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PIANO NOBILE INDIVIDUATION IN THE SALON

Descriptive difficulties continue here. Should one begin with Günther Förg’s central room, then proceed axisymmetrically to Franz West and Georg Herold before returning to the staircase? Things do not work as planned here in the high-ceilinged Piano nobile spaces, where the masters reside who started their own careers with the beginning of Punk and Wild Painting.

One has to start with the video you can see on the wall in the staircase. In STEFANO CAGOL’s loop, the Stars and Stripes are reassembled in the sense of a Rorschach image, ominously setting it in flight like an eagle. Cagol is active in the social-conceptual area. He seems to have taken up the Rorschach inkblots from Ed Atkins’s Hiser, but the case remains mysterious, just like the person at an Internet website who convincingly demonstrated the resemblance between Hermann Rorschach with Brad Pitt via a photograph. Cagol’s soaring emblematic drapery teaches the swan in the adjacent room to fly, ensuring itself in Björn Braun’s cabinet immediately next-door that certain

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American eagles, or better vultures, can surely fly over the wall that is now being planned on the Mexican border. Braun’s wall is of a very different ideological caliber. Comprising baked grain and grouted with sugar paste, it is a gingerbread house for birds that, in keeping with the artist’s wishes, can hear a voice just like the one that called out to Hansel and Gretel: “Nibble, nibble, gnaw, who is nibbling at my little house?” Unlike the fairy tale, however, the birds need to pick holes in the walled-up window in order to let light in. BJÖRN BRAUN’s masonry is a gesture on behalf of songbirds. Regards from the Land of Cockaigne.

Proceeding to the left from the staircase, the visitor arrives at the large space with a glass alcove. The panorama view of the park makes it difficult for art to call attention to itself. The large sculpture of a swan that looks out over the park together with the visitor, manages to do so. It was produced by the English artist ERIC BAINBRIDGE in 1985. I saw it back then at the Gallery Salvatore Ala in New York’s Soho district. It is entitled Dark Style Swan and resembles an enlarged soap dish in which all sorts of banal objects have been packed: a water faucet, a boat, a kidney, a rose, and a blood corpuscle. Although they have been equalized as regards their size as well through their faux ocelot fur camouflage, Bainbridge emphasized in a conversation I had with him in London in October 2016 that the elements are deliberately disparate. He recalled feeling very close to the dark Reggae style in 1985, which is symbolized by the ocelot. Despite everything, it exudes the wit and irony of New British Sculpture as exemplified by artists such as Richard Deacon, Edward Allston and Bill Woodrow, which combines abstract and figurative forms in mostly humorous
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und Gretel eine Stimme hören könnten, die ruft: „Knuaper, knusper Knäuschen, wer knus-
pert an meinem Häuschen?“ Doch anders als im Märchen sind hier die Vögel angehalten,
Löcher in das vermauerte Fenster zu picken, damit Licht hereinkommt. BJÖRN BRAUNS
Vermauung ist eine Geste an die Singvögel. Schlaraffenland lässt grüßen.

Vom Treppenhaus gelangt man links in einen großen Raum mit Glasperker. Der
Panoramablick in den Park mit seinen hohen Bäumen macht es der Kunst nicht leicht, die
Aufmerksamkeit auf sich zu lenken. Die große Skulptur eines Schwans, die mit dem Besu-
cher in den Garten blickt, vermag es dennoch. Der englische Künstler ERIC BAINBRIDGE
schuf sie 1985; ich habe sie im gleichen Jahr in der Gallery Salvatore Ala im New Yorker
Stadtteil Soho gesehen. Sie heißt Dark Style Swan und ähnelt einer im Blow-up-Verfahren
vergrößerten Seifenschale, in die allerhand banale Gegenstände hineingepackt sind:
Ein Wasserhahn, ein Schiff, eine Niere, eine Rose und ein Blutkörperchen. Sie sind in
ihrer Größe, aber auch durch ihre Camouflage mit Ozelot-Plüsch egalisiert, doch
Bainbridge betonte in einem Gespräch, das wir im Oktober 2016 in London geführt
haben, dass die Elemente absichtlich dis-
parat seien. Er erinnerte sich, dass er sich
1985 sehr dem Dark Style des Reggae nahe

constellations. The dark side nevertheless
remains present in this grotesque. Like Hans
Christian Andersen’s “Steadfast Tin Soldier”
in the paper boat, the swan has set off on a
mysterious voyage; artefact and readymade
in equilibrium with a mysterious life. In an
editorial for Artscribe International (No. 55,
Dec/Jan 1985–86) entitled “Letters to a
wound” the renowned British art critic
Stuart Morgan linked Bainbridge’s Swan to
Joseph Beuys’s Plight and Julian Schnabel’s Avoiding Open Heart Surgery. He concluded that
the inner workings of swan’s cargo encompass pipes: “Nature and machinery, blood and
water”. The dark sides of the bonbon decoration can also be deduced in some of the other
sculptures Bainbridge showed at his New York exhibition. The viewer of this swan natively
has associations with Jeff Koons, who at the very least was surely familiar with Stuart
Morgan’s illustrated Artscribe text before he began producing his own figurative ensembles
shortly thereafter. Bainbridge’s sculptures from 1985 largely have an assemblage character,
while Koons, with the exception of the stainless steel figures, initially occupied himself with
more narrative models. In retrospect, one could also mentally add Martin Kippenberger’s
ambivalent 1985 Ertragsgebirge into the mix. The swan, however, is also an art historical

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Aftermieter, 2017

Veit Loers, ’Piano Nobile Individuation in the Salon’ in Haus Mödrath, ”Aftermieter Lodgers”. Dortmund: Verlag Kettler,
2017.

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felt, because it stands out as a challenge. The Dutchman de Wilt, and
the irony of New British Sculpture in us, the abstract and figurative forms in the most
humorvollen Konstellationen verband, like Richard Deacon, Edward Allson or Bill
Woodrow. And still the dark side remains in this grotesque present. The Swan has
itself on a geheimnisvolle Fahrt to be back under Christian Andersen's Zinnsoldat im
Papierschip, Artefakt und Ready-made im Gleichgewicht mit einem geheimnisvollen
Leben. The known English art critic Stuart Morgan linked in the introduction of the
Artscribe (Dec./Jan. 1985/86) under the title "Letters to a wound" Bainbridge's Swon
with Joseph Beuys' Plight and Julian Schnabel's Avoiding Open Heart Surgery. He
stated, that the beauty of the Swans inner life is in the mind: "Nature and machinery,
blood and water (Natur und Maschine, Blut und Wasser)". The dark side of the Bergon-Dekoration
was a man in the other sculptures Bainbridge in the New
Yorker Ausstellung erahnen. Naturally one wonders if Jeff Koons, when he looks at
the Swan.

This, the zumindest Stuart Morgansische Text in der Artscribe mit der Abbildung

trouville that spent many years in Turin forwarding company, where one had to look for it
so that it could celebrate a rebirth.

Two sculptures by FRANZ WEST that belong to his late painted epoxy resin works
are in the immediate vicinity. They are entitled Kain nicht Abel, and the viewer can well imag-
ine that the figure on the right sitting on a kind of dromedary goes on offence and attacks
while the figure of the left defends himself by holding out his arm. The arrangement has
something ridiculous about it that West deploys theatrically in order to deceive the
viewer as a side effect at least. The two figurations are simultaneously so monumental that they
manage to combine the comedic with sculptural drama. They share their inscrutability with
the swan, even though it celebrates a different almost kitschy glamour. Deliberate trivial-
ity of the highest order—and to avoid misunderstanding: the trivial is disseminated solely on a
contetntual level, while the aspect of what we call form features artistic authority.
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Gleich nebenean stehen zwei Skulpturen von FRANZ WEST, die zu den bemalten Epoxyharz-Arbeiten der letzten Jahre gehören. Kühl & Abel sind sie betitelt, und man könnte sich vorstellen, dass die rechte Figur, auf einer Art Dromedar sitzend, attackiert, während die linke den Arm schützend entgegenstreckt. Offensive und Defensive. Das Arrangement trägt jene Lächerlichkeit in sich, die West theatralisch einsetzte, um zumindest als Nebeneffekt den Betrachter zu dupieren. Gleichzeitig sind die beiden Figuren so monumental, dass sie das Komödiantische mit einer bildhauerischen Dramatik zu vereinen wissen. Ihre Abgründigkeit teilen sie mit dem Schwan, auch wenn dieser den fast kitschigen Glamour in anderer Weise zelebriert. Absichtsvolle Trivialität auf höchstem Niveau, und um einem Missverständnis vorzubeugen: Das Triviale hat sich ausschließlich auf der inhaltlichen Ebene breit gemacht, während das, was wir die Gestaltung nennen, künstlerische Souveränität besitzt.

Die diskursive Sprache bedarf dieser Wendelzüge, um das, was Bainbridge, West, Förg und Herold in situ viel einfacher zeigen können, einsichtig zu machen. Denn visuell

The discursive language requires these dodges in order to make comprehensible what Bainbridge, West, Förg, and Herold can show much simpler in situ. Visually, they concern amalgams that stir dissonant emotions in the academically educated, as if he was reading the adventures of Don Quixote's or watching film scenes by Karl Valentin or Woody Allen. It is similar in GÜNTER FÖRG's space, even when disregards his basic humorous approach. The large 1996 picture belongs to the group of grid paintings begun by Förg in 1991 with Canto, a work on Canson paper. His enthusiasm for the Cantos by the American poet Ezra Pound, especially the Pisan Cantos, is well known. He was paid by Mussolini's regime to make propaganda broadcasts against the Allies. After the war he was detained by his compatriots for several weeks in a steel cage, a pre-emption of the Guantanamo system. The grids are naturally more than that. As the paintings of Piet Mondrian similarly demonstrate, the wedding of the vertical and the horizontal is a magical act in which the occupation of the picture plane dynamizes the surrounding space. Edvard Munch's organic crossing of the pictorial subject was another source for Förg's grid paintings. Siegfried Gohr is nevertheless correct when he writes in the catalog of the first presentation in 1996: "The abstract elements that appear in his [Förg's] works already exist, as it were, they do not have to be deduced first." Förg's grid began to dance in the latter half of the 1990s, the orthogonal system veers in part into the diagonal. The over four-meter wide abstract acrylic painting features scratch like those on a school blackboard, although such scratchings are impossible to produce with a wide brush. Like the other large-format works by Herold and West, a

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sind es Amalgame, die dem akademisch Gebildeten dissonente Gefühlsregungen ver- 
schaffen, als lese er in Don Quichottes Abenteuern, sehe Filmzehnen von Karl Valentin  
oder von Woody Allen. Ähnliches passiert in GÜNTHER FÖRGs Raum, auch wenn seine  
Grundhaltung den Humor beiseite lässt. Das große Bild von 1996 gehört zur Gruppe der  
Gitterbilder, die Förg 1991 mit dem Canto, einer Arbeit auf Canson-Papier, einleitete. Sei- 
exte Bewunderung für die Cantos des amerikanischen Dichters Ezra Pound, vor allem die  
Pisaner Cantos, ist hinreichend bekannt. Pound wurde nach Kriegsende 1945 als Radio-Pro- 
pagandist des Mussolini-Regimes von seinen Landsleuten wochenlang in einen Käfig ge- 
sperrt, eine Vorwegnahme des Systems Guantanamo. Aber die Gitter sind natürlich noch  
mehr: Die Vermählung der Vertikalen mit dem Horizontalen ist ein Akt von Magie, bei dem  
die Besetzung der Bildfläche den Umraum zu dynamisieren weiß, wie dies die Gemälde Piet  
Mondrians veranschaulichen. Die organische Verkreuzung der Bildsujets bei Edward Munch  
war eine andere Quelle für Förgs Gitterbilder. Dennoch hat auch Siegfried Gohr Recht,  
denn im Katalog der Erstpräsentation 1996 schreibt: „Die bei ihm [Förg] auftauchenden  
abstrakten Elemente sind sozusagen schon gegeben, sie müssen nicht erst deduziert  
werden.“ In der zweiten Hälfte der 1990er Jahre beginnen Förgs Gitter zu tanzen, das o- 
rtogonale System dreht sich partiell in die Diagonale. Das über vier Meter breite abstrak- 
te Acrylbild ist bekritzelt wie eine Schultafel, nur dass Kritzzeln mit einem breiten Pinsel  
icht geht. Wie auch die anderen Großformate von Herold und West gelangte es über das  
hohm Mittelfenster mittels Hebebühnen und einer Rampe ins Innere der „Burg Mödrath“.  
Wenn man die Augen verengt, glaubt man, zwei Hände zu sehen, die eine schwarze Schale

hydraulic lift and a ramp was used to deliver it via the tall center window to Mödrath Castle.  
Squinting one’s eyes, the viewer thinks he can see hands carrying a black bowl. Günther  
Förg’s grid painting seems to be the enlargement of a pastel drawing whose contents are  
absorbed in the large abstract gestures. Gohr, Förg’s long-time biographer, locates the  
paintings ideally as belonging to a house, “the venue of human life”. The extraordinary  
painting can in fact be found in such a building, and not in a Luxemburg bank, as was the  
case when it was first exhibited.

