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Sub, Counter and Someothers

Tim Bearse

Virginia Commonwealth University

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THE –SUB, COUNTER AND SOMEOTHERS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture at the Virginia Commonwealth University.

Tim Bearse
Bachelor of Fine Art, Massachusetts College of Art, 2003

Director: CARLTON NEWTON
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SCULPTURE AND EXTENDED MEDIA

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Forward:

The thesis that follows is a compilation of experiences and observations that have influenced my sculpture. Included are poems, short fiction, and prose. Much of this material looks to my experiences in the built environment and activity within the skateboarding subculture. Images of the same work are often used in reference to different sections of text offering variations on interpretation of meaning.
I peeled an orange
the skin was thick
so thick
I gave up
       sliced it in three
five seven pieces
miniatures
I smashed it into my face as I ate
It ran down my chest
so sweet
beautiful
       it sat on my tongue
       way back
       for hours
Figure 1
I bought a grape fruit at the grocery a while ago. It sat around in an empty basket on my counter-top; I had no sugar and was certain that it would be too bitter otherwise.

Every couple of days I would pick it up and squeeze it, and yesterday it felt ripe, just right.

I was hesitant to eat it though, the working hand that picked it, wherever it came from, would have toiled to no end if it spoils.

, truthfully I just don’t want to eat a bitter fruit.

Today I found myself cutting it in half, using a knife to loosen the slices in the peel. I ate it with a spoon; it was very perfect.
The Spot:

The kind of time that is of basement hangouts, and printed wood paneling.

The kind of time you like, but is so knowable, comfortable and wrong. The kind of aura constructed of refuge & moist air.

Death to walk down the steep carpeted stairs, underneath the wood and nails and plywood, put together in the most stingy fashion. Coming down is a unique physical occurrence. Starting like a fall, a brief suspension followed by skuttle shuffle foot movements. Somewhere in the middle the shifting and adjustment needs micro adjustment, just falling and catching yourself, it’s frightening to realize that the rug is in fact loose.

The whole of the structure shakes, even from the outside, asking perhaps whether these things were meant to be here this long. Or maybe the variations, additions and removals were the purpose. Across the way, the old school and its expanse of green field, has been added onto as well. Made and remade, the asphalt parking strip at the very back, occluded, a territory of plywood constructions shifts the unusable frontal mug toward alter ends.

So I’d built a series of objects, I guess you might call them reproduction objects. They were boxes, low to the ground, oblong, constructed of plywood and nails with various metal edges fastened to them with screws. I had let them accumulate at the derelict tennis courts behind an old school. The whole scene was starting to shape shift into a disorganized plaza, spread out for a velocity and flow distinctly non-pedestrian. Friends had started coming by and we had dragged some parking blocks from across the way. With one slanted edge, these were luscious geometries, and a punctuation of repurpose amongst fabrications from bits and pieces of some far away idealized urban landscape.

I had had a kind of spiritual experience building these boxes. The first was of rag tag construction, plywood scrapped from construction sites and a piece of metal pole I found in a basement. Whose basement I don’t remember. I had spent much energy setting the pipe into the edge of the box just so. It stuck out slightly from the side and projected past the surface on the top noticeably more. This ledge was tall, just below the knee, it took a deep crouch to get on top of, and was short, the duration of the crouch and post-move compression were longer than the move itself. This resulted in a slicing, succinct dispensing on the box; the body briefly settling on it if at all, many moves could appear to float over it, assisted by, yet distinct from, the edifice.

The second box was a different thing all together. The first box had problems: it was too tall to be as short as it was. This took work: there are some good things about this: dudes will have to use the things they have worn in well. A move worn in well is a beautiful thing. There is a kind of thinking that is repetitive, a series of motions that become reoccurring phenomenon. Inside this event something amazing is communicated, where
slight emotive shifts mar the continuity of the move, a set of ineffable, unalterable things find expression.

Figure 2

The second box was different; I bought some wood from the lumberyard and two angled pieces of steel. The plywood was breathtakingly expensive and so the tact I chose began with conserving it. Dividing the 4’x8’ panel into four cuts, I crosscut the cap for the ends first, eight inches tall. The next two cuts were eight inches as well, ripping down the sides. The remaining center became the top 32”x80”. I cut up four studs into 30 1/2” pieces, nailed them one up, one down with, four sixteen penny nails each, from end to end on the ripped 8” sides. The caps were nailed as well with six nails each. The top was then trimmed to size to remove the excess inch of material that is standard factory sizing, then used to caress the structure into square as it is fastened, three nails in each stud, six times.

