

Notes on the Knock-offs exhibition  
by James Hull

Green Street presents **Knock-Offs**, an exhibit of objects, wall paintings, photographs and installations created specifically for Green Street. As the name implies, the show will include unauthorized versions of artworks by “big name” artists created by smaller name artists. Green Street invited artists living in Boston and New York to (re)create works by other artists of their choice for a Knock-offs exhibit. More than half of the work was created on site during the week preceding the opening on April 16, 2005.

Artists often work for museums, galleries and as assistants for other artists to survive - think of it as an art-oriented day job. These artists bring some of that experience back into their own studios and now into the Green Street Gallery. The role reversal of working for another artist is often an inspiring and intimate look at the techniques used by well known, often famous artists in the privacy of their studios. Interestingly, in the process of installing Knock-Offs, the staff at Green Street became assistants to these artists ( a sort of second generation assistant to the assistant) when helping produce some of the artwork exhibited. The temptation to take that knowledge and create similar works is usually not as powerful as the ideas for new work that the experience naturally inspires.

For these “studio-assistant trained” artists their job becomes a “backstage pass” to see and participate in making the work for a large scale exhibition or commission. It is a balancing act of authority with the talented crew of installers “trained” by the artist or crew chief to play the part (like a character in a play) of the artist while creating all or part of a work of art. This means doing things like *that* artist would do them, getting inside the head of the artist and NOT doing it the way you would do it in your studio - even if there is a better, faster or smarter way to do it (usually the established artist they are hired by has the best way figured out - but not always...).

This exhibit combines years of experience working for and with other artists with the excitement of making something from “scratch”. We all appreciate the complexities of thought and technique when we take a project - whether it is biscuits or a bookshelf - and try to do it ourselves. But we never can predict the specific areas that the artists asks us to pay special attention to: the edges of the paint, the scale, the spacing or the truth to materials. This attention is what the assistants teach new studio workers and this “insider information” often reveals the artist’s conceptual focus, making the process as rewarding as the resulting installation. Working for another artist is very different from the creative act of originating an idea and a process and a form, but there are many similarities and even enjoyable escapes from the responsibility for the ultimate success or failure of the idea. There is also a trust and a sincerity involved with this activity that creates a unique relationship between the artist and the studio assistants.

Is this relationship because they are coconspirators in a misrepresentation, partners in a crime of convenience? Not at all, the underlying principals of conceptual art, which date back to the early 1960’s eliminate the requirement that an artist fashion everything personally. In fact, since the advent of the ready-made urinal “Fountain” in 1917 and signed R. Mutt, a movement toward more indirect production methods has been underway in many areas of art. How could collage or silkscreens of photos from the newspaper or appropriation be considered art if we are still forcing everything to be made by the artist? However, the “wow” factor of artistic struggle does persuade many artists to create amazingly difficult works all by themselves. After all Michelangelo Buonarroti consistently stressed that he

“worked unaided” when he painted the Sistine Chapel frescoes.<sup>1</sup> The History of art is one of artists seeking and eventually being given more and more freedom in both how they create art and what is included as art. The Fauves freed color of its descriptive accuracy in exchange for expressive content. Cubism allowed for more than one viewpoint to be depicted at a time. Dada attempted to remove any limitations that remained. Minimalism removed any evidence of the hand of the artist. So if color and the mark-making on the surface are not forced to function according to the old rules, why should the artists have to? Conceptual art took that position and began to treat artists more like art and less like laborers. That left open the question of who would make the art if the artists were more interested in the ideas? Often it is *other* artists, that's who! (and factory workers and programmers and lightning and anybody who would follow the directions ....the list goes on).

So why hide the fact of who actually *makes* a work if the artists are more focused on the effect of the work ? Here artists are divided into those who embrace a conceptual approach and those who want to have the “wow” factor of having done it all but don't have the time to do what is needed in the time allotted. Then there is the market's perception of which is more valuable, a market which is much more comfortable now with fabricated and editioned works of all stripes (commercial galleries are torn between “affordable editioned works by big name artists that are more available and the “autographed” like cult of the artist's hand and valuable-added impact of exclusivity and rarity of hand-made, one-of-a-kind works).

There is no doubt that creative ideas must be nourished with some practical, technical knowledge and often institutional support, to actually be rendered successfully into artwork, especially on a large scale. Since an idea is not an artwork until it is made, and an artwork is certainly more than a commodity (no matter what Jeff Koons says<sup>2</sup>) what role does a well crafted impostor play? A knock-off, copy, reproduction, appropriation, collage, montage, sample, homage, fake, counterfeit, inspired by....call them what you like, relies on a reference to another existing work (imitation is the sincerest form of flattery after all). The more well known an *original* work is the more obvious the counterfeit work is (if you copy an unknown artist it functions very differently from a fake Mona Lisa). The higher the cost of the original the more carefully the authenticity of the copy is questioned; very expensive items are more susceptible to being copied because they are so recognizable and in demand because less people can afford to own the real thing. This brings more scrutiny upon the originals and the copies by prospective buyers which helped launch the field of art appraisal.

