

STAGING FUNCTIONS: Joseph Daun's *Listening to Wire*

November 22, 1997 - January 17, 1998

Opening Reception:
9pm - 11 pm
Saturday, November 22, 1997

With assemblages resonant of both material and metaphoric process, Joseph Daun presents contemporary social themes charged with satirical humor. These processes, in works dating from 1992, include pickling or dehydrating food "for thought," corroding steel with salt "of wisdom," machine-drilling books "for knowledge," and shouldering crosses with load-bearing wheels. His assembly-line processes and production machines confront the viewer with industrial systems of control that are brought *by their own mechanisms* to a state of abject disfunction through over-functionality. If Daun's art can bake bread (as in *Bun Making Machine*, 1995), this is because its ingredients include an unstable social amalgam which the work examines: the implicit modernist link of utilitarian form with moral purpose ("form follows function") reanimated in a contemporary Protestant work ethic and fundamentalist worldview. Daun's installations (such as *Sew*, 1996) and performance events (such as *Shred*, 1995) make the viewer an accomplice to desecrated functionality. As an accomplice, the viewer is made to confront her/his own contradictory relationship to the authority of the manufactured object and of past knowledge which informs and morally values processes of industrial production, labor and craft.

Diner, 1997, wood, steel, coffee, cups, etc.



Coffee Break

Let's start at the end. Let's frame the final image and throw the projection machinery into reverse so that our view — a peephole, a vignette — can open outwards and pan across the scene, a scene where we may form a larger picture.

Every "object" presupposes the continuity of a flow; every flow, the fragmentation of the object.¹

Shards from a tomb? a grave robbed? a catacomb with bones in a forgotten heap? The fragmented jumble of our vignette betrays easily recognized shapes.

We stand before the heap as witness. The cracked stumps of these objects "return" our gaze. We know that these Forms have followed their Function, as members of a cult follow their Leader: "to the edges of the earth," or "until the end of time," or "til death do us part."

Functionality hovers, like the ghost of a lost relative at a séance.

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From time to time another white stoneware coffee cup crashes onto the pile, merging with the other carcasses. The pile continues to grow over days and weeks and, as it grows, it presents itself in uncanny mimicry of raw materials waiting, seductively, to be strip-mined, processed and put to Productive Use.

Our view widens, and as we pan across the room, the mis-enscène of Joseph Daun's installation, *Diner*, signals memory-fragments from childhood. The counter that is out-of-scale and too high. The sturdy materials of booth and counter that can withstand any unruly crawling and climbing. Industrial lighting fixtures that glare relentlessly at the squinting eyes of those who are always looking upwards because they're too small, too young.

Old books (vessels of old knowledge) with their multiple, particular textures and smells, sit incongruously in rows beneath the counter, "below the belt" of conveyor machinery used to transport cups across its twenty-six-foot length. If the books are functionally (and awkwardly) accessible to the adult, their placement makes them sensuously available to the child. The organization of space becomes this sensory division of "above" from "below," efficiency versus sensuality, present versus past, a boundary visibly articulated with every coffee cup that drifts by. It is the implied expansion of that horizontal plane to bisect the entire space, above and below that the visitor moves through.

Book Passage to the Past (early eighteenth century)

*'tis found already that this coffee-drink hath caused a greater sobriety among the nations...Whereas formerly Apprentices and clerks, with others, used to take the mornings' draught in Ale, Beer, or wine, which by the dizziness they cause in the brain, made many unfit for business, they use now to play the good-fellow in this wakeful and civil drink.*²

The introduction of coffee-houses into Europe from the Middle East occurred in the mid-seventeenth century, spreading with such speed across the continent that within fifty years, the number of coffeehouses in London alone exceeded two thousand. Business professions such as stockbroking (the English Stock Exchange), insurance (Lloyds of London) and banking metamorphosed from coffee-house establishments. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the drinking of coffee was already perceived as "a valuable tool in the prolonged struggle of capitalism to discipline its workforce."³

Over at the booth of the diner, cups are stacked on top of the table in a nostalgically formalist display. An aesthetic of ef-

ficiency. Every cup an exact copy. Functionality here is paradoxical, since it attends the "scene of a crime" - its own impending desecration. However, the orderliness of the arrangement is an order: we are recruited to help ourselves to coffee and participate in the sociality which the mundane activity of coffee-drinking makes possible.

