

Mas'

Paul Baumann & Shari Mendelson
Slideshow Gallery, Brooklyn NY
June, 2010

on an exhibit

Sometimes a show speaks before it is seen – just by the route to it. Sometimes a show is – the end of itself.

I walked to the Opening through streets buried in me, streets I rarely walk anymore – old neighbor hood, vanished city; ‘new’ remains. Streets inside, beyond a rupture that never really happened, streets walked back in the last hours of the analog age – that city. I remembered: cellless, not perpetually on call. Between encounters – wilderness: brightness, darkness, quietness, hiddenness, a *privacy* now long eradicated. Bedford Avenue – that at night had been gauntlet, demand, risk and adventure as it humped its way South – now a shopping mall.

Many that I knew in that city, and had not seen since it – or I – disappeared – they were there, at the Opening. Like Proust’s masked ball they were in costumes – of age. *This is how it happens. It’s actually happening.* Like a bat using echo-location I’d suddenly found | again | my location in time. *And it’s happening to me? Well, has it? is it?* The mind’s eye that cannot recognize time watched.

Inside – the masquerade continued. What first looked like ceramics and glassworks – bottles, vases, ornamental dishes, urns – some ancient, some more victorian, some vaguely familiar – larger ones mounted on free standing bases, smaller ones in groups on tables and shelves – turned out to be made of plastic. Cut-ups of plastic water bottles, masquerading as vessels. The factory repetition of forms – water bottle necks, mouths, sides, bottoms – hot glued together into beautiful delicate illusionary hive-vessels evoking the worker bees that assisted the machines. Vessels warty, monstrous, elegant. Greens, blues, clear. Some minimally decorated with paint or clay, mosaic. A striking one, evocatively famous, like a large transparent stone with three tall trumpeting spouts, alien and erotic. Others asymmetrical and majestic, funerary and somber, imitation aged. Some homey, kitcheny, common, subdued. Even some like candle holders. Simulacra. These were vessels that held drought, held the end of water. The memory of water. The idea of water. Because these things – they couldn’t hold a drop. These were vessels – of thought. Archeological and phony, nostalgia jugs – tit jobs, perfect to look at then all wrong when you touch them – they churned recycled thoughts in me, thoughts about *surplus* and *the end* and *what remains* ... the word *amphora*, and its root *amphi-*, *ambi-*. Amphibology. A kind of scission of desire, and knowledge. These containers holding the absence of what they promise – glasses of thirst. And so, vessels of – Beauty. In the emotional tide of just having remet old friends from our own *fin de siècle* – these objects, masquerading age and use, seemed to pour out the night itself – became containers to fill with inner experience.

As anyone who's danced in Trinidad Carnival knows, hot glue is an essential element for playing 'mas – masquerading. For piecing together one's costume. And that one's mask reveals one's deathless, faceless and unfaceable life within. Not 'one's true face', but something other-than-truth. Real. In 2004 while BP was greening their US image – playing global 'mas – I was down there teaching, and witnessed them destroying coral reefs in the southern Caribbean. This early June night in 2010 they were fitting Gulf turtles with slippery toe shoes of death. The faceless, deathless life of capital, dancing its mad royal dance across the world, shitting as it leaps, leaving its excremental trail of indestructible remainders. The gallery was full with it, here, tonight. The thirst-vessels. And, from west to east along the long north wall of the gallery, a rollercoaster-wave shaped flux of white-painted trash, detritus, crap, things. Remains. Things made that assumed a beyond that doesn't exist, never existed, and exists even less now. And from a certain vantage point in the room – standing behind a table of the memory-vessels – it could look like what was on the walls had been poured out of them. That out of the thousands of [found] water bottles used to create these twenty-eight vessels – [found] water bottles accruing exponentially as Earth's water-sources vanish or die – that out of these twenty-eight memorials mined from a dying planet this flowing, rhythmic, elegant white river of [found] garbage was ejaculated. Because jugs just don't hold they come. Don't they?

Two things are said to be the sign of human civilization: the handmade vessel and organized waste. The womb and the asshole. Our hole life. And human desire is said to bend around itself. In speech.

