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Roula Partheniou and the Art of the Double Take



Roula Partheniou, *Dopplekopf*, 2013. Acrylic on wood, altered found objects, double-sided mirror and vitrines, dimensions variable. Commissioned by Sheridan College, Trafalgar Campus. Courtesy MKG127. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied.

by **Shannon Anderson**

Roula Partheniou's studio is a standard-issue white cube, organized to a degree that seems in keeping with her practice: a white desk, simple shelving and a gathering of many of the same items that have appeared in her past work, including Post-it notes, erasers, clipboards and tape. Various images and to-do lists are neatly

arranged on the walls. I had two studio visits with her, a couple of months apart. My first visit met with few surprises: we connected one evening and chatted about her various current projects and her practice in general. When I walked into her now-familiar studio for a follow-up visit a short time later, I was about to sit down when I did a double take. The desk, shelving and notes were not where I remembered them. I recalled the entire arrangement on the north-facing wall, and now it lived on the south-facing wall. I asked Partheniou, not altogether sure if my memory had done some kind of strange flip. She assured me that she had indeed reconfigured her studio—on practical grounds, not artistic. But I felt I had walked into a performance, so perfectly did the experience reflect her interest in mirroring and confusing the everyday. In processing the slight but disorienting shift, it was as though I was already seeing the world through her eyes.

Partheniou's practice often engages in the art of the double take. She takes the familiar and tweaks how our brains make sense of it. Usually, she turns to the most everyday of materials, objects so ubiquitous that we stop really "seeing" them—and that very quality makes them perfect players for her subtle interventions. In Partheniou's own words, her practice is about "finding a material and reacting to it." At the foundation of her work lies an interest in honing in on a quintessential property of a material, conceptually manipulating that property and seeing what happens. Optical illusion, games of perspective and associative play are all involved. Toying with the notion of the replica is also part of her territory: tennis balls, electrical tape, paint rollers, sponges and candy wrappers have each taken a turn as subjects. She likes to keep viewers on their toes, inviting them to pay attention to the plethora of objects that are scattered around their daily environment. I can't think of any object she has replicated that I couldn't track down in my own house.

In Partheniou's past gallery exhibitions—"Never Odd or Even" (2010) or "Parts and Wholes" (2013), both at her Toronto gallery MKG127—numerous objects and configurations are thoughtfully arranged on the floor, walls or makeshift tables and plinths. Each object necessitates close examination to determine the real versus the replicated, the physically present versus the illusion and the methods of its making. And once a viewer gets accustomed to this heightened way of looking, everything starts getting called into question. Partheniou recalls getting emails during the run of "Parts and Wholes" from visitors who were "confounded by the eavestrough." The object in question was one from a small arrangement titled Proposals for Monuments (2013), Partheniou's series based on maquettes for public monuments that are all bound to fail because each one relies on a particular material choice or perspective inherent to its existing scale; an effect that would completely fall apart at the scale of a monument. The series is, in part, a nod to Claes Oldenburg's late-1960s series Proposed Colossal Monuments. The small section of curved eavestrough that was positioned on a table among a handful of other proposed objects raised much interest because of people's fascination with how Partheniou could have fabricated it so perfectly. They were stumped by its amazing precision, and wanted to know how she was able to get those seams just so. But the eavestrough was simply a readymade that Partheniou had partially repainted. She hasn't shied away from such incorporations of readymade objects in the past, but viewers had gotten so used to the artist's crafty replicas that they got lost in the exacting nature of the eavestrough's curve and were able to observe it as pure sculpture. And that is precisely what Partheniou aims to achieve in her practice.

Two directions seem to be shaping her work of late: a minimalist paring-down of her objects and public installations that make use of what the artist terms a "doubled double take." In the first, her objects are less

about replication than they are about identifying them with as few visual cues as possible. The goal of this reductive approach is to have the viewer make a link to the original object through the barest of means: a wooden rectangle of a particular size painted in particular shades of green and yellow is unmistakably a scrub sponge. Along with this are objects that move away from replications to explore simple visual trickery. In *Part and Partial* (2013), for instance, two white cubes are presented side by side, each with a single corner painted black—or so it seems. The slight difference is that one cube's corner is painted, but the other cube's corner has been sliced off and the cut edge is painted black. At a certain angle, though, both appear to be identical. Often, these different tracks in her work blend into each other: a sculpture may be based on a particular found object, but her focus isn't in replicating the object so much as exploring some aspect of visual trickery.

