

cold comfort

An installation by Constance Bacon and Karen Reimer*

Borrowed Clothes Never Fit

by Anthony Elms

*A true culture manifests itself in
fresh color, white linen and clean art.*

—Le Corbusier

These days telling trash from treasure is a science. Punk fashion, slacker sleek, and heroin chic have opened a slippery border between dressed up and poorly dressed. Mismatched seams, frayed ends, excessive wrinkles, ill fits and fabric just a bit too short are just as likely to be found at Barney's as at Unique Thrift. In fact your only clue as to class or crass may be the athletic shape of the body contained. Fashion doesn't labor, fashion works for you, but only if you're working it.

Strict fashion etiquette declares that when formality is required only a white shirt will do. That white conveys a sense of cleanliness, purity, crispness, and above all else, class. Likewise, in architecture white walls have been instrumental in the movement to make surface and structure fuse into one athletically sleek machine for living: to resist all that is tainted by the ornamental fluctuations of feminine fashions. People of good standing would never be seen in whites that are anything but crisp. Faded blue jeans are one thing, dirty whites another; you cannot hide the ketchup stain that resists all the intentions of bleach. In modernist architecture's desire for the sterile sheen of the eternally new, if there is anything more amoral than ornament it is the ravages of wear and tear.

According to J. G. Ballard fashion is "a recognition that nature has endowed us with one skin too few, and that a fully sentient being should wear its nervous system externally." It's about time the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) became fully sentient and admitted a desire to be a modern gallery through the white cloth of Cold Comfort. But what kind of gallery has surfaced? Yes it now has all markers of the classic white

cube of modernism: white walls, uniformity of design, right angles and a repression of ornament; but something is lacking.

Artworks, like all objects, create their institutional spaces. One look at a work and we envision it in a sphere or context that on occasion is architectural as well as philosophical. Does it belong in the Louvre, or the thrift store? Would it make waves at Sotheby's, or vanish on E-bay, or perhaps even more to the point, would you hang it over your own couch? As art viewers we have become accustomed to assuming a white cube when we look at the work of art. Cold Comfort physically defines the institutional space of the artwork at the same time it fails our expectations for that idealized space. Through the manifestation of this institutional space we catch a glimpse, like the hint of skin under a shirt, of all that is removed from this social sphere.

While other buildings use moldings and ornaments to hide their ungainly bulges and roundness, the white cube is sleek, chiseled and open—all the better to display its buff, shapely figure. The white cube as a space for art gained prominence in America before being exported to Europe as an alternative to cultural palaces. But even Le Corbusier, a major proponent of the white wall, found in America's lack of polychromatic architecture a disturbingly potent Protestantism fearful of sensuality and other libidinous desires. In his book *When the Cathedrals Were White: A Journey to the Country of Timid People* he deplores Broadway, even the burlesque shows, for lacking in emotional charge. As much as he respected our new cities and crisp white shirts, Le Corbusier found us stifling many necessary urges under our white cloth.

Given the cloth, the gallery, the whiteness—temptation calls the easy reference to the Emperor's New Clothes—and it would work if everything weren't so secondhand: used tablecloths, bed sheets, shirts, blouses, skirts, and the ill-fitting gallery. In the current HPAC surfaces have been whitewashed and half-walls added to carve out a space for the display of objects, but try as hard as we might, we can never ignore the dilapidated

ballroom. The floral plaster ornament and windows are always peeking down from behind the nice drywall; the impossibly high vaulted ceiling calling our attention skyward and occasionally falling into our arms. Those of us who have known and loved the HPAC for years must reluctantly admit that looking at the art in this space is like ignoring your uncle's comb-over, or your grandmother's penciled-in, perfectly arched eyebrows. Giorgio Armani by way of Minnie Pearl.

To quote J.G. Ballard again: "modernism is the gothic of the information age," which makes Cold Comfort the monster of Frankenstein, desperately trying to overcome its origin, stifling crude urges in an attempt to fit smoothly with the refined folk. "Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding" the monster cried in exasperation. But Frankenstein's monster never successfully integrated into Victorian society, dying in the arctic landscape instead of finding creature comforts, cold or not.

Curiously, draping a white cube within the architectural space of the HPAC does not reverse, or undermine what was already there, but rather heightens our memory of the architectural peculiarities we have often ignored. The HPAC, while extravagant by our usual ornamental expectations of a gallery, is quite mundane by ballroom standards; this is not, nor ever has been, the Roxbury. So while Cold Comfort and the HPAC start from opposite ends of the architectural spectrum—

Cold Comfort in the austere minimalism of the white cube, the HPAC in the opulent Victorian detailing of the ballroom—they end up accomplishing the same effect of architectural misfit. Somewhere in the ever-so-crucial two feet separating the surfaces of Cold Comfort and the HPAC is the perfect white cube gallery that neither can obtain due to flawed pedigree.

The repressed can never truly be hidden, and the floral ornament and patchwork construction of the gallery place are unleashed with a vengeance from the psyche of the fabric. Frayed ends, piecemeal patterning and lace reminders of barricaded windows command your attention. This bride may be wearing white but the guests are mumbling behind her back. The closer in form the HPAC gets to its aspired being, the more humbled and defeated the attempt becomes.

Our choice of fashions, be they in fabric or in architecture, clearly display for others our aspirations and status in society. The white cloth seams together a philosophical, as well as a physical, skin within the gallery. Our language, and thought, is meaningless without architectural metaphor: we continually build up confidence, knock down pretensions, reinforce beliefs, and concretize ideas. Language and architecture fuse in even our most basic understandings of the world. The existence of space, and our ability to physically demarcate this space, guarantees there is always room for the other—on the outside. The HPAC and Cold Comfort were made for each other, which is not to say they are a perfect pair: it may take two to tango, but these dancers are going home with broken toes.

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Liv Aanrud, Sally Alatalo, Louise Baker, Judith Brotman, Bradley Burke, David Driscoll, Craig Dumar, Anthony Elms, Ben Foch, Vanessa Hagerbaumer, Dennis Hodges, Dustin Larson, Daniëlle Lutz, Bob Peters, Gladys Reimer, Scott Shallenbager, Joel Score, Chuck Thurow, Julie Vari, Michael Vari, Steve Wetzel, and the Hyde Park Mini Mart.

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Tango Dancers from Academy V of Music and Dance performing August 26 include: Valentina Cisar, John Bayman, Erica Sutton, Douglas Rivera, Louise Kwaan, Kuni Ishibashi

Experimental musical ensemble Pillow will perform on October 5 at 8:30 pm.

dry ice and reeds Michael Colligan
bass Liz Payne
guitar Ben Vida
cello Fred Lonberg-Holm

* Constance Bacon appears courtesy of IDAO Gallery; Karen Reimer appears courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery.