

Collapsing Utopias: Brian Jungen's Minimalist Tactics

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My approach to working with existing objects and altering them is directly related to a material sensibility I experienced in my childhood, the way my mother's family would use objects in ways that weren't originally intended, a kind of improvisatory recycling that was born out of both practical and economic necessity. Witnessing that resourcefulness continues to exert a deep influence on how I relate to the world as an artist.¹

—Brian Jungen

In the late 1940s, engineer and architect Buckminster Fuller applied the principles of the geodesic dome to prototypes of rapid-construction dwellings. At that time, the United States was in the midst of a housing shortage, and these dwellings could be made efficiently from the same equipment that was used to build airplanes during wartime; indeed, Fuller understood how advancing technology had the potential to decrease the relationship between human culture and geographical place, and he imagined the houses being delivered by airplane to address the need for shelter in remote or inaccessible regions of the world. However, by 1967, just a single generation later, Fuller's dream of advancing the welfare of all humankind through more efficient and affordable housing had not found large-scale practical application. Instead, the dome's most resonant expression became its use as the United States Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal—an unqualified success as a spectacle of American ingenuity and engineering but a tragically hollow testament to Fuller's utopian vision.

OPPOSITE:
*Isolated Depiction of the
Passage of Time*, 2001 (detail)
plastic food trays, television monitor,
VCR, wood
112.5 x 117.5 x 100 cm (44 1/4" x
46 1/4" x 39 1/4")
Collection of Bob Rennie, Rennie
Management Corporation, Vancouver
Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery

Thirty-six years later, at his first international solo exhibition at the Secession in Vienna in 2003, Vancouver-based artist Brian Jungen presented a sculpture in the form of a geodesic dome. Whereas Fuller's design of the American pavilion for Expo 67 was an awe-inspiring construction whose transparent skin engulfed and surrounded the viewer, even the smallest of viewers towers over *Little Habitat I* (2003). Jungen's geodesic domes (a second version was created in 2004) are only 30 centimetres tall and have been constructed by cutting, scoring and reassembling the black-and-silver display boxes for Nike Air Jordan running shoes. These boxes are emblazoned with a portrait of Michael Jordan, one of the greatest (and most highly branded) athletes of our time. Jungen multiplies and fragments Jordan's determined gaze across the surface of the *Little Habitats*, pointedly creating a utopian form from the detritus of brand identification. In light of Karl Marx's famous dictum that history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce, Jungen's *Little Habitats* might be understood as a travesty, a farcical monument to the collapse of idealistic aspirations.

Like many of Jungen's works, the *Little Habitats* reference architecture and are constructed in a tensile relationship to the viewer's body. That is, their scale invites emotional responses that might oscillate between contempt (the domes are on the floor, alone in a corner) and empathy (they're small, fragile, in need of protection). Given that Jungen often produces very large-scale work, one's response to the *Little Habitats* does not simply register the difference between sculptural and architectural scale. Instead, Jungen's work is embodied not only by calibrating the scale of the sculpture to the scale of the viewer, as might be expected of an artist engaging with the legacies of minimalism, but also by using objects and materials usually associated with food, clothing, furniture and shelter.

Art historian and theorist Hal Foster describes how minimalism announces its interest in the body "not in the form of an anthropomorphic image or in the suggestion of an illusionist space of consciousness, but rather in the presence of its objects, unitary and symmetrical as they often are (as art historian and critic Michael Fried saw), just like people." Foster suggests that "a problem emerges here too, for minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality and power... If minimalism does initiate a critique of the subject, it does so in abstract terms, and as subsequent art and theory develop this critique, they also come to question minimalism..."² Over the past decade, Jungen has tactically deployed minimalist strategies—a theatrical use of scale, the multiplication of integers (permutations of multiple identical objects), the use of industrial materials—in his embodied forms, not to fetishize the abstract forms of minimalism but to refocus their potential to critique social realities.

