

## Access Codes and Avoided Objects in the Work of **BRIAN JUNGEN, JOSIAH MCELHENY and CORNELIA PARKER**

The history of artists working in or on the museum is closely tied to the interventionist project of institutional critique. As delineated by its most articulate champion, Benjamin Buchloh, institutional critique stems from Marcel Duchamp's readymades and the Constructivist work of Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky, but reaches its apogee in the 1970s work of Michael Asher, Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke.<sup>1</sup> This work was characterized by specific and temporary interventions into the collections and the architecture of museums, and was led by an understanding given voice by Daniel Buren in 1970:

Every work of art already bears, implicitly or not, the trace of a gesture, an image, a portrait, a period, a history, an idea. . . and is subsequently preserved (as a souvenir) by the Museum.<sup>2</sup>

From this notion of the work of art as already marked by the museum framework, Buren claimed that for producing artists "any work presented in that framework, if it does not explicitly examine the influence of the framework upon itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency and idealism."<sup>3</sup> Often such examination denied the Museum its souvenir in order to unveil or demystify the ways in which the institution directed its

viewers to certain values or preserved certain canonical attitudes towards art objects and artists. For example, Michael Asher's *Contribution to the 73rd American Exhibition* (1979) at the Art Institute of Chicago, where Asher relocated a bronze cast of a marble statue of George Washington that normally sits at the main entrance of the museum to the eighteenth-century French gallery where the originary products of its maker, Jean-Antoine Houdon, would normally be sited. As Anne Rorimer, one of the curators of the exhibition explained, the "commemorative and decorative" public monument, weathered



BRIAN JUNGEN, PROTOTYPE FOR A NEW UNDERSTANDING #5, 1999, NIKE AIR JORDANS, HAIR, 22 X 27 X 5"; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST.

and worn, was recontextualized as a work of art within the museum's framework and the entire French gallery was annexed to the ostensibly separate contemporary art exhibition. As a sign of the intolerability of this situation to museum protocol, the statue was replaced in its original position soon after the "73rd American Exhibition" closed.<sup>4</sup>

Though Asher's intervention took place in 1979, already by 1972 Robert Smithson was skeptical of interventions. For his "Documenta 5" contribution he sent a text to be printed in the catalogue and no exhibitable art work. Neither souvenir nor temporary intervention, his text directly renounced participation in exhibitions, claiming participation as acceptance of the "cultural confinement" brought about by "fraudulent categories" imposed by curators. Like Buren, Smithson regarded this as, in part, the result of artists colluding in curatorial frameworks, but Smithson added: "Some artists imagine they've got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control."<sup>5</sup> In line with this position, up to his death in 1973, Smithson worked on site-specific projects outside of the museum and temporary exhibition circuit.

I present this capsule account of attitudes from the 1970s in order to further consider a tendency in recent art to move away from temporary intervention or site-specific ways of working. The three artists I discuss, Brian Jungen, Josiah McElheny and Cornelia Parker, do produce souvenirs for collecting but these souvenirs displace and intermit conventional frameworks through a creative misreading or rereading of the museum's expectations. These I call "access codes" – analogous to the passwords and keywords used to gain entrance and information from databases. The use of access codes of museal expectation is not unique to these artists, and there is no direct connection to think of them in common. However, they represent manifestations of work that uses objects to implicate their art in already-existing discursive formations while, at the same time, their works challenge or confound those same formations.

To begin with the English artist, Cornelia Parker: her 1995 exhibition "The Maybe," at London's Serpentine Gallery, consisted of vitrines in four rooms containing thirty-five relics from archival collections devoted to famous people. There was also a performance element, as Parker's collaborator, actress Tilda Swinton, was seen asleep in her own glass case for the opening hours of the week-long exhibition. While Swinton's contribution repeats the sort of durational performances of Chris Burden, Vito Acconci or Stuart Brisley, her activity of just sleeping, of being

on display while unconscious, produced her as a celebrity curio in loose correspondence to the celebrity relics around her Sleeping Beauty-style coffin. The inanimate curios were borrowed items that illustrated something of the fetishism of collecting items intimate to history's famous: a stocking of Queen Victoria's, a quill pen used by Charles Dickens, a piece of fabric covering from Charles Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis" – all utilitarian detritus that seem to speak of the past but possess contingent relations with the person named.

