

MAKE-UP KIT MIGUEL MITLAG'S COSMETIC REALISM

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When the compact is open, the space is divided into two clearly defined sectors. To one side, the unblemished surface of the mirror that reflects the image of the face. To the other, a geometrical palette of strident colors: skin color, nude, that blends into florescent pink, maroon, slightly pink metallic white, silvery sky blue, fuchsia with golden shimmers, electric blue. The grid's vibrant sequence of colors is projected onto the face. The divide between the mirror and the palette is not only spatial, but also temporal. The palette is projected onto the image that the mirror duplicates, indicating its future: the skin tone will cover the blemishes on the surface of the skin to recreate it; the chiaroscuro produced by the scale from florescent pink to maroon will give the eyelids volume. The entire breadth of what is visible in the mirror will be covered with the orchestrated chromatic sequence. Make-up seduces in the Baudrillardian sense of the word: by means of tricks of appearance, artifice, inessentialities, surfaces.

The beginning of Mitlag's make-up-kit scene lies in Richard Prince's Untitled photograph (1982), whose beginning in turn lies in an advertising image. Prince's is an image of an image that he reframed with the celebrated operation of appropriation he used a great deal in the 1980s. The re-photograph shows a hand holding a make-up kit on a dark background. In the mirror are two expressionless eyes with highly stylized black liner; where the rest of the face's skin should be, we see instead the make-up kit's palette of colors. In an article published a few years ago, Miguel Mitlag mentioned this Richard Prince photograph as one of his favorite works of art. He even told the story of a failed attempt to reconstruct that work with a make-up kit bought at a Chinese market. He described his interest in the scene and image: "It speaks of the urban experience of glitter, of glamour, of superficiality, of consumerism, of the night."

More recently, the image of the make-up kit appeared in *Recepción* [Reception, 2010], a photograph in Mitlag's latest exhibition at Braga Menéndez Gallery, entitled *Cómo hacer un experiment* (How to make an experiment, 2010); Cynthia Kampelmacher and Gastón Pérsico contributed to the show. The installation included a replica of Wilhelm Reich's organe accumulator, an artifact of dubious use and function that –according to Reich, an estranged disciple of Freud– increases organic (orgonic) energy, a notion bound to the ideas of vital energy, libidinal flow and cathexis. Like a monolith, this object was surrounded by a series of photographs. Pills, powders, paint cans, pieces of paper, and other things seemed to suggest the

construction of a set through a sequence of images like frames. The narrative of the series was geared towards the construction of a depicted, fictional space, a space of imposture. Imposture associated with the experiment, like the imposture that Wilhelm Reich's artifact was condemned for, ultimately leading to its destruction on a mass scale in the early 1940s.

The experiment that Mitlag produced ensues in the same altered, dysfunction experience of perception. It exceeds the real-fiction dichotomy to interrogate the real of these artifacts, these producers of sensitive environments and designed perception, like that feeling of weightlessness produced by the over-oxygenated air in the hotels of Las Vegas described by Fogwill in *The Sensitive Experience*. Under the effects of LSD, the reference to altered states of consciousness and perception is clear: the compositions seduce, formulate a play of surfaces, an exchange of signs that always evade veracity, depth, structure. Once again, "the urban experience of glitter, of glamour, of superficiality, of consumerism, of the night."

A pseudo-realism. With the glaring exception of *Tv Set* (2010), the emphasis on the unreal, fiction, simulation would not, at first glance, seem to be the distinguishing trait of the series of photographs that illustrates this issue of *OTRA PARTE*. The explanation for the apparent disconnect between the latest production that Mitlag exhibited and the most recent and never displayed images in this series from his archive lies in the textual genres that composes the two sets of images. The images from the archives are [...] sketches, tests, documentation for installation projects, quick notes on the urban and domestic environment. The documentary and "realist" quality of these images (heightened by the absence of color in these black and white versions) seems to separate them from *Cómo hacer un experimento* and other shows after 2003, like *Codex Platino* (2007) and *Holiay!* (2008). But this distance is not be insurmountable. It is not a question, of course, of eking out an essential coherence in Mitlag's operations to ensure an authorial wholeness. It is, rather, a question of understanding how these images are linked to other, less precarious productions. It is a question of understanding how the direct observation of the contemporary urban environment generates this sense of irreality and staging that, in Mitlag's other production, is given free reign, in order to understand how that fictionalization forms part of our experience of the daily. Along these lines, it is interesting to recall Mitlag's own words: "I like to think of a pseudo-realism: the moment when a recognizable element performs a function that is not entirely clear, one that interferes with and disturbs the normal functioning of the whole whose usefulness is skewed by this minor interference. In my work, pseudo-realism is found in the coverings and coatings, in the functional and the dysfunctional, in the utilitarian structures." The pseudo-realism of these everyday images lies in their unstructuredness, in that which coats and covers but bears no functional relationship whatsoever to what is hidden. This is also central in these photographic notes. The scenes in these images include: rolls of carpet leaning against a