Many of Jungen's best-known works involve integers: running shoes in *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998–2005), plastic chairs in *Shapeshifter* (2000), *Cetology* (2002) and *Vienna* (2003), pallets in *Untitled* (2001), cafeteria trays in *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time* (2001), replicas of Air Jordan boxes in *Michael* (2003). With these pieces, Jungen has been intensively mapping



Little Habitat II, 2004
Installation view at Walter Phillips Gallery,
Banff, Alberta, 2004
Nike Air Jordan boxes
65 x 65 x 30 cm (25 1/2" x 25 1/2" x 11 3/4")
Collection of Brett Shaheen, Cleveland
Photo: Courtesy of Walter Phillips Gallery,
Banff, Alberta

what photographer Roy Arden has termed “the landscape of the economy”—by exploring the effects of neo-colonial and global economic forces on the construction of social space and representation. For example, *Untitled* is a stack of ten identical replicas of industrial pallets. *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time* uses one of these pallets as a base and on it tightly stacks rectangular plastic cafeteria trays to a height of about a metre. *Michael* reproduces in cast aluminum copies of the Air Jordan display box. Finally, *Court* (2004) is a scale model of a basketball court produced with 224 sweatshop sewing tables. All these works use the raw materials of economic production and marketing as their foundation, and they might be understood as tracing the production cycle and its effects.

Jungen's sculptures and installations summon up a range of references. By evoking the landscape of the economy, Jungen claims a place in an important genealogy of artists from British Columbia who have depicted the local environment not as the picturesque landscape of tourist brochures but as a site riven by vectors of economic power and social consequences. This lineage reaches back through Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace—some members of the so-called Vancouver School—to others, even as far as the modernist painter Emily Carr in the early part of the twentieth century.³ However, whereas the works by Jungen's Vancouver predecessors are predominantly photographic or at least photo-based, Jungen and his generational peers, including Geoffrey Farmer, Myfanwy MacLeod, Damian Moppett and Ron Terada, have invested much more heavily in sculpture, and much of their work relates in various ways to found or



Installation views of *Court* at Triple Candie, New York, 2004
 224 table tops, basketball hoops, paint
 37.6 x 85.3 x 215.1 m (12' 4" x 28' x 70'
 Collection of Bob Rennie, Rennie Management Corporation, Vancouver
 Photos: Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver



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store-bought objects—ready-mades—a concept first employed by Marcel Duchamp in his *Fountain* (1917)—a urinal presented, physically unaltered except as to its orientation, as a sculpture. Jungen's art recalls the work of Carl Andre and Andy Warhol in the early 1960s and of Ashley Bickerton, Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach in the mid- to late 1980s, artists whose work questions the opportunistic and hypocritical view of the art market as somehow more elevated and pure than other arenas of marketing and exchange.

In this generational shift of emphasis from photography to sculpture, it is tempting to recall artist and critic Robert Morris's trenchant observation that sculpture has the potential to take a position "absolutely opposed to the meaning of photography."⁴ Morris was particularly interested in the way the phenomenological space of some sculpture was resistant to being captured and frozen in a photographic image. Although Jungen appears to have rejected photography as his means of expression, he nonetheless continues the local tradition of engaging in a critique of representation as a form of social criticism: he further invests minimalism's deceptively abstract forms with social implications. For example, the pallets Jungen uses in *Untitled* and *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time* are not real: carefully handcrafted from cedar, assembled with pegs rather than nails and finished by hand, these pallets and their fragile surfaces are not meant to be sullied. They stand before us like a stage prop that cannot be used without being destroyed.

Similarly, *Court*, a more recent work that premiered at Triple Candie, an alternative space in Harlem, New York, is constructed from a field of sweatshop sewing tables and suggests that the economy might be understood as a sweatshop of desire. Instead of Michael Jordan's intent silvery visage on the simulated display boxes in *Michael*, *Court* leads viewers back to the basketball court from which Michael Jordan came, where the dream of the flight to a better life might only be a slam dunk away. However, Jungen's court is pockmarked with holes originally cut to hold the industrial sewing machines that might have produced Air Jordans or other articles of apparel. Any attempt at a slam dunk might well result in a broken ankle.

