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# ARTWEEK

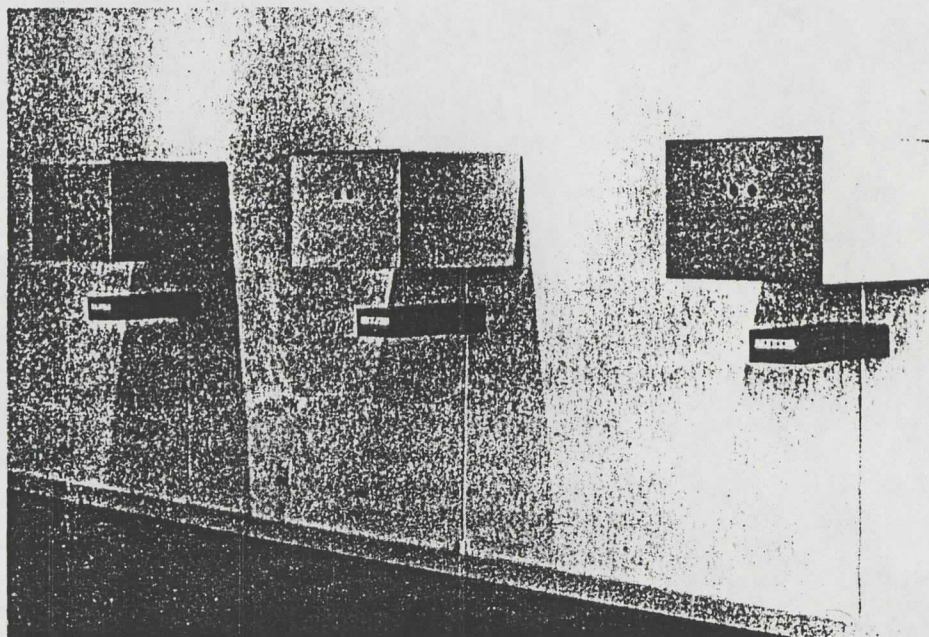
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## AFFINITIES OF THEORY AND FORM

Los Angeles / David Pagel

Aimee Rankin's twelve peep-holed boxes at Michael Kohn Gallery play the seductive eye-grabbing powers of MTV against the intractability of French-based critical theory. Her miniaturized audiovisual spectacles appose the charged visual allure and pulsating aural stimulation of debased popular media with the sophisticated analytical formulations of an elite group. By combining the mesmerizing pleasures of pop-music videos with theory's investigation of desire, voyeurism and fetishism, Rankin's delightful and repellent fantasy cubicles show that the Americanized version of French psychoanalytic discourse is just as derivative as—and more enervated than—the popular culture from which its rigor-seeking theoreticians obsessively attempt to distance themselves and their thoughts. By demanding critical immersion in its culture's dominant system of representations, Rankin's art exposes what American theory represses in its continental sources: the punning fun of mastery undercut and the insouciant jubilation of sound unwound. In this way, her boxes display the affinities between French theory and American cultural forms that her compatriots fail to discern or struggle to hide.

*Perversity*, one of the six pieces from Rankin's larger 1986 *Ecstasy* series, features David Bowie's song "Cracked Actor" from his *Aladdin Sane* album. Bowie, who has made a brilliant career by scrambling the signs that are supposed to identify one's position on either side of a series of oppositions—man/woman, human/an-



Aimee Rankin, *Ecstasy/Atrocity* (installation view), 1988, mixed media, at Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.

droid, person/beast and fantasy/reality—here allows his album's title to shift its meanings between the sanity of a young man and the rationality of a mythical magic lamp. Backed by the rhymed power of Bowie's throaty voice—driven by desire fixed on its object—Rankin has constructed an uninhabited pleasure chamber crammed full of tactile and visual delights: luxurious curtains of purple silk, a bed of violet cloth flowers with brightly colored, sensually twisting stamens and a miniature mound of glistening purple quartzite. Black lights,

fluorescently colored spiraling disks and the images, in small mirrors, of a helmeted soldier passionately kissing a slender naked mermaid guarded by a fierce orange-eyed, sword-and-shield-wielding being, create an erotic space, not without danger, for the playing out of fantasies.

As the spectator plugs into the audio box and peers into the cube's eyeholes, Bowie commands: "Crack baby crack, Show me you're real. Smack baby smack, It's all that you feel. Suck baby suck, Give me your head, Before ya start professin' that you're

knocking me dead." In this fantastic world of shifting identities and sliding desires, Bowie's address to an imagined absent partner of indeterminate sex becomes directed toward the box's sole jacked-in spectator. Bowie's command becomes a challenge as the reality of one's experience and self is thrown back upon that self/spectator. The alternative to participation, when the body and its pleasures are at stake, is not the objectivity of distance, but the lifelessness of disengagement. The human head, Rankin suggests, is as well suited for performing fellatio as for undertaking the difficult processes of abstract reasoning. By allowing the meaning of "head" to shift, Rankin proposes that theory had better take pleasure's excesses into account or risk being taken over by them.

By choosing this refrain that brings together sexual pleasure, domination and the willful submission to another, Rankin engages a complex set of issues surrounding the body and the viewer's subjugation to internal desires and external forces. With an extreme economy of means, she rubs the abstract concerns of a detached, if not defensive, body of theory up against those elements of culture which hold sway over the body's irrepressible impulses and unquenchable desires. Embracing neither a mindless immersion in the sanctioned pleasures of this physical realm nor the safe, critical distance of Americanized French theory, Rankin's art charts a course on which these usually separated worlds collide. □