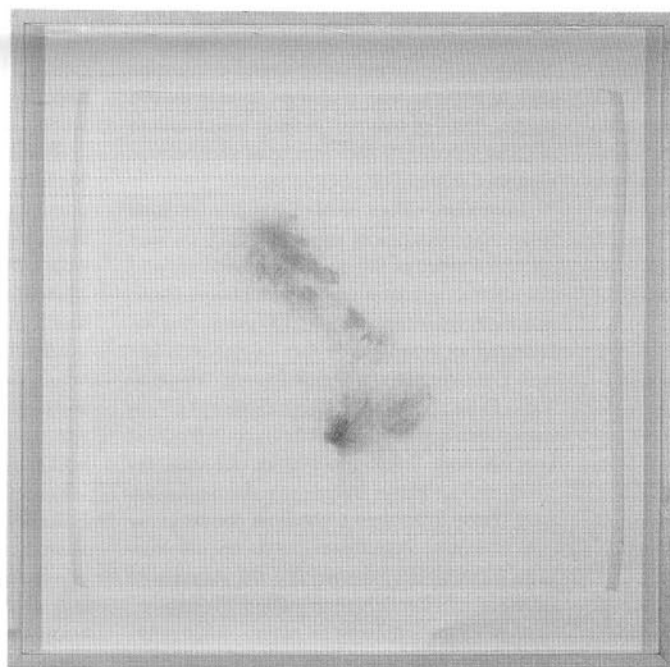
Another set of objects, the butt of one of Winston Churchill's cigars or the preserved halves of Charles Babbage's brain, were definitely closer to the celebrity – positively intrusive in Babbage's case – but they still retained an affective presence as interesting precisely because someone had saved them. After all, Churchill's cigar was part of his public image when he posed puffing on it, yet its preservation merely suggests the absurdity of some acolyte or opportunist seeking to uphold connection to the Great Man by pocketing his trash. Similarly, though the brain was a bequest for medical research, the irony is that Babbage's major contribution was the "difference engine," a mechanical computer, and, hence, the supposed study would be of a human brain notable for its capacity to conceive and design a mechanical replacement for its organic functions.

But the brain and the mind as seat of consciousness was best presented by Parker's selection of the pillow and blanket from Sigmund Freud's study. An everyday object raised to cultural significance because of its intimacy with the patients whose aggrieved bodies came into contact with it during their therapeutic sessions, this object seemed as central to "The Maybe" as Swinton's sleeping. Like her potentially dreaming mind and body inches away, the pillow and blanket called up the psychic processes that collectively worked to generate the impetus to conserve and value the discrete parts making up the selection. Processes like displacement, projection, condensation and fetishism, all described by Freud, represent possible ways of reading the objects' presence in collections and offer ways of reading the exhibition. This allusion to psychic processes I take as the main motif of the exhibition and it can be extended to some others of Parker's works. For example, before returning the Freud exhibit, Parker retained samples of material from the blanket. *Exhaled Blanket (Mammoth Hair Drawing)* (1996) is the image of the collection of dust, hair and fibres taken from the blanket and projected anamorphically on two walls. For Parker, it is important that the image is caused by light passing through the actual tangle of hair and fibres sand-

wich between glass slide mounts rather than by a photographic representation of the residue. In this way, the microscopic motes and snarls of material become indexes for the mammoth image, a metaphor for the intricacies of mental processes that projectively expulse the kinds of residue and dirt continually shed by all bodies and objects.

Parker designates this kind of residue, the "avoided object," calling it "a fallout, a debris, a residue that has never been picked up."<sup>6</sup> Though this concept has anthropological and psychoanalytic significance because it determines qualities of cleanliness and filth that uphold many conceptual schemas of everyday life, Parker pointedly refers to the regimes of cleanliness and maintenance required by curators of museum collections. Thus, extending "The Maybe" in the direction of the "avoided object," she has displayed cleaning cloths marked by removed tarnish from museum collections of silver. These objects were again labeled with their sources, such as a suit of armour worn by Henry V or a tea service owned by Queen Victoria, and played again on celebrity connections but subtly called out the fragility of the objects themselves and the slow shedding of substance by all objects and beings. Why, she proposed, preserve the object as it decays and not preserve as well the debris it gives off? In this way, through showing the avoided object, Parker points to acts of distinction that express judgments of value and perpetuate hierarchies of objects, genres and taste that the museum as institution is bound to maintain. Her work is to render those acts explicit by looking toward the compulsory and artificial character of those acts and, hence, render them as mortal and transformable as the objects themselves.