Unlike photographer Jeff Wall's backlit transparency *Outburst* (1989), which dramatizes a confrontation in a sweatshop that might take place in any

Abandoned pallet and production stills
of *Untitled*, 2001

Photo: Courtesy of Brian Jungen



large industrial city, Jungen's *Court* merely provides a stage set, a set constructed of sewing-machine tables that foregrounds the gap between aspirational lifestyle and material realities. Jungen's sculptures position viewers not as silent subjects of photography but as actors upon a stage. It remains to be seen, however, what role the viewers might be able to play. Jungen's *Court* continues the trajectory of theatricality that Michael Fried observed as a constituent quality of minimalism, where a sculpture's mute surfaces are largely activated through a somatic relationship with the beholder. As such, Jungen's installation operates from a different perspective from the absorptive composition of Wall's *Outburst*, whose protagonists enact their drama with no awareness of being observed. By absenting the literal representation of the body, Jungen subtly shifts the beholder from a position of observing a parallel universe to occupying a space of simultaneous awareness.

Although the consistent use of multiple integers of identical objects in Jungen's sculpture, reaching its apotheosis in *Court*, implies a minimalist legacy, this connection can also be drawn back in relation to Jungen's choice of materials. His use of Western red cedar in *Untitled* alludes not only to Northwest Coast Native carving traditions but also to the work of Carl Andre, an artist whose early work came to be identified with minimalism.⁵ In those early pieces Andre set out, in grids or other formations, industrial materials such as sheets of metal or blocks of wood. Several of his signal works consisted of arrangements of untreated, unfinished blocks of cedar;⁶ for example, *Pyre (Element Series)* (1960/1971) is a stack made by alternating layers of cedar blocks. Each layer consists of two blocks laid one block width apart and arranged perpendicular to the blocks below them, creating a volume whose surfaces rhythmically alternate between solid and void.

Jungen's *Untitled* is also, materially speaking, a cedar stack and has something of a human presence about it. However, where Andre's rough-hewn blocks are arranged precisely, Jungen's pile of beautifully finished pallets is slightly ragged, as if someone had casually but efficiently left them stored there. As with most but not all of Andre's work, Jungen's accumulation of pallets offers no implication of progression or other structuring device. Both artists' works speak to an interest in commodities and the landscape of industrial manufacture.



Jeff Wall
Outburst, 1989
 cibachrome transparency
 229 x 312 cm (90" x 122 3/4") image
 Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery
 Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
 Photo: Courtesy of Jeff Wall



Andre described how his “particles” are “all more or less standards of the economy because I believe in using the materials of society in the form that society does not use them.”⁷ The elements of Jungen’s sculpture are precisely standards of the economy—pallets are used around the world to store and ship commodities of all kind.

Jungen’s pallets are simulacra whose finely tuned craftsmanship (almost fine cabinetry) might be seen as a wry misreading, or misprision, of Andre’s description of himself as “an artisan.”⁸ I say “misprision” because Andre described himself in the context of an economic—not an aesthetic—judgement: “I’ve never minded somebody buying works at all. My social position really, in classic Marxist analysis, is I’m an artisan. That is, a worker who employs himself essentially as his own tool to produce goods that he exchanges for other people’s goods. This is different from a worker who is employed by somebody else. So technically this business about the art object being corrupt or uncorrupt is simply not an issue.”⁹

With *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time*, Jungen can be said to have shifted his focus from Roy Arden’s landscape of the economy to Robert Morris’s “realm of the carcereal.” In fact, Jungen’s piece was inspired by “one of the most infamous objects” in the Correctional Service of Canada Museum, “an escape pod fashioned from a hollowed-out stack of lunch trays clandestinely hoarded from the prison cafeteria.”¹⁰ The object was built in 1980 by a prisoner from Millhaven Maximum Security Institution who knew that trays and dishes were sent for cleaning at Bath, a minimum-security facility thought to be an easier launch for escape.”¹¹ *Isolated Depiction* was the first of Jungen’s works to be almost entirely composed of ready-made integers: the colour and number of trays in the work stand for “the number of Aboriginal males incarcerated in Canadian penal institutions. Each tray represents an individual, and the five colours (orange, light pink, pink, mustard, yellow) correspond to the sentences meted out (life, ten or more years, six to ten years, three to six years, and less than three years, respectively).”¹² In the centre of Jungen’s stack is a hollow, just like the one that secreted the prisoner in the original pod, and into it Jungen has inserted a television—whose presence is given away only by a murmur and a blue glow.

