



I had not been planning to write that Olivia Mole’s exhibition at Five Churches is about the police, the state, and therefore the police state. Or at least not in so many words. That I have to write it is something I regret; it would be so much nicer if these things didn’t exist. Let’s back up, then, and start over with an apparently more innocent claim. Olivia Mole’s exhibition is about the fact that we are at once bodies and minds—that we are subjects. (Of course, good art is not really “about” things, but for the sake of getting started let’s allow that fiction.) A subject is a subject for someone else, since a subject needs to be recognized. At the same time, being recognized as what you are is a problem for any subject, given that a subject also needs interiority. Interiority is the sense that who we are and what we want are at least partially withheld from the other’s knowledge. This makes it possible to plan, to deceive, to seduce. So, there is an antagonism built into the structure of subjectivity. The other has to know us, but not too well.

In the exhibition, a set of Mole’s charcoal drawings that hang on a black wall isolate a moment in the Warner Bros. short “Little Red Riding Rabbit,” from 1944. Bugs Bunny confronts the Big Bad Wolf, who is dressed as Grandma. (The real Grandma is “working swing shift at Lockheed” and thus doesn’t appear in the cartoon.) Or rather they confront each other, each screaming “hey you,” each increasingly incensed at having recognized the other. Sparks seem to fly where their fingers touch. Think of Adam’s finger reaching to God’s in the Sistine Chapel, the primal scene of sentience. Across the wall from the drawings is an empty triangular frame. This is a case meant for displaying a folded flag. Since the case is empty, it displays only black flocking. More obtrusively present than either of these elements are a set of three gray inflatable corner sofas that occupy the center of the room and which accordingly disrupt the sightline between the drawings and the flag case. On the floor there is also a light that slowly cycles through a few colors. The three inflatable forms are identical readymades rotated into different positions, producing the effect of oscillation between “the known constant and the experienced variable” that Robert Morris describes in his “Notes on Sculpture” (1966). The most anthropomorphic sofa is upright and leans against a wall.

The classic critique of Minimalism—Michael Fried’s, in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood”—is that its objects are crypto-bodies. But bodies, we know, are also sometimes subjects. Mindedness is the fly in the ointment, not bodiliness per se. Mole’s sofas are versions of the *Untitled (L Beams)* that Morris constructed in 1965. A press release for an exhibition at Sprüth Magers, London, in 2013 rehearses a familiar script for Minimalism: *Untitled (L Beams)* “demands the viewer to set aside their preconceptions, memory and knowledge, and approach the sculpture from a level of basic perception in order to grasp the reality of the experience.”¹ It would indeed be remarkable if an artwork were to induce its viewers to set aside their preconceptions, memory and knowledge. This would amount to a radical undoing of personhood. We would then be subjectivized, literally, by the artwork rather than by other people and the whole of our preceding existence: a fantasy of art’s direct, godlike efficacy that doesn’t really withstand scrutiny, dear as it may be to writers of wall labels. One’s sense that art does and undoes something on a primordial level corresponds to a sense (which I share) that art can, under certain circumstances, matter profoundly; this is also, however, the ur-fantasy of the most questionable sort of aesthetic politics (or rather, the substitution of aesthetics for politics). And there is an authoritarian dimension to such politics insofar as an artwork’s “demand” is a demand.

Bracketing for the moment the colored lights, *Fighting Words* consists of three basic elements that stage a surprisingly complex scenario. Three terms are the minimum for a dialectic or a conspiracy; two people can have a relationship, but three is melodrama. The drawings illustrate recognition as a kind of outing that precipitates violent competition. Bugs and the Wolf are mirrors even as each tries to be the other’s bigger Other. What happens when this mirroring (mis)recognition spirals out of control? Well, eventually, you encounter an Other so big that any mutuality, any mirroring, ceases to be possible. You can call that biggest other God, or God’s placeholder, the State.

¹ <https://spruethmagers.com/exhibitions/robert-morris-hanging-soft-and-standing-hard-london/>.



Which brings us back to the flag or rather its absence. The empty frame is not facialized. It doesn't look back at us. It does, though, punctuate the wall, functioning both as figure (form against background) as well as figureless hole. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the face as a “white wall/black hole system”: “Significance [sic] is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies. Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges consciousness, passion, and redundancies.”² A face makes claims. Its “redundancies” are part of the general surplus of signifiers over communicational meaning that bludgeons people into accepting a given (social, political, aesthetic) order simply because it repeats itself. Deleuze and Guattari want to say that the face exerts despotic power as an “abstract machine.”