Two large photographs with athletes from Förg’s series on the Foro Italico (formerly  
Foro Mussolini) in Rome can be viewed as substantial extracts of the grid picture, even  
though it was already made in 1983. Förg transfers the pathos of fascist convictions visible  
in the sports facility’s mosaics as a timeframe to his own day, the somewhat cumbersome  
wood frames of these photographs proving to be advantageous to this purpose. Italian  
Fascism is not being circulated here but rather fragments of the archaic—or perhaps one  
should say embarrassing—emotional values whose intrusiveness is employed like a flavor  
enhancer. At least Gino Severini and Giulio Rossi were involved in designing the mosaics.  

This time GEORG HEROLD assumed the great gesture, although he mostly pre- 
ferred satire to pathos. While his brown lacquered sculpture transfers the affirmative  
materials of slats and canvas as the trademarks of his art to plastic when the task at hand is  
to produce sculpture, but in a nutshell one can still sense their presence. The enormous  
elephant trunk-like entity that protrudes into the space is in fact a woman athlete. With one


GEORG HEROLD hat dieses Mal die große Geste übernommen, auch wenn er meist die Satire dem Pathos vorzieht. Seine braun lackierte Skulptur hat die affirmativen Materialien Latte und Leinwand als Markenzeichen seiner Kunst, wenn es darum geht, Skulpturen zu schaffen, aber diesmal in Kunststoff übertragen, aber in nuce vermeint man sie noch zu verspüren. Der riesige in den Raum ragende Rüssel ist in Wirklichkeit eine Sporthalle. Ein Bein nach hinten gestreckt, das andere angewinkelt, scheint sie wie im Anflug auf die Wand aufgeschlagen zu sein, der Bildträger formt sie vorn zum Relief. Keine
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schnelle Vorstellung. Alle Bewegung und plastische Energie läuft also rückwärts, auf die Wand zu. Gegenüber, zur Vorderseite hin, antwortet eine große Farbfotografie auf das spitz zulaufende Skulpturenbim. Weibliche Konturen, wie Brüste aussehen, und die Hand einer alten Frau, La nourrice. Das spitz harte Bein und die weichen mütterlichen Knie bilden eine disparate Einheit. Angesichts der Tatsache, dass Haus Mödrath auch mal ein Wöchnerinnenheim war, erhält das groteske Humorpoesie eine tief Sinnige Beziehung.


Leg stretched to the rear and the other bent, she seems to have run smack into the wall, the support forming her into a relief in the front. Not a particularly pretty notion. All motion and sculptural energy thus runs backwards, towards the wall. Opposite it at the front, a large color photograph responds to the pointed sculptured leg. A female knee that looks like breasts and the hand of an old woman, La nourrice. The hard sharp leg and the soft maternal knee form a disparate entity. In the face of the fact that Haus Mödrath was once used as a maternity home, the grotesque humorous package is lent a profound relationship.

As is the case in the works of West and Bainbridge, this humorous element is a Janus-faced. Its other side is a vanitas motif. Pathos and irony take leave of the unambiguousness of the empty phrase. Hooking on to an outdated theory with the help of C.G.Jung, the results of the individuation process in this piano nobile are monuments of melancholy. In the corner room that leads back to the staircase, André Butzer presents four gray paintings that apply shock absorbers to Günther Förg's painterly gesture. Articulation, painting's genuine language, becomes an impenetrable substance, a fermata with decrescendo. Butzer's phrasing of this in gray still draws on the remaining colored figurations or seemingly engraved abstract ground patterns. Painting is the assurance of residing in the house, the loading with pictures. When I visited the artist in Rangsdorf near Berlin, in his studio and his home in Bauhaus-like tracts from the Nazi period, I realized that no colors are required in the diaphanous atmosphere surrounding a garden—just like in Mödrath, where the park's trees are very close by.
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Das Geisterhaus


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Eric Bainbridge

Das Geisterhaus, 2017

Sebastian Frenzel

Monopol - Magazin für Kunst und Liebe, Nr. 04/2017

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Und die Aussagen der Künstler: „Das Haus Mördrath war ein typisches Beispiel für die Dialektik zwischen klassischer Architektur und moderner Kunst. Es war ein Ort, an dem die Grenzen zwischen Kunst und Leben verwischt waren. Das Haus ist heute ein Symbol der Kultur und des Künstlerlebens."


