

FALL 2015

JOHN MARRIOTT: SYMPATHY  
FOR THE INSTITUTION



# EXHIBITIONS | CENTRAL GALLERY

## John Marriott: Sympathy for the Institution

Curated by Blair Fornwald, Assistant Curator

SEPTEMBER 18 TO NOVEMBER 15, 2015

Artist talk: Friday, September 18, 6:00 pm, reception to follow

### **Making Meaning: A Conversation in Three Parts**

by Blair Fornwald

With precision and clarity, John Marriott's artworks bring together contradictory materials, images, processes and ideas to consider how meaning is made in the wake of modernism. Two neoclassical-style bronze portrait busts serve as a frontispiece for his exhibition, *Sympathy for the Institution*. Anachronistically, and uncannily, their faces have incised emoticons in place of human facial features. *Selfie (Male)* winks with semicolon eyes and the downcast *Selfie (Female)* wears a lower-case "r" as a half-frown. Both expressions are indeterminate and ambiguous, stripped from their usual context – the technologically-mediated environment we increasingly spend time in. They are a synthesis of three distinct conversational threads running throughout the exhibition.

Along the red-painted wall are works that express contradictions between form and meaning in minimalist and conceptual art. One of these pieces, *Minimal Composition in Three Parts*, is comprised of three square painting supports, each bisected by a guitar string. As the title alludes, these are compositions that could hypothetically be plucked and played, a musical composition comprised of three single notes, an image of imagined

SILENCE

A neon sign spelling the word "SILENCE" in white, mounted on a red wall. The sign is made of white neon tubing and is held in place by several small metal fasteners. The word is written in a clean, sans-serif font. Below the sign, a dark shadow of the word is cast onto the red wall, creating a strong visual contrast.

sound. *Light Show*, conversely, refutes its functionality; its sealed glass tubing spells “SILENCE,” but it lacks the neon gas and wiring to illuminate it. Both works allude to minimalist art and music’s aporetic and self-reflexive tendency to speak, as philosopher Gianni Vattimo notes, “by lapsing into silence.”<sup>1</sup> This strategy, meant to protect art from being denigrated into kitsch and propaganda, Vattimo argues, also robs the work of its potential for “immediate enjoyment (it’s ‘gastronomic aspect’, as it were).”<sup>2</sup> Here Marriott imbues the conceptual gesture – still resolutely spare, still completed in the mind of the viewer – with a humour and playfulness often lacking in minimalist, conceptual, and non-referential art.

On the adjacent blue wall are works that reference utopian forms in mid-century art, architecture, and design. By altering materials and juxtaposing images, these works speak to the contradictory or unintended meanings that these forms have acquired since their creation. The photo triptych *Synthesis* presents a pair of hands ripping an image of Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome from a book and crumpling it into a ball, approximating its three-dimensional form and summarizing its impact on contemporary architecture, a persistent reminder of utopian aspirations never fully realized. In *Placeholder*, a bright yellow backhoe bucket balances atop a delicate but sturdy replica Eames Eiffel chair base, fusing two surprisingly congruous industrial design vocabularies. *Brutalism Quilt*, composed of piece-worked fabrics printed with photographs of the honeycombed concrete facades of Brutalist buildings, draws formal comparisons between traditional craft and modernist architecture. It calls into question the veracity of gendering media as “masculine” or “feminine,” and the resulting material and discursive hierarchies.



Works along the yellow wall engage a broader dialogue about materiality, meaning, and translation. One work, *Hoarders: Season One, Episode One* is a clay tablet inscribed with Cuneiform script, a translation of the binary code extracted from a segment of a DVD recording of *Hoarders*. The tablet cumbersomely documents an image of a garbage-strewn kitchen and indicates, via numerals scratched into its lower portion, that it would take 122,502,299 similar tablets to record a single episode. Presented in a museological display case, it draws comparisons between the accumulations of individuals and those of museums and other collecting institutions. Another sculpture, *Out of Time*, replicates IKEA's ubiquitous BILLY bookcase using 3D modeling software and imaging techniques to reproduce the perfectly-staged lighting conditions of its catalogue image. Subtly incongruous with the gallery's actual light and shadows, *Out of Time* is a comically exhaustive and exacting simulation of an object that is a cheap simulacrum of Scandinavian modernist design.

These works have the acuity of clever jokes, but without compact punchlines that resolve ambiguity or contradiction. Rather, Marriott's efforts are generative. The interplay of form and meaning doesn't adhere to organizational, hierarchical, or institutional structures. We should be grateful: the alternative is at best boring, at worst, dangerous.

<sup>1</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. Jon. R. Snyder (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

## Artist Biography

John Marriott is a multidisciplinary artist and writer whose work has been presented nationally and internationally. He is represented by MKG127 in Toronto.





## CREDITS

JOHN MARRIOTT *Selfie (Male)*, 2015, patinated bronze; edition 1 of 7. Photo: Don Hall

JOHN MARRIOTT *Lightbow*, 2013, neon tubing minus the gas and electronics needed to illuminate. Photo: Don Hall

JOHN MARRIOTT *Sympathy for the Institution* installation view, 2015. Photo: Don Hall

JOHN MARRIOTT *Out of Time*, 2011, computer-generated inkjet prints on adhesive vinyl, IKEA BILLY Bookcase. Photo: Don Hall

JOHN MARRIOTT *Synthesia*, 2008, triptych; Chromira prints. Photo: Don Hall



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