With the form constructed and small bits of cutoff material lingering about, I called a friend to talk about cutting and fastening the metal edge. He came by bringing an angle grinder with a cutoff wheel and a counter sink bit for the screws. I marveled again and again at the seamlessness of the process, the lack of excess, the spare rigor of the design...as though some deep organizational abscess had been worked loose, to leave a gaping, clean, order. At the spot, the object became fantastic, so workable and well scaled that many new moves became possible. I watched over a few days as the thing was transformed through group visualization into a slab of granite. Over a few more, bodily contortions that I had only seen in short segments of video taken in exotic public places were made manifest.
After a few weeks there was a way about the space, it had become a zone, a territory of intent. People from other towns would come through, amplifying the energy. The space between the three objects connected three separate landscapes. Each thing required a different scale shift, and in turn speed shift, and in turn visualization shift. Their ecology, being “not natural” in the sense they weren’t discovered, yet were actualized in an already understood space. Joining the geographically remote zones of expansive cosmopolitan plazas, cramped second city use driven structures and the serially ubiquitous space of the parking block; our spot was good.
Ramblin’:

So the other day, I was taking a ride outside of town, when I saw these jagged pieces of concrete on the side of the road. I was driving the company truck, so I stopped to get a better look. There were three pieces, and I’m telling you, Franz West, Rodin and William Tucker couldn’t have done better. Like a blizzard staff or a baby arm, these things might have been in the corner of a yard.

I decided to huff ‘em into the back, so I girded up my loins and went.

On the third one, a short, bald, bug eyed old coot came running out of his house. He was yelling and this and this and that. I made like I was going to get in and drive off but he headed me off, saying,

“Put ‘em back, put ‘em back right now! Put ‘em back or I’ll get my gun!”

This was convincing, so I did.

Then yesterday, I get a call from someone saying he got this number off the side of one of my trucks. It’s the guy, he’s talkin’ some this and this and that. Your guy was in my yard. Your guy tried to steal my rocks…

I was pressed, so I said,

“Okay, okay, he’s fired that’s all there is to it, but, let me ask you one question…

Was he good lookin’?”
Well Worn Moves:

The well worn move, the move undertaken in conditions that are harsh, spots that demand moves that are simple and moves that are deeply communicable because of their commonness.

Taking my adapted tennis court skate spot from the year 1998, and imagining the middle of a session as it likely would have happened on a late spring afternoon. People are doing moves, circumambulating the three objects. Almost everyone is doing the same move on the first box. There are similarities between the qualities of the movement, but what is even more obvious is the vast difference in the way bodies negotiate these positions.

For some it seems that the eyes are in fact guiding the entire event, controlling where the body goes by where the eyes are looking. Others seem to be involved in movement guided by phantoms of a motile imagination; they seem as though they could operate with their eyes closed. Most times though, these two approaches are mixed into the same individual during a sequenced maneuver. It’s here that the intensity, the true form of the move is embodied. Slight adjustments in velocity interrupt the continuity of action - as visualization falls away and the eyes steer the body. A moment later, the eyes become glass and a bodily imperative follows through. These pauses are the points that the subject uses and ultimately wear in, movements that come to define the breadth and resonance of their style.

At these points, the interruptions, pauses, break the continuous flow of the move, slight shifts in speed become enunciative: the moment of emotive communication through the act of skateboarding. This is what speed is used for.

I like styles that make this territory malleable. Kinds of moves where these emotive shifts are left open, asking for more uncertainty, pushing the structuring of bodily contortion to its liminal capacity. An unruly object will bring these things to the fore. When I think of speed in this situation, yet another layer of intimation becomes apparent. Speed shifts, open risk, the confident aggression build a context in which the subject attempts to ask something to the other.
The Curious Field Research:

Photographing works in architectural sites to reframe the object, in some cases critically, here are some thoughts about interior, about infrastructure.
Richard Nuetra’s Rice House:

Built in the mid 1960’s the structure sits high atop Lock Island, which juts into the James River. Signature tiered flat roof, intersecting rectangles, hundreds of square feet of glass; a craggy stair down to a patio with an in ground pool. The lower bedrooms, like bug-boxes, open out to a pool. It is the only house in Richmond in the International style.