In another work, this mortal state is related specifically to the fragility of the material and arrangement involved. "ONE DAY THIS GLASS WILL BREAK" is the sentence read off of six beer sleeves stacked up like those cleared off pub tables. Gravity, transport and less than flawless handling will surely make the sentence a fulfilled prophecy and offers a transition to the work of American artist Josiah McElheny. His work has the quality of a revival movement, one that both replicates the great tradition of European and particularly Venetian glassware while also producing fictions about that tradition. McElheny uses his own command of glass techniques to reproduce works from existing collections and from those imaged in Renaissance paintings and frames his objects with textual fictions that parody the workings of art history in order to re-position his efforts as critique. He suspends conventional knowledge of the period to remind us of the overall downgrading of craft production in



CORNELIA PARKER, TARNISH FROM A COMMUNION CUP, 1998 AND TARNISH FROM JAMES BOWIE'S SOUP SPOON, 1997, SILVER OXIDE, COTTON, 61 X 61 CM.;  
PHOTOS: PAUL LITHERLAND, COURTESY THE ARTIST, GALERIE OPTICA AND FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON.

relation to the tremendous energies expended on securing the history of painting and sculpture, while also reflecting on the history of a practice requiring intensive labour and dedication in order to produce work whose material is under constant threat of breakage.

McElheny presents an instance of non-breakage in *Recreating a Miraculous Object* (1997). Taking an account of a miracle of St. Anthony of Padua as recorded in Girolamo Tessari's sixteenth-century fresco in the Scoletta of the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua,<sup>7</sup> McElheny recreates the object in question. A cup fell from considerable height yet, through the supposed intercession of the Saint, the cup cracked the pavement instead of smashing. Recreating the glass from its representation in the fresco, though, does more than portray the incredulity involved in belief in intercession. Rather, McElheny reminds that the glass in the painting almost surely did exist, and that it was produced by skills analogous if not equal to the painter's. Yet the cup possessed less venerative properties then and even less now. That the cup was not retained, is part of the ecclesiastical mechanisms whereby the proof of holy miracles is situated in the everyday world of objects but the painting is somehow beyond that realm. Secured in a church in order to propose a cosmological continuity between the holy and the quotidian from within churchly power, the painting speaks holiness while the purported encounter and the vernacular glass emphasize the everyday. The everyday, McElheny suggests, was the habitat of the person who made the glass and McElheny's reconstruction speaks more to the persistence of the work of a line of craftsman in glass than to the ecclesiastical luminaries and noble patrons who sheltered the fresco but forgot the cup.

Following this sort of insight, McElheny refunctions the evidence of historical glassware, without apology for the fictions he constructs. In *The Development of Social Critique (The Designs of Jacopo Ligozzi)* (1996-98), he makes use of some of the scant evidence from the history of Italian glass and re-reads it facetiously. Using the name of a recorded seventeenth century draughtsman employed by the Medici, Jacopo Ligozzi, and that of a documented Muranese glass manufacturer of the same period, Giacomo Della Luna, McElheny proposes a questionable collaboration and attributes an improbable motive to the partners. Alleging that the three vessels on display were designed by Ligozzi and executed by Della Luna, McElheny indicates that "it is virtually impossible to drink from these glasses without spilling wine on oneself."<sup>8</sup> On this account, he claims them for social critique. On this argument, Ligozzi

exploited the aristocratic desire for things of extreme elegance and finery with a product that made them soil their fine clothes, furthering a plan to "insert his own concepts of rebellion and inquiry into the culture at large." Now, this interpretation is a red herring, as the drawing offered by McElheny as evidence of subversive intent is barely a design and, in a simple search of a British Museum catalogue of Venetian glass, I found close approximates to the displayed goblets with no mention of either Ligozzi or Della Luna.<sup>9</sup> In addition, recall the goblet held forth by Caravaggio's *Bacchus* as a contemporary image of the type of goblet involved, one surely ready to spill but offered to the aristocrat as evidence of the sure hand of the artist in rendering a precariously poised glass of wine.

By this I do not correct McElheny but locate his satire of some current art history which seeks resistance everywhere and imputes a proto-avant-garde status to seventeenth-century painters like Caravaggio. Not only does the attribution of rebellion to such artists not fit with historical evidence, the intactness of McElheny's models attests to the fact that goblets "it is virtually impossible to drink from" survived because their owners did not use them. They recognized the uselessness of the glasses as part of their character as artifacts. The goblets were not critiques of their clients' taste but examples of those same clients conspicuous consumption of objects which almost totally defied usage. And, of course, owning functionless objects served the self-image of aristocratic elegance instead of criticizing it.

