced to nothing more than vapid products.

GIMME \$HELTER An Exercise in Remix and Worldmaking

Cultural eccentricities are constantly being syphoned from their origin and watered-down in order to make a marketable, desirable product. The exotic has always been coveted. Since the first world war exotification and commodification have been coupled and often occur simultaneously. The process of commodifying is essentially remix and is both translatory and regurgitative, a process in which symbols ideas data are reterritorialized by new proximities. While remix is currently a hot buzzword; Lessig states that marrying the old and the new is nothing novel and in fact, remixing has been the strongest apparatus for cultural movement for centuries, but in the past was only done with words

(Lessig, 83). These “new proximities” are associations that are so far removed from the origin of the appropriation, that the appropriated becomes something entirely different and begins to occupy new existential and physical terrains. Regardless of whether it is wanted or not, a direct result of remix, appropriation, and commodification is assimilation (Lessig, 94). For decades, queer culture was taboo and isolated from the mainstream. Now, homosexuality is a hot topic, queer culture is currently being commodified, and in turn assimilated into the mainstream. In the past homosexual men were forced to carve out their niche in the safety of their homes and did so by embellishing, decorating, and redesigning already existing spaces or ideals. These privately embellished worlds and redesigned properties were coined “queer spaces” (Belsky, 20).

There is a long, deep, and rich tradition of artists taking up shop and selling their works in self made spaces that straddle between showroom and art gallery. Oldenburg’s “The Store”, Haring “Pop Shop” and more recently a Prada store in Marfa. Claes Oldenburg’s “The Store” opened in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1961 and was a conceptual piece that addresses similar issues of art and commodity as GIMME \$HELTER. Oldenburg would remake popular merchandise found in the surrounding shops out of plaster and hawk the objects in “The Store”. Claes would sell plaster cakes; dresses; equipment, and because he was an artist, everything Oldenburg made and sold “became viable subjects for art” (Breslau, MOMA). Oldenburg’s store was not an experiment in branding, but an attempt draw attention to notions of authorship with readymades that many of his contemporaries were grappling with. From photographs it is clear that Claes did not employ any design tactics for “The Store”, and as a result “The Store” is very transparent and looks like what it is: a storefront-studio occupied by a sculptor selling plaster casts of popular objects. If Claes was removed from the equation

and “The Store” existed without its life support rooted in Art, there is no doubt that the store would have floundered. Keith Haring is another artist who used the storefront as a platform to display and sell work. Unlike Oldenburg, Haring created the “Pop Shop” to capitalize on his fame and continue developing/supporting the style he had become known for. The “Pop Shop” was a branding scheme (Sleslin, NYTIMES). Haring worked with the architectural firm Moore & Pennoyer to create a well designed space that had a lasting impact on the store's success because people *wanted* to walk inside. Haring’s hand could never be removed from the shop and the Pop Shop remained open for nearly a decade after his death. “The Store” was a conceptual artwork that barely critiqued consumer culture and focused on the value of an artist’s work, whereas The PopShop was a practical and sincere attempt to sell works independent of any gallery. Unlike GIMME \$HELTER and the works comprised within in, Oldenburgs “The Store” and Haring’s “PopShop” are fairly stable and remain unchanged whether they are in the shops or in a gallery/museum; because of this, “The Store” and “PopShop” are not able to successfully exist in both spheres.

Just as Oldenburg’s “The Store” was based off of and capitalized on contemporary-popular items, GIMME \$HELTER uses popular culture as its main source. The media “barrage” that defines and makes up the contemporary landscape is fertile territory and the advent of accessible digital technologies including the internet allows for endless ways to manipulate material. A chef uses various ingredients in various amounts to create something interesting; a remix artist does that same thing, except instead of using spices I use the “bits of culture found in [my] digital cupboard” (Lessig, 71). The remix and resulting mashup of words, images, and sounds is the most effective way to disseminate a complex message to a large, diverse audience (Lessig, 74). Lessig notes the importance of using the original in a

remix and states that the expression of the reference, not content, is crucial the success of a remix. About half of the works in GIMME \$HELTER are remixes and the original source materials range from the mainstream to esoteria. Pulling from all strata of the INDEX allows GIMME \$HELTER to address and engage a large audience at multiple levels. For example the remixes with well known, popularized-mainstream references allow for instant (and hopefully universal) access. Esoteria can often be interpreted as pretentious and is in turn marginalizing; however when juxtaposed with the mainstream, effectively dislodging the esoteric from its pedestal and leveling hierarchy of expected knowledge, the esoteric is no longer alienating and can engage the audience. Those who are aware of the esoteric reference feel a sense of heightened self-worth because they are able to engage with the works at a “deeper” level than those who are unaware (or so they think); yet, those who have never been exposed to the reference can revel in their ignorance as they experience a completely “fresh” and original work, an impossible privilege today. The ability for the remixed to be accessible to both parties, those in “the know” and those not, is crucial for the works to exist in both an intellectualized, cultural institution like a museum and a reduced cultural setting like a mall.

