

How Capitalism Functions: Carol Szymanski at Guided by Invoices

By David Carrier

Carol Szymanski: *Pissin' Against the Wind, or, Sketches of the Mental Dream on the Dead Banker* at Guided by Invoices

April 26 to May 26, 2012



HIM, 2008-2012. Brass and copper, 48 x 11 x 24

On December 12, 2008 in her ongoing emailed text piece, “Cockshut Dummy,” Carol Szymanski quoted one of her French banker colleagues as saying “in this climate don’t go pissing against the wind.” This man added, “That’s not an easy one for a girl to understand.” Szymanski admitted, “they had me on that one.” Then, she added, “I said, ‘Oh yea now I get it.’” That conversation gave her part of the title for this exhibition. A visual artist who deals with the literal meanings of language, Szymanski originally was concerned with the smallest units of linguistic meaning. Her charcoal drawings from 1996 contain variations on the word “stand.” And the three brass horns in *Him* (2001-12) form the shape of that word. More recently, she has expanded her concern to larger units of language, to texts. To understand and describe a way of life, you must understand how people compose their sentences. And because she is interested, specifically in how bankers present themselves, she became a political artist.

When Szymanski started exhibiting, in the late 1980s, Marxist-based art criticism was all the rage. The only legitimate goal of art, so we were told endlessly, was to critique the social order. But since the galleries and the artists who exhibit in

them are a very peripheral part of that system, it was always superabundantly obvious that studying art galleries is not the best way to teach you how capitalism functions. To learn that, you need to enter the financial world, which is what Szymanski did. When she became an upscale banker in London, she wrote about that experience, sending to a few lucky friends a series of texts and images (mostly taken with the camera of her mobile phone), which was transmitted by e-mail every evening at the end of her working day. Walking in The City, London's equivalent of Wall Street Szymanski noticed the *Evening Standard* form of advertisements, which had catchy and ironic phrases on them to get people to buy the newspaper. "I always enjoyed reading these placardsThey were an odd form of poetry for me." Hence the origin of the name "Cockshut Dummy": "for the word *Evening*, I chose cockshut which means evening twilight and dummy for the word *Standard*."

Szymanski's *We Want We Said Wanted More* (2010-2012), taken from "Cockshut Dummy," includes many fragments of conversations from her banker-colleagues. (No image accompanies this text.) Like the words in Stephen Mallarmé's prose poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard" ("A throw of the dice will never abolish chance") or in Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974), with its juxtaposition of quotations from Hegel and Jean Genet, hers are not easy to decipher. Szymanski's banker's world is opaque to us art writers as, no doubt, our concerns are to them. If you want an account in plain English of what bankers are doing, then you should read *The Nation*. *We Want We Said Wanted More* is a work of art, which is to say that its relationship to the economic and political history it draws upon is elliptical, subtle and indirect. To fully comprehend Szymanski's achievement, you need to read and view "Cockshut Dummy." Soon that cumulative work of art will be completed and published, and so that will be possible. Meanwhile, this marvelously suggestive mini-retrospective, which speaks in deeply original terms to our present aesthetic and political concerns provides a good introduction to the ambitious *oeuvre* of a great mid-career artist, whose art deserves (and soon will surely receive) close sustained discussion.