

Book Reviews by Conor Wilson***Where is Production? Inquiries into Contemporary Sculpture***

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***Thinking is Making: Presence and Absence in Contemporary Sculpture
The Mark Tanner Sculpture Award***

192 pages

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‘Sculpture is something-art [both words an inextricable mix of noun and adjective]. This book is largely being read by those somewhat fluent in something-art.’¹

I’m assuming that this double review, being where it is, is largely being read by those somewhat hesitant in something-art, at least as it is configured within the polymorphous, globalised world of contemporary art practice, where ‘making sculpture includes everything from drawing hurried sketches while traveling to supervising the fabrication of monumental works produced outside the studio.’² Forgive me if this is not the case, but if it is, your vocabulary and comprehension will certainly be improved (as were mine) by reading these two Black Dog publications, preferably concurrently.³ Both are by-products of the work of artist-centred, non-profit organisations: SculptureCenter in New York and Standpoint in London.

Thinking is Making celebrates ten years of the Standpoint-administered Mark Tanner Sculpture Award, and its transition from London-based to national competition, in 2013. Ten winners, from Rosie Leventon in 2002 to Jemima Brown in 2011, are profiled and each is represented by between nine and fourteen high quality, mostly large, images of work and a short, interpretative text by Standpoint curator, Fiona MacDonald. The format serves the artists well, but one small gripe is that the images are uncaptioned, necessitating the fiddly flick to the back of the book to retrieve titles, dates and any materials listed. This does mean, however, that the layout is very clean, with the text at the start of each section (which seems to have been developed from interviews with the artists) surrounded and then superseded by images - perhaps it was a bold move to leave these unencumbered by further textual markers.

The book also contains an introduction, credited simply to Standpoint, and essays by Matilda Strang and Martin Herbert. Read together, these give an excellent introduction to the shifting patterns and fashions of sculpture practice and its recent historical roots, particularly in the UK. Strang’s piece briskly charts the blossoming of St. Martins sculpture department under Frank Martin, between 1952 and 1979, as a radical educational experiment that promoted open-ended methods for exploring potential interactions between humans and materials:

The revolutionary beliefs of tutors such as [Peter] Kardia and Martin, who encouraged an intellectual, almost spiritual, engagement with materials that allowed students to experiment with underdetermined thoughts and processes, demonstrated that there was no clear cut division between labour and thought.⁴

Mark Tanner (who died in 1998) trained at St. Martins and this statement evokes the ethos of the award that carries his name, as demonstrated by these three, non-consecutive quotations from the introduction:

The Mark Tanner Award has always sought to explore the relationship between the artist, their ideas and their means of production. The act of making is seen as much a cerebral as a physical engagement, with the choice of materials and methods of manufacture as integral to the art-making process as any other input.

Several of the Tanner Award artists describe their studio methods as being the spontaneous development of an idea through the use of materials found easily to hand, without much prior conception or planning. They think, articulate and conceptualise through the activity of making and the manipulation of their chosen materials.

Bricoleurs, as opposed to conceptualists or craftsmen, then. And, perhaps of most interest to those with, or undergoing a crafts-based training:

Most ideas around the relationship of making and thinking seem to foreground craft and thus technical expertise and skill, yet much of the sculpture of the present would seem to articulate an outwardly opposite position to this. For many contemporary sculptors the seeking of a homemade, personal aesthetic, one that engages with an unconventional relationship to materials and a relative lack of accredited technical knowledge, provides the very space within which to experiment and develop their practice.⁵

This ethos (or bias?) is certainly reflected in many of the works that represent the winners of the award, particularly since 2007, when John Summers took the honours. And the work of John Wallbank, the 2010 winner, pops up in Martin Herbert's essay as exemplary of an approach that 'figures the resultant artwork as the tip of an iceberg of exploratory labour.'⁶ He goes on to say:

As with [Philida] Barlow, the materials are unassuming but the result complex. One's eye has to master their nooks, spelunk their constructed caves, while the mind exchanges assumptions of happenstance for covert deliberation, albeit deliberation within improvising: that is, informed selection.⁷