Der Künstler Herbert Hilsenbrand – Vorbesitzer Hilsenbrand leitet das Mördrather Elbzeichen ein, ein Für jedes seiner Kinder, faste Künstler, eine Weltkult und eine marmorne Schwimmhalle von einer Größe, die bei öffentlichen Ausstellungen eine Rolle spielt.

Kurator Veit Loes verspricht eine „abgründige Transformation auf vielen Ebenen, vom Individuum zur Gesellschaft, von der Kunst zur Epiphanie“.


dunkler Schwarm in den Park, eine Arbeit des vergessenen britischen Bildhauers Eric Bainbridge aus den 80er-Jahren, für Loers ein „Photo-Jeff-Koons“.

Im Dachgeschoss schließlich lässt die Bildhauerin Alice Kwade Lampenspuren, und Eva Kooijmans errichtet einen großen Käfig. Disziplinierung und Architektur am Ort, wo erst die Heldinländler spielten. Seine Ausstellung sei schon etwas düsterer, räumt Loers ein. „Der Untergrund ist extrem, der Park verwildert, das Haus von Schuld nicht frei, die Gegend heruntergekommen. Aber ich will auch zeigen, dass im Moribund neues Energien stecken.“


denkhaus Mühlshofe – Raume für Kunst eröffnet am 23. April mit der von 

Volkswagen gestifteten Ausstellung „Alterneier“. Weitere Informationen unter:

www.haus-muellshof.de

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Poor Art | Arte Povera
Italian Influences
British Responses

Eric Bainbridge
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Poor Art | Arte Povera
Italian Influences, British Responses

20 September – 17 December 2017

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Introduction

September 2017 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first Arte Povera exhibition in Genoa at Galleria La Bereska, when Germano Celant used this definition for the first time; accordingly, we felt that this was a fitting occasion to explore the influences of the movement on a generation of British artists. Since opening in 1998, the Estorick Collection has increasingly set up conversations between twentieth-century Italian art and the work of British artists, as well as international movements. In the autumn of 2005, the Collection presented an exhibition of works from the collection of Marcello Levi, entitled Portrait of a Collector: From Futurism to Arte Povera, in which a large number of works by Arte Povera artists were presented alongside pieces by a range of international figures. The exhibition was one of the first at the Estorick to showcase more contemporary Italian art, with the aim of exploring the legacy of the avant-garde and of our own permanent collection. It is interesting now to explore further the impact of this particular movement on a generation of British artists.

Arte Povera had many strands, and different elements were taken up and explored by different artists, who can perhaps be seen more as intellectuals and craftsmen, rather than painters or sculptors in the traditional sense. Art resides in an idea, and the thinking process often breaks it down into different currents - different influences. The 'legacy' of Arte Povera for this group of artists is therefore varied, and each artist has picked up on either the general idea or a 'minor' aspect of the movement that has seemed most relevant to them and their work. We did not prescribe what we were looking for: rather, the artists themselves wanted to acknowledge their connection (as loosely or as closely as they wished) with the Italian movement.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Stephen Nelson and Martin Holman for suggesting the exhibition to the Estorick Collection, as well as for curating the show; I would also like to thank Roberto Minucci for her contribution to the project. My gratitude goes to Paul Bonaventura for his important contribution to the catalogue, and his enthusiasm for the project as a whole. I am naturally indebted to all the artists who have agreed to show in our exhibition, and to all the galleries that have facilitated the loans - in particular, Mira Dimitrova at Mazzoleni and Ursula Casamonti at Tomaso Monti. Finally, as always, I would like to thank my colleagues Christopher Adams, Luke Alder and Claudia Zanardi alongside the many people involved in putting this show together.