An empty black triangle makes no such claims, or more precisely, voids the claims of the flag that ought to be there. A flag is a face for a nation; not coincidentally, anarchists fly black flags. (The technical term for the trope of facializing an abstraction, such as national identity, is *prosopopoeia*.) But there is a minimal dialogue here nonetheless. The black flocking mirrors the black wall across the room, absorbing into itself the potentiality of all color, as in the colors of the switching lights. The sofas are gray, midway between black and white. The Morris L Beams are gray, too. The black triangle—so poor in form, so rich in art historical associations (Malevich, Blinky Palermo)—swallows the disaster of identity. The empty flag arguably signals a death of the subject in the super-subject: the State as endpoint of the logic of recognition.

If there is an antagonism built into subjectivity in general, there is also a more specific antagonism built into identities that the State ratifies. The State interpellates or “hails” us, as Louis Althusser puts it. But the State as such lacks a face; it issues a call to which no one can respond intersubjectively. Althusser names the call “ideology.” The police are a material apparatus of interpellation, meaning that the police are, in a strict and not inherently pejorative sense, something other than human—something other than subjects to whom we can relate as equals. Police, like flags, are a *prosopopoeia*. Althusser stresses the physicality of interpellation:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else).³

Note Althusser's insistence on the “one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion,” a scenario that he curiously reiterates (redundantly) just a paragraph later:

²Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167, emphasis in the original.

³Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118, emphasis in the original.



There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there!’ One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing.⁴

The “really” in “it really is he” is a lure. A subject becomes the “right” subject (becomes a subject at all) by responding to the hail, not thanks to any preexisting true identity. Subjecthood is turtles (misrecognition) all the way down. But why does the hailing have to come from behind? Because interpellation is not intersubjectivity. Ideology does not speak to us face to face, person to person. Ideology creeps up on us and then, when we respond to its call, catches us in its grip. Whether there is anything necessarily cognitive about this process at all is worth asking. Althusser might as well be talking about any state-sanctioned abduction and thus about bodily rather than “merely” ideological violence. The word ideology seems to imply discursive, immaterial, somehow softer coercion—though part of the point of Althusser’s argument is to show that the “ideological state apparatus” and the “repressive state apparatus” operate in tandem. This is the way in which journalism, for instance, is usually an arm of the police. The only winning move is not to play.

Now, look at the Morris *L Beams*, or for that matter, at Mole’s sofas. An identical form rotates in space. Since three dimensions are involved here rather than only two, the “physical conversion” may not add up to exactly one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees. The sofas, though, are already caught between, and block, another specular relay, that between the flag case and the wall of drawings. It is not clear that the sofas orient themselves towards one side or another (or towards the room’s sole window). If we take seriously the notion that Minimalist objects are crypto-bodies, then we also have to say that these objects/bodies are caught on the threshold of subjectivity. These are bodies missing their appointment with mindedness. It’s furthermore tempting to say that their just being there, together, and not exactly responding to the call is already a form of resistance. A lot of politics or at least political theory over the past couple decades has jumped to that conclusion: assembly is its own end. This was the logic of occupying city squares and refusing to issue demands. But as Marina Vishmidt reminds us, the language of “bodies in space” valorizes a “pseudo-concreteness that often accompanies theoretical projects intolerant of the (real) abstraction that organizes contemporary social life.”⁵ That is, the rhetoric of bodiliness-as-plenitude-and-resistance pretends that bodies aren’t already saturated with the violence of the social order. Bodies are products rather than substrates. This is another reason why the Minimalist blank slate is a utopian fantasy. “Body” is a way not to say “person” or “subject”; the whole difficulty, though, is that people are both.

In his book *Heretics of Dune*, Frank Herbert casually introduces something called a chairdog. Chairdogs are large genetically engineered dogs that instinctively shape themselves into ergonomic chairs when sat upon. They also vibrate, like those massage chairs that are (or used to be) common at malls. They have no role in the novel’s plot; it seems that Herbert just came up with the idea and thought it was cool. Halfway between sentience and furniture, a chairdog is Michael Fried’s nightmare. The fact that you can sit on one of Mole’s sofas ought to give you pause.

– Daniel Spaulding

⁴Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118, emphasis in the original.

⁵Vishmidt, “Bodies in Space: On the Ends of Vulnerability,” *Radical Philosophy* 208 (Autumn 2020), 34.



Olivia Mole is an artist based in Los Angeles who works across disciplines including installation, video, performance, drawing and animation. She examines the ways in which popular culture serves historical and contemporary ideologies and explores ways in which those ideologies can become unfixed, politically and personally.

She has participated in exhibitions, screenings, and performances at the Hammer Museum, 2220 Arts, Leroy's Happy Place, Gattopardo LA, Tiffany's, Weirdo Night, MOCA, LAXART, Human Resources Los Angeles, JOAN Los Angeles, Los Angeles Contemporary Archive, The Wattis Institute, Southern Exposure and Cloaca Projects, San Francisco, among others. She teaches video and time-based experimentation, audio and video production, and experimental studio practices at UC Riverside.