

REGEN PROJECTS

Rachel Harrison: *Museum With Walls*, essay "Monkey House Blessing Potpourri" by Jack Bankowsky, published by the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited, London; and Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2010



Distinction
2008
(detail)

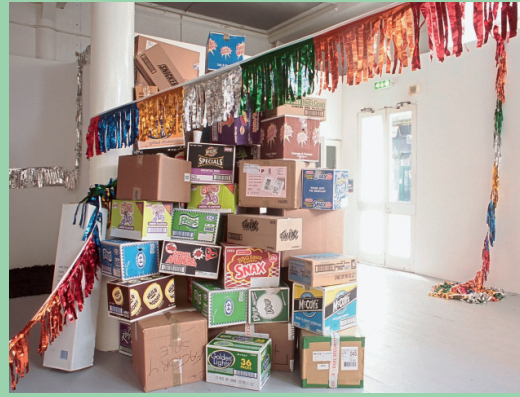
Monkey House Blessing Potpourri

Jack Bankowsky

The view my window crops from the wider world features most of “The Andaz,” a stucco and glass hotel tower, one end of which is entirely given over to a billboard announcing a new season of *Glee*, “the most beloved comedy of the year” (Wed., 9 p.m., Fox 1); a sliver of the rusticated, “Wild West” theme eatery Saddle Ranch Chop House; and a tangle of impossibly pink bougainvillea punctuated by a Dr. Seuss palm tree tipsy in the breeze. I can’t decide if this landscape—a fairly typical stretch of Tinsel Town’s fabled artery, the Sunset Strip—is ugly or beautiful, but it reminds me of a Rachel Harrison, of the way this artist’s sculptures and, for lack of a better word, installations bunch and parse disparate textures and references (“from Marfa to the *National Enquirer*,” as she has put it), one-upping the real world’s inspired way with the improbable.¹

Windows are not a bad place to begin. Harrison’s work is all about frames, about what lies outside the frame and what goes unnoticed within it—about, that is, the blind spots in our everyday imagining. Her penchant for extreme syntaxes, for the far-flung scrap of detritus—pop cultural, but also high artistic—may occasion a nod to a now-forgotten celebrity (“I don’t know who Shakin’ Stevens is,” the artist confesses, “but he must have been famous if they made a mirror out of him”), or it may inspire a passage of gestural painting (impossibly naïf but for the fact that her handiwork shows up on the side of a pedestal instead of a canvas). For “Consider the Lobster,” a selective survey of past sculptures and mise-en-scènes, the blind spot (read, the center of attention) is the frame itself, including the big frame of the museum. Not only has the artist approached her oeuvre as a shape-shifting Gesamtkunstwerk, reframing past efforts for each stop on the tour, she has put the white cube that contains and constrains them though its paces. Indeed, at Bard, the walls of the museum themselves were every bit as much a protagonist as “Shakin’,”

Car Stereo Parkway
2005
Transmission
Gallery, Glasgow



or painting, or, for that matter, "Sculpture" itself, the medium that, despite the rigors to which Harrison subjects it, remains her anchor and degree zero.

In one work, a reprise of *Marilyn with Wall* from 2004/09, a wall—or rather two walls, in two separate galleries—have been torn down, the wreckage stacked to form an imposing support for, of all things, a small framed photograph of a photograph of Marilyn Monroe; in another, *Indigenous Parts IV* (2009), a wall built, improbably, of standard-issue museum pedestals offers a strategic peek into the adjoining installation, *Perth Amboy* (2001/09); and, in a third, a perimeter wall has been opened to the world outside. No demolition, I should qualify, was required to achieve this expansive effect; like much in Harrison's art, this hole in the museum was "found" as opposed to created. Indeed, a large plate-glass window lighting an awkward corridor space provides the backdrop for an arrangement of nineteen cans of aerosol air freshener, a gesture that simultaneously extends the artist's frame to include the landscape beyond and proposes, in the guise of packaged air, a hilarious figure for everything that exceeds the frame, that escapes our efforts to order and to understand.