Roberto Ceroncini
Director, Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art
Eric Bainbridge
The patination of..., 2015
Plywood, rable and fur fabric
H. 213 cm

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Courtesy the artist and WORKPLACE, UK
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Plywood, table, and fur fabric
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Introduction

September 2017 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first Arte Povera exhibition in Genoa at Galleria La Bereska, when Germano Celant used this definition for the first time; accordingly, we felt that this was a fitting occasion to explore the influences of the movement on a generation of British artists. Since opening in 1998, the Estorick Collection has increasingly set up conversations between twentieth-century Italian art and the work of British artists, as well as international movements. In the autumn of 2005, the Collection presented an exhibition of works from the collection of Marcella Levi, entitled Portrait of a Collector: From Futurism to Arte Povera, in which a large number of works by Arte Povera artists were presented alongside pieces by a range of international figures. The exhibition was one of the first at the Estorick to showcase more contemporary Italian art, with the aim of exploring the legacy of the avant-garde and of its own permanent collection. It is interesting now to explore further the impact of this particular movement on a generation of British artists.

Arte Povera had many strands, and different elements were taken up and explored by different artists, who can perhaps have been more as intellectuals and craftsmen, rather than painters or sculptors in the traditional sense. Art resides in an idea, and the thinking process often breaks it down into different currents — different influences. The ‘legacy’ of Arte Povera for this group of artists is therefore varied, and each artist has picked up on either the general idea or a ‘minor’ aspect of the movement that has seemed most relevant to them and their work. We did not prescribe what we were looking for: rather, the artists themselves wanted to acknowledge their connection (as loosely or as closely as they wished) with the Italian movement.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Stephen Nelson and Martin Holman for suggesting the exhibition to the Estorick Collection, as well as for curating the show; I would also like to thank Roberto Minucci for her contribution to the project. My gratitude goes to Paul Bonaventura for his important contribution to the catalogue, and his enthusiasm for the project as a whole. I am naturally indebted to all the artists who have agreed to show in our exhibition, and to all the galleries that have facilitated the loans — in particular, Mira Dimitrova at Mazzoleni and Ursula Casamonti at Terrazzoni Art. Finally, as always, I would like to thank my colleagues Christopher Adams, Luke Alder and Claudia Zanardi alongside the many people involved in putting this show together.

Roberto Cremonini
Director, Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art

Eric Bainbridge
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right & over *The Ghost of Jimmy Nail*, 2012.

42 Gallery 2, cotton, clothes pegs and cable

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CAMDEN ARTS CENTRE CONVERSATION
ERIC BAINBRIDGE + PENELOE CURTIS

An edited transcript of a public conversation on 24 October 2012.

Penelope Curtis: My first question is: do you think this is new work or old work?

Eric Bainbridge: I can see what sort of evening this is going to be already.

PC: I want to look at a familiar abstract language and see to what extent it can 'carry' other content, and be considered in relation to the present. It clearly references work from an earlier period – Caro, Smith, Constructivism, but it follows in quite a logical way stages in my own work. For me this show is certainly a new body of work - in the sense that it is an attempt to make work that is about now; thinking of how we understand history, what is sustainable, and what can be taken forward.

The material maybe looks old - it has a 'found' aesthetic; this is quite deliberate. It's not overly cleaned or newly painted; I don't want to control the material completely. Half a century on from early Caro for example, I'm trying to include something else, to add something speculative, so yes I think it's new work.

PC: I think this is a conversation that you've been wanting to happen for 25 years.

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Eric Bainbridge

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EB: Yes, or more.

PC: Is it because you couldn’t make it happen before, or you didn’t know how to make it happen, or you weren’t ready, you weren’t mature enough?

EB: I think I probably said so many times that I was going to do it that at some point I had to make a stab at it. It’s taken a long time to get here; maybe it has needed all the previous work I’ve made and this amount of time to elapse to give me the right distance. The feel of these works might have been different if I’d made them 10 or 15 years ago. What you’re referring to though is a time when I was a student in the 1970’s. I came to London and saw St Martin’s School of Art full of steel sculpture that all looked the same to me. I was horrified by it, because it seemed closed, everything seemed to have to be made to a formula, a sculpture formula. The memory still lingers. At the time I didn’t know much about the other side of St Martin’s which was Gilbert and George and Bruce McLean and Richard Long etc. So the image stayed in my mind that there was a dominant, narrow formalist teaching that just seemed to me to deny all the things that were going on in sculpture in Europe or America that I found interesting. I also encountered a similar attitude as a student in Newcastle.