I read the wall right to left. Because that's how I first learned. It looked like a giant braille poem of human confusion, all of it whited out. But look. It started with the whitepaint skins of an old wall itself, as if remembering its past life. And then it spewed out into itself, paper scrap and food wrappers and shell-like delicacies, toy remains game pieces bowling pin and factory shards, business receipts and uncertain wands, all meticulously butterfly-pinned to the wall, in sidereal-floral flows and blooms and scatterings, some things with like things, some isolated and unmatched, all of it a frozen undulating dump-wind blowing in large billows the whole twelve foot height and fifty foot length of the [great] white wall. *The whiteness of the wall.* By sheer accumulative mass it began resisting the narrative it seemed to start with. (An effect of Beginning.) Then in the sweeping cloud of it I started to notice human remains. Or the forms of human remains – plaster hand casts, denture casts, gloves, the douser-shaped middle of a crutch. And right where the gallery divided into front room and back room, a spiraling crescendo of things, hip height, a milkyway cluster of white painted boxes with their unlit insides exposed, flaps open, bases attached to the wall. Celestial-botanical, a density urgent protruding and indecipherable – and also in the way. People's asses were knocking them off the wall as they went through the narrow space between dividing wall and gallery wall. They were the wave's middle, and made this middle place in the room an irritated passage. That very trouble seemed to ventriloquate the wall itself.

At the end of the wave – The End, in my inner language – I sensed its internal resistance to narrative subside. (An effect of End.) Observing my own unquenchable automatic narrative thirst. (And anyway I'm the perfect audience for this shit. I like to look at a

thing, just where it fell, where it came to final rest. Just look. Set in its specific spot by chance, its resting place an aperture from which a kind of radioactivity emanates. And as I look I feel myself pinned, stabilized, located. And as unlike as we appear, the thing and I, we are, then, of a single species: the gaze. In all its homophonic, marginal splendor.) Anyway: there, at the end of this wave of trash: a knife, a grey old lady's scalp, a giant, sootgrey mutant freak-fingered glove (18 fingers, with pink fingernails), a small powdered desiccated sunflower carcass and a small white box, narrow and deep, its end agape, flaps open, insides unlit, protruding from the wall, punctuating and ending the flow. Theater. Yeah. Just the end of Carnival. Her costume come off.

Agape.

A banquet. It was a banquet. A banquet of detritus, thirst-vessels pouring fragments of memory found in a street-sweepers bristles. And the labor, repetitive and obsessive, of reassembling the golem again and again as its infinite component parts are found strewn everywhere across the earth. *The Thing – das Ding – is a lost object – but lost only after it has been found.* And this the work that goes on without cease inside these emptiness hives: [re]collecting, re[ex]claiming, collating, tribalizing, shit-picking. Thinking.

I found it oracular that in all the debris, the found street-debris that made up this white wall installation – an ongoing series which its composer/conductor Paul Baumann calls *Taxonomies* – that in it (and also in the other, almost 6 foot square framed C-Print of a pink *Taxonomy* of debris, this one forming a perfect circle) there were no condoms, no condom wrappers. As if – that is what is missing, and why his taxonomies and Shari Mendelson's plastic vessels are possible – there is no capping the monstrous flood of it all, there is no stopping the *adding* to it. That there is no prophylactic *inside us* that will stop the act of *making*, even with these found, indestructible remains of the system that is structurally designed to destroy the human earth.

An eerie, alien street, one void of the remnants of outlaw desire.

Although the Sideshow Gallery's artist's statements emphasized the 'playfulness' of the work – which struck me as kind of a handpuppet's voice – both artist's works are works of mourning. As is all good art. Which this show is flooded with. Because these are our remains. We live in the unburied city of what was. On an earth whose strata no longer rest at depths but have been shoveled and flung unfalling into the air. Like the tossed cremated bones at the end of Imamura's *Vengeance Is Mine* that hang motionless in the blue sky – bones that refuse to disappear into the sea, bones that refuse to be forgotten – bones that when alive expressed the pure surplus labor of serial murder. Because now there's no life after, no dark – that was the analog age, back beyond the rupture that never happened and whose effects we're all living now. Now no end, just recycling. And so this show, playful yes, a banquet yes, also a funerary rite of sorts – masque-urns and -vessels having poured out the river of (their own) remains. Hysterectomy'd birthing. Two separate works, made in a likeness of obsessional collecting, placed in juxtaposition and creating a memorial service, a memory of art itself. A memory of the world. And making, implicitly, the gallery a kind of garbage container. Eloquence.

