

David Muenzer - Gareth James Interview

David Muenzer: Did you want to be an artist when you were young? When did you first (or do you) consider yourself to be an artist?

Gareth James: Not really. I wanted to leave school to be an electrician when I was fifteen, to get an apprenticeship with my best mate, Lee Hastings, at the Tate and Lyle refinery in Silvertown, East London: earn money, live it up. But my art teacher at school, Paul Finn, went on a campaign of deception, telling me how awesome art school is, all the parties, the drugs, misbehaviour. That convinced me to stay on at school, and it was too late by the time I went to my first party at the Slade (a miserable affair, no dancing, no outrageousness). I never really used the name "artist" while I was in the UK - it always seemed like a slightly delusional nomination to accept, like calling yourself a unicorn. A unicorn is just a horse that you thought you could have made a bit better, a bit more special by giving it a twirly horn but its real purpose of course is to make you feel more special for having the thought of it. I started using it ('artist' not 'unicorn') after living in New York for a while, but around the same time I started using a credit card, and for much the same reasons. It drops in and out of relevance according to the context.

DM: I was really blown away by your 2009 show at Elizabeth Dee. Looking at that work, I thought that the production of formal complexity by comparatively inexpensive (and possibly fugitive) materials let that complexity become poetic (as opposed to someone like Ansem Reyle, whose formal experiments harden and leave me feeling cold at best, angry at worst). Could you talk a little about that show, and particularly, how you came to work with bicycle inner tubes?

GJ: Thanks for the kind words ... they made a nice pun too: blown-away (blown-up, deflated and inflated, flat tires and flatulence and so on)!

It's an interesting problem once you attempt to find some non-subjective cause for a value judgement between two artistic practices: as often as not you discover that the grounds for making a value judgement -- the assumption that they share important attributes (being art) that would allow us to say that one manifests those attributes better than another -- almost entirely dissolves. In fact the ground is so unreliable that IF we choose to keep the formal integrity of the idea of art intact, in retrospect we can normally see that we had already unconsciously chosen one of the following tactical forms of compensation: either we explicitly or implicitly dismiss the claims of one of the two to being art at all in order to preserve the coherence of the identity between the idea of art and the other; or we have to force an identity between an attribute that is NOT shared and the idea of art, but behave as though it was shared in order for our preferred candidate to win.

I totally agree with you by the way, I find his work to be death, without regard to the question of whether his work is better art or not. I think that it's probably accurate to say that our work proposes extremely different ideas about art that are apparent in relation to the question of form you bring up: Reyle is touted as dealing with abstraction and formalism but these things are reductively objectified to become of the same order as Ikea decor or early Modern primitivism. They remain captured by a figurative economy and have very little to do with abstraction or formalism at that point it seems to me. I don't know how he speaks about it himself. Operating on forms is very different from understanding formalization AS operation: what's interesting to me is

the passage of a chaotic sensibility, the becoming formal of something that was not: it's a largely Badiouian description of the emergence of genuine novelty, substantial transformation, in this moving distinction between what, of the world, takes part in formalization and that which cannot be taken up. This relation is utterly immanent to questions of form, not statically disposed outside of it.

This is one way of summarizing the relation between one show and the next for me: a new possibility of formalization emerges with each show, and the subsequent show tries to do something with that new possibility, before it too hardens and becomes mere statistical form. There's a very specific relation between that show in 2009 and the preceding show at Nagel's in 2008 and the one I'm currently working on which we can go into later if you like, but to talk about the tubes themselves, they entered the work in the first place because I had stolen a bike without wheels of its own. Within the symbolic economy, the stolen bicycle's access to the status of the readymade was blocked by its wheels having already been distributed.

I was calling attention to this by the proliferation of tubes, but I was even more interested in the way in which rubber is different from most elastic materials in the way in which it stores strain energy. For some time I'd been interested in finding ways to decenter my subjective choices from the production of the work, but not in a systematized fashion and what I knew was that I wanted my materials to have a history that preceded my encounter with them (of course this is a banal truism at some level) that could resist being mystified upon entering my field of art, which has a tendency to represent itself as the historical origin of all that it encompasses. It's a contemporary problem, in terms of

identifying expression with contingency and necessity, but also an historical one - some years ago I read Primo Levi's book *The Periodic Table*, which remains one of the most important books to me in terms of the thought of materials in art. Levi attempting to extract life-sustaining calories from cotton wool pads by secretly frying them in the camp is a real problem of materials.

DM: As you say, I identify the expressive quality of Levi's wool-cooking-attempt with the necessity of the act and uncertainty of his situation.

You mentioned that the tubes entered your work after you stole a bike without wheels of its own. I have a vision of you, at night, "liberating" a rusted partial bike frame still sadly locked to a stop sign. In thinking about the objects in your gallery show, I wonder... what if those objects returned to that stop sign and the empty street? Would the objects remain similarly expressive?