Marcel Duchamp
Air de Paris
1919 / 1939

KISS
2005
(video still)

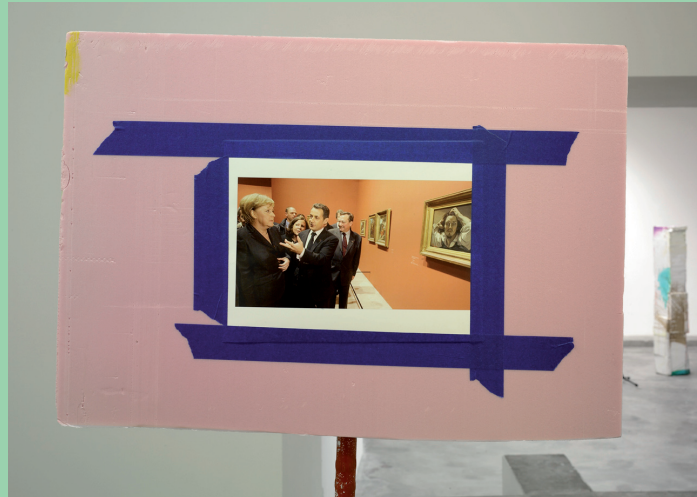
Tinhenge

Air is the stuff outside—the fresh air of this upstate New York campus town—but also the invisible molecules that bump about between the pedestals, the stale air inside the museum. Harrison’s toilet-tank Stonehenge (squint and the tin canisters look like mighty menhirs) is the conceit that connects the nothing-special view through the window—a couple of plastic sawhorse-style roadblocks, a metal shed dressed up with a hardware-store trellis—and the calibrated chaos inside. *Car Stereo Parkway* (2005–09) includes not just the colorful cans but a wall-size projection of a KISS concert (with the sound shut off) and a posse of chunky abstract “sculptures” slathered in her signature iridescent acrylic paint and adorned with, for instance, a Rastafarian’s knitted cap with dreadlock extensions—or a pair of fake lemons. One “sculpture,” a large wood pedestal parked atop a dolly as if it were about to be rolled out of the gallery, is as plain as a pine coffin on one side, while the other, hung with an African mask, reveals a paint job to put Per Kirkeby to shame. The pièce de resistance, however, must be the pair of platform boots sticking out from beneath this sizable block, as if a tornado had just dropped Auntie Em’s farmhouse on Gene Simmons. The whole array is festooned with foil bunting, recalling a used-car lot on sale day: the festive fringe streams from a ceiling corner (where it ropes in the video projector that might otherwise have gone unnoticed) to the sculptures below—and finally out into the adjoining corridor where the aerosol totems command the horizon.

Beautiful Breath

Harrison’s air-freshening feint inevitably recalls Duchamp’s *Air de Paris*, the 1919 work in which the master bottled the stale air of the then-dying art capital he had recently abandoned for the fresh air (!?!) of Manhattan—and, indeed, her colorful canisters brilliantly update the blown-glass ampule for our cheese-ball present. Harrison’s gesture marks her debt to her precursor’s example—but also, and inevitably, her distance from it. If Duchamp’s longing for fresh air was famously

Mustard and Ketchup
2008
(detail)



motivated by his frustration with the institutions of bourgeois art (and his rough handling at the Salon des Indépendants of 1912), if he fully intended to leave the art object behind—both its defining autonomy and the retinal surplus that autonomy permitted—Harrison is happy to keep the “Art” in the picture. Indeed, her work admits the whole universe of retinal and plastic play Duchamp’s cerebral theater disavowed, and “sculpture,” its old-fashioned conventions, supplies a kind of syntactical base unit for her project, though given the way she torments and teases her totems, knocks the sculpture off its pedestal only to put it back on top, the spirit of her precursor never seems completely absent.

