

Stephen Kwok Retreat

bologna towers

23 May - 6 July

Any written record is a series of omissions. I shake out my black polyester raincoat with ultrasonically welded seams and drape it over the stiffened back of the kitchen chair. My bike and ferry ride to this neighborhood of Amsterdam-Noord was a solo one, colored by that shade of watery luminescent northern light I am coming to associate with Amsterdam summers. This short pilgrimage to visit Plan van Gool—a social housing complex of over 1,100 residential apartments built in 1968—prompted by Stephen Kwok's solo exhibition “Retreat” at bologna towers.

Walking the long, eerily silent halls of the housing complex to its northernmost corner, I arrive and am warmly greeted by the artist. I settle in, leaving my things in the comfort of the gallery's kitchen entryway, and turn towards the exhibition. A flutter of motion. Framed in the kitchen doorway of the stripped-bare apartment is a spinning ceiling fan that hovers, kissing distance from the floor. Dropped two stories by a dramatically elongated white shaft, the fan's pull chain comes to rest, heavily, on the linoleum. The oblong ball and cord lay rigidly still, their subjection to gravity eased, their duties as a switch rendered useless by this simple act of repositioning. Carefully approaching the spinning blades, I look down and am surprised by a sudden sensation of vertigo as I see my own reflection flickering at a frame rate dictated by the object's rotation. Slowly tipping towards the sculpture, I am shocked out of my momentary reverie: although dull and domestic, these now all-too-close whirring blades will surely inflict damage upon contact. Later, as I sit down to tease at the compacted layers of *Fixture* (all works in the exhibition 2025), I cycle through the language games of the Portuguese word *lâmina*, which can signify the blade of a knife, a slide projection, a leaf (a handheld fan), or the exceedingly thin chemical layers assembled in photographic film.



Stephen Kwok, *Candelabras (mesh)*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and bologna.cc.

Unsettling “corporate” aesthetics and vocabularies by redirecting collective experiences or inserting personal subjectivities, Kwok describes his oeuvre as the creation of *situations*: constructions that unfold through emergent contradictions between a site and the activity prescribed for, or by, that site. Kwok's language around his seemingly minimal gestures and interventions is careful. Precise. The thickness of studied observation is palpable. Kwok, who was working in the upper-floor office of bologna towers when I arrived, studied business at the University of Southern California (USC) before receiving his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Moving to New York not long after 2013, he began working in the education department at Dia Art Foundation, which led to his current position as the foundation's curator of public engagement.

The strategies of Kwok's “Retreat” absorb and retune my attention. Looking up from *Fixture*, my eye is caught by a glowing constellation of tiny red points suspended in a section of cheap plastic vertical window blinds. The sculpture, titled *Blinds (redeye)*, articulates its objectness through subtle compliances with, and rejections of, its assigned architectural frame: the blinds act as a partial covering for the bank of windows behind them, though an ill-fitting one that is both too long (it hangs over the radiators) and too sparse to block out the light. A vinyl laminate frosting applied to the sealed double-pane windows behind the hanging slats effectively blurs any view of the exterior. Standing in front of Kwok's sculpture the distant reek of America's liberal-capitalist failures to achieve “a good life” (Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*) wafts towards me from the shades: mass-produced window treatments that became a vernacular ubiquitous to Midwestern corporate offices of the 1980s and tract housing development across the Southern and Western United States. Their smell profoundly at odds with the damper odors of this building, this edifice of Dutch consensus making and social infrastructure. The layers of normative standards compacted into the flat, heat extruded materials of the sculptural assemblage feel laden with the irrepressible damage of cultural assimilation; of being made to “pass”; of systemic violences as to who (and by what means) a citizen is legitimized. I move to align myself with the windows. The red spheres are translucent marbles lodged in the thin plastic blades: a precision-fit balancing act, beautifully executed as though by some sleight of hand. I gaze at the scattered sea of sleepless red eyes, which likely made their own midnight-flight

across the Atlantic, and think about Argus (the many eyed surveiller) being slowly blinded by Hermes (the god of exchange).