PC: So you had to make it, or re-make it to tackle it?

EB: I wanted to make some steel sculptures for a long, long time. I don’t like the idea that a material or way of working is out of bounds because of history or personal bias. I probably didn’t know how to go about it; I sort of knew how I wanted them to feel. I didn’t know what they might look like, but slowly it began to form as a possibility in my mind that the previous works I had made - although they were made of teak, iroko (another kind of hard wood), and melamine - had a hard edge linear character, so these new works could follow on from them. I had also, over the previous 18 months, been working on a series of collages which started completely by chance. The intense focus on that work stopped me from making any sculpture for that period of time. I didn’t make any sculpture at all. So when the collages finished, I was desperate to make some sculptures again and thought okay, this is the time, now I can try - I’d had my eye on some particular pieces of steel for a long time.

PC: So you mean that you could have made these in wood earlier but because they are now in steel, they now deal with Caro?

EB: Yes. I mean I wouldn’t have made things that actually look like this in wood. Once the idea of
using steel was fixed, so my idea and memory of early Caro and David Smith and other people developed. I thought a lot about what my feeling was about early Caro for example: which you know I think is fantastic. I'm less keen on Caro as he gets through his career but early on I think there is invention, a lightness of touch that still looks great today. Those works, which I didn't see at the time as being really great works, I have grown to like more and more.

PC: Do you feel you have laid that ghost to rest now?

EB: No, I think I've probably opened up now a whole set of problems for myself. I'm very pleased though that I've made these pieces, because the time feels right. So, to contradict myself, to some extent - yes!

PC: Which problems?

EB: I mean, how close these pieces are to a kind of formal abstract language that we know well, yet they are also different – the same but different. How much the sculptures rely upon the interaction of the metal construction with the objects I've applied to them? How can this perhaps familiar sculptural language be used as a carrier for issues that interest me in art, outside of the limited potential of a straight formalist abstraction? How is that language affected by an additional treatment? The issue of colour, all the colour here is found, I've not applied colour to anything. Apart from using, say, this blanket which has colour; I haven't applied any paint to the steel. So immediately, I see these rooms full of sculptures and think, maybe next I could apply colour to something I might make in the future. It's opened up a set of possibilities. The really exciting question though is when I ask 'What are they? What have I done here?'

PC: You don't see this show as anomalous in your work? Or do you? Is it?

EB: What always happens, I find, is you think you make a move that's different from what you've done before, and you think you've done something that is, you know, a real breakthrough – you're in different territory. Then, three or six months later it just merges seamlessly with what's gone before; it can be seen as a logical progression. That's happened each time I feel that I've made a move. The work that I've made over the years can be identified as lasting for a clear period and then it stops, and then something a bit different starts. Looking back though, the stages make a kind of sense.

PC: So you're in that moment now, about three months since you made this.

Eric Bainbridge

Steel Sculptures, 2012

Jenni Lomax; Penelope Curtis - "Eric Bainbridge: Steel Sculpture". Belgium: Camden Art Centre, 2012.
EB: Yeah. Actually the piece out there ("That Turangalila Symphony Really Rocks Man") was finished here at Camden, so I've got a bit more time. I do have to think a bit, a while probably, before I start to make some more.

PC: By and large to me this work seems more serious or less obviously humorous than your work often is. Although there are some touches which are slightly unsettling and make it clear that it is not quite what it seems, it looks like a more serious show.

EB: This is a really interesting question because I don't think I've ever made work that isn't serious, but I have made work that is more overtly humorous or subversive. I don't know whether it's a British thing that if you make something that employs humor, it can't be serious. I've never felt that. But it does seem to be an issue that if you make something that makes you laugh, or as you say feel uneasy, it can't be as serious as something that is more po-faced. I've always seen humor as another strategy to deal with the world, with life, - whatever, I have always admired the role of comedy within culture. So, I don't know whether it is an art thing that if you identify something as being humorous, it's less serious. I do know what you mean though because it does feel a bit more serious, so I'm contradicting myself again, and it does feel a bit more, kind of, grown up. Maybe that's to do with the way it looks, but I'm not convinced it's actually different from the earlier work. With each phase I do try to push things along a bit to add something - maybe that's why it's interesting to do this show now because we have had a lot of space since 'Early One Morning' and it's easier to see it's value but not feel affected by the arguments, and by it's influence.