Retreats—inspired or merely amnesiac—from Duchamp’s determined purity are hardly rare. Rauschenberg stands above the crowd in surveying the overpopulated divide that separates Harrison’s use of found objects from that of their large-looming predecessor, and yet, despite the affinity suggested by the plastic and retinal qualities Rauschenberg brought to his scavenging, a Harrison never really feels like a Rauschenbergian “Combine”—perhaps because the older artist’s fabrications seem so intractably bound by compositional laws inherited from the abstract painting that preceded him, unities that inevitably supersede the found material in his finally familiar-feeling designs. Indeed, musing on her 2006 work *Stella 1*, Harrison notes that the found souvenir mirror featuring '90s boy band Hanson included in this work and the reference in her piece’s title to the famous abstract painter “don’t really come together.... They coexist. The mirror is closer to a Duchampian object [than a Rauschenbergian “Combine”],” she offers, but then adds, “I have made it less pure because of all the Stella around it!” Jessica Stockholder, to cite an artist of more recent vintage, also makes her readymade material “less pure.” Indeed when Stockholder emerged in the late '80s, the exaggeratedly retinal, “too formal” quality of her fabrications suggested a counterintuitive step backward from Dadaist orthodoxy but one that as such constitutes a potentially productive heresy. It is in this respect, more than for, say, the high-key, artificial-feeling palette she shares with Harrison, that her example remains relevant here. Of course, where Stockholder reduces her found material to very nearly purely formal “push-pull,” Harrison depends on the densely encoded meanings that attend each scrap of pop-cultural detritus she incorporates, which explains why artists like Cady Noland and Isa Genzken are finally her closer kin.

When Hangover Becomes Form

If there is any sense in asking how Harrison—or, for that matter, any contemporary we might liken her to—extends the tradition of the readymade, it will have to take into account what happened between the ampule and the aerosol can, between the master’s first ground-clearing response to the fate of art in the age of manufacture and our own aggravated global-capitalist present. What



Isa Genzken
Oil
2007

happened is the “culture industry,” which brings us—in the CliffsNotes version—to Andy Warhol, Harrison’s other omnipresent precursor. What Harrison knows with Duchamp is that the house of cards of capital-A art is just that; what she learns from Andy is that there is no experience of the world today outside the ruses of the publicity machine. Neither lesson implies that a measure of old-fashioned, pre-Duchampian, autonomous art does not circulate in the virtual ocean of our modern-day reality. The old forms have hardly vanished; they linger, exert pressure—as popular perception, as institutional apparatus, as habit of mind or, more positively, tradition. They just mean differently (because we know what that phantasm of Art consists in), and the way they mean, it seems to me, is rather craftily captured in Harrison’s pedestal game.

Two questions are paramount: How does “Art” work in Harrison’s “art”? And how does “pop” (meaning pop culture) work in her Pop art? The answer to both, surprisingly, is that they work in much the same way. Harrison’s will to dare the edge of meaninglessness evinces itself at the level of both form and content, which, not that they can be divided, run the gamut as we have seen from pure paint to tabloid drivel. Art is as much a readymade in Harrison’s work as the souvenir Hanson mirror or the aerosol can. If the shovel and the bottle rack are objects of utility, generic types, and as such first and foremost about not being art, Harrison’s “sculptures” are less concerned with Duchamp’s baseline maneuver. They are at once highly artful in their inhabitation and parsing of space; they are, that is to say, specific objects. But, more important, the readymade scavengings she incorporates in her work carry specific meanings; they are artifacts that map the world as she lives in it. Take, for instance, her aerosol Stonehenge. If, on first impression, the work suggests mere whimsy, the microcosm of air refreshing becomes in Harrison’s hands not only an out-of-nowhere recipe to make a sculpture today, but—hilariously!—the grain of sand in which we glimpse the larger order of global-capitalist things. With *Secretos del Campo* (its canister graphics all new-growth and green apples), the business of disguising odor reveals its global spirit, as does *Cool Inspiration*, a “*lutterfrischer*” from the “Fantasy Collection,” promising both “*qualité*” and “*prix*” with the image of a perfect wave. By calling our attention to the restroom lingua franca that is air freshening, Harrison wakes us up to the creepy/funny ways our contemporary global village hangs together. She clearly savors the surfeit of absurdity—both linguistic and retinal—that attends the

Ringo
2004
(detail)



packaging of this perfectly ludicrous product. Air Wick Vanilla Indulgence (“New!” from Wizard), fittingly decked in creamy pales, contrasts compellingly with the autumnal tones and cobalt cap of Glade’s Apple Cinnamon. And who can resist the formal frisson where a translucent, frosted spray top breaks ranks with the opaque and shiny rule; or doubt—here Harrison mounts a challenge to the global consumer and art connoisseur!—that Monkey House Blessing (Potpourri), as the label boasts in pidgin English, is “100% great.”