wall, wrapping paper scattered on the floor, a towel and a shower curtain hanging from a rod, different color plastic bags, pieces of fabric in a closet, faux-wood synthetic coverings. Objects that cover surfaces, non-functional objects in a soft and accumulative anti-architecture: anonymous, mass-produced, lowly, disposable things from our daily culture. In this sense, these photographic observations also evidence the dysfunctional nature of the common architecture of security booths in improbable shapes, spherical points of purchase like UFOs that have just landed on the moon, and folding screens in an array of styles that remind us that we are still “learning” from Las Vegas. There is something else, a third aspect, to the non-structuredness of this series of images: the collision of heteroclitic objects yielded by daily uses. In their fleeting and nonsensical uses, these clustering tactics undermine the original design of the objects. They appear in the heap of domestic objects in a city courtyard or in the heterogeneous composition of a shapeless percussive instrument. In this pursuit, Mitlag’s work is akin to the sculpture-installations of Diego Bianchi and Leopoldo Estol, which also heed the daily uses of objects.

By means of these works of observation, it is possible to interrogate the origins of certain ideas, procedures and discursive figures in Mitlag’s production. Moreover, though, they act as a proxemic analysis of contemporary urban experience, where proxemics is understood as a theory of the use of space as “specific cultural product.”

Disciplinary ambiguity. In Mitlag’s work, a single operation has many sides: imposture, simulation, covering, coating. Elaborating a scene by stretching over the entire plane of the visible. On the basis of the notion of the set –whether for theater, photography, television or film, all of which are central to Mitlag’s universe due to inclination and training–, his operation evidences the “projection” of the perceptible. It is a question of signaling the fact that, like a diorama, everything we see partakes of artifact, and of covering everything the eye can discern. This logic of the set enables Mitlag to challenge an array of languages, to pivot between different devices and supports, and to keep his production in the impure spaces between disciplines. Mitlag’s work borders on the ambiguity of disciplines in more than one way. If in his early production the documentation of the domestic setting meant different configurations of objects, in later work emphasis was placed on the construction of those configurations. In the end, the stagings of clusters of things gained terrain, fostering the design of installation-sculpture groups like the ones presented in *Codex Platino*. This passage from photography to sculpture indicates interesting oppositions within the essences of disciplines. Photography, as opposed to sculpture, has been considered an art of seeing, of signaling the existent, the Barthesian index as protocol of existence. That definition, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, served to enmesh photography with other artistic practices, both in the era of the readymade and the *objet trouvé* and at the threshold of immaterial and conceptual practices. Mitlag, however, emphasizes the constructed, the planned: the photographic studio is the paradigmatic space of his work. At the same time, his

“sculpture,” which is reminiscent of the “sculptures of consumer goods” of the 1980s (Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and others), places emphasis on existing objects and constructions, like the set of portable radios with outstretched antennae in *Codex Platino* or the roll of red carpet in *Holiay!*

There is still more dispersal of disciplines in the photograph *Tv Set* (2010). As if a stage set, the space opens up to a fourth wall reminiscent of Guillermo Kuitca’s empty theaters from the 1980s. In Mitlag’s work, chairs, glasses, platters and plastic crates compose an environment of disposable, anonymous, mass-produced objects. Something has happened or is about to happen; the hints of a barely suggested narrative make themselves felt. The photograph gives up the purity of the all-encompassing instant to become a frame, an isolated image in a sequence gone astray. Mitlag’s work is explicitly indebted to the act of making the photographic image into a painting or a slide, the resignation of its autonomy in favor of the fragmented status of paradigmatic works by artists like Cindy Sherman and James Coleman. Thus, his work is indisputably scattered amongst disciplines; it addresses the concerns of photography, sculpture, installation, film, television and theater, placing at center stage devices for the construction of reality, the artifacts for the production of sensory environments, of designed perception.