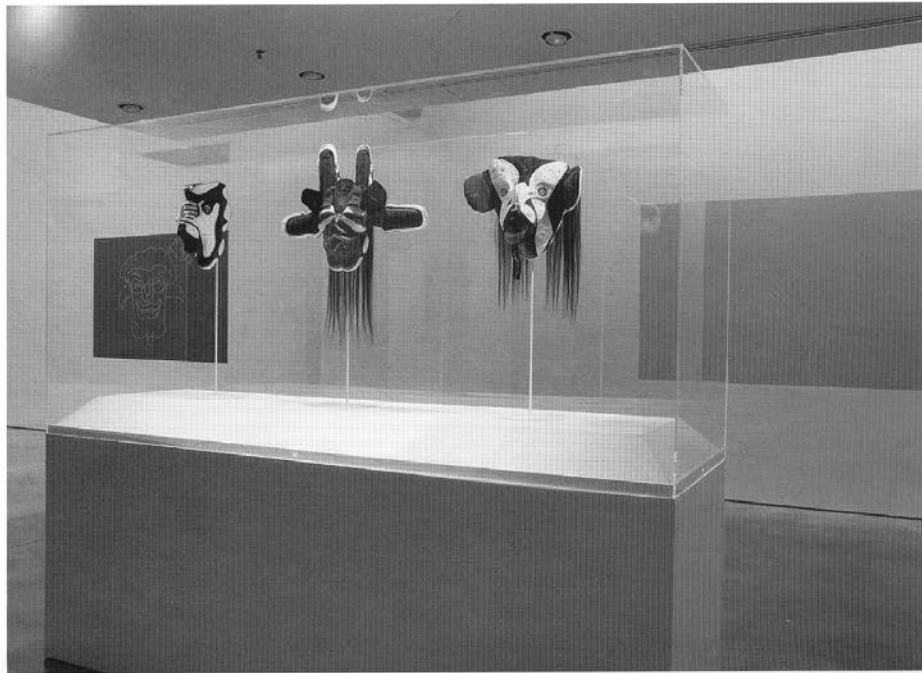
Likewise, other of McElheny's fictions follow art-historical methods only to veer off into a satire of the quest for exactitude and the misrecognition of circumstances those practices manifest. Much as Ligozzi was attributed an avant-garde motive, so McElheny's *The Controversy Surrounding the "Veronese" Vase (From the Office of Luigi Zecchin)* (1996) parodies twentieth-century art-historical speculation. Taking as object the vase reproduced in Paolo Veronese's *Annunciation*, McElheny fabulates a modern controversy over the products of twentieth-century Murano glass works, specifically the exactitude of reproduction of the so-called "Veronese" vase as a touristic item in twentieth-century Muranese workshops. As the instigator of the fictional controversy, McElheny draws on the work of Luigi Zecchin, giving him credentials including a series of publications detailing the history of the administrative regulation of Venetian glass as well as a post in actuarial mathematics at the University of Venice. McElheny posits Zecchin worrying over the proliferation of Veronese-type vases in twentieth-century products from

Murano and, like any accredited obsessive, working to discern the purest example of the type. That is, the example that most closely resembles the painted image. Now, the Veronese image offers difficulties in this regard as the vase is filled with water and is therefore subject to the distortions of refracted light and the distortions from painting a three-dimensional but transparent object on a two-dimensional plane. The designer or glassblower in producing a Veronese vase might have simply wanted to achieve a serviceable equivalent and eyeballed the relations between painted image and imagined vase. Or, in the case of a number of variants produced by various works, as McElheny describes and produces for his display, there may have been an accurately thought-through rendition that was copied with slight changes in order to generate non-identical but commercially viable versions. McElheny presents seventeen variants, three of which are attributed to Zecchin's designs prepared after mathematically calculating the different halves of the vase as represented by Veronese. In this collection, the variability of urban myths or the mangled result of a game of pass-the-story-round-the-table is represented as the ground of artistic practice under the commercial regime of modern glass production. Exactitude is an issue for the amateur historian, a pedantic pursuit, while maintaining the tradition in reluctant relation to canonical art, and under the rule of consumer appeal, constitutes the current state of glass work.