GJ: The possibility of the stolen bicycle returning to the scene of the crime is absolutely central to the entire show. The exhibition's title was: *The Real* is that which always comes back to the same place. The exhibition was structured as a response to the problem of how to have a non-subjective relation to the question of materiality which had arisen in the previous show, *Dead Unconscious Desire* (my povera show as my friends would jokingly refer to it, not inappropriately). Some low-level criminality has been of interest to me for a long, long time - an inevitable attendant notion when dealing with iconoclasm - and it occurred to me that the best solution to the problem of decentering the authorial agency of the artist at the level of material would be to steal something. The illegal status of the materials trumps all other qualities, and trumps them indifferently (making this structural connection sensible allows us to show how aesthetics necessarily confronted questions of property for Kant too).

But now, as to your question of whether the objects' expressivity remains consistent upon return to the street ... this was, at the level of questions of art, the problem rendered as a threat to art. The subtitle of the exhibition, "*The Real* is that which always comes back to the same place: Broadway between 101st and 102nd Streets, New York, NY 10025, March 21, 2008" gives the date and location of the crime, and the remaining information necessary for the original owner to make a claim upon the bicycle was provided by the photograph of the locked bicycle (which was rolled to form the vertical cylinder standing in for the light stanchion) and the actual broken lock. All of which means that the art work here carries with it all the necessary information

for its own dissolution as art (the threat that the owner of the bicycle could at any given point come across the piece and say, "Hey, that's not art, that's my bike".

I considered this work incomplete until someone bought it: it only gets interesting when it bifurcates ownership: there is the owner of the bicycle and the owner of the work of art. Once this occurs, it is no longer a case of the object reverting back to its "proper" expressive, communicative relation to the world, but of considering expression as a binding of objects and worlds. Clearly, the bicycle cannot return to the world of riding untouched by having been an artwork, and the world of art, bereft of its bicycle is marked by this happy new negative presence. It has more than one bicycle after all.

DM: I am fascinated by how that is a kind of context specificity—a well-formatted relationship to the gallery, system, etc—but how your work is not overtly or traditionally marked as site-specific. The possibility of formalization, as I believe you put it, is very very much dependant on context.

Here is—to my mind—a related question: could you talk about the value of drawing as a technique? Would you talk about your use of drawing in your art practice as well as your work with *Scorched Earth*?

GJ: Lets be careful not to suggest that we can extrapolate from the operations of an individual work (one that explicitly draws the destinations for the values it causes to circulate into itself as its own critique) an affirmative and generic claim that could be used as a kind of apologia for the art market. What I mean to say is that for the most part selling the stuff does very little to make art interesting as art, even if the forms of speculation involved evidently produce interest. The sale of art is value-neutral in its effects at best, value-negative more often, and appears related to art as a kind of recursively structuring value-added. We can choose not to remain silent on the question of the market without reconciling with it. Anyway, this is not your point ...

Formalization, as we are beginning to talk about it, has a complicated relation with context, making it a good question for us to address. In an important sense, it is the very process of withdrawing from context that is necessary for formalization to take place. This necessity suggests to us that we ought to say that formalization doesn't depend upon its context at all, but rather determines it. That is, formalization limits the endless openness of the concrete situation in favor of making something intelligible within it that was previously inchoate. This is Brecht as much as Badiou. Its been Badiou's contribution to recover this operation (he names it subtraction),

from the critique of formalism as a sort of myopic isolationism. This would be a way again of making a critique of Reyle's formalism (poor guy, I really don't know his work very well and he's become our fall guy here). In fact, we would really have to be a bit more rigorous about our terms if we wanted to develop this argument further since we are using "context" in a casual fashion to mean something like milieu, when context is already a differentiated notion of a structuring and weaving process, much like the difference between formalism as a reductive homogeneity and formalization as an emergent power, but that's another discussion.

You can see I'm procrastinating about really getting to your question concerning drawing ...

Scorched Earth has become, to my mind, one of the great interminable projects of art that needs to be viewed in relation to the sort of map-territory farces played out in Lewis Carroll, Borges, and Musil. That sounds horribly grandiose of course, but I mean it as an affirmative critique to say that Sam Lewitt, Cheyney Thompson and myself resemble the unfortunate characters in these stories: what began as a political defence of drawing against its instrumentalization by the market quickly became mired in uncertainty. So, you're quite correct to link that project to this discussion – the market, reification and the reduction of aesthetic and philosophical questions to technical ones are all wrapped up in this story. And it is very much a work of fiction at the moment – the project was discussed as though it had already been printed by numerous people, when in fact we have still failed to bring it to publication to date.

For my own part, yes, drawing has a fairly prominent place within my work so I ought to be able to say one or two sensible things about it. The fact that I have been unable to choose in the end between two perfectly compelling but contradictory initial claims that, on the one hand drawing is a mode of inscription that displays a complete indifference to the surfaces and supports that make its inscriptions possible, and on the other hand that drawing is little else than an attention to this relation becomes precisely the interest that drawing maintains for me. Everything that's interesting for me about art proceeds from this indiscernable situation: a theory-practice relation in which thought resists being supplanted by techne, where a practice allows itself to be drawn out precariously ahead of its present-best powers, where art monstrates the relation between a subjective conviction and a social-historical objectivity rather than represents a concept concerning its condition. Drawing is awesome. Or something like that.