One need not plot the lines between each improbable part of *Car Stereo Parkway*—between, for instance, the myth type embodied in the Wicked Witch of the West and KISS frontman Gene Simmons, or the camp catharsis of the glam-rock spectacle and the ritual placations of institutionalized art, but the “subliminal” intercutting (willfully ham-handed in point of fact) of images of air-freshener cans into the Simmons’s footage—a daft sendup of our public-relations culture via the stereotype of advertising’s old-school coercive tactics—is too funny not to celebrate for its own reward, never mind as the glue that binds this web of incommensurables.

Empire

Once while visiting the artist’s studio, I noticed a script for Jack Smith’s *Brassieres of Atlantis: A Lobster Sunset Pageant* in a metal mixing bowl, and it occurred to me to ask Harrison if she could recall how many artists she had explicitly referenced in her work. Warhol, it turned out, appeared at least two or three times (or many more, depending on how literal one wants to be). He shows up expressly in *Marilyn with Wall* and *Untitled (Sotheby’s-Jack Smith)* (2007), which puts him ahead of Jack Smith (one appearance) and behind Courbet (four, including a cameo in *Mustard and Ketchup*, 2008) and neck-and-neck with both Hans Haacke (*Nice Rack*, 2006, and *Hans Haacke with sculpture*, 2005) and Frank Stella (*Stella 1* and *Stella 2*, both 2006). Of course, Warhol can also be seen to figure rather prominently in *Perth Amboy* (2001/09), if, like me, you can’t look at a cheap plaster reproduction of Marilyn Monroe’s head in a cardboard Stor-All box (helpfully labeled “Marilyn” in Magic Marker lest one forget her!) without thinking of Andy, whose eyes these days it is so hard not to see everything in art—and life—through. What Harrison likes is the fact that this



souvenir head is “personalized.” “Hand painted and badly done” in fact, it doesn’t even really look like the star, and yet we instantly know that it is she: “It would be slower,” Harrison reminds us, “if it weren’t for Warhol.”

The Honey Collector
2002

Harrison means all of this to be part of “the read” of *Perth Amboy*, which includes a series of photographs she snapped on location at a reported sighting of the Virgin Mary in the window of a home in the eponymous New Jersey exurb. Harrison remembers showing up to document the faithful filing up to press their palms against the visited windowpane and witnessing one pilgrim pulling a holy card from her wallet to demonstrate that the blotch of humidity (or whatever that is on the window) really was the Virgin Mary. Harrison, an artist who never employs a photograph without finding a way to remind us that pictures inevitably lie, presumably relishes the frisson of these “just-the-facts” shots of real people paying tribute to an index of the miraculous. It is no accident that the icon in a box, the star as both victim and victor, and as such as pure a figment of our culture of celebrity as has yet been conjured, stands by, if a little the worse for wear.

Marilyn, Andy, the Virgin Mary: Boldface names are not the point of course, and during my studio visit Harrison got fidgety when she suspected I was hung up on the Warhol celebrity connection, quickly diverting my attention from the overt cameos, from her Marylins and her Liz, to *Frog* (2006). The film, a thirty-minute loop, is indeed her *Empire*, or, as the artist quips, maybe just a screen test, though the camera does not turn the warts-and-all superstar into a princess; in fact, in keeping with Warhol’s celebrated method, nothing much happens at all. Eventually, the sound of a passing plane or a chorus of crickets tips you off that a measure of duration is involved, but I like the fact that Harrison omits the running time from the wall label, so you are not too quickly sure if you are rewatching a one-minute loop or up against an all-day ordeal. I will confess I did not wait out (or even see) a supporting frog that, in a lightning-fast instant, apparently hops into the pond.

If the Bard exhibition, like the reconfigured pieces within it, can be treated as a work in its own right, then *Frog* plays a role as significant as the window behind the air-freshener cans. Just as Harrison’s penchant for distended syntaxes finds its spatial outer limit in the uninflected landscape beyond the cans, it finds its temporal outer limit in this film (and the specter of real time with which



5 Guys Named Jean
1996

it teases us). There is something reassuring about the still but breathing frog presiding over Harrison's cotton-candy *Merzbau*. Harrison leads her viewers to the edge of legibility, those moments where, as in a garden, order (however haphazard in her case) gives way to the untended wood. And Harrison is happy if her viewers get a little lost there: "It is OK," she says it herself, "if things are missed"—though, if she is honest, this artist, like most, is happier if the telling nuance is discovered just in time. One of my favorite moments in "Consider the Lobster" occurred when I took my place in a darkened room to view a video called *Ringo* (2004). As I settled into the six-minute loop, a matter-of-factly visceral take on a Dalmatian with a bone, my hand passed across the wood slats of the bench beneath me and rubbed against an unexpected bit of metal, a delicate chain, I discovered as I squinted and took a closer look, with a charm dangling from it. Had a previous viewer—mindlessly? with some obscure purpose?—unclasped it from her neck and fastened it there? But then I noticed another chain and another charm, and then another one still—an uncanny effect that came at the end of the show and made me want to start again at the beginning.

