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ENCLAVE REVIEW

Catherine Harty: *600 a Month Max.*
Tom Barry's, Cork

Ed Krčma

Here is a typically brazen story that Slavoj Žižek tells to illustrate the system of tacit laws that regulate our symbolic order:

'In academia, a polite way to say that we found our colleague's intervention or talk stupid and boring is to say: 'It was interesting.' So if instead we tell our colleague openly: 'It was boring and stupid', he will be fully entitled to feel surprised and to ask: 'But if you found it boring and stupid, why didn't you simply say that it was interesting?' The unfortunate colleague is right to take the direct statement as involving something more, not only a comment about the quality of his paper but an attack on his very person.' (Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 2006)

With a series of 14 photographs entitled *600 a Month Max.* (2010), on show at Tom Barry's till the autumn, Catherine Harty gives visibility to the unspoken hostility that greets potential tenants of low-cost housing in Cork City. The works are made using a basic digital camera to photograph a computer screen onto which some unusually dismal pictures have been downloaded from a well-known property website. It is not just that these low-end flats and bedsits are unappealing; it is the frank declaration of the *zero* effort that has been taken to render them even minimally attractive. Their casual and blatant ugliness speaks very clearly of an utter disregard for the aspirations and subjective life of the potential tenant.

One image of a shadowy bedroom, taken from outside in a dingy corridor, would easily stand in as a convincing crime scene photograph. In another, a stained mattress neighboured by a wretched little pine table and set against a blank grey wall seems destined to become the dreary arena in which the endgame of some deep depression will soon be played out. Or again, in another image, we are presented with a pair of orange armchairs, brighter this time and actually arranged as if to be viewed; they do not retain this veneer for long, though, as we soon notice how the photographer has neglected the low sloping ceiling that would painfully cramp the space that one's head would occupy if we were to sit down. Sometimes such neglect is signalled by a particular incongruous detail: the absurd dangle of the unplugged chord of a kettle; or the faintly obscene way the empty fridge door has been left hanging open; or an empty, unlabelled green plastic bottle that has been left behind to proudly rule the kitchen work surface, competing only with the raw white glare of the camera's flash reflected back from the ceramic tiles behind. Harty writes of the deep sense of 'hopelessness and despair' that attended her trawl through these dismal living options, and this, we imagine, might be no exaggeration. Especially in a visual culture so saturated by endlessly airbrushed and eroticized advertisements, these photographs constitute veritable emblems of cold disregard, symptoms of a complete withdrawal of care.

Why is it important that Harty's photographs are not simply prints of JPEGs downloaded from the Internet? What is the effect of the mechanical interference of her camera, which has evidently struggled to focus properly on these images on screen? What additional meanings are produced by the contingent distortions, striations and other pixellated variations that result? For me, these chance effects suggest the affective background against which the everyday reception of such images takes place. Computers do not process meanings, but rather code; they do not get upset by hostile moves made within our specifically human symbolic structures. By contrast, a person looking for a place to live attends to and invests in such photographs: they are visions of a potential home, and they need to sustain, on some level, the projections that will attend this idea. The sophistication and success of Harty's series has, then, partly to do with the way in which this affective dimension has been registered: as a friction, disturbance, or distortion on the surface of the image itself. The camera's blind, automatic struggle to capture the image from the screen can be allowed to signal something of the flathunter's stung incomprehension at having this indifference served up with such excessive bluntness.

Harty's series concisely figures a harsh knotting together of point-and-shoot photography, economic

division, the Irish property market, and a subjective world of aspirations and vulnerability. In terms of artistic strategy, her project makes sense within a trajectory of conceptual practices directed towards the critique of institutions and ideologies: Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966-7), Hans Haacke's: *Shapolsky et. al.* (1971), or Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-5), to name three crucial precedents. The artist selects, appropriates and re-contextualizes in order to produce new meanings from existing material. In large part, such gambits succeed insofar as the logic and effects of specific systems (economic, architectural, semiotic, aesthetic, etc.) are given new visibility. The apparently blank, anonymous or deadpan presentational mode is one way to reserve a space for both fascination and indignance, whilst avoiding the (innumerable) traps of rhetorical cliché and righteous posturing.

Much recent (and, indeed, not so recent) theorising about art has championed its potential to perform assaults upon the smooth functioning of dominant symbolic systems; art can interrupt the seamless surfaces of a reified world and render its familiar objects strange again. This programme becomes particularly resonant when, as here, the disturbance of art's formal, semiotic and aesthetic conventions is united with a registration of the cold negligence with which basic social bonds are cut by the continuing proliferation of the currently dominant economic system.

Ed Krčma is Lecturer in History of Art at University College Cork. *Catherine Harty: 600 a Month Max.* is on view till the autumn.

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Catherine Harty: *600 a Month Max.* (2010).
Digital photographs on transparencies, each 29.7 x 21cm. Courtesy of the artist.