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Hard Thought in Halifax, Or ... Conceptualism's New Clothes

In these overly self-reflexive times, sculpture can be seen as a stubborn hold-out that refuses to adopt the fashionable stances. Sculpture's recalcitrance is rooted partly in its unambiguous object quality. The medium resists easy classification and cannot be comfortably framed in terms of its relationship to the viewer. It doesn't exist in the comfortable fiction of the picture plane but competes with the viewer for room, challenging our instrumental culture by having no set function. Sculpture resists its exploitation through use and in doing so questions its potential as commodity. It is present to the viewer yet it is not presented for a specific, saleable function. Sculpture is difficult to exhibit for these reasons. Its refusal of the easy ghetto of the wall limits exhibition venues, collections and permanent sites. What venues there are seem to be relegated to the dated idea of the public monument, which stems from the pictorial bias of our culture. Token shows of contemporary sculpture are held, lip service is paid to sculpture's importance, and more wall work is bought for the gallery, the boardroom, the office. Viewers of art are more comfortable if the art is compartmentalized, set within easily definable limits and contexts. Sculpture challenges these limits and thus challenges the viewer.¹

The instrumentality of our culture, the belief that all things are ultimately exploitable, stems from our distance from the world. The radical modern stance of disengagement (which has been manifested as Cartesian dualism, Existentialism, Post-structuralism, and any number of other -isms and post-isms) is based in the logical fallacy of the mind/body distinction. Various theories of language and the sign stemming from this distinction are often applied to painting, photography, and most other forms of

¹ 25 years on it is remarkable how much sculpture has arguably become the predominant form in the contemporary art world, supplanting painting in every forum but the marketplace and the museum collection.

art. In each of these media, the object quality of the work is secondary to the content or to the mediated nature of the experience. The material of the work is neither the subject nor the object of the work, but the carrier for an image, text, pattern or colour. As a result of this inherent distancing from the actual stuff of the artwork, these media lend themselves more readily to discourse, are more literary in effect. Sculpture lacks this distancing from the perceiver, it exists in and among the everyday objects of the viewer's experience. Yet while sculptures are perceived as at-hand rather than at-one-remove, and aren't instrumental or *for* anything, they are the products of sustained thought. They are the results of a merging of conceptual and material factors that create uncommon objects, each a thing-in-itself. The ideal of sculpture is a seamless amalgam of concept, matter, and process, a thinking through material. Or, more correctly, the ideal of the latest artistic activity to be referred to as sculpture, an activity rooted more in the uncompromising intellectualism of Conceptual art than in the techniques, processes, and representational bias of traditional sculpture.

In this apparent non-correspondence to what is considered its history lies the other part of Sculpture's recalcitrant refusal to be timely; as a medium it lacks any clear definition or history, is in fact constantly remade as each generation of artists discovers, and chafes under, the intellectual and aesthetic limits of more traditional art forms. Sculpture today bears little relationship to the traditional art found in museums; Michelangelo, for instance, is less an influence than a pop culture icon. His type of sculpture, really a kind of painting in three dimensions, met its intellectual end in Rodin. Brancusi redefined sculpture as an abstract pursuit, cut loose from representational concerns, and later artists continued the process. Until very recently however sculpture still was based mainly in materials and processes, leaving intellectual content for the more rarified air of the painter's studio. Sculptors who sought to incorporate the artistic movements of the day into their work were content to make sculptural versions of painterly ideas: thus Jacques Lipschitz attempted Cubism, Alexander Rodchenko adapted Constructivism, David Smith aspired to Abstract Expressionism, and so on. The sheer folly of attempting to translate theories designed to overcome Painting's essential limitation, the picture plane, into a three-dimensional medium with no such limitation should have seemed absurd; it certainly does today. What sculpture has become is, essentially, a means of making art with the materials and processes of the everyday world. As such there is no need for movements and theories to translate it, or for artists to strive

to overcome generic limitations on expression. The only limits on production are practical and eternal: time, skill, money, opportunity.

Sculpture Expo '94 (The Mall Show) reflected a current reality in Canadian sculpture: the stylistically diverse yet conceptually interrelated school of object-making that has come, and it is still coming, out of Halifax and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design sculpture department.

Schooled in a tradition of material/process logic, the practices of these sculptors are conceptually based and reflect a concern with the object and its apprehension in the world. These works called to the viewer to reassess their perceptual and conceptual habits, to remember that the world is more than a diorama created by others for our use. Sculpture, by remaining non-instrumental, refuses the habitual and reminds the viewer that all of our artifacts are the result of human fabrication, that none of them should be taken for granted. The works of these artists, and most other contemporary sculptors, demand an intellectual engagement with the material world, subverting the habitual compartmentalization of the conceptual and the physical. We live, after all, in a society based on forgetfulness and denial: forgetting that we are physical and thus limited; denying that we are material, and thus natural. Thus Sculpture's constant call to remember is inherently subversive, and the artist's projects are nothing less than to undermine the comfort that the viewer takes in some cherished illusions – in particular, notions of power, control, dynamism, that are fostered by the structures and habits imposed by technological culture. Instrumentality, ultimately, leads to perceiving everything as a tool and to the idea that everything and everyone is a consumer product. Sculpture's thoughtful objects undermine the anonymity of the objects that fill our world and question the disposable and supposedly upgradeable contexts within which we watch the millennium stumble to a close. The world's not on TV, and sculpture demands a level of participation from its viewers that transcends the passive gaze turned on other art forms.

