

# rachel uffner

Pam Lins: *model model model*

April 19 – May 31, 2015

Opening Reception: Sunday, April 19, 6 – 8 pm

“It’s For You,” by Juliet Koss

“When does the telephone become what it is?” asked Avital Ronell in *The Telephone Book* in 1989, six years after mobile phones went on sale in the United States. The first phone call had taken place in 1875, between Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas A. Watson; almost 75 years later, the Model 500 black rotary phone began setting the postwar standard. The Princess model, marketed to women in a range of colors, was produced from 1959 until 1994; the Model 1500, with push buttons, appeared in 1963. Carefully designed and manufactured objects of mass communication, these phones rolled off the American assembly line; they were nothing without their network. As Ronell wrote, the telephone “presupposes the existence of another telephone, somewhere, though ... its singularity is what we think of when we say ‘telephone.’” You may hold that special object, waiting for that call, but the phone you’re holding is a model. And at its heart lies a notion of scale: there are now more phones on earth than there are people, and your phone belongs as much to the global network as it does to you.

What does it mean to craft these obsolete machine objects by hand, to cobble them together in clay, to paint them colors the Princess designers never dreamed of, to render them obdurate—and useless?

In the 1920s, the golden age of rationalized labor and assembly lines, abstract models of all types suffused artistic and architectural culture. Soviet artists especially embraced model making, and nowhere more zealously than at VKhUTEMAS (The Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops), the school of art, architecture, and design founded in Moscow in 1920, renamed VKhUTEIN (The Higher Artistic and Technical Institute) in 1927, and dissolved in 1930. Opening three years after the October Revolution, the school was known for its radical pedagogical approach and Constructivist connections. Student models from the “Space” course, taught by the architect Nikolai Ladovskii, investigated formal and spatial relationships, but far from being useful designs to be built later, elsewhere, at a larger scale, they invoked works by Kasimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin—all of whom taught at VKhUTEMAS. Aiming to replace outmoded bourgeois art forms, avant-garde Soviets turned to models: objects defying classification that promised a utopian dissolution of the categories of artistic production.

The VKhUTEMAS models no longer exist, but their photographic documentation, standard practice in architectural schools by the 1920s, generated a remarkable visual archive: models seen in black and white from one side only, arranged along the assembly line of the studio workbench. In reconstituting these images as a series of new models, Pam Lins jams these categories together and sorts them out. “One fundamental function of images is to show,” Bernd Mahr declared in an essay of 2008; “images show themselves, and they show something else.” You look at them, and you look through them. But a model, whether two- or three-dimensional, is both an image and not an image. “Unlike with images,” Mahr explained, “a model’s fundamental function is to transport something. Models are carriers of cargo.”

The objects made by Lins—a Bell telephone, a VKhUTEMAS model, a table built to the specifications set out by Enzo Mari in his open-source manual *Autoprogettazione* of 1974—are at the same time models for some other form of artistic production: things beyond the categories of craft, art, design, sculpture, image, capitalist consumerism, or communist nostalgia. They, too, exist within a network. “An object’s status as a model depends more strongly on the judgment of the perceiving subject than does its status as an image,” Mahr insists. An image can be an image even without us; a model needs us to be there, engaging, taking it as a model, tracing it back, bringing it forward: picking up the cargo it transmits.

Go on—answer the model. It’s for you.

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**Juliet Koss**, Associate Professor of Art History at Scripps College in Claremont, California, is the author of *Modernism after Wagner* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), a finalist for the College Art Association's Charles Rufus Morey Book Award, along with numerous essays on 19th- and 20th-century German and Soviet art, architecture, and related fields. The recipient of fellowships from (among others) the Getty Research Institute, Canadian Centre for Architecture, the NEH, the Mellon Foundation, and the Humboldt Foundation in Germany, she was a Fellow of the American Academy in Berlin in 2009 and, in 2011, the Rudolf Arnheim Visiting Professor at the Humboldt University, Berlin. She is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University and in spring 2016 will be a Fellow at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., quietly writing the book "Model Soviets."

**Pam Lins** recent solo exhibitions include The Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY and The Suburban, Oak Park, IL. She was also recently included in exhibitions at The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, CCS Bard Galleries, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, and she was a participant in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. In 2013-2014, Lins held the David and Roberta Logie fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. She also received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2008 and the Howard Foundation Fellowship from Brown University in 2007. Lins has held teaching positions at The Cooper Union, Bard College, and Princeton University. She lives and works in Brooklyn and holds a MFA from Hunter College.

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