

SAM DURANT

MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES

DAVID JOSELIT

You hear Sam Durant's show at the Museum of Contemporary Art before you see it. When I asked the front-desk attendant where the exhibition began, she told me to follow the music: good advice, not only in terms of orienting oneself spatially but also as an interpretive principle. For in a manifestation of Durant's consistent attitude toward architecture, a cacophonous brew of overlapping sound composed of the blues, rock, and rap tracks that accompany most of his exhibited sculptures blurred and even contradicted the geometric rectitude of MoCA's Arata Isozaki-designed building. As in the artist's *Upside Down and Backwards, Completely Unburied*, 1999, in which a miniature model of the structure from Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, is packed with three CD players, MoCA's designer building was itself choked on noise. But the sound tracks featured in Durant's projects don't merely produce sound bleed. In his careful crafting of a rock playlist redolent of '60s dissent and its various prequels (in blues) and sequels (in rap or in bands like Nirvana), he regards music—typically popular music—as both documentary evidence from which history is derived and a metaphor for history's operations. Like history, music is made of time, but one of Durant's lessons is that music also produces spaces to be



Opposite page: Sam Durant, *Beer Bong* (detail), 1995, collage on photocopy, 8 x 10". This page, clockwise from above: Sam Durant, *Upside Down and Backwards, Completely Unburied*, 1999, wood, asphalt, roofing, acrylic, CD players, and CDs, dimensions variable. Sam Durant, *Chair #4*, 1995, color photograph, 20 x 16". Sam Durant, *Quaternary Field/Associative Diagram*, 1998, graphite on paper, 22 x 29 1/2".

"monumentalized"—public spaces like the small "city" convened for the free concert at the Altamont Raceway in 1969, or Friendship Park, the breeding ground of southern rock in Jacksonville, Florida.

All of Durant's works at MoCA undertake a complex set of associations—they juxtapose figures as diverse as Neil Young, Robert Smithson, and Rosalind Krauss in remarkably convincing core samples of late-'60s/early-'70s culture. Such eccentric histories can perhaps only be told belatedly by someone who, like Durant, was not a "participant-observer." It would nonetheless be a mistake to consider this belatedness a form of nostalgia, for Durant's desire to revive the '60s—one shared by many artists and scholars of his generation—is neither entirely melancholic nor entirely celebratory. It is a critical effort to recoup a workable political legacy. A better analogue for this retrospective attention is the cover song, as

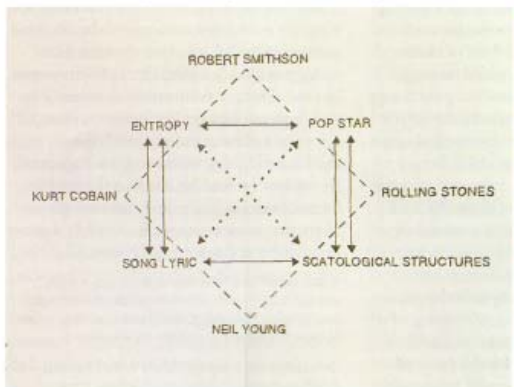
WHAT DISTINGUISHES DURANT'S WILD PROLIFERATION OF REFERENCES IS HIS PRACTICE OF MAKING MODELS THAT ARE BOTH PHYSICAL AND CONCEPTUAL.

proposed by poet Kevin Young in his catalogue essay: "The cover both replaces and obscures an event—though, like the cover of a great record or book, it might just provide something we open, another totem to take with us."

What distinguishes Durant's wild proliferation of references from a lazy form of free association is his complementary practice of making *models* that are alternately—and at times simultaneously—physical and conceptual. In a gesture dear to the heart of a modernist art historian like myself, Durant's *Quaternary Field/Associative Diagram*, 1998, for instance, appropriates the structuralist Klein group diagram Krauss used to map the "expanded field of sculpture" in a canonical essay of 1978. In place of her oppositions of landscape and architecture, Durant introduces terms drawn from the Earth artist, Kurt Cobain, the Rolling Stones,

and Neil Young along axes of, for example, scatology and pop stardom. This is much more than clever parody. Durant is seriously, and I would say successfully, attempting to map the "expanded field" appropriate to our own time—namely, "visual culture," which tries to articulate the complex relation between commercial aesthetics and the aesthetics of advanced art. Part of Durant's wit as an artist-theorist is his deadpan juxtaposition of conceptual models such as the Klein diagram with architectural models like his miniature versions of Smithson's unburied *Partially Buried Woodshed*. In Durant's recent works, these two systems of modeling coexist in heterogeneous installations of sculptural forms, music, and drawings. But in earlier works, such as his spectacular "Abandoned House" series from 1995, the architectural model stands alone.

The first gallery in the MoCA exhibition centered on the "Abandoned Houses" and two related series: a group of photos of modernist chairs upended as though offering their asses for penetration, and a grid of irreverent Xerox collages that introduce inappropriately tacky objects or scatological acts (say, a mooning biker chick) into the refined spaces of L.A.'s now glorified midcentury Case Study houses. The "Abandoned Houses" are themselves humble foamcore, cardboard, and Plexiglas models of the spare domestic structures; they are installed tripod style on simple wooden dowels. As in the Xeroxed collages, architecture has been "humiliated": the walls at times charred and defaced by graffiti, the windows riddled with tiny bullets, and the roofs breached on occasion by holes, as though they've



been struck by meteors. These models are drenched in a certain knowing perfume of Los Angeles, one part Hollywood glamour recalling the mise-en-scène of films like *L.A. Confidential*, one part lush decay reminiscent of Christopher Isherwood's fiction. But these associations amount to little more than the usual clichés about LA art, just as the equally potent elision of high and low in the "Abandoned Houses"—the models are at waist level and one must adopt a squatting (shitting) position in order to peer into them—is pertinent and even interesting but somehow not equal to the work. Ultimately, I think the power of these sculptures lies in their physical and conceptual portability. All of what I have projected onto them—an aching desire for an aesthetic ideal and its simultaneous humiliation—is here modeled. It is available for inspection and mental absorption, just as Krauss's Klein diagram is. Each "Abandoned House" can be possessed, even if you're not lucky enough to be the collector who owns it.