### The (Art) History of Knock-offs

The ideas that inspire many artists today are often far removed from reproducing what they observe in nature or demonstrating that they have the technical facility to paint, draw or sculpt realistically. Contemporary artists have inherited the thinking behind Conceptual art, Minimalism and Pop art movements and continue to develop visual and cultural strategies to interact with audiences in new ways. The result of this legacy (of freedom to do almost anything) has expanded the boundaries of what we consider art and who we consider the artist. The artists in the Knock-Offs exhibit agreed to create knock-offs of some of their favorite works - often they are works that they have made before, other times they are new works they have always wanted to make. The real question is: How does the artwork stand up to the real thing? And if monetary value is not considered - do these copies really differ

---

<sup>1</sup> David Piper, Looking at art, Random House Library of Painting and Sculpture Vol.I, p. 142

<sup>2</sup> Robert Pinkus-Witten, “Jeff realizes that works of art in a capitalist culture inevitably are reduced to the condition of commodity.” Art News, May 2005 p.116

from the originals?

During the post-war period, exhibition of discreet artworks and the “Happening” had overlapped and what was included under the heading “visual art” was no longer as simple as printmaking, painting, drawing, sculpture and photography. It suddenly needed to include some performances, the artist’s body, video and film, architecture, design and even completely conceptual works that were simply instructions to be acted out by others (like Yoko Ono’s “Instructional Paintings” and Sol LeWitt’s<sup>3</sup>). It seemed that there was no limit to the processes that could be used to produce art; artwork was produced by many digital means, explosives, elephants, industrial fabricators, chance, trash scavenging and artwork created by *other* artists in “studio factories” that was what the employer/artist had directed and trained them to produce.

The very definition of what it meant to “create” was shifting toward the conceptual during the years between 1950 and 1970. Moreover, the concept of the conception of a work being a separate activity from the creation of it was finally taking root years after the first “readymades”<sup>4</sup> were so controversial. Yoko Ono’s “Directions for Paintings” were first exhibited in 1961 in a small exhibition as text only, shown as close as possible to how they would look typed<sup>5</sup> (in Japanese). This understanding opened the door to the more cerebral, less physical work of Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt and John Baldesari that continued the development of Conceptual art.

Two important developments in American art have laid the foundations for all of the art exhibited in the Knock-offs exhibition. These innovations also continue to provide fuel for expressive innovation *and* controversy to this day. The first was the trend embraced by Minimalists that allowed for the reduction of “the hand of the artist” (the evidence that something was handmade: fingerprints, brush marks or other irregularities) in a completed work of art. The second development was the extension by Conceptual artists of Minimalism’s reduction of direct making by the artist. Taken to its logical conclusion the artist would not be required to *actually make* anything at all. In addition to the conceptual freedom artists sought by expanding artistic practices there was also a very practical side to the movement: larger and larger works became harder for artists to create alone, and requests for numerous works in different locations required artists (or their assistants) to be in two places at once. The underlying concepts of these two related, and much debated movements acted together to redefine the role of artist for the twentieth (& now the twenty-first) century; laboring maker became idea generator and designer / director of things - things that could be made by others while maintaining a direct connection with the artist.

The artistic freedoms established by these post-war developments made it possible for Pop artists and performance art to borrow directly from day-to-day life. Conceptualism was allowed to change the artist’s role from the inspired “genius artist” (coined by Clement

---

<sup>3</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on conceptual art” *Artforum*, June 1967, p. 83. Sol LeWitt had “telephoned the directions for one of his wall drawings” to an assistant as early as 1971. Sol LeWitt has been credited with freeing the drawing of its inferior position to painting by creating in 1968 a wall drawing that was the “end result” not just a preparatory sketch for a future painting. Scale that took things to a dynamic monumental scale (basically by creating a really large sheet of paper - a smooth white wall). The movement from small canvas to large canvas to wall also incorporates a move from the world of art to the world of design and the attendant architecture.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hamilton, the Brit credited with the term Pop, a tootsie-pop in a collage, ended up making reproductions of Duchamp’s Large Glass, Urinal and Bicycle wheel/stool usually because the originals had been “lost” - or thrown out by their maker.

<sup>5</sup> Yoko Ono Book “Directions for Paintings” p.1

Greenberg<sup>6</sup>) that Abstract Expressionism was based on to a cultural commentator or a draftsman of ideas. The Color field and Action Painting schools of Abstract Expressionism had paid more attention to the process than the product. Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Robert DeKooning's work had defined the process as the "dance" of the artist while making a painting and discovered the way that an energetic application of paint resulted in moving a viewer's eyes through the *completed* work in a similar way. Conceptualism was more of a "concrete expressionism" of formal and written ideas and appropriated images as art. Pop art was a reversal of process over product, where even the name of Warhol's "Factory" emphasized the product oriented work (where he used the term "unique" to describe different variations in works made using more commercially oriented processes like silkscreen and images of celebrities).

