

Balance: Art and Nature

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James Carl's Euphemistic Reality

An artwork is not just a signpost to be grafted onto the walls of some museum's warehouse of tautologies sometime in the future. Nor is it just something to fill a servile place in a public space allotted by city planners and architects to assuage nagging doubts about the wholesale disruption and dislocation of the city as a community. It is a reflection of a far less grand and self-assured search for meaning. The controversy surrounding the removal of Richard Serra's monumental *Tilted Arc* sculpture from Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan illustrates the contentious debate surrounding public art. Installed in 1981, it had been commissioned by the General Services Administration in 1979. This 120-foot-long, twelve-foot-high, seventy-three tonne leaning curve of welded steel was the epitome of modernism. Inflexible and unyielding, it dominated the public space like a heroic and confrontational spectre — the very model of social independence, the ego's eye — modernity personified. For the local office workers it was, in Suzi Gablik's words, "another version of the Berlin Wall."¹ As one employee of the Federal Department of Education stated:

It has dampened our spirits every day. It has turned into a hulk of rusty steel and clearly, at least to us, it doesn't have any appeal. It might have artistic value but just not here ... and for those of us at the Plaza I would like to say, please do us a favour and take it away.²

The debate and subsequent trial became confused. Issues of caring and responsiveness were thrown out of the window as different interest groups clamoured to protect or dismantle the piece. In the end Serra lost. In a caustic comment on one of Serra's prop pieces — which as well as looking dangerous, actually killed one workman and injured others — Montréal-based artist James Carl created a work titled *Que Serra* (1990). He simply propped a cardboard box on top of a cardboard cylinder in the corner of his studio. The same minimalist notions and architectural relations were established in microcosm, yet were rendered harmless. As such, *Que Serra* became a humorous parody of the extra-human expectations and desires of the artist who

seeks to fulfil the obligations of the West's formalist tradition — its self-evident materialist ethos. The piece raised questions about artistic freedom in the modernist sense, where the artist dominates by opposing domination, confronts in reaction to confrontation, and reduces empathy to a whimper. In the process, the artist excludes the public at large, who are as remote from public art as they are from the politicians who sponsor these projects. The codes and signifiers of our postmodern paradigm are so pervasive that they create a web where the real and the artificial meaning of art and life become intertwined and confused, just as they have become in all areas of life.

In the solo show, *Border Patterns* (1990), held at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, China, James Carl assembled a group of works that expressed a different state of confusion — an intercultural one, far from the Western hue and cry over formalism. With the ghosts of the Tiananmen Square massacre still lingering, Carl presented a foreigner's view of the cultural situation in Beijing, confronting, among other topics, the emergence of a consumer ethic. Demands for products and services were becoming part of the new spirit of communist China. Objects found by Carl in Beijing markets were assembled within architectural and artifact constructions made of chopsticks whose configurations echoed local architectural traditions. Despite the adverse conditions and political chill in the air, his show was well received, probably because he approached his subject with a sense of humour and some understanding of Chinese attitudes about art. Carl relates the experience of being a foreigner in this way:

While living abroad, one's aesthetic faculties are naturally exercised in confrontation with new art forms and architectures; yet these same faculties are also instrumental in such simple decisions as the purchase of such common items as toothpaste or batteries.³

In *Rearguard*, a ping-pong paddle resting neatly on top of a world globe in miniature became a loosely orchestrated comment on the two-sided face of "Ping-Pong" diplomacy. In the period after the Tiananmen Square uprising overseas, business with China from abroad was halted for a short while to then quickly resume as usual. Within China, the intelligentsia, university scholars, poets and artists were being silenced and imprisoned. Surrounding this innocent construction was a form made up of a continuous series of black and red chopsticks, assembled in the shape of a tri-pedal Shang dynasty (1766-1028 B.C.) ritual vessel. Intended to highlight the mysteries of the an-

cient Chinese art of bronze cast vessels, whose deep relief and casting techniques excel anything created in the history of Western sculpture, the piece had the benign charm of a *Time* Magazine cover illustration. But Carl's parody of the international media-generated image of China versus the internal realities of life in China could not be missed. Exploring a similar notion, *Encore* (1989-90), a sound-activated installation piece where the latest in Chinese toy technology — a replica of a giant panda — sat ignominiously on a red platform surrounded by a construction comprising 2,000 disposable chopsticks, presented an architecture of self-defense, welded together with a glue gun. With a clap of the viewer's hands, the battery-operated panda clapped its hands, made a squeaking sound, its eyes lit up and it moved in a disturbing robotic fashion like the toys in a Duracell battery commercial.