In his catalogue essay, curator Michael Darling quotes Durant on the subject of a 1995 project derived from kitchen-counter displays at a home-improvement store: "The act of 'remodeling,'" the artist states, "is about ordering chaotic materials into a finished product." I've already asserted that Durant's art pivots on the double meaning—physical and conceptual—of *modeling* or *remodeling*. In the five installations that constitute the remainder of

the exhibition, at least three formal strategies of remodeling are evident. The first, which might be described as "retrospective possession" (à la *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), is manifest in *Upside Down and Backwards, Completely Unburied*. Smithsonian's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, in which twenty truckloads of earth were piled on top of a derelict building on the campus of Kent State University, ultimately causing the structure's central beam to crack, was completed not long before four student protesters were murdered by National Guardsmen in an anti-war demonstration at the Ohio school. The piece retrospectively served as a monument to that event. Durant's miniature model of the woodshed is intact and unburied, but it is filled with three CD players linked by a web of cords to six speakers arranged in a circle like witnesses. Three songs play concurrently: "Gimme Shelter" by the Rolling Stones, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana, and "Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)" by Neil Young. In this work a genealogy of the pop music of youth-culture dissent inhabits and surrounds—buries with sound—a "revitalized" inadvertent monument to youth martyrdom. This juxtaposition is complex, and is further enhanced, as in most of Durant's projects, by a series of related drawings that focus in on particular conceptual and visual intersections. Of special note is the way the architectural model in this work is inhabited by an electronic apparatus that emits a penumbra of music around its built form. A medium that is spatial, traditionally constructed, and aesthetically specialized is colonized by one that is temporal, electronic, and popular. A second tactic of remodeling, which is present to some degree in all of Durant's works, is most evident in his *Proposal for Monument in Friendship Park, Jacksonville, FL, 2000*, in which traditions of southern rock music are linked to such far-flung cultural markers as Isamu Noguchi, ramshackle rural structures, and public garbage cans sheathed in aggregate-stone surfaces. Particularly in his drawings, Durant demonstrates the mobility of meanings from, for instance, "rock music" to



Above: Sam Durant, *Proposal for Monument in Friendship Park, Jacksonville, FL, 2000*, wood, fiberglass, paint, aluminum, glass, paper, stereo receiver, turntables, speakers, record albums, plastic, metal, and trash receptacle, dimensions variable. Below: Sam Durant, *Abandoned House #6, 1995*, foamcore, cardboard, Plexiglas, tape, spray enamel, wood, and metal, 4 1/2 x 30 1/2 x 23 1/2".

Noguchi's "rock gardens" to the absurd attenuation of such highbrow aesthetics in "aggregate rock" garbage cans designed to beautify public spaces. If Durant's first tactic of remodeling was a mode of *repositioning*, this second strategy would suggest a perpetual—even compulsive—chain of conceptual *dispossessions*.

A third tactic of remodeling in Durant's art pivots on the mirror. Sometimes individual works play on mirror images, as when the word "counterclockwise" is reversed in the upper right-hand corner of a 1999 drawing representing Smithsonian's *Partially Buried Woodshed*. In establishing a conceptual link between the mirror's reversals and a backward flow of time (which is differently expressed through the act of redrawing a photographic "original"), Durant deftly associates the retrospective gaze of his art with a spatial trope of reversal. Such a conceptual link may enrich our reading of the culminating work in the exhibition, *Upside Down: Pastoral Scene, 2002*, which makes a twofold allusion to Smithsonian's use of mirrors as a mode of displacement in the landscape and to his series of trees buried upside down. *Upside Down: Pastoral Scene* consists of a forest of artificial tree trunks and grafted organic roots, doubled like the faces of playing cards through the placement of

the flat cut end of each stump onto a mirror on the floor. Roots are thereby brought into the air and simultaneously, by reflection, sent deep beneath the floor—the mirror functioning as agent of both reversal and mutation. In a familiar tactic of conceptual and sensual enhancement, Durant projects a second manifestation of "roots" onto this arboreal variety: Each trunk is fitted with a speaker playing a diverse anthology of African American music, including Billie Holiday, Sister Sledge, and Public Enemy. The lyrics introduce allusions ranging from exuberant solidarity to threats of violence, allusions that circle the virtually scatological forms of the doubled stumps growing into one another like snaggy-ended botanical barbells. In works like this Durant accomplishes something truly extraordinary: He broaches charged questions of race and political dissent in the United States without allowing identities to ossify. And he does so through a formal lexicon, alternately intensive and extensive, that manages flammable materials without dousing their burn. □

"Sam Durant" will be on view at MOCA, Los Angeles, through Feb. 9; travels to Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Jan. 18–Mar. 30. The contents of the exhibition will be different at each venue.

David Joselit is associate professor in the Department of Art History at the University of California, Irvine.