

PLOT

JAMES CARL

CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

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DIRECTORS' FOREWORD

James Carl's *Plot* brings together a large-scale installation and individual pieces that proffer several new directions in the work of this mid-career artist. Versions of *Plot*, tailored to the respective gallery spaces, will be presented at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC and Open Space, Victoria, BC. The two galleries have also collaborated on this accompanying publication, working with the artist in his exploration of materials and analysis of consumer culture, in which the cultural politics of interior space and objects are investigated as quietly and assuredly as possible.

The work of James Carl presents real spaces and concepts, triggering memory, identification and imagination. Each work complicates and expands our recognition and understanding of simple objects and space. Drawing inspiration from these impulses, writer Robin Peck creates an illuminating essay, *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. Peck's elucidation of the process and placement of Carl's work in the context of contemporary sculpture is a detailed vision of the artist through a literary version of the work itself: understandable, in its complexity, even abstract at times and as vitreous as the work is honest, genuine.

Icelandic artist Margrét Blöndal has drawn on Carl's recent drawings of wood grain and bottles as sources of inspiration for the poetic compositions that are included here. Like the hypothetical contents of such bottles, the liquid medium of her

imagery echoes and reflects the social flows that inflect Carl's sculptural meanings.

Conducted through email and telephone conversations over the course of several months, the "interview" published here captures Carl's own voice—probing, contrarian at times, but thoughtful and generous in his comments about his approaches. Carl asks us to look for the import of his work through a web of social and material relations, and then look again.

TODD A DAVIS
Executive Director, Open Space

CHRISTINA RITCHIE
Director/Curator, Contemporary Art Gallery

January 2003

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS The Sculpture of James Carl

...sculpture has been created by artists thinking not only about the materials they were employing, but about those which they were not employing.

Nicholas Penny ¹

I was introduced to James Carl's sculpture with *Public Works, cardboard only* (1993), a one-to-one scale cardboard replica of a steel garbage dumpster.² I still remember the frail individualism of its cardboard body in contrast to a real steel dumpster, posed ominously in the alley beside the gallery. At the close of the exhibition, *Public Works* was abandoned alongside this dumpster. Its huge steel mandible seemed a weighty sign of enduring social authority, a gaping maw on a trough of flowing commodities.

The unpainted pale brown cardboard replica managed to satirize the modernist ethical dictum (and dilemma) of "truth to materials" and criticize the entire self-denotative modernist enterprise even as it was subsumed by the social structure of consumption and disposal. At the time, I thought the replica a necessarily supple, if somewhat duplicitous reaction to that social authority. The flow of Carl's cardboard (art) commodity seemed to flesh out the structure of state authority. It was as if Carl's sculpture was the individual sculptural body socialized, made in an anorexic cardboard image of the steel skeleton that supported it.³

But I also recall the exhibition as being like a giant pop-up book, a sculptural exhibition catalogue of a sort, as if it were a deliberate and ironic sycophancy suited to the fetishistic book and catalogue consuming habits of a specialized art audience. *Public Works* was smart and neat and looked like art from an art magazine, and through this complex entanglement with art institutional authority it transformed the outdated coinage of the atavistic sculptural object into a credit.⁴

An often-cited example of skeuomorphic form is the marble Doric Temple, with numerous of its non-functional forms (for example, the *triglyphs* and *guttae* of the frieze) having as their prototypes the functional timber forms of its once contemporary and now lost Ancient Greek domestic architecture. As a more recent example, consider how in the 20th century, the development of a plastics technology, the vanishing supply of increasingly valuable hardwoods and the economic rise of a consumer class, all contributed to the production of wood veneer: thin sheets glued over cheap softwood furniture in imitation of solid hardwood (and the solid values of the upper classes that could afford it).

