

130 MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI

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Miriam Laura Leonardi's work has some of the aerial qualities of a skywalk between tall buildings. She is part of a striking generation of emerging feminist Swiss artists, who regularly re-enact, re-perform and reconstitute historical works with dry wit and spare aesthetics. It's present in the sculptural work *Tonsure Nuova* (2018), which features 12 midnight-blue Alice bands lined up neatly on a plexiglass cylinder, each with a single black star affixed to it at a cute angle. It's the kind of accessory that a 10-year old girl might wear, yet the bands are rigidly lined up in precise display that summons both the store window display of a global brand and the rigid seriality connected with conceptual art. This work's roots can be traced to a photograph of the back of Marcel Duchamp's head taken in 1921 by Man Ray, revealing a tonsure in the shape of a shooting star that has been shaved into the back of Duchamp's head. This particular image was taken up by Carol Rama in 2002, in a work on paper on which the image of Duchamp's starry head appears in the top right-hand corner. Rama extracted the star shape from the image to create a repeated motif, drawing a shower of comets that travel across the paper towards Duchamp, colored black and blue. It is Rama's serial stars on which Leonardi has modeled her *Tonsure Nuova* accessory, a way to wear both Duchamp and Rama as a style and a reference.

The work wryly suggests certain 'accessorizing' strategies of artists who wear references to others, 'on their sleeve.' *Tonsure Nuova*, which featured in the artist's recent exhibition,

Oh, là, là, Cookies, at LA project space Bel Ami, is a form of third-tier object, in that it rests on at least two other strata of practice—both that of a male iconoclastic insider who ushered in appropriation and use of found objects that are here applied, and that of a self-taught female outlier who is being celebrated posthumously for the rawness of her imagination and vision. In presenting such layering through the production of a wearable multiple, Leonardi appears to have something to say about repetition and multiplication of concepts as distributable products in favor of unique objects or images. It's a locus of interest for the artist which suggests a tacit reversal of Pop or Pictures Generation strategies of mass appeal, in favor of a coded conduct which trades in hermetic and specialized symbols among a localized group. Art produces a community of viewers, who are increasingly interested in purchasing souvenirs and insignia.

This strategy also appeared in the same exhibition in Leonardi's modification of a triangular cushion glimpsed in a Lawrence Weiner video from 2002, *Deep Blue Sky / Light Blue Sky*. The cushion carries a simple 'girl-scout' style emblem of a burning campfire, framed by the name of the group (Camp Fire Girls). Leonardi has previously remade the cushion, replacing the word 'Camp,' which is illegible in the video due to cropping, with 'Water,' creating a trio of elements—FIRE, WATER, GIRLS—that splinters the phrase into three entities which could be considered an index of sculptural elements as they might be seen in Weiner's work, which consists of: 'language + the material referred

Tattoo by Maxime Plescia-Büchi Courtesy the artist (p. 131) It's a pity she hung up the t-shirts and they caught fire & Bauchladen III (und vor allem fehlt es an Brot), 2016 Photo: Douglas Mandry Courtesy the artist and Plymouth Rock, Zurich (p. 132)





Help in the Searchi, 2018 Invitation for Help in the Searchi, Kunsthalle Fri Art, 2018 Courtesy the artist (top)

Pair of Shoes, 2017 Photo: Annik Wetter Courtesy the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich (bottom)





the sense that we are witnessing an initiation rite with ambivalent consequences. In the more light-hearted *Michèle* (2019), Leonardi and the artist Michèle Graf each play one hand of Scott Joplin's ragtime classic *The Entertainer*, a piece taught to both women by their fathers. When two separate hands explore warm flesh or play an old tune together, they create a subtle awareness of female artists and their late arrival to an old game. In response, a subjectivity splits in two, a bifurcation that paradoxically binds the women to each other as they play simultaneous roles of artists and subjects. In these works Leonardi's camera is always focused on her partner in crime, as though searching for proof that they are aware of the rite that has just taken place: that they are creating rituals in order to reveal the network to which they already belong.

to.' In 2016 she created an animation of a cartoonish leg having this same triangular logo tattooed onto it, and for the Bel Ami exhibition she created her modified version of the insignia as 100 wearable patches, again summoning the symbol as conceptual décor or knowledge signaling.

It's important to note that there is barely a person alive who would be able to decode or even recognize such arcane references to works such as these without guidance or accompanying material, despite the fact that they refer to works by canonical artists. And to add that the acknowledgment of a certain impossibility to read such work without help is not self-evident—in art it is customary to conceal any gaps in knowledge, assuming that if we didn't know, then we should have. In its willingness to engage with the power of the niche symbol as souvenir or as social communication, Leonardi's work shows contemporary art to be the elaborate club that it is, in which a variety of underground or specialist signs are traded and exchanged among a group of insiders.

For another recent two-person exhibition, *Contiene Lengua* (Contains Language, with Víctor del Moral) at Aguirre in Mexico City, Leonardi dramatized the existence of such social codes and cliques, creating paper frames printed with lettering around each of the doorways in the gallery's exhibition spaces. These titled the area beyond each threshold as a different kind of club for different social types. A black-and-white striped frame around a cream-colored door heralded the entrance to THE ANGST CLUB, another in the same monochrome palette around a doorless frame between gallery spaces announced the passageway to the ONLY YOU CAN COMMENT CLUB, whilst another rainbow frame simply read THE CLUB CLUB CLUB CLUB. Simply by walking through a passage, our membership status is changed, and we are initiated into an ambient participation in identity codes designated by space.

Leonardi's approach to her own social life as an artist examines such laws through more intimate means. In a series of short video portraits of a number of female friends, the artist undertakes a task with her subject. In *Bleta* (2015) she goes hunting with the artist Bleta Jahai, examining each part of a deer's innards and organs with their hands after its stomach is slit open. An ominously fragment of piano from Bruno Alexiu's 2009 score for Henri-Georges Clouzot's unfinished film, *Inferno* (1964), loops over the footage, accentuating



Tonsure Nuova, 2018 Photo: Naoki Sutter-Shudo Courtesy the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles (pp. 134-135)



Yeah, 2018 Installation view, Room of Requirements, Nest, Zurich, 2018 Photo: Gabriele Garavaglia Courtesy the artist and Fri Art Kunsthalle, Fribourg (p. 136 top) GIRLS FIRE WATER (Logo), 2016 Courtesy the artist (p. 136 bottom)