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Valerie Snobeck
by Joe Fyfe

I first came across Valerie Snobeck's work in her first New York solo exhibition at Renwick Gallery in 2010, where she had assembled partially scraped mirrors, peeled sheets of plastic with remains of photographic material, intersecting glass sheets and angled wooden footings. The individual objects seemed to be mixtures of pictorial tropes, containing subtractions as much as accumulations of imagistic information. *Lapse, Delay, Synch*; *Static Movement*; and *Replication* were some of the titles, which underlined the hesitant switchbacks of presentation and duplication that her works transmitted. They also revealed a mind making particular associations, some of which seemed to revolve around questions of what constitutes a picture, a photograph, a sculptural event; how a situation is framed, placed, and presented (that old minimalist preoccupation). And yet, there was also a lot of indecipherable content. I didn't know what was going on but could feel that here was an unusual intelligence constructing situations—perhaps deliberately obscure but simultaneously vivid, and almost hallucinatory.

I became more familiar with Snobeck as an artist when we exchanged studio visits not long after this first encounter. In her studio I saw wall constructions made from peeled photographs, black construction netting, and clunky metal hardware forming a kind of

BILL'S FLOWER, 2013, debris netting, partially removed mirrors, peeled print and linen on plastic, door barricade brackets, wood, hardware, permanent marker, each 96 × 72 × 2 inches. [Image Identifier: 412-DA-2093 Sunflower. Documerica Photographer: Bill Reaves.] Images courtesy of the artist.

Exhibition view of GRAND BEAUTY SALON, 2013, at ESSEX STREET, New York.

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sequenced picture-ness. Later exposure continued to seduce me, both in New York and during a visit to Le Consortium in Dijon while I was traveling through France. There I saw the installation *Tool Construct*, the most dominant element of which was a semi-transparent partition covered in blonde construction netting. The surrounding walls were hung with Snobeck's now-familiar "picture objects," but these were also covered with the same netting. One or two transparent plastic peels were draped over the partition and an aspic-colored Depression-era glass pitcher stood mid-room on the floor. Soon after *Grand Beauty Salon*, Snobeck's gallery exhibition at ESSEX STREET in 2012 was a kind of space poem, made from sequentially situated objects and images that utilized aspects of the surrounding neighborhood in order to annex them to the exhibition. Snobeck continues to surprise. She has a rapidly evolving artistic viewpoint of notable complexity and originality and I have been curious to explore it further. I get that chance here.

— JOE FYFE

GRAND BEAUTY SALON, 2013, peeled print on plastic, each 45 × 32 inches. [Image source: Originally posted to Flickr as "Kiss" by Pedro Ribeiro Simoes.]

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JOE FYFE: We're recording. You better move in, you don't talk so loud. So—Happy Birthday!

VALERIE SNOBECK: Thank you.

JF: What are you going to do?

VS: I haven't decided which museum I might go to.

JF: You go to a museum for your birthday?

VS: Yeah, I might go to the Met.

JF: Actually, one of my questions was about your relationship to—, let's just call it "museum-type art."

VS: What is museum-type art? I would say I have an interest in the ways in which museums are constructed.

JF: Museum-type art, I would say, has an agenda that foregrounds connoisseurship, which is something that can be oppressive—unless you have your own agenda for being in a museum. But if you go to the Metropolitan Museum, what do you anticipate looking at? Or is it more like wandering until something strikes you? Do you have favorite places?

VS: I'm going to look at examples of glass conservation for the edition I'm working on with the SculptureCenter. In grad school we were asked to go to the Art Institute of Chicago and pick something that was conceptually farthest away from our work and then something that was aesthetically farthest away. We were also asked to go to Marshall Field's department store, and choose something in there that was like a classmate's work. It could be a display or the ambiance within it. It could be a movement or shadows that were happening. This sort of comparison made it so that viewing in a museum is not necessarily different from viewing anywhere else, but it is still a construct.

JF: In the Vilém Flusser book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, he describes how we visually scan the photograph. I was thinking about your work in that context and of exhibition spaces as white cubes, an idea that goes back to Brian O'Doherty. But I always thought that an exhibition space kind of takes a photograph of its contents. There's the etymology of camera meaning "room." With your work, particularly with *Grand Beauty Salon*, I saw the gallery space as a photograph the way Flusser talks about it—you were manipulating the way that one's gaze scans within that space. It sounds like your experiences in graduate school with the museum and Marshall Field's also had to do with these spaces being photographs or picture objects that you scan by your physical presence.

VS: I don't read Flusser very literally. I never thought of a whole space as a flattened photograph. Scanning happens at different levels, depending on awareness and engagement at the level of construct.