Sculpture historian Nicholas Penny²⁹ divides sculpture historically into two broad categories: a public art made for a social group (usually sacred images) and that made for individual persons. In the former, the sculpture was concealed by a façade of coloured paint or gilding, to make the sculpture seem more lifelike or materially more valuable. In the first category are the monumental chryselephantine statues of Ancient Greece and the gigantic polychrome Buddhist statuary of Gandharan Afghanistan that were derived from them. In the second category are the subtle



types of rarity that appealed to the connoisseur, patinas on metal, natural colors of exotic wood, or bare clay with traces of the artist's hand. As religious institutions were once the fabricators of the sculptural supra-scale, so now similarly authoritative institutions (including, but not limited to, multi-national corporations) own the gigantic scale that surrounds one as the "gilded" façade of the built architectural and media environments. The electronic media is a contemporary near-equivalent to sculpture once made for a group of worshippers.

The term "three-dimensional" or "3-D" is now commonly used to refer less to sculpture and the actual experience of binocular vision, than to the virtual monocular illusion of three dimensions as represented on a computer screen. The ubiquity of computer imaging now engages Carl, as once did the ubiquity of the cardboard box.³⁰

My work has shifted from [...] the street trash of consumer culture to the cerebral compost of [...] popular intelligence.

James Carl³¹

accommodation (2002), is an image that is the result of a 4 by 8 foot sheet of grained plywood digitally photographed, then proportionately "stretched" by means of a computer program to fill a wall, printed on 8.5 by 11 inch paper sheets and glued to the architectural surface, just as if it was tile work. A subtle grid is visible over the wood grain pattern as a consequence of the computer printing process. Like cardboard construction, it is relatively easy for one to identify with the process of production. This is work that can be sent via email, stretched and printed on site according to local specifications. *accommodation* was exhibited at Mercer Union, Toronto, in September 2002, as one drawing stretched (and inverted) to fit two convergent walls.

The flowing hallucinatory clouds of simulacra that make up wood grain patterns are conventionally sure signs for an apparently natural rhythm. As if a cloudy Song Dynasty landscape painting, wood grain can seem to form images like that of the paradisiacal Xianshan or Penglai.³² But wood grain patterns are really nothing more than the distortion of the circularity of the annular growth rings of a tree formed by angled saw-cuts through a log. The turbulent plywood grain patterns of Carl's *accommodation* are like anamorphic representations of concentricity, maps of his eccentric transformative orbits, as if plots for future sculptural landscapes.

notes

Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 270.

Exhibition at Grunt Gallery, Vancouver, 1993.

See George Bataille's fearful intuitions of Catholic architecture in Denis Hollier, "The Architectural Metaphor," *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989) 14-56.

"No matter that the art does not sell [...] lecture fees and airplane tickets will be generated, and if enough critical writing is produced [...] an Arts grant will be forthcoming." Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 34.

On the covert modernism of Rachel Whiteread, see Tom Lubbock, "The Shape of Things Gone," *Modern Painters*, Autumn 1997, 34-37.

See Robin Peck, "Scattered Across the Floor," *C Magazine*, February-April 1999, 8-13.

Both cardboard and the cardboard box are late 19th century American inventions. In 1871 Albert Jones of New York added a liner to both sides of a corrugated paper to produce cardboard. Robert Gair, another American, invented the folding corrugated cardboard box in 1890.

"...a solid brown-ness that [is] most secure." T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958), 28.

Oswald Spengler, "Gold Background," "Studio-Brown and Patina," *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928; Oxford University Press, 1991), 130-134.

"The Whiteness of the Whale," *Moby Dick* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1851), 189-197.

Walter Pater, Chapter II, "White Nights," *Marius The Epicurean, His Sensations and Ideas* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1903), 13.

"For some reason I have always hated plaster, the quintessential art-school material." Carl Andre, "Robert Smithson: He Always Reminded Us Of The Questions We Ought To Have Asked Ourselves," *artsmagazine*, May 1978, 102.

Eloi, the pacific, vegetarian and non-technical surface dwellers in H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: William Heinemann, 1895), as opposed to the cannibalistic and mechanically inclined Morloch who dwell beneath them.

Exhibited at the Art Gallery of Calgary, February 2003.

A hybrid language neologism, "kara..." meaning empty, "...oke" an abbreviation of o-ke-su-to-ra (orchestra). Karaoke is the popular contemporary custom during which a person stands in front of a crowd (most often in a bar) with a microphone and sings along to a pre-recorded popular tune visually displayed on a projected video screen.