The idea of sculpture volumetrically implying a body might be traced back to Carl Andre’s *Well* (1964/1970), in which blocks are stacked to create an implied but invisible hollow centre big enough for a person to stand in unseen, or to Robert Morris’s *Box for Standing* (1961), in which Morris constructed from pine boards a rough-hewn, open-fronted box whose horizontal and vertical dimensions perfectly contained the artist’s body and might also evoke a vertical coffin. Unlike these two works, Jungen’s *Isolated Depiction* does not so much suggest human storage as it copies a structure that somebody actually built in order to hide. It also continues a critical trajectory of sculpture that has used minimalism’s forms to speak to issues around violence and incarceration.

In 1978, influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Robert Morris produced a set of drawings of walls, cells, containers and stockades suggesting containment or imprisonment that he called *In the Realm of the Carcereal*. More recently, Hans

TOP:
Untitled, 2001
 Installation view at Secession, Vienna, 2003
 red cedar
 116.2 x 119.4 x 101.6 cm (45 3/4" x 47" x 40")
 Collection of Bob Rennie, Rennie Management Corporation,
 Vancouver
 Photo: Matthias Herrmann, Secession

BELOW:
 Carl Andre
Pyre (Element Series)
 New York 1960 (proposed) / Minneapolis 1971 (made)
 wood
 8-unit stack, 4 tiers of 2 timbers each alternating
 30.5 x 30.5 x 91.4 cm (12" x 12" x 36") each
 121.9 x 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm (48" x 36" x 36") overall
 Private collection
 Photo: Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

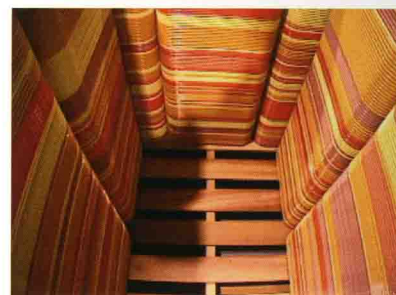
RIGHT:
Millhaven Escape Trays, 1980
 glued and hollowed-out stack of food
 trays
 68.6 x 58.5 x 38 cm (27" x 23" x 15")
 Collection of Correctional Service of Canada
 Museum, Kingston, Ontario
 Photo: Cheryl O'Brien



Haacke's *USA Isolation Box, Grenada 1983* reproduced a wooden crate used by the U.S. military to store prisoners. And Theresa Margolles, who works in a morgue in Mexico City, has often used the by-products of autopsies (such as the water used to wash unidentified corpses which she adds to concrete mix) to produce her minimalist forms. In this context, Jungen's *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time* portrays dead weight by bearing witness to prisons as human storage and to Aboriginal males as integers in a carceral economy.

Although Jungen's use of the ready-made has few earlier exemplars in Vancouver art, Ken Lum's early 1980s sculptures used mass-produced furniture as domestic minimalist integers. Often these sculptures refused their original function: couches were tipped on one end or sectional components were placed to form completely enclosed circles. In a similar sense, Jungen's *Prototypes* remain recognizable as running shoes, but they could never be used as footwear. Jungen has described how he uses the ready-made object "as a device to merge paradoxical concepts. Often, such concepts have raised questions of cultural authenticity and authority while simultaneously comparing the handmade over the mass-produced. I attempt to transform these objects into a new hybrid object, which both affirms and negates its mass-produced origin, and charts an alternative destination to that of the landfill."¹³

If Jungen's *Little Habitats* originated from an impulse to reuse discarded material, *Michael* consists of a stack of cast aluminum replicas of Nike Air Jordan display boxes. Jungen's fetishistic mimesis of the display boxes elevates and makes permanent what would usually be temporary and discarded. Unlike Andy Warhol's screen-printed facsimiles of Brillo boxes or Campbell's soup cans that amplify the glitches of an imperfect screen-printing process, Jungen's luxurious Air Jordan boxes fetishize the perfect reproduction of the Nike logo and Michael



ABOVE:
 Video stills of Brian Jungen's
*Isolated Depiction of the
 Passage of Time*, 2001, being
 installed at Agnes Etherington
 Art Centre, Queen's University,
 Kingston, Ontario, 2001
 Photos: Courtesy of Brian Jungen

consacrent une partie de leurs revenus au financement de projets éducatifs.

