



Julian Myers on Eric Wesley

Just for kicks

A recent photograph of Eric Wesley shows the artist on the corner of Pico Boulevard, near his studio in Los Angeles. He stands in the indefinite pose of the dealer: wary, attentive, non-committal, simultaneously open and defensive.



• Ouchi 2002. Installation view





urb Servin (detail) 2002 Mixed media Installation view

Ready to run, ready to sell. But sell what? Drugs? Contraband? Or art? Picture Daniel Buren selling rock instead of painting stripes.

Or – and this comparison seems closer to home – David Hammons hawking snowballs on Cooper Square in New York City (*Bliz-AARD Ball Sale*, 1983). Wesley's recent work seems to owe a great deal to Hammons, from its proclivity for literalizing slang – compare Hammons' *Pissed Off* (1981) with Wesley's *Kicking Ass* (2000) – to the hilarious negativity of its institutional critique. Wesley's work is often straight-faced, serious in its intent but also deeply funny in its off-centre imagining of what an artist does and how he occupies himself. He shoplifts and schemes. He is a dysfunctional bootlegger and a failed conman. The 'drug dealer' photograph is one such case: Wesley's performance is just faintly out of tune with his role, his face on the edge of cracking up at his own half-arsed enactment of the

drug dealer stereotype. And doesn't the shifty pose of the dealer seem uncomfortably familiar? It's a little too close to the solicitations of an artist working the collectors at an opening. The subtle subtext of desperation: 'Buy my shit, please'.

Wesley's recent installations have taken a similar tack, though their methods and imagery vary from place to place. In each Wesley has transformed the gallery into the scene of a parasitic, dysfunctional sub-economy – one that echoes that of the gallery itself. The idea seems to have originated with Wesley's contribution to the 'Snapshot' exhibition (2001) at the Hammer Museum at UCLA (named after Armand Hammer, who made his money through the Occidental Oil Corporation). The artist initially proposed installing a Jiffy Lube (the American oil-change franchise) in the museum's car park: Wesley designed working hydraulics to pump the dirty engine oil from his car through the museum offices and into the gal-



ntitled (Mug Shot #3) 2002 C-type print 130x100 cm

eries, using the existing water pipes as their host. The museum, unsurprisingly, did not go for it. Instead Wesley made them a 'proper' oil painting, with unaesthetic splodges of used oil from his car. In reproductions the work seems to ventriloquize a certain convention of abstraction – Vija Celmins, maybe? But up close the painting was grimy and reeking, oil painting at its (literally) crudest extreme.

Another installation, at Galleria Franco Noero in Turin, posed as a custom paint shop called Ouchi (a bastardized version of Gucci), which sold only red and black paint. Behind the scenes, however, visible beyond the unoccupied sales counter, was a disorganized workshop that exposed Ouchi's true function: the paint cans were actually weapons – primitive grenades. Installed in each was a bomb made of a mousetrap and a shotgun cartridge, and the shop was thus revealed to be a front for a low-level arms manufacturer. Conceivably, the paint cans were functional explosives, though the crumpled cigarette packets and open beers scattered around the terrorist workshop suggested something more muddled than dangerous.