Soon after returning to Montréal in 1990, James Carl presented an ongoing exhibition at his studio on St. Laurent Boulevard that embodied the influences of his stay in China. *The 5 Elements* (1990-91) was a transitional work that interpreted the five elements theory of ancient Chinese cosmology: earth, fire, air, water and wood. Presented on altar-like pedestals, these assemblage constructions, made from a vast range of consumer and found materials, had their constituent elements moved around each day to suggest the sense of constant change and ritualistic immolation that the Chinese vision prescribes as part of the mutual dependencies which exist between all elements — an interconnected continuity and atomized web of nature's particularized elements. Air was represented by an aerosol can and coffee filter; Fire, by an *Oxford English Dictionary*; Water by a freezer pack, and so on.

For the Strathearn Centre's interactive group show dedicated to nature in the city, *Les Jardins Imprévus*, in the summer of 1991, James Carl made a site-specific installation at the spaghetti-like traffic intersection of Pine and Park Avenues. His work was comprised of a set of headphones installed in a metal box which visitors were invited to wear to block out the background noise of traffic. The title of Carl's piece, *Les Paumes de Terre*, commented on the curves and shapes of the roadway patterns, resembling the lines a fortune teller might read in one's hand. The elements of chance and luck can be understood as an eastern parable on Western determinist notions of progress and opportunity. Carl's work also suggested that the role of the artist is to intervene and go between the standard thinking of a culture — its *modus vivendi* and *raison d'être* — and to suggest alternative ways of seeing. In this work, our standard spatial and temporal reading of the

environmental surroundings is slowed down, producing a "moment of realization." Each evening the box was locked and each morning the box was opened by Carl, in a parody of the work-a-day world. The hustle and bustle of traffic apparently going somewhere, but from this vantage point seeming to go nowhere, was mirrored by the purposeless method of Carl's routine of opening and closing of the installation like a jailor. James Carl's piece demonstrated what the performance artist Alan Kaprow, in an essay titled *The Real Experiment*, has called "lifelike" art, that which remains connected to everything else, as opposed to "artlike" art, which remains separate from life and everything else.⁴ The latter performs a function in relation to mainstream Western historical traditions because art galleries, journals, museums and professionals need artists whose art is "artlike." "Lifelike" art remains outside these traditions and performs a more generic social and ethnological function.

In the same year, at another location in Montréal (*Parc Portugais*), Carl presented *Spring Collection*, a five-by-eleven-foot igloo assembled out of discarded plastic containers. The supreme irony of this symbol of a northern shelter against the cold was that its component parts were discarded anti-freeze containers left lying around on the streets after winter. As an inducement for the public to interact with the artist, Carl set up a table and served drinking water tinted with an attractive bright blue colouring that looked more like Prestone windshield wiper fluid than Perrier or Labrador "naturally pure" drinking water.

For a solo show at Galerie Clark in 1992, Carl presented a myriad of consumer appliances "disposable art" that called into question art's position in the production-consumption chain. Meticulously pieced together out of cardboard in a one-to-one scale, these constructions were indeed "lifelike" reproductions of functional consumer objects. Fridges, stoves, radios, record players, toasters, a television, washer and dryer littered the gallery space. The process they engendered, the craft of construction and contemplation they entailed, presented a mask of consumerism — the "artlike" design of the production assembly line. The care and time taken to make these pieces — usually constructed from the discarded containers of exactly the products they represented — in fact, became a kind of creative employment — albeit without consumer value. In this sense, the work was also a comment on the value placed on dehumanized work in an age of mass production. Carl's attitudes to the role of the artist in the creative process recalled Walter de Maria's *Meaningless Work* manifesto from 1960 which stated: "Meaningless work is potentially the most ... important art-action experience one can undertake today."⁵