For me, this comes close to the core of McElheny's work, for the vernacular variants of the Veronese vase are none of them true, but each are adequate without being exact. He offers a consideration of glassblowing as a tradition adjacent to Renaissance painting but also a practice that continues in ways peculiarly close to its past while painting has been transformed in almost immeasurable ways. Not only does glass lack the material solidity of painting and sculpture, it lacks the extensively documented history of those disciplines and the edifice built around authorial voices in art history. McElheny reads a social, obscure, opaque and fictional history of a way of working a material prized for qualities of clarity, transparency and functionality, a material always fragile. Displacing those qualities through fiction and satire is a means of refusing the relegation of glass blowing due to its temporal involvement in functional products while recognizing that its techniques and processes were passed on by highly skilled individuals whose dedication and achievement seem to surpass the role of functionary. His works thus illustrate a conundrum: they attest to the fragility of a traditional prac-



JOSIAH MCELHENY, RECREATING A MIRACULOUS OBJECT, 1997, BLOWN GLASS, PHOTOGRAPHY, DISPLAY, TEXT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CRITIQUE (THE DESIGNS OF JACOPO LIGOZZI), 1996-8, BLOWN GLASS, DRAWING, DISPLAY, TEXT; PHOTOS: COURTESY ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM.



BRIAN JUNGEN. INSTALLATION VIEW OF EXHIBITION AT CHARLES H. SCOTT GALLERY, VANCOUVER, 1999; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST.

tice which also challenges the canonical practices of painting and sculpture to retain their once-held levels of skill and social utility.

To turn to the work of Brian Jungen, a young Vancouver-based artist, is also to reconsider a tradition. But Jungen offers a re-reading of the tradition of Northwest Coast mask carving rather than a revival. Jungen is part-native and last summer displayed a series of masks at the Charles H. Scott Gallery at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. While we could deliberate on the presentation of a contemporary native artist's work in the context of an art school named for British Columbia's best-known recorder of native life and artifacts, Jungen's work is in severe contrast to the nostalgia and melancholy of Carr's views of disappearing peoples and cul-

tures. For Jungen has inexactly based his masks on types carved by natives but, instead of carving wood, he has constructed his masks from carefully dissected parts of Nike Air Jordan sports shoes. He has exploited the red, white and black colour schemes found in the mask tradition and in the Nike designs, as well as reconfiguring the curvilinear forms used to make shoes into approximations of the forms used in painted and carved masks. Titling the group of nine, *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1999), Jungen presented these masks as possible talismans for young urban natives living between demands to continue traditional ways while surrounded by a predominantly non-native consumer society.

Jungen's ironies are explicit: the masks are displayed on armatures in vitrines like those

in any ethnographic museum. Yet, unlike such displays, or those found in commercial galleries selling native-made work, Jungen's masks do not carry labels identifying mask types or the artist's band affiliation as a sign of the masks' authenticity. Nor would we find many marks of consumer society in the commercial mask trade which depends on the producer's connection to particular ceremonial traditions and the reproduction of traditional forms and in native woods. It is not that Jungen sets out to be a *pasticheur* of the commercial mask trade and those carvers who continue working traditional forms and materials, but his work does question assumptions about that tradition. As has been understood for some time, it is more than likely that the "traditional" masks form-

ing the canon of types date from after native contact with European and American traders and colonists. And, although pre-contact examples do survive and the practice of mask carving for ceremonial purposes has a continuous history despite pressures to relinquish ceremonies and carving in some communities, most museum-held masks were part of the trade between natives and colonists and were executed using tools and sometimes materials exchanged through such trade.<sup>10</sup> This is not to forget the gross injustice of the forced seizure of ceremonial masks by government officials seeking to eradicate native ceremonies, nor to forget that, through missionaries and residential schools, a good deal of native art was an element in moves to "reskill" natives in craft skills and, in some cases, industrial-styled production techniques for the tourist art market precisely because of the dispossession of their traditional livelihoods.

Jungen's masks do not occlude those historical conditions, but they may be said to update them. The Nikes featuring the silhouette of Michael Jordan are near-global representations of power and prestige associated with celebrity culture and with the ceremonial life that goes with sporting spectacles, mass media advertising and youthful aspirations to escape mundane circumstances through emulating athletic heroes. With this, Jungen plays upon the bond between the frenzied attention and astronomical sums of money involved in sports promotion and their resemblance to native practices like potlatch.<sup>11</sup> Such practices colonial governments tried to suppress under the belief that they were unproductive and expressed "primitive" social impulses of an undesirable and unruly nature. In this way the image of Jordan and the shoes stand in for the global economic reach of spectacular society and the regulation of that society through orchestrations of unfulfilled desires, a bit of "primitivism" returned to contemporary life.