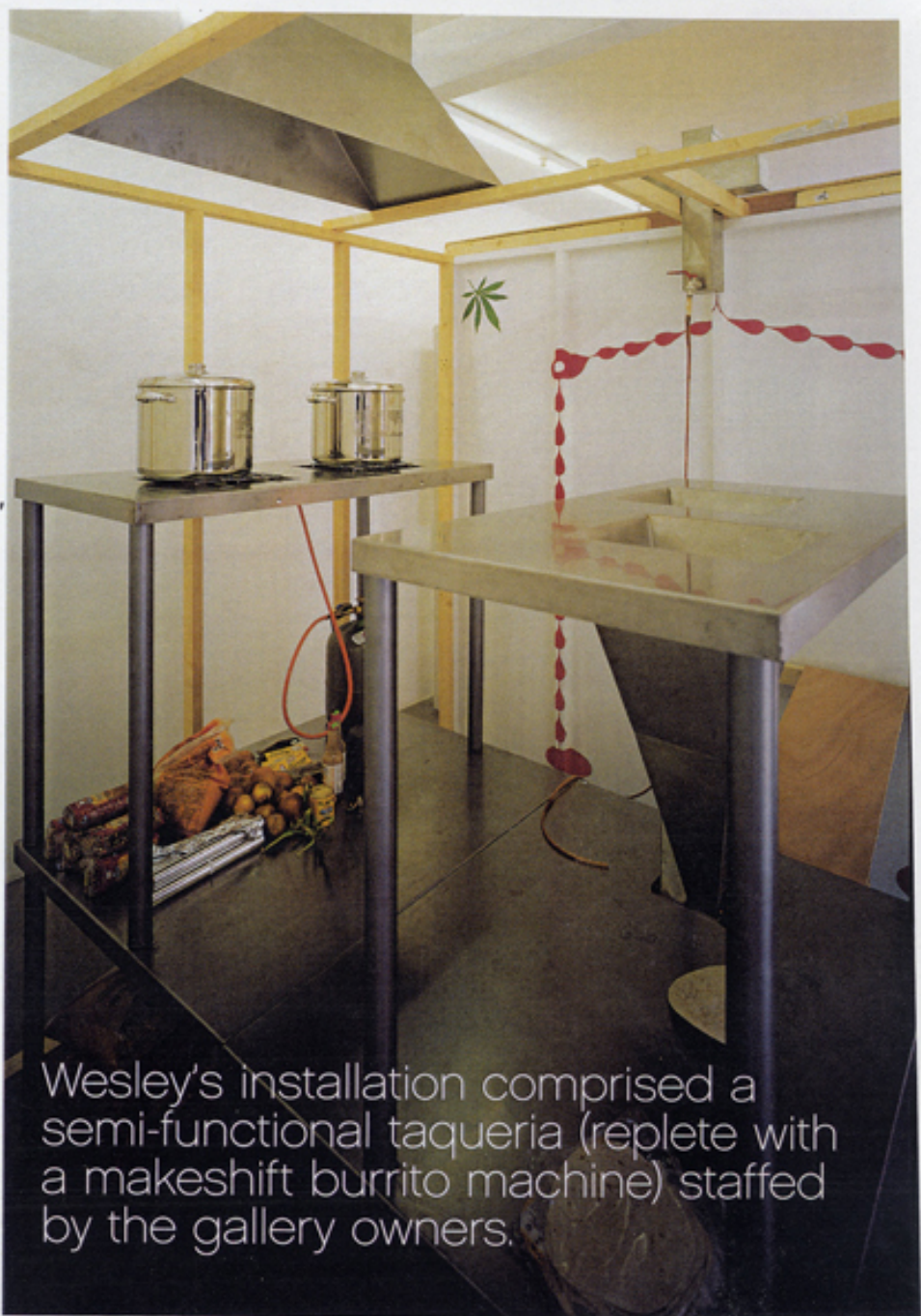
These installations are not merely reflexive – the gallery posing as a paint store posing as a terrorist workshop posing as an innocent art gallery. They also refer to the secretive, quasi-parasitic businesses that are everywhere in Los Angeles. Pico Boulevard is crowded with them, dotted with ramshackle car-refitting shops, scavenger and second-hand stores, taco vans and the like, the kind of unregulated sub-economies and weird, vaguely legal modes of getting by that have little to do with – and little visibility in – culture at large. (Indeed, the whole Pico/Crenshaw area, quite a large neighbourhood wedged between Hollywood and downtown LA, is apparently, bizarrely, nameless.) How do these places make money? Who are their patrons? And what else is going on behind the scenes? What are they a front for? What are they really making in there? They don't really sell artworks in those galleries, do they?