The *bi* or *pi*, a perforated disc of jade from the Chinese Neolithic, is generally described as a ritual object, a symbol of heaven. It possibly originated as some portion of an astronomical instrument. *Bi* is also a contemporary Chinese slang term for a vagina. Consider this in relationship to Carl's pairing of it with a pink stone microphone.

"Purity is a consequence of distance." Aidas Bariekis, in conversation with the writer, New York 2000.

Note to the writer, 2002.

Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture: The A.W. Mellon Lectures on the Fine Arts for 1954* (New York: Bollingen Series XXXV3, Pantheon, 1961), 88.

Diane Waldman, *Carl Andre* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1970), 6.

The Abraham Rogatnick Library.

See Jessica Bradley, "On James Carl and Building a Public Collection," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2001.

Installation, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, 1979.

"Viewer manipulation, including touching the individual works, should be strictly discouraged." James Carl, unpublished text, instructions to exhibitors of *Whitewalls*.

The fictional treasure-guarding dragon of J.R.R. Tolkien's quasi Anglo-Saxon saga, *The Hobbit* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1936).

Marcel Duchamp's most famous ready-made, *fountain*, was a urinal purchased from

Mott Works and submitted to (and rejected from) the Society Of Independent Artists' 1917 New York Exhibition, under the name Richard Mutt.

Rina Greer, Ed., *Toronto Sculpture Garden* (Toronto: Toronto Sculpture Garden, 1998), 118.

From the Ancient Chinese dictionary *Shouwen* by Hsü Shen, quoted in Kao Jen-Chün, "The Evolving Shape of the Ting," *Pearls of the Middle Kingdom, A Selection of Articles from the National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art* (Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China: National Palace Museum, 1993), 20-29.

Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1993).

The first "computer art" that I recall seeing was a work produced in 1971 at NSCAD by Halifax artist Ken Porter titled "A" Box, a computer program for the construction of a cardboard box.

Artist's Statement, Galerie Clark, Montreal, 1998.

The mountain home and the island home, respectively, of the Taoist Immortals.

Throughout the decade of the 1990s cardboard seemed to be Carl's signature material. Between 1990 and 1994 he produced a series of works titled *re:possession*. These sculptures were one-to-one scale replicas of consumer appliances: washing machines, stoves, refrigerators, and television sets. Constructed from salvaged cardboard appliance boxes, it was as if they were the consequences of the containing boxes having been imprinted with the images of the previously contained objects; ghosts that became plans for the construction of sculpture.

James Carl's sculpture looks good. It looks good for some of the same reasons that Rachel Whiteread's⁵ and Colleen Wolstenholme's⁶ sculpture looks good, because the particular represented *objet trouvé* ironically mimics the secure formal conventions of modernist industrial "good design" at the same time that it transports us within a scale model of charged metaphors. Cardboard evokes prototype, the model and the toy. Architectural models were once cardboard boxes (now they are plastic), but cardboard boxes are still architectural models. Cardboard is boxes⁷ and boxes are architecture. Recall the cliché of the innocent child under the Christmas tree preferring to play with the gift boxes and the wrappings rather than with the gifts themselves. Cardboard gift boxes in the hands of children (and sometimes in those of artists as well) become happy, flimsy houses and castles and ziggurats, and parodies of utopian modernism.

Public Works: cardboard only





As plaster is to gypsum ore, so cardboard is to wood. It is still wood, but wood refined and redefined, its values disturbed with those of industrialism. As particle-board is wood transformed into a hard synthetic material, so cardboard is the softest of the woods, composted into paper, akin to soil, peat or humus. Wood seems never to really die. It expands and contracts with changes in temperature and humidity, is always full of tiny insects and subtle vegetal rots. Timber always seems ready to take root again. Cardboard partakes in all the characteristics of wood, but as pale memory.