Referring to a broad range of work produced over the last fifty years or so, Herbert identifies the recurring waves that have thrown the 'sculptural handmade' onto the long, Duchampian terminal beach; the cycling in and out of fashion of the direct engagement of artists with their materials in the face of the prevailing move towards dematerialisation:

The sculptural object since the investiture of the conceptual category has become a splintery index of possibilities, as is readily evident: the object designated as art at one extremity, the emphatically *sculpted* one at the other. Between these magnetic

poles lie assisted readymade-like combinatory procedures, industrialised processes, dematerialization, hybrids of all the above. The toughest furrow to plow amid all this has been to start from something like scratch: assay the unpredictable physics of raw materials, bend them to one's will, improvise and think through them.⁸

Justifying a longish extract from a statement of practice by the currently fashionable Los Angeles-based sculptor, Vincent Fecteau, Herbert ascribes his 'problem-creating, problem-addressing process' as demonstrative of 'how physical engagement with sculptural materials is a form of cognition, of learning'.⁹ This idea seems to lie at the heart of this book and is of particular interest to me as it is just about as close to a description of craft pedagogy as you are likely to find in association with fine art practice. In section two of the essay, Herbert charts a course from the Deacon/Cragg generation of makers that emerged from St. Martins in the 1970s, through the YBA 'hirers of fabricators', to a subsequent reactive generation that argued for 'qualities tied to querulous touch'.¹⁰ He concludes with the idea that the formerly forbidden practice of handcrafting has, having been 'absorbed into the pluralist tessellation of practices that we have now... passed through being a non-issue to... a redoubt of quiet repudiation'.¹¹

Herbert follows Michelle Kuo in ascribing more to the relationship between artist and fabricator than meets the eye – 'a complex back-and-forth', rather than the Fed-Exing of 'napkin plans'.¹² Kuo's contribution to the second publication under review, *Where is Production?*, is an essay entitled 'Industrial Revolution: Fabrication', which explores outsourced art production largely through a series of visits made to the California-based firm, Carlson & Co.:

To get the job done, Carlson would work closely with artists and yet also disperse activity among assorted vendors. Far from merely applying prescribed techniques (such as sand-casting), its staff would solve new engineering and organizational problems with both patent-worthy and outmoded or discarded technologies.¹³

I selected this quotation before reading Herbert's essay, which also uses the second sentence, but takes it from an earlier essay, 'Industrial Revolution: On the history of Fabrication' that appeared in *Artforum* in 2007. Kuo seeks to characterise fabrication as a messy, multiple, polymorphic process involving diverse people, equipment and materials, which somehow has its own agency:

What I witnessed, in other words, was the *estrangement* of artists from matter, of engineers from artists, of things from machines, of bodies from information. But this dislocation also offered strange latitude: these various subjects and objects could actively intervene in processes normally given to us.¹⁴

Many thinkers from a range of different disciplines, including philosophy and anthropology, are making exciting speculations on the agency of non-human actors, but why does this form of production enhance that agency? I can see that the apparently direct relationship between an acting subject and an acted upon material

might appear to be disturbed by the potential inherent in a production facility rich with skills, technology and stuff. However, as an artist intent on exploring that relationship, I am more convinced by the notion of estrangement. Despite having seen some funny things, some clever things, even some beautiful things, at Jake and Dinos Chapman's exhibition, *Come and See* (Serpentine, Nov 2013 – Feb 2014), my overriding response was, 'take some time off, slow down, make the stuff yourselves.' Kuo, though, sees fabrication as,

a demonstration of the malleable, shifting status of materiality and objecthood —of form and forming—in the present. For example, here *color* is clearly not just secondary property or attribute but a *thing*, as real as pigmented powder or chrome lacquer, a presence that generates meaning in conjunction with its digital manifestation.¹⁵

This reads to me like a wide-eyed embrace of plenty, of industrial muscle. What artist worth their salt would see colour as a secondary property or attribute? Why is a bucket of colour in a studio, or on the street for that matter, less exciting, less strange, less *vital* than a larger quantity of 'raw' material in a factory? A passage at the start of the piece might offer a clue:

I wanted to know: could we understand instances of art not as thin, transparent idealizations or simply inert stuff but as other, opaque, even resistant, assemblages of equipment, information, things and flows?¹⁶

Perhaps Kuo is worn out by the egos, the striving and the endless waves of mediocre art. I am with her in her desire to move away from the dominance of the human subject, but don't see commercial fabrication as a solution. Materials are never inert, always other and resistant, wherever they are. Despite accepting that interesting things might emerge from relationships between artists and fabricators, I can't believe that there is any great value – to art or to the planet – in the ability of well-funded artists to make concrete any concept that flits through their minds, however often they have to visit the factory. Towards the end of the piece, Kuo writes, 'Carlson showed me that even when I got close, so close, so inside, the workings and works of art, I was still not really there.'¹⁷ Again, I'm consonant with the desire to connect process and materials to interpretation, but am not sure why anyone would expect to understand an artwork any better through observing its production in an art factory. Isn't that the job of the artist – to present an encounter with materials, whatever they might be, from paper to people, in a form that somehow brings that encounter to life? Not to render us slack-jawed, marveling in our hordes at the latest art-spectacle.

Martin Herbert sees a strong counter current to fabrication in the 'panoply of contemporary practices whose own look and feel links back directly to an artist in their studio'.¹⁸ Part of this is the rebirth of assemblage-derived practices, the most notable midwife of which is the German artist, Isa Genzken. And strong traces of the 'handworked antimemorialism'¹⁹ of artists such as Franz West and Thomas Schütte can be identified in the popularity of the junk-sculpture approach, taken by American artist Rachel Harrison and younger adherents, such as Helen Marten and Trisha Baga:

The presiding context of such work... is a contemporary form of dematerialisation, advertised by the weightless state of the internet. This is a form of sculptural combination that physicalises the drag-and-drop speediness of digital space...²⁰

Herbert could just as readily have used Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin as representative of this tendency. Their collaborative video / object practice is explored in Brian Droitcour's essay, 'Spacebitch', in *Where is Production?*

Lots of artists operate with consumer goods and construction materials in agglutinative processes, combining them in weird ways to break up the surfaces of junkspace and transmute its substances (which are all surface), to make the relations between objects and environments palpable by making them strange. Relations matter. Matter's natural properties don't.²¹

I can't imagine a clearer-eyed assessment of this tendency, assuming that the last two, short sentences pertain only within that tendency. Drawing on Rem Koolhaas's 2002 essay, 'Junkspace', Droitcour brings the work to life as funny, difficult, ambiguous, critical:

The titles say that Fitch and Trecartin are interested not only in the forms of bodies but also in forms of relations – and they're interested in aligning the two to show how social stuff is material and vice versa.²²

Here, as elsewhere, relations are externalized vehicles of contact. Relations are matching outfits, clichéd phrases, dance moves, gestures. Trecartin and Fitch barely differentiate people from space or things...²³

At the start of the essay, after discussing the seamlessness of email account themes, internet shopping and domestic interiors, Droitcour writes,

These are environments of presets and options, the relations that supersede space and material. This is junkspace, and it "replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition", in the words of Rem Koolhaas. "There is no form, only proliferation."²⁴

And towards the end, citing the 'signal' work of Mary Miss in Rosalind Krauss' landmark essay, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', Droitcour sees earthworks as emblematic of the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt, he writes, said that the century was characterized by a shift from man acting into history to man acting into nature. And now,

The human field has expanded. Nature shrinks from view. Our relationship to materials and spaces has become unnatural, which is wonderful. Convenience is unnatural. Nature only appears as an inconvenience – the apocalyptic inconvenience of a hurricane, the

minor inconvenience of rain. People only tweet about the weather when it sucks... The conditions described by Arendt still hold, but action into nature stopped being a thrill and became background noise. And so the touchstone theorist for sculptors today should not be Krauss but Koolhaas, who says things like this: “Junkspace is like a womb that organizes the transition of endless quantities of the real — stone, trees, goods, daylight, people — into the unreal.”²⁵

Koolhaas’s essay is influential – my memories of a talk between Hito Steyerl (one of the ‘nowest’ artists on the planet) and Nina Power at the ICA in March of this year, are filled with the word junkspace. But the essay reads to me as a funny/angry stream of consciousness lament for humanistic perspectival space. A lament for people-centred street space and, ultimately, for nature, both of which are colonised, in turn, by the mutant indoor blandness of junkspace.