I spent two days there, moving a work of mine around, the piece is entitled Looking at the Sky While Your Looking at My Baby. Dave Weaver worked the camera, friends Adrian Meyers and Nick des Cognets helped lift the four hundred pound sculpture. Alternate titles were suggested; perhaps the Venus of Heavy-Dorf is more fitting (thanks Adrian).

In the studio while making …Looking at My Baby I accumulated a group of large concrete fragments. A couple of pieces came from Hippoland, one was extracted from the decorative perimeter of a vacant lot in Carver, and another was a loose segment of sidewalk in Scott’s Edition. Initially it was just the Hippo two; I built a pallet with casters on the bottom and stacked one on the other. It remained this way for some time; I had a number of other things happening around it, propped assemblages, photographs, a needlepoint, and drawings. I was working sporadically on these, moving them around, cutting and refitting, painting them, etc.
Every so often something would happen to the pile, causal episodes maybe, green paint or plaster would splatter on them, then I’d knock them over and put them back. This is the way I approached the studio at the time: methods, moods and behaviors would build a surface, I spent a lot of time in the studio dragging my eyes over things, walking between them, making a move, laying around on a blanket, then another move. I took pleasure in the rugged heavy slabs. The frenetic energy of these other objects found repose in these two ugly lumps. They were casual; they started growing from there.

I used clay, plaster, body filler and miscellaneous debris to build Looking at My Baby’s surface, though only in certain areas. Some parts became sensual, smooth; from some angles the object appeared whole. From other vantage points it seemed awkward, aching and raw.
Andrew Cauthen’s House:

When I moved to Richmond and started meeting people, skating the spots and ramps around the city, I made the acquaintance of Andrew Cauthen. At that time there were always sessions going on at the former Leigh Street Ramp (what is now the Barn). On a few occasions we had skated together on the mini-ramp, sometime in the spring of 2009 he began building a structure in the lot behind the ramp on top of a utility trailer. When I first saw it I was blown away by how tall it was, nearly 12 feet to the peak of the steep pitched roof. It is clad in standing seam metal siding and had disproportionately large windows and doors that he bought at closeout prices. On the rear is a micro porch, which I suppose is for sitting, and there is a sleeping loft that juts over the porch and is accessible from the inside by ladder. On the front is a small solar panel with a wire snaking into an electrical fixture for a quick plug in.

The house has moved a few times since, neighbors are usually an obstacle. I helped him to move it one night and Andrew and I spoke about living, about the essentials, the things you can’t do without. About how rigidly we perceive other’s lifestyles, and perhaps the lines that divide empathy. When we arrived at the new site, I witnessed a plea for a stay of execution with some concerned residents, a winding argument leaving the locals baffled by Andrew’s resolute approach.
I had been making a series of drawings based on a denim skirt. Not a mini-skirt, but one that flares out and ends just above the knee. I guess the thing I was thinking about really were the bare legs, starting at the knees, the soft skin underneath the skirt, skin that I’ve known a long time. When I wear things do I wear them for me, or for you? Which one is theatre? Around this time I made a two-part press for a molded plywood section of corrugated siding, orienting all the grain the same way, once out of the press the object curled back on itself.

I waxed the piece, but before I did, I rubbed a few handfuls of lawn where it met the floor. These grass stains struck me as awkward, awkward in the way an amateur painter might fumble to suggest plant life through a series of distracted movements of the brush. Hearing about Charles and Ray Eames privacy screens, I took a look. What lush things!
I brought the work over to Andrews house in May. It was the middle of the day and getting warm. The house had moved a couple of times since. The new location is in the back of this guy Phil’s yard, right next to a big pine tree. We put the piece up in the loft; I took a few shots from the outside.

Figure 8
Hippoland--

At the edge of Richmond and Henrico there was a skate spot, built into the foundation of what was a department store. Slabs of cement had been configured to make a series of ledges and by the time I first went, a crew of dedicated souls had taken to fastening angle iron to the edges of cinderblock constructions. There was also a mini embankment built into one of the tiers with a little gap to traverse, a fine piece of folk handy-craft.

