

## Aude Moreau : Refinement Vacuum

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## Aude MOREAU: Refinement Vacuum

Bernard SCHÜTZE

It is no secret that art often serves to embellish opulent ownership and by extension to obscure wealth producing production process that are far from beautiful. In her monumental installation *Tapis de sucre 3* (shown at Fonderie Darling, March 20–June 1, 2008) the artist Aude Moreau inverts this logic of embellishment to reveal, rather than conceal, the links between an object of cultural prestige—a carpet—and an industrially mass produced product—refined sugar—that ubiquitous consumer staple with its economic glory days and sinister plantation history. In conflating the real and metaphorical spaces associated with these objects the installation generates an implicit social critique that is made operative from

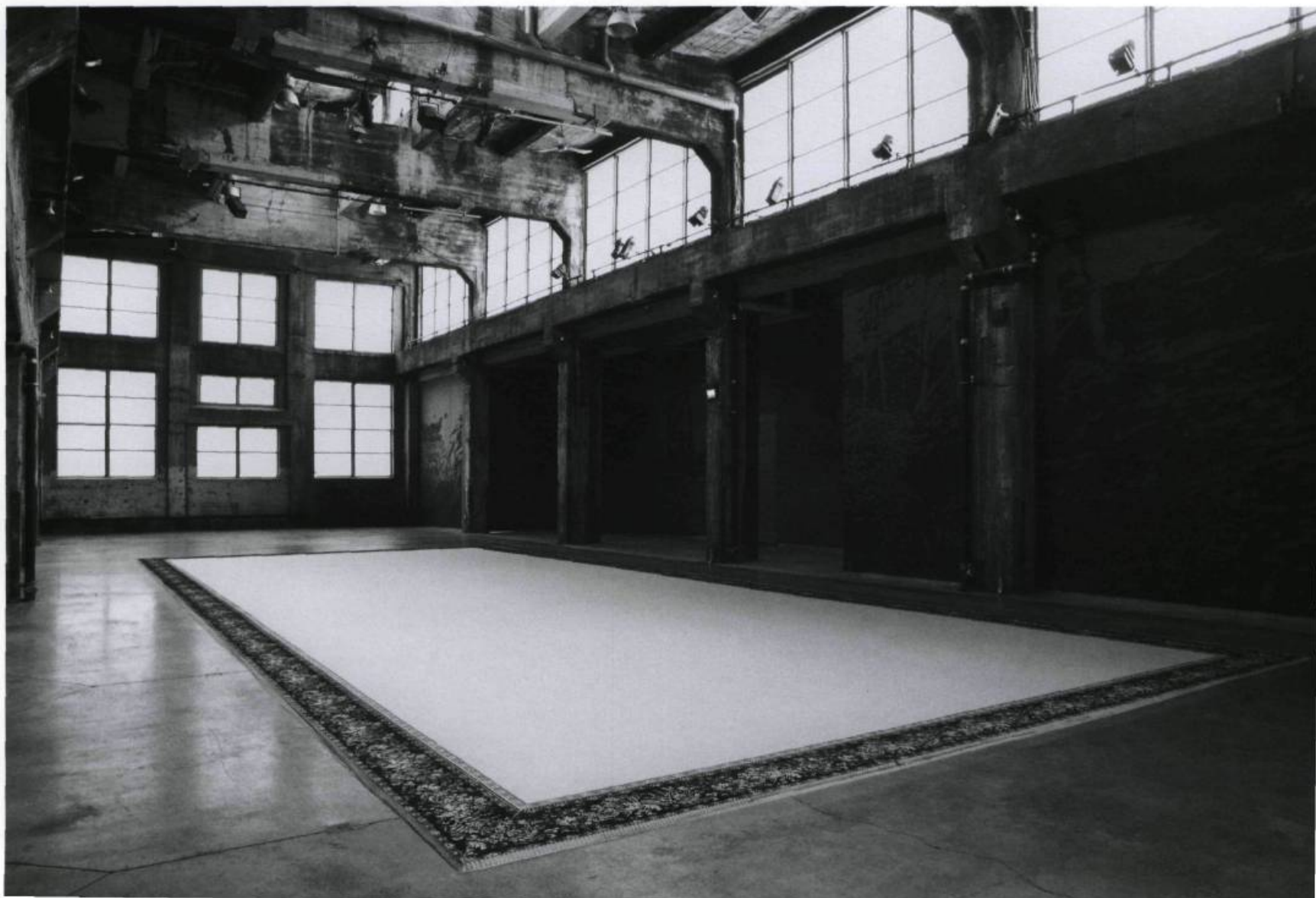
within the materiality of the aesthetic display. The approach hinges on a clever use of *trompe-l'œil* technique. Usually such a technique is based on producing an illusion through careful artistry, an illusion so well rendered that the delight in the display displaces the awareness of its material fabrication. In continuation with countering the logic of embellishment Moreau uses the *trompe-l'œil* so that the illusionary display returns the viewer to its physical constitution and confronts him/her with the disillusion of an underlying reality squarely at odds with the beauty of the initial object.