Junkspace is the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness. Junkspace is a Bermuda Triangle of concepts, an abandoned petri dish: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization. It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition.²⁶

Earnestness. Not even sincerity, but earnestness - that garlic to the clever, irony-vamps of the art world. I’ve been aiming towards tying this text up with the view that producers of art are divided, broadly, into two camps:

1. Those who seek to be representative of societal change, through the adoption of production methods that are in opposition to the means of production that produce society.
2. Those who seek to reflect society as it is, through co-opting the means of production that produce society.

Well, perhaps, but Hal Foster has just saved me from claiming one as preferable to the other:

The manifesto is a modernist mode, one that looks to the future... *Junkspace* makes no such claim: “Architecture disappeared in the twentieth century,” states Koolhaas matter-of-factly. Junkspace does a harder thing: it “foretells” the present, which is to say that it calls on us to recognize what is already everywhere around us.²⁷

Where is Production? Inquiries into Contemporary Sculpture contains four essays and a mix of short texts, text and image and straight image, contributed by 21 art professionals of various stripes. The list is international, but there is a North American bias, the SculptureCenter being located in New York. Standout contributions, for me, come from Trevor Paglan (artist), Pavel S. Pys (curator), Ruba Katrib (curator), Francesco Stocchi (curator) and Tue Greenfort (artist). There are a remarkable variety

of approaches and opinions in such a slim volume – in an attempt to pin down common concerns and themes, I categorized each contribution under the headings of:

Time
Space / Material
Distributed Authorship
Labour / Capital

The longest list was generated by time. Something that I am short of, needing to turn my attention to the production of a thesis. During my reading, I thought of several ways of structuring this review, none of which included the above. It just happened that way, in the spirit of Adorno. I intended a fairly brisk criticism of the Droitcour essay, before moving on to other things, but changed my mind in the writing and will give him the last word:

Junkspace is the amorphous stream of thought and imagination, solidified and filling the world. It gets strange when it leaves bodies, but it comes from them nonetheless. The materials and space of the world in these times—fast and continuous, branded and provisional—are inextricable from the social psyche. Production of art is an edit of the viscous junk that binds them.²⁸

Notes

¹ Darren Bader (2013) ‘Where is Production? Everywhere’ in *Where is Production? Inquiries into Contemporary Sculpture*, Black Dog Publishing with SculptureCenter, 2013, p.16

² Pavel Pys in *Where is Production?* p.58.

³ For those unfamiliar with the concepts and language central to ‘recent debates about the visual’, the first chapter of Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies*, (Sage, 2000), ‘Researching Visual Materials’, is indispensable.

⁴ Matilda Strang in *Thinking is Making: Presence and Absence in Contemporary Sculpture The Mark Tanner Sculpture Award*, Black Dog Publishing with Standpoint, 2013, p. 37

⁵ All quotations from *Thinking is Making*, introduction, p.8.

⁶ Martin Herbert, ‘The Broken Arm: Making, Unmaking, Remaking Sculpture’ in *Thinking is Making*, p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid*, p.11.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.24.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.19.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Michelle Kuo, ‘Industrial Revolution: Fabrication’ in *Where is Production?* p. 25

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.24.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁸ Martin Herbert, ‘The Broken Arm’ p.19.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.18.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

²¹ Brian Droitcour, ‘Spacebitch’ in *Where is Production?* p.18.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid*, p.20.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.18.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.21.

²⁶ Rem Koolhaas, *October*, Vol. 100, *Obsolescence*, Spring, 2002, p.176.

²⁷ Hal Foster <http://www.nottinghilleditions.com/books/junkspace-running-room/188>

²⁸ Brian Droitcour, 'Spacebitch' p.22.