JF: I don't mean the space is a flattened photograph.

VS: What do you mean, then?

JF: I mean it in the way Flusser writes about the process of scanning a photograph. In your installations, the viewer is scanning the space in steps, having to traverse it, as if scanning a picture, an image, while being conscious of the gallery space as a frame. With *Grand Beauty Salon*, it's almost as if the image was across the street and the exhibition in the gallery was going on behind the picture. Or another way of saying it might be that the gallery space was like a magnet, assembling the image by pulling certain elements in from the outside (in this case, using aspects of the business across the street as metaphor) through an artistic filter of some sort. It was like literalizing what art does, what galleries do.

VS: That's an interesting way to word it. I can see where you're coming from. I guess I was doing something similar, in the sense that I was trying to open the exhibition outward. I was also trying to focus closer and show what the peels attached to the gallery walls are, and to further expose the process of the peel—like inside *and* outside.

JF: In French, the skin of the picture is *peau*. Is there a cross between skin and peel here?

VS: It is like skin in a way. When you laminate an image, through heat and vacuum pressure, the top layer of ink is absorbed into the plastic surface that is intended to protect the image. When I peel away the plastic, the ink comes with it. I then apply another sheet of plastic and do the process over again, stripping away the next layer of ink. In a way, the mirrors are peeled as well, but with different methods—using acid, razor blades, and steel wool.

JF: How did you start doing these "peels"?

VS: It started with a discard from an experiment in the studio that I saved the parts of. I really loved the velvety print underneath the plastic, skin once the laminate and the first layer of ink were peeled away. The first images I printed were my own photographs of objects that I had made. They were ambiguous about the way they were produced. There was also a scan of processed sushi seaweed that I printed. The images were printed at a friend's workplace that produced graphics for courtroom cases. They would laminate large printed images—timelines, charts, or graphics—on a foam board so that lawyers could draw on them and visually make their case. They would spend hours choosing which hue of the text and which outlines of a drawing would subconsciously influence the jury to find sympathy with, say, the big tobacco companies. I started experimenting by cutting and shaping the boards because they were around my studio. I noticed that the plastic that had been laminated onto the image and the board would come off, but the image would remain on it. I started saving the pieces of plastic with transferred images on them. Later research led me to a logic of wanting to work with the plastic. I therefore had to figure out a way to make it work aesthetically and conceptually, and figure out why I'd had a problem with it before.

JF: The first exhibition I saw of yours was over at Renwick Gallery. There were peeled photographs in that show.

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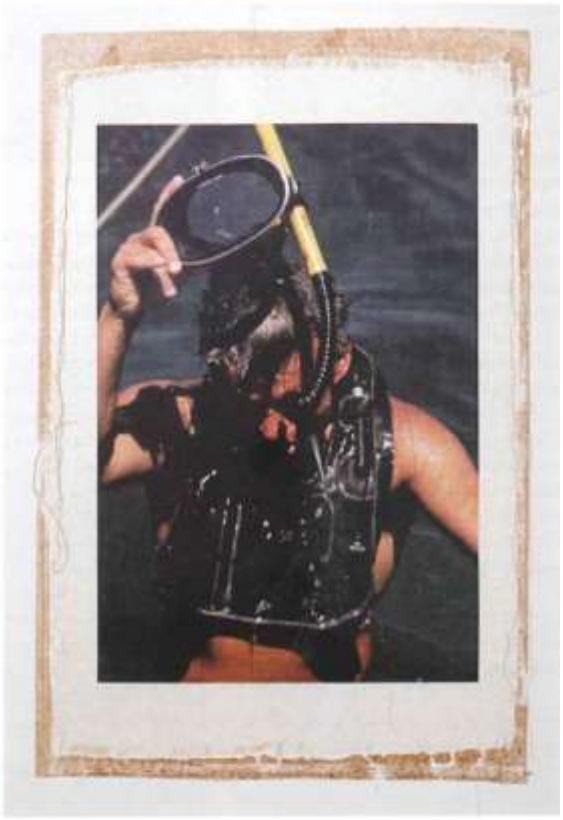
GIVE OUT, 2013, inverted Depression glass pitcher, conservation epoxy, 8 × 5 inches.

GO DOWN (REPRODUCTIONS), 2013, peeled print and burlap on plastic with marker, 58 ⅔ × 38 inches. [Image Indentifier: 412-DA-6239 Scientist from Shell Oil Company surfaces after an expedition to study coral formations. Documerica Photographer: Flip Schulke.]