Partheniou's "doubled double takes" are not unlike the north/south switch of her studio layout: two viewing situations that mimic each other to a certain degree, but with subtle differences that lead to careful study and comparison. Usually, however, these happen in side-by-side viewing situations. In *Dopplekopf* (2013), her most recent spin on the "doubled double take," installed at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, the work is situated in the far corner of the school's group-study room, a bustling hub filled with student chatter and keyboard clicking. The discreet installation lies in a far corner, consisting of a set of paired repurposed vitrines, each holding an assortment of office supplies: glue sticks, envelopes, index cards, paper clips, binders and the like. The collection is neatly arranged inside the vitrines—twice. In the first vitrine, the articles look like a selection of found items from the local bookstore, but close inspection reveals that they are, for the most part, replicas—sculptures crafted from her go-to materials of medium-density fibreboard, wood and acrylic paint. A near-identical configuration appears in the adjoining vitrine, with precisely the same size and number of objects, but as a mirrored arrangement replicated in greyscale. Between the two vitrines is a sheet of double-sided mirror, offering a confusing in-between space that invites the viewer to constantly shuffle between both displays in the game of ascertaining each object's companion and the play between them. What a reproduction of *Dopplekopf* won't show is that the viewing experience increases in complexity after you parse what the artist has done—it's really all quite logical and Partheniou lets you follow the cues to work it out with relative ease. But there's an unnerving hamster-wheel feeling that ensues as the space between what your mind knows and what your eye sees is ceaselessly confused and reconciled.

Five O'Clock Shadow (2012), an installation made for Convenience Gallery, is another instance of these. The gallery—in a former corner-store window—has a large seam running down the glass front that Partheniou employed as a structural device for her doubled viewing situation. As with *Dopplekopf*, the object selection was site-specific. Given the makeshift nature of the space, located on a corner next to a bus stop on Lansdowne Avenue in Toronto, Partheniou created a tableau of sorts that suggested a space in transition: a propped-up broom, a cardboard box, a cinderblock, some balls of various shapes, a couple of books. An initial impression suggests a random scattering of stuff, but the doubling of the arrangement signals that something deliberate is at work, opening an entry point for reading the installation.

On the surface, these doubled double takes relate to visual games like "before and after" or "spot the difference," but here the process of playing the game is a thought-provoking venture that reveals the viewer's perceptual biases and limitations. As public projects, both *Dopplekopf* and *Five O'Clock Shadow* balance a

response to their environs with the artist's interest in replicas, perceptual play and association. They insert themselves seamlessly into her practice, despite the quite different demands that a public work requires. It's not surprising then that Partheniou was also recently invited to propose a public installation.

On my second visit to Partheniou's studio, it wasn't only the furniture that had been flipped around. A new arrangement of images occupied the wall, many of which related to the public proposal. She's on a shortlist to create a piece for the lobby of a Toronto office building. The project is on an unprecedented scale for her, but the concept she's developing feels like a perfectly natural progression of her work. Consisting of two walls of forms on opposite sides of the lobby (fitting neatly into her oeuvre of doubled arrangements) she is working with large-scale objects of the kind that derive from *Part and Partial*: geometric black-and-white shapes that play with positive and negative space and that require plenty of viewer engagement to dissect. Partheniou is mulling over how best to communicate the concept, acknowledging the limitations of artist renderings and verbal descriptions when it comes to making experiential work. The scale is not without its challenges, but unlike the earlier *Proposals for Monuments*, this proposal finds a way of translating the qualities of her small sculptures into a large-scale environment. Partheniou is game for trying out strategies in new situations and working with the possibilities and limitations of a particular site. As she says, "Problems are good."

Partheniou may be something of a trickster in her work, but as a person she is generous, soft-spoken and forthright. This is reflected in the way that her sculptures, using an accessible common language of everyday objects, are considerate of a viewer's experience. Partheniou's work also has a lighthearted aspect. Part of its accessibility lies in humour. She has painted a basketball to look like a beach ball for a recent exhibition at the Museums of Bat Yam, Israel. And for a show at the Blackwood Gallery in Mississauga, she made a replica of a banana peel out of polymer clay and placed it on the floor (a janitor almost threw it out by mistake, thinking it was, well, a banana peel).

That said, Partheniou is highly aware of where her practice is situated in the history of art, and her work often makes reference to those figures. The Cheezies in *Five O'Clock Shadow* are a nod to Liz Magor , whose sculptural practice often involves a subtle balance of replicas and found objects, including a pile of Cheezies in a piece called Chee-to (2000). And it's hard to see Partheniou's Fluorescent Tube (2013), a lightbox installed above the window of MKG127, and not think of Dan Flavin . Sol LeWitt , Claes Oldenburg , Donald Judd and Richard Artschwager are a handful of the other artists she has referenced in the past. The conceptual writer Kenneth Goldsmith —another figure referenced in her work—once wrote, "I want to live in a world where a fluorescent tube leaned up against a wall is worth a million dollars. Or where a plumbing fixture on a pedestal is considered the most important artwork of the century."

Partheniou likewise embraces that trajectory, putting a spotlight on the everyday, and asking us to look again, look closer and be confounded.

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