



Shana Lutker's *The Future of an Illusion*

By Juli Carson

I knew the earth was rotating...and I with it...and that together we were rotating beneath [Foucault's] Pendulum, whose plan never changed direction, because up there, along the infinite extrapolation of its wire beyond the choir ceiling, up toward the most distant galaxies, lay the Only Fixed Point in the universe, eternally unmoving. So it was not so much the earth to which I addressed my gaze but the heavens, where the mystery of absolute immobility was celebrated. The pendulum told me that, as everything moved – earth, solar system, nebulae, and black holes, all the children of the cosmic expansion – one single point stood still: a pivot, bolt, or hook around which the universe could move.

– Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*¹

What is the relationship between religious belief, historical agency and critical aesthetics today? How might the artist address our simultaneous desire for (and the impasse between) these intellectual categories? This is the project of Shana Lutker's *The Future of an Illusion*, to which we gain entry through the paradox demonstrated by Foucault's Pendulum.

Leon Foucault first hung his pendulum in 1851 under the dome of the Panthéon in Paris: a wire sixty-seven meters long and an iron sphere weighing twenty-eight kilos whose swing proved the rotation of the earth. If you watched the Pendulum for an hour, you could see the plane marked by the swing of the sphere shift counter-clockwise by approximately 8.4 degrees per hour. But the swing is an optical illusion because what is shifting under the Pendulum is the building itself. This creates a paradox for the viewer because the pendulum is attached to the building, which is attached to the earth, which rotates around the sun, which in turn rotates around the galaxy. And yet, as Umberto Eco points out, all this motion fails to affect the Pendulum. For the Pendulum is attached to the Only Fixed Point in the universe. In the optical illusion of materiality we thus see the conceptual fact of the infinite. Therein our concept of God and Science merge.

In Freud's 1927 book *The Future of an Illusion* religion and science converge through human *belief*. Since it's impractical to put every school child on a voyage around the world, Freud

notes, Foucault's Pendulum teaches something the child can't empirically *know* but nonetheless *believes*: that the world is a sphere. What we are taught in school is thus first taken on trust, while the path to personal conviction remains open. The same is true of religion, says Freud: "Religious ideas are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's beliefs."²

The point here is not to say science *is* religion. Rather, what Freud points out is that the teaching of religion takes recourse to scientific logic, even though the "proofs" that our ancestors have left us on this subject are full of contradictions, revisions and falsifications. As such it is impossible to prove the "truth" of religion. And yet the certitude of religious belief persists generation after generation, which led Freud – in accordance with the psychoanalytic explanation of the subject – to locate the essence of religious belief in the primordial Oedipal scene. The figure of the father, in whom the child seeks protection in-as-much as the child fears retribution, is later displaced onto the figure of God. "When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against the strange superior powers," Freud argues, "he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of the father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads....whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection."³

Enter the figure of George W. Bush. When journalist Bob Woodward famously asked Bush if he had consulted his father before invading Iraq, Bush replies, "He is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father that I appeal to." Bush's ambivalent desire for the protection (of the heavenly God) and for patricide (of the terrestrial father) couldn't be clearer. Moreover, Bush's statement underscores the simultaneous honor and aggressivity towards the father that affords a child's paternal displacement of authority and strength onto God.

Shana Lutker's *The Future of an Illusion* engages our unconscious complicity in this ambivalent state – with both the primordial scene described by Freud and its contemporary reiteration described by Woodward. If Lutker engages us as such, it is not from a realist didactic perspective but from a neo-surrealist approach, one connecting waking and sleeping states. In the past, Lutker's work consisted of sculptures, based on objects drawn from her dreams, which she in turn

photographed. Her intention was to transgress the realist boundary between "documentation" and "art." In that way, Lutker's work returns to Breton's specific notion of surrealism, one in which the artist sought to cast a conduction wire between the distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness, science and love. The belief was not just that reality informed dreams but that dreams informed reality. Breton thus conceived of dreams as the crossroads between what is conscious and unconscious, this interstice constituting a "real" space for social change.⁴

Lutker's *The Future of an Illusion* continues to mobilize the "dream state." However, the origin of the dream is no longer her own unconscious. Instead, Lutker extends Freud's notion of the dream-work to represent, allegorically, a cacophony of *public* unconscious states related to recent traumatic events. Indeed, in a post-911 world, one where we are inundated by numerous threats both cultural and natural (the ongoing War in Iraq on the one hand and Hurricane Katrina on the other), "we" as a nation desire protection. Under these circumstances, the essence of Freud's "God-as-Father," in its most pedestrian form, may today be located in the "Media-as-Distracter," one that pumps out catastrophe after catastrophe, which, in turn, further drives the popular belief in (or wish for) the One Fixed Point of the universe.