As a color, cardboard is neither white nor brown, but a sallow mix of the two. Brown evokes the ordinary, the color of wood, earth, beer, manure, rusted iron and un-patinated bronze.⁸ It is the artistic *atelierbraun* of Spenglerian historicism.⁹ White can be innocence, but in art it has conspired with neo-classicism and imperialism in a process of petrification that is the body of the state. White plaster was a paradigmatic material of both classicism and early modernism. The English aesthete Walter Pater, seconding Melville,¹⁰ wrote of the “mystery of white things [...] the doubles [...] of real things, themselves but half-real, half-material.”¹¹ As a “half-material,” plaster

was suitable for replicas, molds and provisional experimental art. This identification once caused white plaster and now causes Carl's pale brown cardboard to be read as if a solipsism, a sign for signification itself.

Along with and usually preliminary to plaster, cardboard is a contemporary "quintessential art-school material."¹² Art students now use cardboard as they once used plaster, because it is lightweight, relatively easy to work and freely available. To work with cardboard and plaster is a neophyte habit that can continue as a mature vehicle for an artistic ethic: the simplicity of means.

This very lack of an involving technology makes the working of cardboard accessible to a non-technical but specialist art audience. The limited audience for contemporary visual art has only small knowledge of the technical processes historically used in the production of sculpture. The rude working-class esoterica of metal working, for example, can quickly alienate a middle-class art audience unfamiliar with such technologies. (As haptic and sensual art, sculpture has easily been accused of anti-intellectualism, as if intellection was the sole property of nascent Eloi.¹³) Cardboard, on the other hand, is familiar and domestic, and most middle-class persons can imagine themselves working with it, given a good pair of scissors or a sharp knife, some tape and glue.

Carl's sculpture is contemplation on the preciousness of the sculptural object, a strangely collaborative criticism of the aesthetic or museum object. For even given its relatively cheap materiality, Carl's sculpture is undeniably precious: precious in the sense of being an article of value, precious as being fastidious or affected, precious in the sense of being fragile and delicate, and for all Carl's prolificacy, precious for being rare. It is also precious in that it makes claims (and claims, including my own, are made for it) to be of substantial intellectual or otherwise non-material worth. At each stage in the definition of preciousness, Carl engages us with critical argument, contrasting the relative values of the found cardboard box with that of the finished sculpture, and the fastidiousness of his construction with the irony of his conception.

The preciousness of Carl's sculpture begs for curatorship. The material weakness of cardboard attracts preservation efforts. Etymologically the art curator is a physician, "curator" from Latin *curare* (to cure). Cardboard is paper, and recalls the archival

book fetish. Sculpture (of metal, stone, wood, et al) often preserves itself without curatorial assistance, hence its conventional memorial function, and hence the convention that conservators are more often trained in the preservation of drawings, photographs, prints, paintings and the like.

Somewhat anomalous or contradictory within the context of Carl's (cardboard) oeuvre, *empty orchestra* (1995-1997)¹⁴ is a set of hand-carved stone pieces, begun in Beijing during his second year-long residency in China at the Central Academy of Fine Art. Small and hard, made from relatively precious materials, this is post-studio art. Peripatetic until only recently, Carl has developed a sense of domestic place in which psychological security is found in signs of transience, transportable commonplace commodities that function nostalgically as memories of another place, their arrangement a home; the cardboard box a home.

empty orchestra is the English language translation of Karaoke.¹⁵ The sculptural ensemble consists of a microphone, a videocassette, a Walkman, a Discman, a CD (this carved from jade, resembling a *bi* disc)¹⁶, a cell phone, a camera, etc. During this same period in Beijing, the first of Carl's *take-outs*, marble carvings of Styrofoam takeout restaurant lunch containers, was also produced. This and *empty orchestra* are Carl's summative homage to the century long modernist campaign to replicate the twilight aura of the museum artifact: the neo-Neolithic that is 20th century sculpture.

Carl's sinophilia, his nearly impenetrable titular references to East Asian culture, provide an ideational if obscure provenance of a sort. Orientalism has a long history in Western Art, a consequence of the attractiveness that another culture can possess when viewed from the distance of one's own.¹⁷ The titles of Carl's works hold our gaze, the sculpture apparently redolent with meaning. Then the textual mist clears, and there is a cardboard box.