*It is the merit of the coffeehouse that you can sit there the whole day and half the night amongst people of all classes. The coffeehouse is the only place where conversation may be made to come true, where extravagant plans, utopian dreams and political plots are hatched without anyone even leaving their seat.*⁴

In contrast to the finite symmetry of the booth and stacked cup arrangement, both the rows of books and the conveyor-belt counter seem as if each could extend in an endless assembly-line of production. In the gallery context one might compare this quality of extension-through-repetition to a Brancusi column, or to Carl Andre's bricks. However, unlike those instances of modernist "transcendence" and minimalist "presence," a repetition is being spacialized, not by materials so much as by audience mimicry of mundane activity.

*The coffee-house was one of the places in which the space of discourse was being systematically decathected...The emergence of the public sphere required that its spaces of discourse be de-libidinized in the interests of serious, productive and rational intercourse...The coffee-house was thus a significant institutional instrument in the furtherance of the protestant ethic and its concomitant regulation of the unruly body...and in the symbolic establishment of power.*⁵

Untitled, 1997, color photograph, 30 x 40"



Mime of Cruelty

The audience enters the tableau where “task performances”⁶ are expected (or invited). One shares coffee and conversation at the table. Next one walks over to the counter to ritually release the cup to the conveyor belt where it proceeds with absurd dignity on its funeral march.

And what is the next task? *Where does one put oneself next?* Is one still the indulged and indulging audience, or at this point does one become a “detail” of this environment — swallowed up in the process — coupled to an encompassing machine?

During the uncomfortably stretched-out duration that it takes the cup to drift along the conveyor belt to its cruel end, I am drifting, too, dispossessed, “lost in space.” The cup reaches the edge and falls crashing from “above” to “below.” Only then am I released, self-possessed, functional again in my spectator role... The audience steps back to admire its handiwork.

Fordist Fort-Da, or Maquiladora Zone of Consumption

In previous versions of this installation, dating from 1994, there has been reluctance (even refusal) of some individuals to allow the destruction of the cup. They catch it as it falls off the edge or advise others about “waste.” Do such reactions represent the need to avoid this strange caesura in the experience of space? A dilemma produced to avoid exactly that experience of displacement and suspension? ...This cup that has touched your lips for

the last time, and that will touch no other’s... What drama! What a moment! reminiscent of the infant’s separation game of *fort-da*, originally described by Freud.⁷

Mastery From Without

The artist describes his concern with the way his installations present themselves from the outside “like a picture.”⁸ Daun attributes this attention to his years as a photographer. He is concerned with the presentation not only from within the installation, but also the visual impact as the spectator approaches the installation from the outside. Yet it is within the installation that the irresolvable tension of material space versus picture space ‘takes over.’

A formative experience of ‘unruly’ proximity to art is described by Daun in his memory of first-hand encounter with a tableau by Edward Kienholz titled *The Beanery* (1965). Kienholz in the 1960s was characterized as a “brutal sensibility,” “the moralist who sees disorder and decadence in contemporary society.”⁹ *The Beanery* occasionally appears in photo reproductions in a frontal, flattened view so that the reproduction seems to frame a total work, able to be apprehended with the eyes alone. On a museum visit, Daun discovered that *The Beanery* is meant to be entered by the viewer. Daun also was surprised to realize that it is impossible to move through the crowded work without rubbing against elements of the tableau, physically touching and being touched by them.¹⁰

In an essay on Surrealist photography, Rosalind Krauss cites “the peculiar conception of the visual” described by the Surrealist writer and sociologist Roger Callois, which influenced the psychoanalytic theory of the ‘scopic drive’ developed by Jacques Lacan.