“Eat Cum and Carry On” (a) and “Boys will be Boys” (b) are two remixed works that find refuge in Gimme \$helter. The former uses a mainstream source material whereas the latter pulls from esoteric art history. The “Eat Cum and Carry On” is a direct ripoff of the British World War II phrase “keep calm and carry on”. The British phrase had been lost to history and was only rediscovered in 2000 and since its resurfacing has flooded the mainstream. “Keep calm and carry on” is most commonly found on tote bags or t shirts and despite its “newness”, the phrase was quickly commodified by a multitude of companies and subcultures, for example phrases like “keep calm and have a cupcake”

or “now panic and freak out” reduce the phrase and overshadow its reintroduction into contemporary culture. “Eat Cum and Carry On” is a queered-vulgar iteration of the original that capitalizes on the current exotification of queer culture. Remixing the already popular phrase was a conscious decision to create a work that is automatically “edgy”-hip, accessible, and inturn marketable. Placing this phrase on a shirt turns the normally inoffensive garment into jarring art-object. Other artist-shirts can be bought in Gimme \$helter, and the choice to use clothing as a medium is a conscious one. In “Stuff”, Daniel Miller states that clothing is not superficial and actively reveals “the true inner and relatively constant self within” (39). Based off this logic, clothing becomes an appropriate medium to directly interject myself into mainstream culture. In stark contrast to the already mainstream “Eat Cum and Carry On”, “Boys will be boys” uses the undeniably obscure Robert Morris artforum ad from 1972 as its backbone. The add is mainly remembered (if at all) just because of the Lynda Benglis incident. Morris’ photographic-add barely holds relevance today and just like “keep calm and carry on” was lost to history, until now. The timeless, ever-POPular phrase “boys will be boys” is printed in a not-so-masculine font on top of Morris’ selfprofessed superhomo-hypermasculine photograph. The added text complicates and resurrects the original work by adding new layers through association and simultaneously reduces the conceptual-performance-photograph-advertisement to a pop culture trope. However, the text does not completely consume the original work and Morris’ rawness still reverberates in “Boys will be boys”, even when viewed by someone unacquainted with the image and its history. It is this preservation of the original that makes “Boys will be Boys” a succesful remix (lessig, 52). Because the piece has elements of both high art and pop culture it can be interpreted differently depending on its setting. “Boys will be boys” is equally at home in an art institution, mall kiosk, hot topic, bathhouse, or dorm-room wall.

The New York Times likened being in Haring's store to being inside his head (Selsin, NYT). Unlike Haring's store which stood independent of anything or anyone else, GIMME \$HELTER requires a larger environment to live in, whether it be a gallery or a mall. Because of this, GIMME \$HELTER also became an exercise in and an attempt to interject myself into contemporary culture. Like the title suggests, GIMME \$HELTER is a self made queer-space-nest-shelter carved into the already established art and commercial spheres. For example, the space is adorned with a pink, floral wallpaper, perfect for a store like Delias or Forever 21; however, at the center of each flower is well hidden anus ("Anus Poppy" c). This perverse addition estranges the pattern from simple design and flings it into the realm of contemporary-photorealism-shock art. Going another step deeper, the flowers are Afghan Poppies and this reference as well as the wormy texture take the wallpaper into the realm of psychedelic drug culture. Nature, anuses, and drugs are all combined into one wallpaper that adorns an entire space. That same anus-poppy-pattern is printed on silk and made into a tie "poppy tie" (d). Besides the penis, the tie is arguably the ultimate symbol of the heteropatriarchy as it represents business, power, wealth, class, etc. Business ties are traditionally blue or red and the anus poppy pattern makes the tie a perfect accent piece for a suite because of the vibrant color, luscious detail, and the anuses go unnoticed, yet they are still present and effectively queer the supermasculine garment.

GIMME \$HELTER is a pop-up store housed inside the Des Lee and framing a pop-up store in an art gallery automatically addresses the intersection of art and commodity. GIMME \$HELTER also tackles the complex relationship between art, commodity, design, remix, and queerness by displaying a mix of original works remixed works that effectively queer what is expected. Because the shop exists in the gallery, GIMME \$HELTER is seen first and foremost as an ART-installation, not a store. By simply

installing GIMME \$HELTER in an art space, the store and all its contents are automatically elevated to ART. However, when removed from the gallery and placed in a mall, GIMME \$HELTER is stripped of the context/setting that formally makes it ART and the pop-up shop quickly assimilates into its new environment. Outside the gallery, GIMME \$HELTER takes on a new form and is no longer a place for institutional critique or highbrow culture, but instead becomes nothing more than a place of commerce and popular culture. In a paradoxical manner GIMME \$HELTER becomes more subversive, and arguably more successful, when it is installed outside the gallery, in a mall because it is allowed to exist in the same space/place it critiques. The ability for GIMME \$HELTER to seamlessly oscillate between and occupy both art gallery and mall is inherent in the project's conceptual backbone and necessary for its success.