One of the most dynamic art movements to arise out of the sixties was Conceptualism, yet it was also among the first to seemingly disappear. However, Conceptualism never really went away but was adopted by younger artists into their practices of specific artist's media. The ideal of Conceptualism was, of course, the utter dematerialization of the artwork. It was based in theory and ideology and was an attempt to subvert the market economy of the art world. Yet, one only has to see a retrospective of Conceptual art to realize that the emperors of that time were stark naked; the collective

detritus of conceptual gestures, activities, etc., that are periodically gathered up as art exhibits serve only to underscore the movement's inability to last as a specific genre of art making. Conceptualism, the movement from which Halifax Sculpture sprang, was finally absorbed wholly into the gallery and museum system; like all essentially anti-art impulses it was adopted, adapted, and finally discarded by the art establishments.² The intellectual ferment that originally surrounded Conceptualism did not survive its absorption into the galleries and university art departments. However, its intellectual force remains palpable in the ways of looking at art fostered by it. Art as idea is a very powerful concept, one which remains of central import to so-called advanced art. The students of the Conceptualists absorbed the belief that art and thought are inextricably linked. Rather than focussing solely on expression, emotion, formalism, etc., the idea became central to the studio practices of younger artists. Conceptualism, the most naked of art forms, was dressed up as painting, sculpture, video, installation, photography. Each succeeding generation of students went further in mastering the techniques of various media, while retaining their conviction that art and thought were ultimately the same thing. The seamless amalgam of process/material/concept that is contemporary sculpture has little precedent in history, and what little precedent exists is more likely to be found in engineering or mechanics than the traditional fine arts.

The sculpture in *The Mall Show* is a kind of hybrid, relying on the traditional techniques and materials of Renaissance sculpture as well on a subversive kind of logic that can only be perceived by the viewer as illogic. Process is not an end for these artists, nor is it merely a means. Rather, the process is inextricably linked to the intellectual content of the work, a kind of mirroring that becomes material/process logic. Equal parts rational decision-making, intellectual proselytizing, and intuitive responses to material based in a mastery of various crafts, this type of material logic was inherent in all of the sculptures in the show, where every factor of the object was treated as, and thus acknowledged to be, conceptually and contextually loaded. This logical process is virtually illogical, undermining the linear expectations of the viewer, creating a kind of

² Interestingly, a form of "high" Conceptualism is among the hottest forms practised by young artists today. The resurgence of Conceptualism in its current form, which often seems to be a slavish copying rather than adapting, is something I did not foresee in 1994. If art is a conversation, much of the current crop of conceptual art seems to be a parroting rather than a dialogue.

anti-tautology to counter the pleading tone of banality and certainty inherent in the public discourse of a consumer society.

There are many reasons why it's appropriate that this exhibition took place in a mall: malls are the definitive public spaces in consumer society, supplanting the market, the church, the town hall. The subtle subversion of the sculptural object became all the more apparent in a space dedicated to the selling of things, the art more visible because of its steadfast non-utilitarianism. The increased visibility defeated the expectations of the viewer, undermining the short attention span fostered by consumerism and questioning the false sense of security created by having money to spend. This subversive intent is, of course, reminiscent of many anti-art movements, but it is a factor that has been developed beyond the straight-forward ideology of early Conceptualism. By dressing Conceptualism in the work clothes of Sculpture, these artists have been able to be much more subtle than their predecessors ever were. Poetics is merged with politics, creating work that is both simple and profound, work which resonates on many levels. Conceptualism, all-dressed, is what Halifax Sculpture is. It may not be recognizable to its original practitioners; their idea of an idea laid perfectly bare, and thus somehow ideally communicable, led to the kind of flat, dry, esoteric exercises that are now yellowing in gallery and university basements.³

The works in *Sculpture Expo '94* are not crystal clear statements. Rather, they are apparently illogical thought-objects, creations that are internally consistent but which do not shy away from poetic licence. By putting clothes on Conceptualism's nakedness, the ideal of perfect communication has been subsumed under a poetics of materials, within which the concept is equal to the material, the process, and the execution. True to the consumption-driven dynamics of the site, the various artists consumed different portions of art history, reconfiguring them to suit their polemical needs. Thus the landscape, architecture, figurative sculpture, the funerary monument, city planning, carpentry, domestic crafts, commercial design and display, etc. were all used, cited and finally re-sited by their adaptation or absorption into the potent mix of conceptual object-making that has come to be named under the older term of sculpture.

Beneath the instrumental veneer that we lay down on the world exists a kind of order that we can only perceive as chaos. Sculpture, by refusing the mind/body distinction

³ And are now the subjects of exhibitions and conferences across the world. The resurgent interest in first wave Conceptualism is a major feature of the contemporary art scene, circa 2015.

inherent in more refined art forms, anchors the thoughtful viewer in the security of material. The vertiginous distortions of textual (and other) theories have no effect on the seeming unreason of the sculptural object. On the strengths of its roots in the material world, sculpture achieves a simplicity that contains both the transparency of the Conceptual concept and the complexity of the poetic image. This deceptive simplicity underlies Halifax Sculpture and solidly grounds these hard thought practices.

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Institution website: <http://www.smu.ca/campus-life/art-gallery.html>