Carl's more recent "cardboard" sculptures are made from Coroplast, a type of corrugated plastic, itself a replica of cardboard in more enduring substance. *Original Six* (1998) consists of six large polychromatic Coroplast representations of disposable cigarette lighters arranged in a semicircle around a representation of the Stanley Cup (an ice hockey trophy, recalling a slightly earlier work, *A Trophy (for Tom Dean)* (1997)). The title refers to the six original teams of the National Hockey League; the

colors of the lighters derived from (or coincident with) the team colors.

Disposable cigarette lighters are one of the last vestiges of communal property. My own disposable lighters often disappeared, but I soon learned that they would always reincarnate, perhaps with color changed, but never empty of fuel. Historically, communalism disembodied the object through sharing, giving some form of movement or life to otherwise inert objects. This same transparency of the object is achieved in consumerism through planned obsolescence, display, purchase, and disposal. Carl's moving social sculptures are a consequence of a somewhat surreal juxtaposition, a collision of the *objet trouvé* shared by consumerism and communalism.

I think that my notion of 'public art' might reside...in the common.

James Carl¹⁸

redemption (1993, Vancouver) was a metal sculpture made from salvaged aluminum beer cans glued together to form a cruciform block. (It recalled an earlier piece,



fountain



Spring Collection (1991), a full size copy of an Inuit igloo (snow house) made from discarded antifreeze bottles.) Carl towed this cruciform juggernaut around Vancouver while collecting cans that were returned to be recycled at the conclusion of the exhibition. It was a subtle chiding at the conceits of Vancouver's redemptive ecologic politic, and a dispute with the ironically static conventions of sculpture as movement.

Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo's *Kinetic Construction (Standing Wave)* (1920), a shaft of motorized vibrating metal, was a prototype for the development of sculpture as movement and material disembodiment. By the 1930s Bauhaus professor Lazlo Moholy-Nagy understood that the history of sculpture was a development from carving through modeling to linear construction, and thence to sculpture as movement. But kinetic art failed as an art movement. It never really went anywhere and its restricted motions became another form of sculptural stasis.

There is an essential contradiction between Sculpture and movement, a statue is

something that stands, and the word itself comes from the same Latin root as the word 'static'.

Herbert Read¹⁹

By the 1960s, Carl Andre's minimal history of 20th century sculpture (from sculpture as form, to sculpture as structure, to sculpture as place²⁰), although structured similarly to that of Moholy-Nagy, is actually a vision of the historical sculptural body in a deathly ruin, decomposing to the skeletal (structure) and then to the memorial (place) and by now, through the work of persons like the late Gordon Matta-Clarke, transformed into a ghostly, transparently moving social body, resolving Herbert Read's contradiction.

Carl's work attempts to keep pace with the vast sublime scale of the consumer economy. As an example of the moving transparency of the social object, consider the catalogue and magazine rack that has been expanded into a library at the Contemporary Art Gallery.²¹ It is a facade that grows only incrementally with the procession of proprietary and other exhibitions. Contrast this sedate, archival pace with the rapid turnover of the popular magazine stand, the monthly, weekly, even daily replacement of text, the quick flickering quasi-pixilation of the architectural façade of consumerism.

Carl's *Whitewalls* (1998-ongoing) is a pile of constructed Coroplast tires, each different, but each based on a standard pattern. It was begun in New York in 1998 with various portions of the pile exhibited in Canada, the US and Europe. The largest portion is now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario.²² It is intended that the production continue indefinitely. The folded Coroplast construction technique produces a faceted appearance that evokes gems, jewelry, and currency, as well as the pixilation of the digitized visual environment. *Whitewalls* evokes the ring coins of China, and also recalls Gerald Ferguson's *One Million Pennies*.²³ a similarly sculptural study of the social economics of art production. Like Ferguson's low brazen mound of coppers, *Whitewalls* is piled like an untouchable²⁴ treasure hoard around which coils the pale white walls of the institutional guardian örm, whether *Smaug*,²⁵ or AGO. *Whitewalls* is a questioning sculptural indictment of both artistic prolificacy and the attendant institutional avarice.

fountain (1997), was Carl's first officially sanctioned and boldly complicit public work. It consisted of nine vending machines; each fronted by a backlit photograph, placed side by side in a semi-circle, making up a panoramic photomontage of Niagara Falls, that cliché image of the sublime. *fountain* is a Duchampian²⁶ titular reference to the managed sculpture garden (a folly of a sort) in relationship to the artificially managed flow of the spectacle of Niagara Falls.

fountain is a monument to obedience; it dispenses observance; and through its complicity and compliance, attaches itself to the site and to the world.