More explicit art-acts of memory – fictional or lived – were the Baumann Polaroids, in the back room. In the context of the entire show, they seemed the splurged detritus of the factory within. On one wall three oversized Polaroids, mutant, like Polaroid tumors – hung three separate images from three realms – a collaged, imagined sci-fi-y future-past, the material everyday (a mini-van’s interior), and the theatrical (a play set with a piano and a painted tree) – all with a kind of childhood nostalgic self-awareness laminating the viewer. A separate corner had normal size Polaroids, in simple glass frames, pinned from a tab at their top edge, spread randomly, covering the surface of two walls. Also nostalgic, familial, theatrical, performed memory; some of the same scene, the camera moved slightly, like the perspective shift from one eye, then the other. Some photos of photos. Their geometries – the perfect rectangle, the frame, the *image* – when encountered after his and S. Mendelson’s waste-forms, which are really the expression of asymmetry itself – initially felt disappointing and overwhelmed. And that somehow – disappointment and being overwhelmed, and the human aversion to waste matter – seemed a source of the craving for *the photograph*. These, each unique (and of the past) because a Polaroid, but yet many appearing as multiple ... the desire to repeat, to multiply and not have vanish – the contention of the singular – of the to-death. (Paul, naked, dances with a skeleton in one picture. This seemed like one of the only unrepeated images in the array.) In my passage through the show, I noticed my own craving for *the image* to have subsided: the banquet of waste preceding them having fed my mind, the Polaroids were practically indigestible. Or perhaps just uncooked, not having moved yet through the belly of the world. Because that, yes, was the secret, savory ingredient of the other works: the enzyme flavor of having been broken down by the intestines of human neglect, and released from the factory-made bondage of utility. The banquet – ejaculated waste, vessels breaching and failing themselves – had taken me beyond the frame. The photographs wanted to reframe me, and my nervous system would not have it.

The artist is a second tier factory worker. Reassembling the assembly line. Like a replicant in an enlightenment-programmed body, running code that commands undo.

Related to this impulse as well – the impulse to segregate a Thing as a Thing within the frame – was the fact that many of Shari Mendelson’s vessels were copied from Museum collections – this too, a vein of nostalgia, of mining shared memory (a kind of civic mental debris), a thirst for the known Thing – and the desire for it becoming the replication of it, and the replication of it a kind of corrosive love – or the corroding energy of love itself – melting the skin off the object with impassioned licks of an acidic tongue.

Segregation ... these *Taxonomies* of color – the gaze of control, of itemization, of the power-to-enclose; delineate, make-of-a-kind. Name. Frame. Cut out of life, and make ready for, to place in, discourse.

In memory: under one of the larger, separately standing *Vessels*, mounted on an uneven pedestal of masking-taped boxes painted semi-gloss white – a rectangle of mirror which the vessel sat on. It seemed so *precise*, incongruous in its realness – as if through this looking glass was that which absent made these works possible.

I found myself, in the crowd, feeling the flows from drought-vessel to waste-wall, remembering Delmore Schwartz's sad true last lines:

*The poisonous world pours into my mouth
Like water into a drowning man's.*

I stayed much longer than I expected, much longer than usual, partially pinned by the vision of time having seized past friends so mercilessly – the sight of it, the suddenness of it, not having seen them change gradually – not that they (or we) were old now – we're certainly not that yet – but certainly are in that troubled, irritated alive middle place – as full of loss as fullness – and felt a prickling satisfaction of having passed through, and arrived, here, back here – a thrilling, a gift of death. A deep swig from the vessel of thirst. Isolation, my insistent isolation from community and friends also sounded in the gathering, and in the sieve-like bellies of the faux-vases. And so I stayed, just a little bit longer, to be amongst people, part of this living human debris, refound and lost, the art in the rooms joining the crescendo of it all, inside.

Matthew Seidman