As well, the masks are infused with the knowledge that production of the shoes is part of the punishing condition of a global economy requiring sweatshop and child labour in developing nations in service to First World corporate wealth. The implication is that natives like Jungen represent pockets of "Third World" identity in the so-called First World, and that the Northwest Coast traffic in museum masks and commercial art trade in contemporary examples are both historically rooted and historically contingent. That two of Jungen's masks were purchased by the Vancouver Art Gallery and not by collections of ethnographic specialization like the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver or the Royal British Columbia Museum in

Victoria, may be part of the story. As contemporary art made by a native they are acceptable to the art world; in the artifact-based purview of traditional practice – on the sites where carving by contemporaries is encouraged – *Prototypes for New Understanding* are not yet recognizable as native art if they ever will be. Perhaps the fact that Jungen does not explicitly identify himself as a member of a native group known for its carving prohibits museum interest in his work, but almost certainly the composite and hybrid character of his masks and their reference to contemporary circumstances displaces the lure of sustaining pre-contact cultural values which underlies most all native art production and consumption.

With this, Jungen strategically takes advantage of the access codes of the mask tradition and his position as a native-identified subject living and working in a mostly non-native setting. In addition, by employing mass cultural materials, his masks allude to the avoided history of contact that shadows native art and native artifacts as well as to the asymmetrical power relations underpinning consumer exchange. That too is an aspect of McElheny and Parker's work, since it is based on the relegation of certain activities, like glass blowing or the products of curatorial maintenance, to secondary status within institutions. To re-possess Smithson's claim that "Some artists imagine they've got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them," in these cases might be to recognize the "idealism and self-sufficiency" of Smithson's attitude that artists could be free of that apparatus and still be recognized as artists. That, of course, was the status that Asher and Buren risked in their temporary interventions, and those actions have been retained as documentation and discourse that no one studying recent art can avoid. The interest of the work of Jungen, McElheny and Parker, then, lies in its extension of institutional critique in the form of objects that manage to model the institutions without being exactly comfortably captured by them or by their idealism. If, as their work suggests, the categories and histories of museum practice can be re-read and potentially transformed, then these objects might become souvenirs or broken shards or dust or reformed into shoe leather. Perhaps such is what they risk while preserving the category of the artist.

#### NOTES

This article was originally given as a paper at the Universities Art Association of Canada 1999 conference in Toronto, as part of a panel titled "In the Belly of the Beast," chaired by Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher.

1. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has written many texts on institutional critique, the most notable being "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* #55, Winter 1990, pp. 105-143.
2. Daniel Buren, "Function of the Museum," *Artforum*, September 1973, reprinted in A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, *Museums by Artists*, Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983, p. 58.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
4. Michael Asher and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, Halifax: NSCAD Press, 1983, pp. 207-221. See also Thomas Crow, "Site Specific Art: The Strong and the Weak," *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 121-150.
5. Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," *Documenta* 5, reprinted in *The Collected Writings*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 153.
6. Cornelia Parker, interview with Stuart Cameron, *Cornelia Parker*, Cardiff: Chapter, 1997, p. 55.
7. Anne Dunlop kindly provided the identification of the fresco.
8. Josiah McElheny, text for *The Development of Social Critique (The Designs of Jacopo Ligozzi)*, reprinted in Jennifer R. Gross, *Josiah McElheny*, Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1999, p. 28.
9. Hugh Tait, *The Golden Age of Venetian Glass*, London: British Museum, 1979, pp. 51-52.
10. See Peter McNair, "Power of the Shining Heavens," *Down From the Shimmering Sky*, Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1998, pp. 53-60.
11. The relationship between potlatch and Jungen's work is explored in: Reid Sheir, "Cheap," *Brian Jungen*, Vancouver: Charles H. Scott Gallery, 2000.

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Dans l'histoire des interventions artistiques en musées, la critique des institutions a principalement pris la forme d'œuvres éphémères et d'installations in situ où les notions de collection et de propriété étaient contestées. L'auteur souligne que, récemment, certains artistes ont abordé la critique du musée en adoptant la stratégie inverse, soit en fabriquant des objets que les musées peuvent collectionner et consommer. Le Canadien Brian Jungen, l'Américain Josiah McElheny et la Britannique Cornelia Parker sont des artistes qui produisent des souvenirs «viraux», des objets qui connaissent les discours muséologiques, mais qui les déplacent et les réinterprètent pour ainsi critiquer les attentes et les cadres institutionnels conventionnels.