Blinds (catseye), occupies an identical position in the window bank of the upper floor. The only difference from its twin downstairs is the glowing spheres: here, clear marbles with a lamina of swirling color trapped within. Sightless blinds, uncannily staring back at me. Reading Ivan Cheng's accompanying exhibition essay, itself a peephole through which the audience might peer behind the scenes, I shift again. From this angle, I see the sculptural doubling enacts a self-reflexivity. "The work wants to know itself," writes Cheng, an offering that moves me closer to the interior dynamics of bologna towers itself, an artist-run exhibition program hosted out of Cheng's various homes and workspaces since 2017. Close enough to feel the overlaps in Cheng and Kwok's corpuses, which, although oceans apart and formally incommensurable, coalesced to produce this suspended *tableau vivant* of multi-directional rolling eyes.

The remainder of the second floor is occupied by *Candelabras (mesh)*, a networked composition of neatly coiled coaxial cables that sprawl across the floor, connected and spliced together via splitters on which are mounted delicate telescoping antennas topped with thin, unlit, ochre candles. The low forest of unpowered communications infrastructure hovers around a yawning rail-less chasm, at the bottom of which I see *Fixture* tirelessly circulating air—a breeze that will never reach this upper landing (yet did it somehow blow out these candles?). The structural and material choices of *Candelabras (mesh)* clearly reference the simple branching, looping, or repeating logics that animated Fluxus performances and early media art. Yet this reading is ultimately denied by the work's obdurate silence and inactivity. I notice the blackened wicks and varying candle heights evidence another kind of energy. The work darkens into an opaque afterimage of possible transmissions, seances, memorials, communal meals—a sociality now evacuated or placed on indefinite hold.

"How does abstraction construct emptiness?" asks Eunsong Kim in her book *The Politics of Collecting: Race and The Aestheticization of Property* (2024). Throughout, Kim provides case studies that construct clear and violent lineages between the aesthetics of the avant-garde and the operations of the museum collection, tracing their role as actors of racialized capitalism. Kim asks a simple yet profound question: why and how are certain spaces deemed

"vacant"? Kim's writing formalizes a critique made by a group of primarily New York-based artists—Torkwase Dyson, Cameron Rowland, Ronny Quevedo, Jessica Vaughn, Gordon Hall—whose work refigures the formal concerns of Minimalism and the logics of conceptual art as thick with those bodies, memories and stories absented from History. Here, Kwok's work brings its own formal strategies to bear as he intersects Kim's critique of the mechanisms of abstraction with what art historian David Getsy describes as the queering *behaviors* of objects. Getsy uses the term *dissemble* to describe the mimetic concealment or disguise by which an art work performs "as if" ("as if" it is furniture, "as if" it is functional, "as if" it is normative)—a technique possible for some queer communities to employ, yet on the whole impossible for adoption by other minorities or racialized groups.¹ In "Retreat," behaviors stick in axes of use/uselessness, presence/emptiness, adaptation/maladaptation, creating a webbed tangle out of bologna tower's emptied rooms, here sparsely populated by objects distinctly ambivalent in their refusals (to block out the light, to turn on or off, to evaporate). In Kwok's works, misbehaviors are elegant, unfree, re-trapped by new self-perpetuated logics. Yet they offer generous material and linguistic slippages that open new registers. They insist on close reading: on the pleasures of prolonged attention to oneself, to others and to the world's operating parameters.

As I return to the kitchen to have tea with the artist, I find the final, literal, hook of the exhibition: a single wall-mounted metal coat hanger on which a drop of simulated water hangs frozen (*Condensation*). The smallest of Kwok's sculptures in the show, it is also the most simply resolute in being what it is and what it is not: a simulacra of arrested potential (loss, transformation, motion). I think of literary critic Mark Seltzer's observation that the demands of modern life require a constant state of self-monitoring, auto-updating and modernizing: activities which form a "complex infrastructure stabilized by its own tensions."² Kwok's sculptural compositions for "Retreat" generally behave through such tensions, each stilled, trapped, caught and looped within their own logical actions, reaching a state of suspension (of disbelief, of judgment, of activity) with which they hold us over the void. *Where are you going?* they ask me, seductively. *Why not stay with us for a while?*

by Marissa Lee Benedict

1. *Operación Triunfo* is a Spanish reality show for music contestants in which they live isolated in a house for a few months while attending singing and dancing lessons, media training, and get voted as favorites.

2. Mark Seltzer, *The Official World*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2016, 6.