"Art," as I have argued, is as much Harrison's subject as the mass-trash culture that puts the category under pressure, and, as with Duchamp before her, her work forever asks what art is and where it comes from. Yet where the master posed the questions as a sequence of serene and well-timed acts of negation, Harrison's approach is decidedly maximal. "Art" for her is a bit like the famous auto junkyard in Godard's 1968 *Sympathy for the Devil* (one of her favorite films, though, she owns, "I am too old to say that"). Just add to the Fordist scrap heap the wreckage of modern art. "Art" shows up in all sorts of guises—as pedestals, as packing crates, as Cubist combines gummed in goo. It is almost as if Harrison is making a map of where we are today that includes all the ways art has tried to outpace the recuperative rhythms of capital and failed. *Performance* (2008), for instance, starts with a standard wooden shipping crate of precisely the type in which a sculpture moves around the international art world, which she employs as a pedestal, if one that,



Untitled
1991

Brancusi-like, is also a part of the art. Labeled with the name “Martha Rosler,” and the word “Performance” (presumably the title of a work by that artist, though subsequent investigations revealed Rosler never made a piece so named), the crate supports another plain pine pedestal that looks as if it may have just been pulled from the shipping container on which it is perched. The words of course do as much labor in this artistic equation as the painted pedestal (or the crate that supports it), a fact Harrison was banking on when she invited two students to collaborate in “making a sculpture,” by each producing a painting for opposite faces of the wooden box that, she instructed them, should embody one side of the venerable tension between the abstract and the figurative. Of course, the old-timey dichotomy is implicitly supplanted—or better, mirrored—by the tension between the “presentness” of her sculptural object and the heretic theatricality evoked by the label “Performance” (not to mention by her collaborative gesture). It is this dichotomy, of course, that undergirds the stakes of Minimalist sculpture, a legacy that still weighs on an artist who might yet consider herself a sculptor, and as such it plots another point in the diagram of her expanded field of operations, and makes fresh work of it at the same time.

Sympathy for the Devil

For Harrison, the cat-and-mouse game with capital (its power to co-opt art’s evasions—and turn it into profit!) never strays too far outside the frame. Take *Indigenous Parts IV* (2009): In it, there’s a film of a country auction with a typical motormouth shill serving as the price ticker for the everything-but-the-kitchen sink proceedings. Here, indeed, the readymade—amusingly suggested by the what-the-hell-is-it, low-end auction objects on the block—and its double bind (the common object, once a refuge from art, turns into a precious commodity) hark back to an earlier work like *Untitled* (1991), in which a tatty fur pelt ornamented with generic family-album-style snapshots nods to *La Peau de l’Ours* (skin of the bear), the band of speculators (perhaps the first such racket) brought together by André Level in 1904 to purchase avant-garde works with the explicit intent of selling them later at a profit.

The ways in which the marketplace (and art’s relationship to it) surfaces in Harrison’s art are curious. It never makes itself available via the sort of sociological/anthropological exposition you get in, say, Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story* (1999), where an industry as a symptom of multinational capital

Jean-Luc Godard
Sympathy for the Devil
1968



is dissected. It appears rather in poetic, epiphanic moments—structurally mirrored at a formal level—that reveal, often comically, the economic networks that undergird our cultural doings. Think again of the air-freshening cans or her signal *The Honey Collector*, a 2002 sculpture that did for squeeze-bear honey what *Car Stereo Parkway* did for canned air. A Flintstones-primitive display shelf arrayed with near-identical (and presumably competing) squeeze honey bears makes us laugh out loud at the market-induced mutation whereby honey—generally and not just a particular brand!—comes in bears. But it's on the flipside of this piece—one of my personal favorites—that things get interesting. Posted on a tilted slab surfaced, like the rest of the piece, in what looks like rough-trowel concrete is a handmade flier advertising the services of a “reliable CAT-SITTER” with “reasonable rates and excellent references,” complete with a row of tear-off phone numbers for interested customers. Here we get two economies: that of the mass-produced food industry and that of a DIY system controlled by early teens and urban widows. Oh yes, the third side of the sculpture features a detail of Marlon Brando's face, an inscrutable reference that nonetheless typifies the presiding role of celebrity culture in Harrison's art.