*[This] peculiar conception of the visual...coincides with the primacy that modernist art gave to pure visuality and conflicts with the utopian conclusions that the theorists of modernism drew from this idea of optical power. For the notions of Callois and Lacan did not support the modernist idea of sensuous mastery, with each sense liberated into the purity of its own experience; the visuality Callois and Lacan described was a mastery from without, imposed on a subject who is trapped in a cat's cradle of representation, caught in a hall of mirrors, lost in a labyrinth.*¹¹

Contradictory modes of visuality are deployed in the large color photos which Daun arranges on the walls of the installation surrounding the *Diner* tableau. The subject-matter of the photos alternates between sycamore bark rigorously framed as “pure,” abstract pattern and the cropped depiction of randomly torn and



Untitled, 1997, color photograph, 30 x 40"

layered fragments of wheat-pasted advertising posters which Daun found and photographed on the streets of Paris last summer.

These latter images present commodity spectacle in the state of decay, crumbling scraps of imagery which occasionally return the gaze. In ironic contrast, the sycamore bark (photographed in the same Parisian locale) stripped of context through its framing, but in a process of organic renewal, appears unified in design, whole, and manufactured. The continuum of these photos, physically lined up in 'unruly' proximity, produces an oscillating attention to surface, shifting between opposing visual modalities.

Listening to Wire

If you "listen to wire," you are one of those audiophiles who claims to discriminate among the relative quality of various speaker wires that transmit music recordings played through expensive audio systems. As a title for this exhibition of work, *Listening To Wire* may point ironically to cultivated, discriminating taste in "fine art," or it may point to a targeted perception of the delivery system that brings art ideas and audience into productive mutual labor: the conveyance of the artwork itself, the gallery, the infrastructure of community support, other layers of representation (including this essay).

The most direct articulation of the title presents itself in the exhibition as signal wire strung between two telephone poles positioned outside the entrance to *Diner*. Audio and/or video signals generated within the gallery space are transmitted from pole to pole. The wires are bare and thus susceptible to spurious radio-frequency signals and noise. The signal becomes muddled, fragmented, decayed in the process of transmission. However, this contingent process of decay is also the signal's process of becoming.

Rather than filtering and "managing" delivery of experience, *Listening to Wire* plugs into contingent flows in the process of becoming. The project of *Listening to Wire* is its audience, whose presence *works* and couples the ideas to a vast social machine of "becoming," beyond the gallery walls.

— Barbara Lattanzi

I would like to thank Joseph Daun for his patience and trust in sharing his ideas, and for the several conversations (over coffee) that assisted in my preparations for this essay.

Footnotes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Hurley, Seem and Lane. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 6
- 2 Quoted in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 97.
- 3 Stallybrass and White, p. 97.
- 4 Quoted in Stallybrass and White, p. 95
- 5 Stallybrass and White, p. 97
- 6 This phrase is part of a quote by Annette Michelson who is describing "new dance" associated with the Judson Theatre in the 1960s: "what came to be known as the dance of 'ordinary language' and of 'task performance.'" I am applying the phrase out of context to suggest a parallel de-psychologizing of the spectator to what was being described vis-à-vis the performer. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981, 1977, p.233.
- 7 Lacan elaborates: "For the [*fort-da*] game...is the subject's answer to what the mother's absence has created on the frontier of his domain — the edge of his cradle — namely, a ditch, around which one can only play at jumping... It is with his object that the child leaps the frontiers of his domain, transformed into a well, and begins the incantation." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan. NY, New York: W. W. Norton, 1981, p. 62.
- 8 From a conversation with the artist.
- 9 See Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900*, revised edition, New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975, p. 266.
- 10 From a lecture by the artist at Alfred University, Oct. 14, 1997.
- 11 Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," from Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: photography and surrealism*, New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1985, p. 78.

Barbara Lattanzi is an artist who divides her time between Buffalo and Alfred, NY. She teaches at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.

Joseph Daun, a native of Miami, is currently teaching at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred. In 1995 while living in San Antonio, he was awarded a residency at ArtPace. He has recently presented his work at Blue Star Art Space in San Antonio, DiverseWorks in Houston, and Fotouhi Cramer in New York.

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