As such, Carl's installation show became a place where East met West. Henry Ford meets Gautama Buddha somewhere between the product assembly line and the recycling depot. The work became a deep felt comment on the meaning of culture seen from two philosophical points of view: that of the third-world vision, religiously astute in a state of being consumed, and that of the West, overloaded with the products of an ephemera-culture of materialism and spiritual vacuousness. In *Small is Beautiful*, E.F. Schumacher comments on the Asian Buddhist view of work, one that is presently being challenged throughout Asia by an emergent consumerism:

The Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least threefold: to give a man a chance to utilise and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his ego-centredness by joining with other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for becoming existence ... the consequences that flow from this view are endless. To organize work in such a manner that it becomes meaningless, boring, stultifying, or nerve-racking for the worker would be nothing short of criminal; it would indicate a greater concern with goods than with people ... Equally, to strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be considered a complete misunderstanding of one of the truths of human existence, namely that work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure.⁶

Seen within the context of the creation of art, the same notions apply, yet Carl has taken this one step further. Each week during the installation, he placed several of these "appliances" out in the street as garbage. Often, they would "disappear," having been picked up by passers-by. Carl recorded these actions using a spy camera from a window located above. Alternatively, the discards were taken to a garbage dump, another kind of "site" — thus bringing the process of production full circle.

By not actually using real appliances and incorporating the element of work into the equation, Carl broaches questions of meaning that are no longer standard to current artistic practice. It becomes a third world comment on contemporary fashions in Western art, accomplished by using the language of Western materialism itself. Ob-



James Carl. *Redemption*, 1993. Grunt Gallery, Vancouver. Beer cans, trolley and artist. Photo courtesy of the artist.

jects are made to appear like consumer items, but are every bit as ephemeral, changing and short-lived as elements in nature. While their appearance and design is made to seem structural, it is a facade, a mask. The whole question of appearance and beauty in art becomes a side issue. James Carl mimics the production process to suggest a different sense of self and community, one that is at once timely and coherent, but ultimately humorous and poetic.

Carl took irony a step further with his *Public Works* (1993) show held at the Grunt Gallery in Vancouver. In his realization of the artist's intimidation, based on the "disintegrated sense of community that characterizes our urban environment, and the alienated sense of art and the artist within that non-community," Carl attempted to "focus on issues and materials that form a sort of common currency within these fractured, polycentric social environments. Searching for the wider disunity that we have come to accept as (post) modern Canadian life."⁷

In a piece titled *Public Works* he reconstructed to full-scale, the dumpster that stood in the alleyway outside the gallery out of corrugated cardboard. The work was exquisitely scaled and detailed down to the nuts and bolts. At the end of the show, the work was placed in the alleyway beside the "real" dumpster. Carl's "maquette" of the real thing challenged the waste disposal function of the original container by building the same purpose into material that itself was judged as mere waste.

Redemption (1993), the other work in the Vancouver show, consisted of a crucifix made out of returnable beer cans that Carl towed around Vancouver. Carl commented: "If there is no salvation in emptying the bottle, at least there's redemption for the empty bottle."⁸ Part of an effort to re-establish a meaningful dialogue between the artist and public outside the usual context where art takes place, Carl's *Redemption* was a "performance" piece that, like the replicated dumpster, became a tongue-in-cheek caricature of the sacred or mystical-religious side of the ecological movement.

Notes

1. Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), p. 63.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
3. James Carl, cited in Ming Pao Yue Kan, *Meditations at the Foot of the Great Wall*, Hong Kong, May, 1991.
4. Suzi Gablik, *The Re-enchantment of Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 137-38.

5. Walter de Maria cited in *The Reenchantment of Art*, pp. 135-6.
6. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, (London: Abacus, 1977), p.45.
7. James Carl, cited in Liane Davidson, *Public Works*, (Vancouver: Grunt Gallery, 1993), np.
8. *Ibid.*

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