MOVEMENT OF AN INFERIOR DIRECTION, 2013, wood, paint, Depression glass, plastic, 72 × 24 × 3 inches.

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VS: It had some of my first partially removed mirrors and some peels. The imagery was more abstract compared with my current images. For instance, a photograph of the folds on a black plastic bag, or of water pipes, or of intertwined electrical extension cords. The peels were a lot more subdued and, I think, almost unnoticeable, sort of ephemeral.

JF: I saw your installation in Le Consortium in Dijon. I was surprised at the ephemeral quality, not of the work itself, but of the atmosphere that you had created. It was almost like with Robert Irwin's work—it was half-dispersed into this kind of filtered, airy light of the space.

VS: I've always been hesitant to intentionally use dramatic lights and theatrical effects. The room in Le Consortium where I had my exhibition has a skylight on one side and, on the other, neon lights in a shape that mirrors the skylight. The lighting in the room was already quite airy. The exhibition and the lighting worked together.

JF: Did you know you were going to use the light-colored mesh instead of the black mesh, or did you bring both?

VS: I asked the museum to source local debris netting. They sent some cell-phone photographs before I went there, but I didn't know exactly what it was. I knew it was used on scaffolding while reconstructing the castles around Dijon. It wasn't pure white anymore, it had this light terracotta color because they don't discard the netting, but use it over and over again. This netting shifted the viewing of images and objects through its openings, because it was a lighter and more open material than I had ever worked with.

JF: There was an element of, maybe it wasn't exactly theater, but there was a performance aspect to it. It was also the first time that I saw your works with Depression-era glass, a pitcher.

At the time, the pitcher read like a figurative element for me. It was a body reference in relation to the other elements. The same way that a piece of glassware or crockery can be a substitute for a figure in canonical modernist painting, such as Picasso—and earlier art, of course. What drew me to your work was this interrogation of the picture object.

Installation view of TOOL CONSTRUCT, 2012, at Le Consortium Dijon, France. Debris netting, door barricade brackets, partially erased mirror, peeled prints on plastic, wood, gesso, hardware. Courtesy of Le Consortium, Dijon.

Rosalind Krauss, in a lecture she gave at Dia on the work of James Coleman, who's known for using picture-slide sequences as his medium, discussed the click of the slide carousel. Elsewhere she discusses the artistic medium in terms of the "technical support"; for example, Ed Ruscha's medium for much of his photography is the automobile. And I remember Richard Serra saying on Charlie Rose that he thought he had moved the medium of steel sculpture forward. I find it really interesting and specific that he thought of his medium as "steel sculpture." Would you say that you have a particular medium?

VS: It's really interesting that Serra's medium is so specific. His *Verb List* is often on my mind because of the approaches to making that were available at the time when he created his list—the movement, transformation, shifting, mutating, flowing, duration, and calls to action.

JF: That was the late '60s.

VS: Yes. I don't know if I declare a medium. Do you think you know your medium?

JF: You were saying you like the way I break it down.

VS: Yeah. You call it a "picture object."

JF: That's because of my continual curiosity about what the French mean by "the tableau." I sent you the link to the Tableau Conference in London in 2011, where Jean-François Chevrier gave a talk about the tableau as form, as an object. What's interesting to me about the idea of the picture object is that the more you think about the photograph in relation to painting now, the more they are conflated. You have Cindy Sherman getting inside of a painting, for instance, and changing things, and that becomes an image. I mean, is a Cindy Sherman even a photograph anymore? It's more of a painting. It's the same with Douglas Gordon's slowed-down films. Looking at his re-filmed films, particularly vintage films like *24 Hour Psycho*, I realized that a lot of them are sculpture—the bodies are carved; they are powdered and lit in certain ways. So you're looking at pictures being taken of figurative sculpture—except that they move.

Pictures tend to be separated into photographs or paintings, but to me these seem retrograde categories that are around because of habit more than because they're actually helpful. I prefer "picture object." Because I was a conventional painter for so long—working from life, then from photographs, creating images from recognizable things—I trust myself now to take apart the picture. I can rely on intuition, based on my experience. But you seem to be building a picture object from a completely different place, which is what's so interesting to me. It makes me curious how you got to this place.

VS: I'm examining lots of assumptions that I have. It's interesting that you brought up Robert Irwin. I've only seen a few works in person, but his book *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* comes to my mind

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THEY SEEM REMOVED, 2012, wood, debris netting, gesso, hardware, 95 ¾ × 139 ½ inches

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quite a bit. He speaks so eloquently about how he came to understand that each decision that he thought he had accounted for could be unfolded, and he began to recognize his assumptions—similar to Flusser in the sense of decoding the reading of a photograph. Perhaps some of my choices come from wanting to *un*-code certain materials and the uses for these materials—either in actual things in the world, or through language. I like finding the material that needs un-coding.

