

*The Parsippany Incident*

Ernst Fischer  
Benjamin Phelan

11/15–12/15, 2013

Opening reception  
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Early last month a RadioShack employee in Parsippany, New Jersey punched a customer in the face because he was "being sarcastic".<sup>[1]</sup> I had a notion that this bit of fin-de-siècle-news would make for a good curatorial opening gambit for Ben and my show. I surmised that the violence had sprung from the puncturing of the retail worker's false sense of self and that it spoke of the state of labor in the age of machines. Sarcasm as the operative rhetoric required to expose the superfluity not only of the worker himself, but of the entire operation he is hired to put a human face on. The Parsippany incident let flicker the hope that all it takes to subvert the smooth running of a formidably calibrated late capitalist machine is to point out its utter inutility.

When I told the story to Ben, he instinctively came to RadioShack's defense. He maintained that RadioShack is instrumental to democratizing electronics and that he likes the fact that he can walk into any of its branches and ask for a specific electronic component, knowing that although the guy behind the counter may have no clue, there is a filing cabinet in the storage area that contains, albeit at shameless prices, every bit needed to build a motion sensor, or a high frequency oscillator, or a bomb.

In some way, the beauty of RadioShack lies precisely in the fact that it has forgotten what it's good for. Improvident to condemn it for its focus on selling mobile talk plans and electronics of bulbous-pink design. Ben felt compelled to also indicate that naturally, tablet computers are primarily successful because they function on the level of finger-painting, and not because they are practical. My pointing towards the inutility of a thing to deflate its value may, if at all, be merely revelatory of my own puritanico-bourgeois set of values.

That said, we both make inappropriate use of machines, that is, we play with them. And we both agree that it is preferable not to break a toy to find out how it works. Better to sustain suspense. Better to try the thing's patience, push its limits, willfully misunderstand what it was built for, as if this human interference might have a kind of psychotropic effect on the apparatus. The resulting art objects are a waste product of this game, like cave paintings record hallucinations. Where that puts us artists, as cybernetic subjects, is hard to pin down.

I would want to invoke Winnicott here and his rethinking of the concept of use.<sup>[2]</sup> He contends that if we can't use an object, that is, cannot be sure if it exists outside our subjectivity and in its own right, then we have no choice but to relate to it. (Relation, thereby, denotes the Cartesian tautology, I equals I.) But use it we must if we are to have a stake in something like a shared reality, and to use it is to profane it. In order for us to trust that it has a life of its own, we are thus reliant on the object surviving our attempts to destroy it.

Ben in turn thinks this brand of animism is dubious. Hallucinations are just the becoming iconic of entopic patterns, the projection of cultural significance onto tricks of the mind. There is no technological sublime, and talk of it smacks of hopelessly romantic surrealism. The art we make benefits not from great claims, Ben might say, but rather from the self-effacing assertion that beyond something that light can bounce off and into our eyes, it may be nothing.

In thinking that Ben is probably right, I feel only a faint sense of loss. "Nothing," to quote uncle Giorgo<sup>[3]</sup>, "is as fragile and precarious as the sphere of pure means". Art these days, like RadioShack, is a sleek apparatus greater than the sum of its parts, a machine from which we are to wrench the possibilities of use it has captured. If ever we approach this task sarcastically, maybe it is in the hope of getting punched.

*Ernst Fischer, 2013*

[1] Hochman, Louis C., "Radio Shack worker punched customer for being sarcastic, Parsippany police say", www.nj.com, October 02, 2013

[2] Winnicott, W.D., "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification", *Playing and Reality*, (UK, Tavistock, 1971)

[3] Agamben, Giorgio, "In Praise of Profanation", *Profanations*, (NY, Zone Books, 2007) p. 87