

# The Red and The Sold of Dots

Derek Brunen’s *SOLD* at CSA Space,

October 21-November 21, 2005

[Approximately 150 000 red dots on a wall, 9 feet x 25 feet, spaced approximately 1/2 inch apart, applied by hand, weeded from vinyl cut by machine, taking approximately 200 person hours to install, filling the wall to the edge where it meets the ceiling, floor, and the other two walls.]

A cynical reading of Derek Brunen’s work as a dematerialized, quasi-retro-bureaucratic-minimalismo-conceptualist process would amount to the cackling of Don Quixote infinitely ramming into a Wal-mart. We want to feel out something utopic, or even sublime, in his working of a material drawn from the very shrines of consumerism.

The sign of the red “sold” dot is a stamp of approval, a trace of a collector’s taste applied alongside an artwork. It is the intermediary mark of the dealer’s hand applying an aesthetic element to the display, *marking the event of a legitimation of property authorized by a client*. In this sense, the sold dot is a trace left in the passing through of propriety itself – a lacuna of property. The sold dot is a conspicuous display of an anonymous endorsement, which, these days, is a generic and familiar place-holder of relation. The sold dot is a sign of success: something worthy has been exchanged, acquired, understood; someone has been touched, moved, convinced, intrigued, flattered, cajoled, or pressured; someone else has been congratulated, encouraged, complimented, supported, annoyed, insulted. The sold dot marks a series of invisible transactions expressed in a number of languages (monetary, verbal, visual, ideological) set up by an economy of art. Neighbour to the artwork, the sold dot announces a constellation of subjects who are successfully enacting this economy.

What if we compare this sold dot to a conspicuous display of a realtor’s sign that marks an un-sold property? Think of the tension between the figure of the sold dot and the proliferation of Fred Yuen’s red realtor signs on the buildings featured in Stan Douglas’ *100 Block West Hastings*.<sup>1</sup> Un-sold property borders on the ill-legitimate: no endorsement, no approval, no exchange, no access, nothing acquired, no movement, just a horrible laying fallow until the real-estate market changes. Poorly legislated property rights in the Downtown East Side of

Vancouver, to say the very least, include the rights of property owners and include the figures of those who are faulty consumers by a strict writing of the law that excludes these figures. (Suitably, Douglas’ image is conspicuously de-peopled.) This follows Giorgio Agamben’s thinking of the state of exception – the residents of the D.E.S. are in a state of suspension somewhere inside the law insofar as they are forced outside of the law (another lacuna). What is evident is that the authors of law and the owners of property have not yet found a buyer to authorize their claims.

A commercial retail space or gallery ushers in a thinking of property in suspension. An exhibition sets a time and duration in which the sold artwork performs the spectacular by suspending propriety between artist/gallerist/collector/viewer. Available for view, yet sold. Both the sold dot and the shopping bag parade a triumphal procession of the spoils of brand names and anonymous labour. Both are placeholders of endorsement. Imagine the proud march of shoppers with their hands full of loot, *happy as long as they remain in or near the shopping mall*.<sup>2</sup> The figure of the shopping bag, in the hands of happy consumers, functions in a manner like the sold dot alongside an artwork. The commodities hidden within it only reinforce the purchased brand names and anonymous labours hidden behind factory walls, trade relations, creditors, labour laws etc. (The flip side of this procession is evident in the recent queues of poor souls *hoping* to file for bankruptcy before new American laws restrict access to financial salvation from overwhelming debt.) We need to sense the movement of this economy pulsing through these suspended figures.

Or how about another tact? What if the joy of shopping, particular to those who can afford to shop without remorse, is not in the obtaining of the desired object, but in the parading around within the spectacle of shopping itself? The strutting shoppers are *not yet* wearing the brand names in the bags, and so they enjoy a freedom of movement that is *almost* fully possessing something that cannot be possessed: a sense of propriety over the spectacle itself. There is a desire to embody something immaterial, a figure or an image. If the spectacle is language, and is as Agamben claims, “the very communicativity and linguistic being of humans”<sup>3</sup>, then in the display of artwork alongside sold dot, shopper alongside bag, we recognize modes of authored (or authorized) exchange. The anonymous nature of the sign of this authorship keeps identity in

suspension along with propriety. Language is allowed to work *as language*, to operate as the desire to embody language, the desire to speak freely, the desire to say what wanting to say means.<sup>4</sup> Could this be the inseparable bond of the image and the body, the physis of resemblance that is the new body of humanity?<sup>5</sup>

The red dot<sup>6</sup>: in Brunen’s installation what is typically alongside the artwork becomes the artwork itself through the act of its proliferation. What is usually alongside (alongside an artwork, or alongside the title in a list of available works) is now in its proper place (its proper place also being *alongside within itself*), following the laws of its installation (1/2 inch from any other dot<sup>7</sup>). What is going to happen when these dots are on the wall of CSA? Thankfully this is unknown to us at the time we are writing this text, since the promise of a visual event in itself is the sublime hope we still, perhaps naively, have for art. Now that the “figurative prison” of painting has extended since Minimalism and abstractionism to block the very routes of escape mapped by those movements<sup>8</sup>, the sublime experience of art, and particularly of painting, seems all the more (characteristically) impossible. From a series of events in art from divisionism, pointillism, all-over painting to installation that have become art-historical figures in their own right and haunt our imagination of this work, Brunen’s unlikely escape route is through the figure itself, the ‘physis of resemblance’ offered up by our engagement with the spectacle.

The figure Brunen evokes in *SOLD* is the co-appearance of red and sold, a dizzying oscillation between the two. In the repetitive labour of the work we sense a desperation and determination to wrest the *red* from the *sold* of the dots, to free them from their ‘figurative prison’. Yet to drive out the *sold* and usher in the properly red threatens to eclipse the labour that went in to producing the work itself, which brings back the thinking of economy and its relation to the sold. It is this oscillation between red and sold, materiality and symbolic representation, that makes them sensible as such – as a movement and as language itself.

The dots occupy a different space in this work from their typical space of signification, a different -topia just to the side of their usual locale. This movement just to the side, or between registers of sensibility, is exactly what must *happen* in

the experience of the finished work, how we might be able to sense an economy of sensibility itself. This struggle to determine a contingency between red and sold, to keep this space open to thought, is the life of the work right at the lacuna of property that remains suspended in the economy of art and the spectacle.

- Hadley & Maxwell

1.These signs were brought to our attention recently by Tim Lee at his talk titled “Specific Objects and Social Subjects: Industrial Facture and the Production of Polemics in Vancouver,” hosted by Artspeak Gallery for the current series of lectures “Vancouver Art and Economies” at Emily Carr Institute, October 13, 2005.

2.The image of the triumphal procession comes from Clint Burnham’s recent talk titled “Art and Imperialism” also part of the lecture series “Vancouver Art and Economies” at Emily Carr Institute, October 6, 2005.

3.Agamben, Giorgio. Means without End. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p.82.

4.Nancy, Jean-Luc. Being Singular Plural. Stanford University Press, California, 1993, p.93. “‘Language’ is not an instrument of communication, and communication is not an instrument of Being; communication is Being, and Being is, as a consequence, nothing but the incorporeal by which bodies express themselves to one another as such.”

5.Agamben, Giorgio. The Coming Community. Trans. Michael Hardt. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p.50.

6.SOLD!

7.SOLD!

8.Lyotard, Jean-François. “Newman: The Instant”, in The Inhuman. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford University Press, California, 1988, pp.78-88.

Thanks to Lisa McIntosh for her patient and expert editing.