JF: That's a great term—to un-code. That's how I got to what I was doing—trying to figure out the givens in the situation I'm working with. Like your working with the netting has to do with what netting is used for.

VS: And how it becomes a signifier of growth, meaning reconstruction, or a new building. But it also protects the workers and the people on the street from debris. It's a window in and out, a space between.

JF: In that Timothy Morton essay, "Thinking Ecology, the Mesh, the Strange Stranger and the Beautiful Soul" that you recommended, he talks about how we're all in this mesh. Nobody's outside of it. Morton writes that "Life forms constitute a mesh that is infinite and beyond concept—unthinkable as such." Of course, I thought of the netting in your work in relation to that and his amazing idea of the "hyper-object," which is, in some ways, about the sublime. His definition of the hyper-object is: "Something massively distributed in time and space in relation to humans," except that we cannot contemplate it, it is inside of us instead of outside—getting outside is not possible.

VS: Plastic is bigger than what we can see. "Hyper-object" is such a good word for it. Netting is plastic, peels are plastic. Think of the plastic debris patches in the ocean, like the Great Pacific garbage patch that's somewhere between California and Hawaii. How to understand the scale of this thing that they say is twice the size of Texas?! There are many of these gyres. The plastic comes from everywhere and nowhere, it's super anonymous. The ocean contains unformed pellets of preformed plastic objects—a breaking down of what had been. Sometimes you can recognize what the object is, or from what part of the production cycle the plastic came from. It can be eaten, but when the fish that ate it dies, it does not disappear but floats in the gyre, to then be eaten and contained by another fish again—the cycle continues this way. So the absurdity of this material's resistance made me want to work with the plastic, the peels. The plastic is part of us, part of me and my contribution, too, even if not directly. Plastic is estranged from me, but it is me.

JF: You mean you can't relate to the fact that part of you is plastic, but it's a fact.

VS: There is no boundary between the environment and us. Our production is us. In one essay, Morton gave this example of being at a bus stop in an innocent conversation with a stranger who says, "Oh, it's a nice day, isn't it?" He thinks, "Yeah, great day. Climate change really taking force." But he just says, "Oh yeah, it's a nice day." But then they bring it up, "Oh yeah, must be because of climate change, don't you think?" (*laughter*) This background, it's hanging over our heads, but we put it at a distance, away from us. We exteriorize it, which relieves us of needing to take responsibility. It's over there.

This problem of interior and exterior, of what is inside and outside of a container, has become more and more relevant in my work.

JF: Another interesting point in the Morton essay was about humiliation. I thought that humiliation was a great word to describe how we're *not* at the center of the solar system (Galileo); that there's an economic system we *don't* have power over (Marx); that we *don't* have power over our decisions (Freud), etcetera. And then he applies that to the environment, our world. How do you define the environment as something that's not outside of yourself? I was happy that I knew what he was talking about in terms of humiliation, but I certainly didn't know what to do with the information, you know?

VS: The essay was one thing that led me to want to change the direction of the SculptureCenter edition in a really direct way.

JF: I want to talk about that, and I'll just come back to it in a minute. But let's stay a bit longer with your medium. In the early '80s, I had a friend who was really big on Donald Judd. But I didn't understand Donald Judd at all and one day I went to Castelli Gallery, and they had these multi-colored modules, all bolted together into different sizes. And I was like, Okay, now I see—this is like a poem. There are certain choices that Judd made to create this rhythm, but the given structure is that of a poem, a sonnet or something like that. The best way for me to approach your work when I first saw it, was actually similar, even though I couldn't exactly identify what your medium was. I understood it as having the structure of a poem. Your work involves this ongoing symbology—things are added to it, subtracted from it, and there's a different emphasis with each installation. But just like when you study a poet, you have to sort of know what he means by "swan" and "garbage" and whatever keeps coming up. With your work, it helps to know what the netting stands for or what the Depression glass is. On another level, you can walk in on it like on any work of art and like it or not. But if you want to become engaged in the work you have to find out about the artist's concerns.

VS: Yeah, I've had to question whether or not I should continue to allow that external information—materials lists, wall labels, or metaphors that evolve in my works over time—to have such power. A pitcher could just be glass without the reference to Depression glass. It could just be this pink glass pitcher that has a rope on its lip and is geometric in its pattern. And the removed mirrors in Le Consortium, because they were removed so fully, most of them probably just look like panes of glass, except for a few that have some marks that were visible through the netting. But when it comes down to it, I enjoy the way that layering can be involved in readings that can continue from one exhibition to the next. I want to allow the work to unfold if the viewer wants it to unfold. Not everything in the world is unfolded for

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us. We don't necessarily know where things come from, who made them, or what process was involved. All we generally get is surface.