It makes good sense that Godard's oft-dismissed experiment is a landmark for Harrison because the director shoe-horns everything from Black Liberation monologues to footage of the Rolling Stones into his film without, it would seem, worrying unduly about seductive camera angles or editing, relying instead on the bait and glue of Mick Jagger in his prime. Honing, in repetitive rehearsal, his perfect product (the song of the title) and his indelible star, Mick remains, like Harrison's Liz, or Marilyn, or Marlon—or, this is just like Harrison, Suzanne Pleshette!?!—the larger-than-life fact of life we can't help staring up at.

Vanity Fare

Bob Colacello, Andy's right-hand man during the artist's café-social late phase, remembers the stock retort he received in the face of his own occasional perplexity over the credentials of this or that new social quarry (the ex-wife, say, of some demi-bold-face industry name): “Oh Bob, you don't know who so-and-so is? She's a big star.” What I have always liked about this anecdote—more than just the irony with respect to the star system Andy's quixotic promotions suggest—is the artistic will it reveals to turn the mystery of the fifteen minutes inside out for his, and ultimately our own, edification. Like so many alert artists in Andy's aftermath, Harrison is an avid student of our tabloid culture; indeed there are lots of “big” (and even genuinely big) stars in her art. And yet for Harrison, as for Andy (though he often feigned the contrary), fame is never the subject of passive awe but a quantity to be parsed and played with, if not perhaps quite owned in the master's manner. Andy, for instance, took great pleasure in juxtaposing the sanctified deity and the next-to-nobody; indeed, in his simulacral theater of king making, he even anointed his own pantheon of superstars, a kind of eerie double to Hollywood's star system—and Harrison can be seen to



Bustle in Your Hedgerow
1999

play a similar sort of fame game in her own art. Take, for instance, her title *5 Guys Named Jean* (1996), comprising Sartre, Genet, Basquiat, Renoir, and Godard, or, to jump ahead to the present, her *Vanity Fare* of 2007, a work that pairs footage of Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean* with shots of “the gentleman grafter,” a Manhattan street-corner personality whose dandyish demeanor and apparent success peddling vegetable peelers earned him a full-length profile in the magazine from which the piece takes its name. My point is that if, for instance, Minimalist sculpture is an anchor in Harrison’s world and in her work, so too is Depp, or Liz, or ubiquitous golf-superstar (and erstwhile advertising mother lode) Tiger Woods, who enters Harrison’s oeuvre as a title (all-important in this 2006 work). That Woods, the world’s greatest golfer (and the most boring man on the planet), recently got a whole lot more interesting—at least by the standards of those velvet-rope predators that spurred his fall from grace—constitutes a bit of tabloid *schadenfreude* that will add to the meaning of Harrison’s *Tiger Woods* in ways, one can hazard, the artist has not failed to appreciate.

Like Tiger (or, less prosaically, Marilyn), Liz is both victor and victim of the long lens of the paparazzi. Warhol’s other great subject shows up in Harrison’s *Bustle in Your Hedgerow* (1999), on the side of a Serra-like obstruction tinted and textured to evoke the clipped-privet boundary the paparazzo must have peeped over to snap the medicated insomniac as she roamed her garden in a nightie, potboiler in hand. The work, one of Harrison’s remarkable early efforts, is a hedge against the irrelevance of the phenomenological body in a virtual world—and the tiny photo of Liz mounted on the great green slab, the punctum that makes the artist’s last stand of Minimalism contemporary.

Harrison asks the big questions: What is art? But also, What would it be like to be Imelda Marcos? And what, after all, does sculpture look like in all of this? It looks, to squeeze in one final work (and perhaps my favorite Harrisonian title of all), a lot like her 2004 installation *Posh Floored as Ali G Tackles Becks*, which is to say a little bit like sculpture has always looked—but a lot like Modern Life.

¹ All quotations from conversation with Rachel Harrison, October 20, 2009.