The illusionary object in question is a 24' x 57' x 6" carpet with a large white rectangular centre bordered by

a red and black motif perimeter. The viewer is at first bedazzled by the fact that what appears to be a woven carpet is actually made of a stupendous quantity of sugar (2 1/2 tons to be exact) and red and black pigments all of which have been meticulously and laboriously laid out to produce this convincing *trompe-l'œil*. It is in the way that the sugar carpet is interwoven with its immediate surroundings that propels the installation from a merely clever exercise in adroit craftsmanship to a compelling work of art that challenges ordinary perceptions and conceptions. The sweeping horizontality of the carpet and the imposing verticality of the large Fonderie Darling gallery space make for a perfect fit here—arguably the most successful use of this locale to date—and this both on a formal and referential level. In its grandeur the carpet adds a touch of airy expanse to

the early modern industrial architecture of the space, and in turn the Fonderie's imposing walls and windows buttress the *objet d'art's* stately repose. Yet, this decorative pleasantness still operates on the level of embellishment and the illusionary. The disillusion appears when the material component of the carpet—the refined sugar—is articulated with the industrial history and realities that the premises bear witness to, and which have everything to do with economics, markets and agricultural labour; realities that the carpet as a symbol of bourgeois well-being and power ultimately serves to conceal—but in its sugar coated *trompe-l'œil* form it is precisely this concealment that the installation thwarts and undoes. This crucial link is further underscored by two barely visible and almost spectral black on grey murals on the gallery's east wall. The first

Aude MOREAU, *Tapis de sucre 3*, 2008. Installation. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.





mural shows an image of a plantation worker cutting sugar in a field, while the second displays tractors delivering sugar cane to a processing plant dotted with large metal columns which strangely echo and bridge into the gallery's similar looking metal columns. Without overstating the conjunction, these pictorial additions enable Moreau to clearly lay bare the enmeshed relation between industrial sugar refinement production processes—with their implicit history of exploitation and inhumanity—and cultural refinement and exclusive comfort of which the carpet is a rife symbol. The force of the installation resides in its capacity to overlap and interconnect these spheres by using the metaphor and reality of refinement as a source of tension. In the moment that one perceptually and cognitively shifts away from the illusion of the "real" carpet to its material make-up and its connection with power relations outside the realm of art, one is brought back to it as a work of art that references notions of cultural value which are complicit

with-, or willfully blind to these relations. A telling historical example of this intertwining of industrial and cultural refinement are the philanthropic efforts of sugar barons such as Henry Tate (the founder of the Tate gallery) and H.O. Havemeyer (an avid collector of Impressionist works, now bequeathed to the Metropolitan museum) both of who were driven by a desire to *refine* the labouring masses through contact with fine art. There are of course many other, less direct connections to be made between these spheres of sugar-driven cultural and industrial refinement (consumption, taste, empty calories, sugar as a medium/ingredient etc.) and Moreau is careful here to leave this open to the viewer's imagination and predilection.

To return for one instance to the installation proper, there is one element that is worth highlighting—the presence of the white monochrome field at the centre of the carpet. In my view it is this space that best resumes the functioning of the operative *refinement* tension. By placing a large white

space in the middle of the carpet and fencing it off through the culturally connoted black and red perimeters, the artist names an empty space, a vacuum where the cultural and industrial registers meet and collide. Aesthetically the white space is a positive erasure that admits only its own presence, while from a political, economic or cultural level it names another sort of erasure: that of exclusion, of a comfort based on extracting labour force, of creating a zone of embellishment that negates the very ground of its existence. For after all, to create a vacuum requires an expenditure of considerable energy, and by metaphorical extension to set up a sweet spot of worry free economic comfort also demands an extensive sapping of living energies: all this the vacuum absorbs but does not show. It is this invisible, or rather, obscured divide that Moreau succeeds in artistically revealing through the paradoxical make-up of the carpet surface and the many levels it references. Fittingly the dismantling of the show was carried out in a spirit that is coherent

with the work's spirit and material. To underscore the ephemeral nature of the site-specific work and the significance of the white vacuum/erasure the artist chose to dismount the work by hiring an industrial vacuum cleaner system and team to literally vacuum/erase the work and relegate the sugar back into its industrial circuitry. A magnificent and appropriate ending for this installation that will certainly leave a lasting bitter-sweet aftertaste. An aftertaste born of the collision of art's beautiful embellishments and the hideous and less tasteful realities that also flavour art but which the art world is all too often content to sweep under the proverbial carpet. ←

Aude Moreau, *Tapis de sucre 3*  
Fonderie Darling, Montreal  
March 20 – June 1, 2008

Bernard SCHÜTZE is cultural theorist, art critic and translator. He is interested in the aesthetics of the media arts, and more particularly in the relationship between the body and new media.

Aude MOREAU, *Tapis de sucre 3*, 2008. Vacuuming the installation. Photo: Dominique Chartrand.

Aude MOREAU, *Tapis de sucre 3*, 2008. Detail. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