It is this concept – the gallery as a front for more grimy or suspicious production – that has structured Wesley's most recent installations. In his 2002 exhibition at Meyer Riegger Gallery, Karlsruhe, Wesley installed a surreal, semi-functional, taqueria staffed by the gallery's owners, replete with a make-shift machine that actually assembled the burritos and a hollow cross full of Tapatio hot sauce suspended from the rafters. The actual workspace of the taqueria was invisible on entering the galleries – the completed

burrito emerged from the makeshift kitchen through an odd hole in a minimalist façade. It was only by ignoring the façade and going behind the scenes that one witnessed the hidden work area: rice cookers, puddles of Tapatio, gallerists in hairnets, mesh bags of onions and six feet of faecal burrito spread out on tin foil. They made burritos once, tasted the wares and then left the uneaten leftovers and unwashed workspace there for the duration of the exhibition. The installation evokes Paul McCarthy's squalid, ketchup-covered performance scenes, but the comparison ends there – these are leftovers of labour, of production, not a tantrum. They really made burritos and ate them. For that day the gallery was a functioning taqueria.

In his landmark polemic *The Tourist* (1976) the writer and geographer Dean MacCannell argues that an anxiety about authenticity structures modern social life.¹ Ironically, he claims, authenticity is increasingly something that needs to be performed or faked. Historically, social establishments have been divided into front and back (dining-room and kitchen, reception and offices, showroom and factory), a division constructed to conceal those props and activities that might discredit the performance up front. Now, though, as large-scale production becomes more and more invisible in the West, those props and activities are often made visible strategically to dispel the inauthenticity of the commercial façade, and thereby endow the performance with a powerful reality effect. Examples of this are common today – guided tours of factories, for instance, or restaurants that stage the preparation of food in the dining-room. Something similar could be said about Janet Cardiff's video tours through the off-limits areas of museums.

Wesley's installations are a fabric of such false fronts and off-stage settings, though the moment of their authenticity is always incomplete, compromised, giving way to even more submerged layers of meaning. Take, for instance, his December 2002 exhibition at Metro Pictures, New York. There his plan centred on the production, transfer and sale of tobacco, with minimalist hothouses, a hand-welded trailer for illegally trafficking cigarettes, and secret rooms filled with stockpiles of custom-repackaged Marlboro Lights available for sale at competitive prices. The exhibition worked on many levels – as a cynical riff on Philip Morris' sponsorship of cutting-edge art, maybe – but most of all as a pirate economy operating semi-legally on the gallery's premises. Again the work is profoundly funny in what it imagines a gallery doing –



• **Untitled** 2002 Wood, stainless steel, burner, gas cylinder, food, acrylic paint, plaster 320 x 410 x 350 cm

Wesley's installation comprised a semi-functional taqueria (replete with a makeshift burrito machine) staffed by the gallery owners.

here it is cast as an unregulated cigarette distributor, and the gallerist as a bootleg tobacco connoisseur. An art gallery, for Wesley, is a system of exchange, in the image of the market but also beneath it, more primitive, more spurious. And if it is at its base an economic system, then it can traffic tobacco or burritos as easily as art.

The façades and false back rooms in the Metro Pictures installation never quite produce a reality effect in MacCannell's sense. Wesley's parasitic economies are always real in some sense or other, of course: you can eat the burritos; the paint-can grenades might actually explode; you can smoke the cigarettes. They work. The engine of the

work sputters to life at least once. But there's always another purpose, another layer of privacy just out of sight. Letters – ZBS – secretly built into the trailer's frame. More back rooms to discover. Cigarettes concealed in the walls, in the ceiling panels. Wesley's work is deeply attuned to the pleasures of this kind of secrecy – the underground economy, the secret hand signal, the complex sign language of the drug dealer's body. Keep your secrets, he seems to say; they're all you've got.

1. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.