James Carl²⁷

The two-dimensional faceted appearance of so much of Carl's sculpture, a consequence of the folding or the wrapping of a flat sheet (recalling the construction of a cardboard box), is also a formal characteristic of ancient Chinese sculpture. Carl's Coroplast sculpture *Dynasty* (2000) was exhibited at Mercer Union as an edition of five. Each is a replica of a modern rice cooker, a form derived from an ancient Chinese prototype, but one that did not enter North American culture until the late 20th century. The form is that of a *ting*, a tripedal bronze vessel that evolved (from various pre-bronze age ceramic prototypes) during the Shang period of Chinese prehistory (17th century BCE through to the 3rd century BCE). While the title, *Dynasty*, in combination with the five exhibited replicas is perhaps an allusion to the Five Dynasties period of Chinese history, it also may be a reference to the fivefold "blending" function of the *ting*. Carl's work is the latest type in the form development of the *ting*, and yet a critical parody of that same historical development.

*The ting has three legs and two ears. It is a precious vessel used for blending the five savours.*²⁸

The two-dimensionality of Carl's work (three dimensional sculpture as a succession of facades) has the characteristics of skeumorphic form. The skeumorphic is a form of three-dimensional representation normally utilizing a two-dimensional transition medium, usually a drawing of some sort. In architecture, this is a drawing of a façade. Carl's latest work, *concession*, installed in late 2002 at the Art Gallery of Ontario, is in fact an architectural façade.

I recently said to a curator that I've become uninterested in hearing what artists have to say—I can't quite put my finger on it, most of it seems either self-congratulatory or just dull, with notable exceptions of course. Curators seem to have assumed a dominant position in the discussion of recent art: what will be discussed and in what terms. You've been closely engaged with several generations of serious artists. What interests you in the work that you're curating these days?

Leaving questions of dominance for another time, there are two things that I see coming up a lot lately that I find engaging. The first entails work that positions itself as a service rather than as a thing, with the aim, in general, of identifying an aesthetic dimension of "normal" experience. The second, which is closely related, is the foregrounding of the viewer through overtures toward some form of social exchange, embedded in the process of conceiving, or executing, or exhibiting the work. A great deal of your work, perhaps the larger part, might have a share in these characteristics, particularly the work that has been located in outdoor, "public" sites only tangentially or occasionally tied to a gallery context. With this as a background, I find it interesting that through the course of our discussions in preparation for this show, you seem somewhat uneasy about situating your work within the gallery, as if it were a form of confinement or censorship.

I'm not sure I'd cite the censorship or confinement of the gallery as primary catalysts to my attraction to outdoor work. These things don't go away when you put them outside, do they? Maybe there's a shift in emphasis. I think we might consider the indoor-outdoor difference in terms of relative permissions and determinations.

I feel like I should be clear here for the record: my initial move to outdoor work

happened over ten years ago in the face of what I thought was a really stultified gallery situation in Montreal, where I was living. I felt that the artist-run centres were really inaccessible and the two or three commercial galleries, more so, probably in the same way a lot of young artists feel today. So I simply started looking for alternatives and ended up outside. I think I was interested in an expanded notion of audience and public. In a way I still think that a garbage man's demands might be as interesting as those of a bunch of poorly educated art students.

My art historical inheritance is also really important, particularly as it problematizes the white cube. Also as it poses questions about sculpture as sign or thing. If we take a standard art historical reading of minimalism as a mythologized crisis point, the shift is away from the author to the viewer, and specifically to the immediate experience of that viewer. This externalizing of meaning is most concretely, if literally, realized in Gordon Matta-Clark's work. His "going public" and his ability to do things without making things were always extremely influential for me. There seems to be some degree of willful ignorance of these issues right now.