A portion of the proceeds from the purchase of JORDAN products support educational initiatives.

Les produits JORDAN consacrent une partie de leurs revenus au financement de projets éducatifs.

Jordan as forms of brand identification. If Haim Steinbach's sculptures between about 1984 and 1986 placed consumer objects onto raised shelves to slow down the viewer's gaze (which generally scans these objects in store aisles), and if Ashley Bickerton's sculptures of the late 1980s were emblazoned with real and imagined logotypes from high fashion, banks, artists and galleries that, with their surfeit of fasteners and coverings, looked like minimalist sculptures held up in bondage, then, stacked on the floor, Jungen's *Michael* intensifies and magnifies the aspirational aspects of the Air Jordan boxes. Made from cast aluminum and placed on the floor, they are both weighed down and laid low.

If Jungen's work manipulates our desire for brands and consumer goods, he also encodes a skepticism towards its promises. His sculptures critique minimalism's socially opaque forms, yet they employ its gestalt, its use of integers and its qualities of embodiment to situate his viewers in the landscape of the economy far from the utopian promise of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome. In doing so, his work also takes its distance from the pictorial legacy of the Vancouver School, even as it extends its tradition of thinking through issues of representation and social critique.

Michael, 2003 (detail)
screen print on powder-coated
aluminium, 10 boxes
86.4 x 117.8 x 83.8 cm (34" x 44" x
33") approximate installation
dimension
24.1 x 38.1 x 13.3 cm (9 1/2" x 15" x
5 1/4") each box
Collection of Bob Rennie, Rennie
Management Corporation, Vancouver
Photo: Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver

NOTES

1. Brian Jungen, "Brian Jungen in conversation with Matthew Higgs" in *Brian Jungen* (Vienna: Secession, 2003), 29.
2. Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism" in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 271.
3. Emily Carr was a pioneering modernist painter who lived most of her life in British Columbia. Several generations of West Coast artists have been influenced by her work, especially by *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* (1934), her depiction of a lone, scraggly tree in the midst of a clear-cut, which has been a particular touchstone for many Vancouver artists. It is interesting to consider Jungen's pieces in relation to Carr's early paintings of decaying totem poles in the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii), which trace an earlier colonialist chapter of globalization and its effect on First Nations peoples. If Carr's emblems suggested a civilization on the verge of extinction, Jungen's masks suggest several vectors on which the struggle in fact continues.
4. Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space" in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily, The Writings of Robert Morris, An October Book* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 201.
5. Lindsay Brown, "Entitlement: Brian Jungen's *Untitled*" in *Brian Jungen* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002), 25.
6. One of the works in the Vancouver exhibition was *The Way North, East and South (Uncarved Blocks)* (1975). Andre was also included in *955,000*, an international exhibition of conceptual art curated by Lucy Lippard. This was the second venue for an exhibition that began life in Seattle as *577,087*. The number refers to the population of the host city at the time of the exhibition.
7. Quoted in David Bourdon, *Carl Andre Sculpture 1959-1977* (New York: Jaap Rietman Inc., 1978), 14. Andre had two solo exhibitions at the Ace Gallery in Vancouver in 1974 and 1975; the latter included his signature arrangements of cedar blocks.
8. Carl Andre, "Artworker: Interview with Jeanne Siegel [1970]" in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 252.
9. Ibid.
10. *Museopathy*, curated by Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, in association with Displaycult, 2002.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Jens Hoffmann, "Brian Jungen," *Flash Art* 36, no. 231 (July-September 2003): 86.