While the earliest roots of "appropriation" can be found in the readymades of Duchamp and the Merzwerk of Kurt Schwitters' collages, some of the most influential artists on contemporary practices were to come a generation later: Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and later Jeff Koons and Richard Prince. This was due to both new commercial processes and by staking ownership of images created by others on altering them (Koons) and not by careful painterly reproduction of observed scenes. The appropriation of other people's photographs by means of the silkscreen or xerox in Warhol's grid paintings and Rauschenberg's collages added momentum to the Pop art practice of including culturally loaded "found" objects in mixed media works (a twist on Schwitters original Merz Werk which used paper and text in a purely formal fashion) and loosened the grip of the "author" over a whole range of objects and symbols-including the copyright.

#### Why Knock-offs?

While there are still many artists (maybe even most artists) that choose to make everything themselves and often employ traditional materials and techniques, this exhibit focuses on the impact of new and old production processes (using assistants and copying other artists in particular) on the "visual value" (as distinct from the cultural or monetary value) of an artwork. This value is the measure of how an artwork functions visually and how important the originality of it is in that regard. This strategy separates the almost automatic regard for monetary value in the commercial arena of art production from formal and conceptual value. Simply stated, if the dizzying optical effects of a Vasarely silkscreen are meticulously reproduced by a photographic means, do they function in the eyes of the audience the same way? How much difference in visual value is there between a set of Bernd and Hilla Becher vintage gelatin silver prints of water towers and an offset print of those same towers? There is unquestionably a difference in the quality of surface, detail in the subtle values of grays and in the blacks, but are those details simply variations that can be used to justify the difference in price between the two versions? Do the artists get the same point across? Is the conceptual focus and visual strategy of this rigorously formatted documentation of the creative architectural variations still the emphasis of the work? For the artists, the answer is yes. The artists decided to create the offset editions and directed the results as far as the (changed) medium would allow. In this way reproduction often points out what the essential qualities of a visual idea are - as separate from the unique artifacts of production. This idea admittedly has its limits; posters, for example, are usually poor substitutes for paintings, architecture and sculpture but it depends on the style and medium of the original work.

The function of the fake or copy as an extension of the sign / signifier theory advanced by Baudrillard is met at street level by Alfredo Conde. He examines the consumer comfort we have with some obvious, often illegal, copies that we see everyday. Conde is exhibiting

---

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg

his latest work and just happens to be working with “Fakes” (actually they are one-of-a-kind, hand made fake fake rolexes, designer sunglasses, cell phones and even the painted Fom-Cor cases they are displayed in). These cases filled with sparkling “gold” and “silver” fit naturally into the subway station sales scenario of illicit, but cheap, knock-offs found all over the world.

By inviting artists to create most of these Knock-offs on site, the curator seeks to illuminate the path of transmission for concepts created by one artist through the mind, eyes and hands of another artist. To achieve this, much of this exhibit looks at a selection of contemporary artists whose studio practice involves using other people in the production of art. As part of this investigation the semantic concepts of “unique”, “original” and “assistant” are called into question. Our goal is to shed some light on the issues that are often kept out of the discussion in the commercial marketplace for fear of eroding the monetary value of works available for sale, no matter how common the practices are for the contemporary artists exhibited.

Even within the Green Street Gallery exhibit the act of “reproduction” generates (at least) three distinct variations of the creative act.

1)The first variation of the creative act may have laid the groundwork for the other two and has been used for centuries: Using studio assistants to create all or part of a work of art. Three of the artists in the exhibit are making a Knock-off of a work by the artist that they were hired to “assist” in creating a large scale artwork for exhibition.

2)The second variation is the use of directions or instructions to build an artwork as a way to separate the conceptual role of the artist as an “aesthetic designer” from the “physical maker” role which allows someone else (anyone?) to create the work of art “by” the artist that thought it up. This is a magnification of the traditional role of a studio assistant that only paints the less important areas while the key areas left to the “master”. To quote Sol LeWitt, “In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work ...the idea becomes a machine that makes the work.”<sup>7</sup>

3)The third variation on this theme of indirect production is the outright forgery: the artistic investigation of the remaining esthetic merit after the idea of “originality” has been subtracted from the equation.

The roles are as follows:

Lana Z Caplan (forger, using Instructions) as	Yoko Ono
Alfredo Conde as (artist dealing with fake as subject matter)	Alfredo Conde
Sheila Gallagher (forger) as	Rob Pruitt
James Hull (both studio-assistant trained,using Instructions) and Denise Kupferschmidt as	Sol LeWitt
Matthew Littell ( UTLIE, Inc.) and Sheila Gallagher (forgers) as	Rachel Whiteread
Juli Raja (artist trained) as	John ArmLeder

<sup>7</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on conceptual art “ *Artforum*, June 1967, p. 83

Kanishka Raja (forger) as

Suzannah Sinclair (artist trained) as

Richard Artschwager

Barry McGee