So, if you had to choose, are the objects you make about something else or do they have a life of their own?

For all its importance, I think that might be a moot point finally, because one is, in fact, capable of and prone to attaching meaning to the most superficially insignificant things. For example, I think you were there at the first opening at the Balcony, Tom Dean's show. At some point a goose fell out of the sky and died in the park where we were partying. Now, did that *mean* something more than just "a goose fell out of the sky and died while we were partying"? Of course there were people there who thought it did.

I once was quoted as saying my objects aren't "about" anything—that their relative worth might be measured in terms of their ability to inflect or infect a given situation or viewer. They are definitely objects, but they are also contingencies: things whose "social life" is central to their conception. I'm just now thinking that it all goes back to Mowry [Baden] and Roland [Brenner] really.¹ Roland was so engaged in making self-proclamative things and Mowry always needed a participant. I feel like I move between these poles, with a bias to the latter.

In my early outdoor works, one of my most important stated concerns was the generation of things not just from found objects but from found ideas as well, shared social conventions—recycling and the environment primary among these. It's important to note that the cardboard work was as much "about" recycling as a social common denominator, as it was "about" waste *per se*. The work was intended as a social provocation that not only called waste into question but also the whole social project of recycling as Salvation. It also highlighted an individual's responsibilities and/or possibilities within these grids and arcs of social expectation. This is most evident in the beer can crucifix (*redemption*, 1993): acts of faith, merit-gaining activities. Not to suggest that there were no sculptural concerns at play. Perhaps these were subsumed by my desire to determine a social situation for both artist and object.

... You rely on readily identifiable artifacts and gestures of pedestrian life as a vocabulary of forms, to which you apply a somewhat reductive logic in order to "dislocate" their meanings. I'm thinking in particular of *Content*, the font created from domestic bottle shapes. In this process you seem to invert the logic of the readymade, giving us a unique, hand-crafted version of the most trite and

redemption



disposable of things. Is this a struggle with the “permanence” or stability of “Sculpture”, or just in flow with the transience of experience?

I might characterize my attempt as “locating” rather than “dislocating” meanings. And I think it would be inaccurate to describe my “products” as unique. The things I make are often created as multiples and, recently, in unlimited editions. “Well-wrought” is maybe what you're meaning.

I've tried for the past few years to work within predetermined parameters of social exchange (including vending machines, garbage heaps, and gallery art) in order to pry these things open a bit. We accept so many things as “permanent” or stable, most notably, the ways in which art is distributed. As if we'd arrived at the optimum institutional conditions for the distribution and appreciation of art!

As an aspect of this notion of distribution, I began making graphic work a few years ago, the earliest examples of which used found drawing conventions like international icons and colouring books. *Content* is the title for an on-going series of bottle drawings generated on the computer. The bottles are available in regular, bold and black, which styles are wholly derivative: from instructional drawings, international icons and silhouettes, respectively. The rendering of some of these as a font (*Content 1.0*) is an attempt to make them widely available for use on any home computer. This seems like the next best distribution system to throwing things out on the street.

You seem to be talking about collapsing the distance between an object and its “ritual” function, that distance that, for Benjamin, gave an artwork its aura.

The next person who says “aura” gets a spanking. I'm so tired of the ways in which Benjamin's essay gets tossed around. So few people ever take into account that the essay is primarily a *celebration* of the loss of aura. That his main reason for writing the piece was to rejoice at the possibility that art, in the age of mechanical reproduction, might finally overcome its foundations in hocus pocus. What remains to be asked is whether reproducibility/reproduction has affected the basic human attachment to things, be it art or cars.

Maybe I can go back to the hand-crafted thing here for a moment. I have a tendency

Stele (from Empty Orchestra)



to expend an incommensurate amount of care in the replication of otherwise dumb objects. It's interesting to me how these replicas are somehow even more mute than the originals, and that if they manage any voice at all it's vaguely accusatory. Dave Hickey quotes Elaine Scarry on how torture is often carried out with the most common objects—plungers, plastic bottles—in reference to Gober's Dia project. I'd like to think that my work weilds that kind of a double-edge.