On the subject of religion Lutker's work is neither didactic nor moralistic. Rather, in accordance with surrealism's tenets, the work is *uncanny*. Freud's notion of the uncanny describes the operation of the unconscious wherein opposites don't exclude each other; rather, they *substitute* for each other, making the familiar at once unfamiliar. Lutker's photographs of readymade objects – a crutch, Styrofoam peanuts, a cake box, a cardboard bottle holder – are all disposable flimsy items that, ironically, are commonly used to protect and/or prop up other fragile objects – a broken bone, a china set, a French pastry, or a glass bottle. But look closer. Lutker has *further* propped up these props by rendering them in delicate materials such as self-hardening clay (or occasionally balsa wood). Defined by their dull monochromatic surface, Lutker's clay

Left: *Matters of Civilization*, Collection Detail Found objects, 2003-6

Center: *Cake Box*, Detail, Light-jet print, 2006

Right: *The Wrong Man?*, (February 3, 2004), Detail, Gouache on paper, 2006

Front: *Crutch*, Detail, Light-jet print, 2006

ready-mades have the visual affect of a non-self-same thing, as if from a dream; a pliable thing is hardened into a material that is, nonetheless, as likely to shatter as the object the prop was originally meant to protect. Like Dali's famous watch that melted over a tree branch in an indeterminate landscape, or Man Ray's formless photograph that collapses the distinction between a woman's neck and a phallus, Lutker's objects are paradoxical thought experiments that petrify dialectical distinctions between inside/outside, hard/soft, or disposable/permanent. But when Lutker places her photographed objects in proximity with actual ready-mades – publications with such headlines as "Is God Still Dead?" or "Can a Trial Lawyer Expose Saudi Complicity in Terrorism?" – the props become more than an aesthetic exercise in formlessness. Together, the photographs and literary ready-mades bring us back to the question of public belief in religion, science and the press, a belief that derives from in-as-much as it feeds our primordial need for protection.

The vitrine of ready-made publications, a site of unprocessed media referents, also conjures up the freely associative operation of the unconscious. Indeed, the imaginary connections made between the headlines index the specificity of the reader/viewer's *own* desire. And yet the universal connection between these publications is their inevitable disposability, so that, as a lingua franca, they paradoxically provide a permanent truth that is at once subject to change. In the media, what is certain *is* certain to fall apart the next day. As with God-the-Father, given all the contradictions that prove otherwise, we still continue to believe with certitude in the events the media feeds us. Again, like God-the-Father, the media spectacle of traumatic events re-instills our primordial need for/sense of protection, the terms of which are subject to immediate revision once the next spectacle arises and our sense of protection dissolves. And so it is: to and fro, back and forth – the contradictory pulse of our unconscious drive for the ultimate truth that will account for our trauma, our drive for that One Fixed Point in the universe. This impulse, of course, *is* the very essence of the death drive.

According to Lacan (in *Seminar X*) all objects are uncanny in that they evoke the dull lifeless object to which we will return. Be they photographed props refashioned in clay or publications encased in a vitrine, Lutker's objects similarly *threaten* the end of functionality – of the life – in things and history. But it is important to note that these objects productively threaten rather than declare such an end. Which is to say, in Lutker's hands the evocation of the contradictory state of things in the dream state – that umbilical cord to the unconscious – is a type of wake-up call for *functional* political engagement.

This question of political engagement is most directly taken up by Lutker's gouache drawings, which represent fragments from newspaper advertisements soliciting a given political action, such as: *Does California Have the Wrong Man?* Severed from their original context, from their lifeline to meaning, these fragments evoke a trauma beyond the so-called content of the message, for as Barthes notes, "trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning."⁵ But there is more at stake here. In newspapers, full-page political ads sit side-by-side full-page commodity ads. Politics and commodities are

seamlessly sold, history and objects "functioning" as props for a momentary Imaginary identification of mastery over our lives (elections, executions, preemptive invasions) and our possessions (internet, real estate, underwear). Does it matter, then, the specifics of the event referenced? Who is being executed? This conceptual lack of agency is re-presented by Lutker in the form of a literal erasure of the fragment's political context. In this way, Lutker's drawings are distinguished from other political artwork that figuratively present events associated with the American civil rights movement, a trend that characterizes a recent wave of Los Angeles art production. Yes, Lutker gives us the fetishistic mark of the hand, indicative of all drawing, but *not* the fetish of the historical "event." For the event that Lutker's drawings "represent" is the very operation of viewing and thinking about what *constitutes* political action/representation. Lutker displaces the fetish of that One Fixed Point in history – the 1960s – so prevalent as an aesthetic *effect* today. What she gives us instead, albeit under the dual operations of the uncanny and aesthetic erasure, is an evocative crisis of the *very* recent past. In the end, Lutker's work critically *provokes* the very crisis of belief described by Freud across the fields of religion, history and art.

¹ Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 5.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, The Standard Edition, Vol. XXI, (London: Hogarth Press, 1961) p. 25.

³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴ See: André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, (University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

⁵ Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," *Image/Music/Text*, Stephen Heath, trans., (New York: Noonday Press, 1991), p. 30.

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