JF: One of the criticisms of modernism was that it required an ideal viewer. I actually miss art that is for the ideal viewer, because I'm willing to do the work. This is a huge generalization, but postmodernism came with a certain populism where the artist tries to figure out what the general audience wants, and feeds it to them. But that seems even more elitist than simply being honest and presenting the viewer with what you're interested in, while you're willing to help them figure it out if they are so inclined.

VS: A lot of the materials that I use are not art materials. Everyone has used a mirror. In that way it's populist.

JF: What about barricade brackets? They're kind of the opposite of the netting.

VS: They do have some opposite qualities. I started using them in an exhibition in Paris at 8 rue Saint-Bon. It was a spontaneous exhibition, and I used what I could find at Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville, the department store where Duchamp had purchased the *Bottle Rack*. For example, these large clips I found to hold the glass were door barricade brackets. I had used door pushes and door kicks on mirror sculptures, inviting a push-kick movement toward pretty precarious floor sculptures—a gesture of opening and closing. The work with the debris netting and the brackets is a kit—I call them "tool constructs"; they can come apart to be used to block an opening, but they're also supporting this delicate mirror off of the wall. The net is pushing the brackets, which push out of the mesh. There are different layers of forces and dependencies.

JF: The way you're talking about these materials, it's so hard to translate to the viewer. Artists naturally get involved in certain kinds of materials or objects, it's what they like to do. On the other hand, you're describing these objects as referencing the body at every given point. What's so interesting about picture objects and installations for me is that the visual is only there to inform other senses. You're looking at something, but it's really informing what your hand does, or what it feels like, or what it's like to push on it. It's not exactly performative, but it's where the work of art is informing the body and what it does.

VS: It's not unlike advertising, either. I have to question my desire to activate how similar and dissimilar it is to other visual information in the world. There's so much that's trying to use the body's senses, feelings, emotions, and movements. When I got my computer reset, it opened to the Mac page on the browser, with this romantic image of a young beautiful girl lying in the dark looking at an iPad which lights the space around her body. I had just read the Morton essay and I wanted to understand why the image made me feel a certain way. I clicked on the image and the text in the ad had the visual form of a poem, short lines and stanzas, but using a corporate language about how it feels to experience a Mac. The poem structure is really what struck me.

JF: With your work, even though it contains images, I don't think of you using imagery's manipulative capability.

VS: I am interested in the many ways of getting across information. If not through manipulation, then through working between layers of information—visual, spoken, metaphorical.

JF: I like to think that art is a place where you get a break from being manipulated in the way you are with advertising. Art takes the same materials and does something kinder with them.

VS: Art is a tool that can have automatic or manual modes.

JF: Oh, but we were going to talk about your glass multiple.

VS: The SculptureCenter introduced me to a great glass specialist, Brett Swenson, who has been helping me with some experiments using Depression-era glass at UrbanGlass. Depression glass was made to cool really fast, for the factory conveyer belt. It has a very small window of melting time, so the mold form that I was initially interested in was getting a little less interesting. Instead, I've been cutting the pitchers in half, cutting the bottoms and handles off, and making molds of the insides and inverting them onto themselves.

JF: So is each piece of Depression glass that you begin with the same?

VS: Each one is part of an edition, but they won't be all the same. They are an edition of unique works. I have a lot of questions with how the glass will re-form. The project is simultaneously going along with and working against the abilities of the glass.

JF: One of the roots of your work might be *The Large Glass*. I usually hate to make references to Duchamp, but there's a way one could look at those Depression-era glass plates as almost like Malic Molds, the name Duchamp gave to the group of nine "bachelors" shapes in one section of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. If one needs a point of reference for some of the forms you're working with, Duchamp's *Large Glass* is not a bad place—because of the various semi-transparencies. *The Large Glass* was a "delay in glass" as Duchamp referred to it. The nets and photographic membranes in your work are similar "delays," slowing the eye as it scans over and through the material.

VS: I love *The Large Glass* and the repair of the work by Duchamp. I work with repairing peels. They are often torn because the peel process is quite physical. Usually I repair a torn one by carefully placing its seams together and creating a patch from the same laminate, then heating and laminating it over itself. Most of the peels have repairs in them.

JF: That seems to be the emotive center of your strangely cool/hot work—this subsumed violence matched equally by a surreptitious healing taking place.