Your long-standing interest in China comes through in your work in odd ways. Sometimes it can be read as "Orientalism" or as an "othering" of the products of the east, but at other times it seems that you're more interested in the territory where the line between east and west blurs. As you've said: Is the Sony walkman "chinoiserie"?

Is Karaoke "exotic"?

It would have to be a pretty superficial reading that characterized the work as "orientalist." This seems to be another one of those moments where the art world latches on to a concept wholesale and discourages its contestation. As a student of East Asian languages and cultures during the 90s, against the backdrop of contemporaneous Western "Cultural Studies," I was easily quantifiable: a straight white male exoticist. While coincidentally, the Chinese artists I was hanging out with in Beijing

were immersing themselves in Western contemporary art. And ultimately some met with tremendous acclaim in that Western art world which had spent a generation problematizing the traffic flowing the other way!

These things are always more simple and complicated at the same time aren't they? At one point in my life I encountered certain very real deficiencies in my knowledge of the world. I had attained a BFA knowing absolutely nothing about the enormity of Chinese art history. So I studied. I encountered a few Eastern philosophical positions and some real life experience which influenced my world-view. For example Zhuang Zi² speaks about non-attributes, and how it's better to use a non-attribute than an attribute to prove that attributes are not attributes. It's a riposte to central disputation in Chinese philosophy. I think that there are a lot of non-attributes like ingratiation and proliferation floating around in my work. When I first started making those cardboard appliances, visually was a non-attribute in the Western art world! I think that what I find valuable in Taoism is similar to what I find in situationist sloganeering: a refusal engendered in an acceptance. A veneer of compliance. Which rhymes with appliance. And there's at least as much Plato in my work as there is Zhuang Zi. And I'm definitely not Greek.

In the installation you're doing for the CAG, you're using elements that have domestic references, and elements that come from the office environment, as well as from the studio (table saw). How do these all come together? Is there a syntax or a logic that drives the way the elements are combined?

Well, for the first time in years I've had a studio and some time to play in it. But before we get to that, I want to ask you a couple of questions that seem relevant at this point: we had talked about calling the show Pathogenic and that was your idea. I had an initial intuition about why, but I wonder if you could maybe flesh that out a bit. I had assumed that there was a social edge to your thoughts.

First of all the idea of the pathogenic refers to the manner in which you've incorporated ideas exterior to the art discourse into your work, almost as if they were infectious agents. By extension, your preoccupation with the features of public social life implies both an ideological and an ethical position, which you have alluded to above, but I'd like to know, what do you believe is your social role as an artist?

OK, I had assumed that you meant the other way round, that I might be trying to infect the social body with art issues. Which is in a way how I see *fountain*, as an acting-out of the prescriptions of a public sculpture garden, in a self-reflexive, high modernist fashion.

I find it somewhat surprising that in the last few months I've heard several art people go out of their way to refer to the art audience as a highly specialized minority. First of all I don't really think we can speak of *an* art audience as an isolated entity. Art is definably a specialized activity, but it's a social act and functions outside of the specialized minority who show up for all the openings. I think that the basic nature of social relations is that they're constantly up for re-negotiation.

As far as ideology goes, well, I think that the best of my work tends to tangle itself up in a given ideological position in order to test the limits of that position. To see where it collapses, where it gets humorous. Ethics seems like another question and one that's been bugging me lately. And this is the artist talking: aren't ethics just a reification of the behaviors of a group of people? By "doing" anything one infects ethics. It's a question that's tempting to dodge and in a way much of my working process is an attempt to dodge difficult questions. But, if I throw my work in the trash, if I create a drawing on a computer that can be accessed and altered by anyone else with a computer, if I spend years making a pile of fake tires, well, it would be hard to describe that as un-ethical wouldn't it?

Carl studied with these artists at the University of Victoria between 1980 and 1983.

Chuang Tzu, *Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (NY: Columbia University Press, 1964), 35. The reference is to a passage in "the discussion on making all things equal."

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