

MYFANWY MACLEOD
WWJD (WHAT WOULD JUDD DO)

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For some time now, ham has been something of a muse for me. It has been both something to eat and to reflect on. From Édouard Manet's *The Ham* (1875) and René Magritte's *Seasickness* (1947) to Peter Fischli and David Weiss' *In Ano's Teppichladen* (1980), luncheon meat, in general, and ham, in particular, have informed my work.

An early work of mine that involved pork products is *Sausagefinger* (1994). In a series of eight Polaroid photographs, this performance work documents my clumsy attempts to photograph my hands with sausages attached to the ends of my fingers. In French there is an old expression, *la patte*, meaning the artist's touch, "his" personal style, "his paw." Although I am not hostile to the tradition of craftsmanship, I do have an aversion to conventional notions of authorial presence and individual artistic genius that have defined so much modernist artwork. Lately, this issue of authorial presence has manifested itself in my work in a number of ways.

Untitled (brancusi) (2009) is a black-and-white photograph of a can of tinned ham lying on its side and seen from the back. The work clearly draws on Duchampian strategies of selection. I came upon this canned ham "par hasard" at the grocery store where someone had inadvertently replaced the tin on the shelf backwards; I was at once struck by the tin's uncanny resemblance to Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (1910). However, unlike Marcel Duchamp, it is not my intention to sever the object from historical or psychological causal chains. My intent is to insinuate the work within a very particular art historical narrative.

The operative idea behind *Untitled (brancusi)* was the "re-creation" of a past form of sculpture through the medium of photography. The work owes much to the Surrealist notion of *sculptures involontaires*, which clearly opposed the traditional notion of sculpture as the deliberate mastery

of a particular material. It also cultivates a dimension of the readymade that has been insufficiently recognized in terms of its nature as an encounter between the artist and object (in Duchamp's words, "a land of rendez-vous").

My homage to Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* takes on the continuing legacy of the readymade as it explores an area of overlap between the work of Brancusi and Duchamp. It sets in motion a dialectical operation between handcrafted art object (Brancusi) and the mechanically produced commodity (Duchamp).

Everything seems empty without you (2009) addresses the problem of authorial presence through the inversion of the traditional subject/object relationship. For Donald Judd, sculpture was neither painting nor sculpture. It was an object in-between. With all due respect to Judd, sculpture is not a specific object. It is a cursed thing. Things (as opposed to objects) invert the paradigm of how we normally understand "objects." We understand "objects" by how they mediate our social relationships. But "things" are a different matter altogether. They have a will of their own (as if possessed by some malevolent spirit). Depending on your point of view, this can either be incredibly funny (like when a man slips and falls on a banana peel) or utterly horrifying (like when a man slips and falls on a banana peel).

Everything seems empty without you is a recreation of a moonshine still based on a postcard from my private collection, which depicts a real working moonshine still photographed somewhere in the backwoods of North Carolina. The still consists of four painted oil drums, a wooden barrel, and a series of wooden washbasins made from shiplap. The oil drums are connected to each other by a series of pipes in order to distill the mash into alcohol.

The work takes its name from another postcard from my collection, which depicts a ghostly silhouette of a beer stein cut out of burlap with the words “Everything seems empty without you” beside it. The notion of emptiness, of absence, of not “thereness,” is central to the work. The title serves to reinforce feelings of solitude and alienation, of the longing for but impossibility of communicating with another individual, especially when that person is no longer around.

Everything seems empty without you draws on my preoccupation with the spirit world (in both senses of the word). Brancusi, Duchamp, and Judd are just some of the ghosts that haunt me. If *Untitled (brancusi)* is my tribute to Brancusi, then *Everything seems empty without you* is my lament for Judd. It is indebted to Minimalism and the final stage of a particular modernist sculptural moment of which Judd is a representative. The work makes use of the geometric forms and repeated units of Minimalism, but not at all in the distanced, engineered way characteristic of that tendency. Instead, it represents the distillation and rectification of the impersonal materiality of Minimalist work. *Everything seems empty without you* references kitsch, folk art, and modern culture; it also attempts to work between tendencies toward the figurative and the minimal by embracing both the representational and referential in sculpture. Although *Everything seems empty without you* refers to the logical forms of Minimal art, it endeavors to capture the illogical, the poetic, the emotional, and the mysterious by navigating between the analytical and the intuitive, thereby occupying that distance between what we know and what we feel, on the one hand, and between the specific object and the cursed thing, on the other.

British critic Michael Archer defines Minimalism as “a movement most usually identified with sculpture endeavour, [that] can be understood, in part at least, as a

continuation of painting by other means.”¹ *Everything seems empty without you* was borne out a series of hand-painted signs that were begun in 2006 and based on the traditional hex sign of the Pennsylvania Dutch. *Hex II-VIII* consists of seven signs painted on wooden panels using commercial sign paint by professional sign painter Albert Nickel. My reinterpretation of these geometric forms with hearts, tulips, an upside-down distelfink,² and a tree of life is nominal. The decision to have the works fabricated by someone else in accordance with my specifications is part of the ethos of Minimal art. By adopting this Minimalist strategy, I wished to sweep aside the vestiges of authorial presence manifested by formal invention and the handling of materials.

Another example of this strategy is *Ain't nothing ever happened*, a painted work based on a quilt pattern attributed to the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective in Alabama that was also executed by Nickel. Like the Hex signs, the quilts of this collective reveal a parallel to modernist aesthetics in their bold colour fields and simple abstracted forms. They are entitled, every bit as much as a Frank Stella or a Kenneth Noland, to lay claim to and participate fully in the aesthetics of modernism. Originally, the collective nature of the quilts meant that they are not valorized as an extension of the individual artist's persona. This has since changed in recent years with the recognition of individual quilter's work within the collective. But my interest in the quilt patterns and Hex signs lies in their original function as an expression of the collective. If the form of these “signs” (not paintings) speaks to Duchamp's renunciation of the uniqueness of the art object, then their content speaks to an exploration of the territory, which lies between cultural sign and individuality.

Repetition and return are themes that emerge again and again in my work in the form of the “re-creation” of Brancusi's

Sleeping Muse, a replica of a moonshine still from a postcard, the reproduction of Hex signs and quilt patterns, and, finally, a return to the past through an old photograph. *Living in the Past* is a photograph of a friend smoking a joint in a forest near a small village in Portugal. I took this photograph in 1981 while travelling through Europe. It is one of the few photographs I have from that time. Only one roll of film survives from this trip as all the others were lost when my backpack was stolen. I chose to present this small photograph in an intricately carved frame against the background of a dark green wall.³ The crouching figure in the photograph stares defiantly out at the viewer from the forest.

The past can be conceptualized in any number of ways. Recreation starts from the premise that we cannot be as knowledgeable about the past as to be able to reconstruct a re-enactment. Instead, we must content ourselves with constructing an envelope for the behavior of the “re-creators” so that they can create the illusion of the past in the present. My work is about subtly repositioning historic events so that they seamlessly blend into the present and, in the process, the audience loses its “otherness” time-wise.

NOTES

1. Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997), 44.
2. This term refers to a stylized goldfinch that frequently appears in Pennsylvania Dutch folk art.
3. The colour is Bottle Green from the Sherwin-Williams Heritage Collection.