

Speaking in Tongues at the Tide

Allow me to begin in a spirit of full disclosure when I say: I don't get sculpture. I mean, I've spent plenty of time thinking about it; I can analyze it, break it down into its historical references and trajectories; I can consider the language of materials and the rhythm of scale; I can discern intent and make convincing arguments about how technologies enable or influence given production methods, or why socially conditioned narratives and performativities discourage others.

But sculpture is nevertheless a secondary language to me; I can survive in its country, read the signs and order a meal, even carry on a pleasant conversation or engage in some level of debate, but it doesn't come to me as a mother tongue. My eyes, despite my best efforts, remain the perpetually clumsy translators of the work of other people's hands (and, in turn, or perhaps causally, my hands remain the clumsy translators of my own ideas).

To use yet another analogue: it's like knowing how to swim but not being able to breathe underwater. And indeed, it is such a sense of being a foreigner set adrift that strikes me first when encountering Jasmine Reimer's constructions. There is recognition, of course, whenever objects from daily life are repurposed and reconfigured into alien assemblages; I know the words, but struggle with the syntax.

Such recognizable objects, therefore, are my refuge when trying to interpret meaning, to pull a sense of cohesion and purpose from the configurations... actual objects (actual ironing board, actual stepladder), readymade things, are characters we recognize instantly despite their having been interfered with. They generate a brief flutter of familiarity, of there being something there onto which to *hold*, to grab, to anchor ourselves in our explorations. They hover between domesticity and labour, between familial contexts and productive purposes. Perhaps this suggests that such a division between the spaces of home-ness and of work-ness is an arbitrary and misguided one--Marx, I like to point out, never saw the Middle Class coming. Or perhaps we should consider these objects as sitting within the art historical tradition of the *vanitas* still life, gathering that they disclose more about their owner's priorities, status, and context than about a specific symbolic relationship. Through such a lens, they gesture towards the social context of their maker-artist to point to the inevitable disappearance of her body and her possessions (*vanitas* being, after all, a particularly mopey genre).

Whether relics resigned to emptiness and futility or monuments of personal, socio-economic positionality, the objects are not left whole; they have been *pervorted*, which is to say distorted or corrupted. In some sense, this is true of the earliest Duchampian readymades as well, as the urinal rotated and institutionalized by the museum is no longer a "real" (i.e. functional, behavioural) urinal... but that is a socio-cultural distortion, and such an object could still in theory be (to continue the rhetorical device of perversion perhaps beyond polite conversation) *redeemed*: flipped back around, installed in a wall, hooked up to the plumbing, and pissed in.

By contrast, Reimer's perversions of her readymades are like irreparable traumas. A soupy, gelatinous, muddy *mess* has attached itself to her found objects, like a parasite that burrows into its host. If the recognizable object is our ship's port in the storm of meaning-making, then the plastic, malleable goo seeping over it is the influenza virus that spreads through our crew. And although we could extricate the one from the other in an attempt to undo their interaction, neither would really ever be the same again. They are already dripping with funk.

Consider, for instance, *Flatiron 2*, a metal, seafoam-green ironing board, stripped of its fabric covering and with small lumps protruding through its holes... Hung on a wall, the distended shape of the board becomes like a phalanxer's shield, pierced throughout by hardened lumps of chemical magic... *Flatiron 3* is similarly but even more thoroughly infested, and *Flatiron 1* has been almost entirely colonized. Contrary to a process of corrosion, these works do not depict the board's inevitable, entropic slide, eventually rusting away into a pile of iron dust... No, these processes of breakdown (and here the departure from a tradition of *vanitas* becomes evident) are externally imposed as an incompatible *other-thing* permeates that which we, fellow meaning-makers, clung to from the outset as familiar.

So, the question with which we are left is, is this really such a disaster? Is the integrity of the object to be prized above all? Of course not; all art is distortive, from the flattening of the world onto canvas to the melodrama of performance. So what, then, is gained or wrought by Reimer's perversions? What's remarkable about these configurations--which I have alternately read through the somewhat doom-and-gloom metaphors of viral infection, colonization, drowning, and corruption--is just how damned *funny* they are. We might well feel some level of pathos toward the poor, unfortunate stepladder as it is devoured by clam and muddy goop alike, and we may even feel some level of revulsion at its sweaty, pseudo-organic contours... but our next realization must surely be how totally absurd that sentence is.

And really, this could be the only truly useful and productive way of dealing with trauma--to dramatize, satirize, cartoon, or exaggerate our horror to the point of farce; to reclaim it as subject to our humour and whim. All comedy is, after all, violence, and all jokes craft a world only to tear it asunder; that is, they give us something familiar, predictable, expected, and then they punish us for that expectation.

In Freudian terms, all jokes ask us to play peek-a-boo with our parents in order to be prepared for their deaths.

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