During my first fall in Richmond, I made a work called the Orange Slice (for the Boys), the name played on its form that was constructed out of rubble from the Carver neighborhood. The top of the crescent was capped with a cast concrete pipe. I started moving material to the studio almost immediately upon arriving in town. The method was something that I had familiarity with because of skating, because of the use value in the subculture of concrete debris.

There is economy and ecology of finding and moving this material, piece at a time, for a dedicated trog with a vision for an overlooked landscape. So the process is one I brought to the studio, piece at a time. I had a friend in the skate scene help me, Chris Gottscha, the work was built on a large wheeled skid. As the mound accumulated the varying shades of concrete, cement, fill and bricks became surprisingly warm in tone against the white wall. Looking at it as I neared finish I started to think about an image, the pressing of Giles Corey. Then about weight, about speaking; some direct punitive relationship between weight and speaking.

Figure 9
…finally I came back to thinking about slang and orange slices.

Figure 10
Highland Hills:

Holly Morrison lives in a neighborhood called Highland Hills just outside Richmond. Designed by regional modernist William Goodman, now over forty years old, the homes seem almost a part of the topography. I like the neighborhood; I like thinking of how much can be made out of so few parts. More than that, the way two spaces can be so similar in terms of component parts yet embody distinctly different presence.

Black Magic is a single serpentine black line that twists its way through space, connecting back to itself in a completed loop. Made of PVC, velocity is implied by the line and by the limpness of the material, this mini-doppelganger for monumental painted steel sculpture offers a double assertion of its gestural speed, being both fast and loose. Just larger than human scale, the grammar of Black Magic, partly because of its essential materiality and partly because of the sub- or counter-claim made by its name, embraces both fiction and physical presence.

Photographing this work in Highland hills, I sited the piece to a North/South axis. As it moved locations, it maintained its orientation relative to the cardinal points. The architecture moved around the work, the photographer in a fixed location within the rectangular interior space. The sculpture, like a 3 dimensional drawing, shape shifts for the camera, the space as a series of component parts, arranges and rearranges itself. Caught out of scale within the domestic interior the sculpture becomes image. As image alone the speed of the gesture dominates and something is changed. I think it is a gentleness, something tongue and cheek, a small thing but a big difference.
Berger’s Double Dome:

Across interstate 95 from Carver there is a double geodesic dome tucked into the industrial park landscape. With bars on the windows and a bunch of unruly trees all around, the structure is native in its surroundings despite its radical form.

Figure 12

A colleague of mine, Andrew Brehm, had ambled upon the structure and met its owner William Berger. The story I heard had visionary flair, the structure itself nestled in a vaporous thick aura, a colloquial wonder.

When Berger greeted me he said something like, “Welcome to Hell”. He laughed it off, but it took a minute.
He was referring to his long saga of real estate speculation, illicit international imports and eventual inhabitation of the structure. He said he’d built a version in Cuba. From the drawings that he showed me it seemed as though he was trying to fuse the form to a colonial style. He told me there are versions all around the outlying areas of Richmond and had process shots to show the progression from foam substrate, to application of the stucco, to period revival detailing.
I visited him with half of my thesis show, *Blizzard Skitch*, an object about two feet cubed. It is a series of intersecting spheres made of vacuum formed plywood and colored resin. I constructed it of four different pieces of a sphere, fifteen separate parts, each stuck haphazardly together with burlap and animal hide glue. The four variations have patterns cut into them, relieving the wood enabling it to compound curve. One of its parts looks like a palm tree, another some intestines, the top is almost alien, and the last might be some sort of graf-like scribble. All are highlighted with a white paint marker, rubbed with tung oil and scribbled on in crayon. The interior is multi-colored, dripping blues, reds, pinks and blacks.

The object exists somewhere in between a hackneyed lighting fixture and a utopian naïve architectural model; it is domestic exotic, in scale and peculiarity of shape. William and I discussed it; it’s potentiality, where it might go. I hadn’t considered the work as a prototype; to me it is fully formed, albeit in the language of attempts.
How the Flower Rubbings Started:

I took to rubbing flowers on objects after getting a concussion. The formal problem was about color. I wanted color, had a desire for it, but all the decisions about paints and applications seemed to be too analytical, too reasonable. Occasions of buying flowers before had been confusing, as though to choose was to be washed away by everything that could be about giving. The rubbings were close to the source, lovely.

Figure 16
Acknowledgements:

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