PC: But I suppose in a way we're talking about these two different ways of working which is a kind of 1960's welded steel sculpture and then the touches: the additions, blankets or tea towels, but as you say you've always had those two ways of working; but it's like adding a tea towel to a plate of steel, seems to be... well what can you say about that?

EB: When I did it, it seemed like it was a risky thing to do, quite intuitive and irreverent. I mean - to add a tea towel... now it seems perfectly reasonable, it's an integral and positive part of the work - maybe the most important. It fits; the stripes fit the composition perfectly well. But I like the contradiction of materials and the contradiction of the action. You know, that simple placement of something, as opposed to the rather more considered and more rational bolting or welding of steel. That, to me, is why it's stayed there because it could have been
removed the next day in the studio. But the contradiction is more than a formal one. I like the idea that the tea towel or the woolen blanket can represent another type of thinking. Something to do with metaphor, a Beuysian interpretation, or, with the bright polyester blankets - an overt ‘Pop’ reference.

**PC:** You worked with a welder didn’t you to have these sculptures made. Did you make them and then think they needed something more? The cloths and the carpets came...

**EB:** This was the first one I made (Bobble Bubble). I decided when I was making it to leave the dust and dirt on the steel; there’s a bit of writing in chalk on it also. I just enjoy the way these things prevent a singular reading. What if Caro and Beuys made a collaboration? So I was already thinking about leaving aspects of the material that I could easily have cleaned up. I was thinking that the dirt and the dust and the grease, or whatever is on the metal, was probably a way of distancing it a little from Caro and opening up some possibilities. If I had painted the whole thing one colour, that would have been much closer. By leaving the material untouched it nudges another aesthetic position, which might be closer to Arte Povera or some kind of process art or something. So, the idea that it might make a very direct Caro reference is one thing, but then these other elements I think make reference outside of Caro, outside of this country to traditions that Caro could never deal with and certainly followers of Caro wanted to pretend didn’t exist. I wanted to go back directly to Formalism and interrupt that formal reading by asking ‘what if I add this?’

**PC:** The cloths came later, is that right?

**EB:** Yeah, not a lot later. That one for example (The Mind of the Artist – Exposed), was conceived as being a two-part thing. I wanted to make a structure that would work on that blanket. Something that would unite but also remain in opposition.

**PC:** So in a way, dealing with Caro you came in at two angles. One was to try and make a Caro-like sculpture and the other was to do something that Caro wouldn’t have done.

**EB:** Yes, I mean, I want to be able to say ‘can a structure that references Caro or 60’s abstraction also be a vehicle to talk about other things’; that’s why that blanket over there is under that sculpture. With that sculpture, (Untitled - Woolen Blanket) I tried to use a polyester blanket not dissimilar to the red one, but it simply didn’t work. So the idea became to have two sculptures in the same exhibition.
with similar constructions, but one with a woolen blanket, which refers to a tradition to do with nature; and another one on a blanket which is polyester. This one has an incredible digital photographic realism: that blanket couldn't have existed before digital technology - there is an accuracy about the image that is quite of this time. It interested me a lot that this might refer to Pop. Caro and nature... Caro and Pop... I should say at this point that it is possible these sculptures might actually have nothing to do with Caro...

PC: I suppose one could say, to perhaps be annoying: that those two sculptures haven't got any blankets or details because they are better sculptures.

EB: Bitch! That one there (Untitled) has two display positions: upright, as it is in the show, and it also has a reclining position - referring to Henry Moore. The point is, it does have another aspect to it.... it has another kind of thing going on. This one, (The Mind of the Artist - Exposed) is interesting in relation to my recent collage experience. This sculpture with its rectangular red blanket might refer to the page, because the collages were made onto a magazine page. So I think this has a very direct reference to the idea of a page as something that you look at or look into. That sculpture at the back (Greenline) also has a kind of page thing, because it looks so much like a steel sculpture from a reference book, it has a strong image... it is identifiable as something outside of itself. So even the works that do not have an obvious and contradictory object as a component do have an unseen element or more conceptual 'other' aspect. It became important that they all had something beyond the formal so that I could direct or interrupt the way that the sculptures were thought about and understood.

PC: You mean a lot of that sculpture from 50 years ago, that you have learn about through books and magazines; the illustration, or image is as much what you are dealing with as the actual thing.

EB: Yes, part of my interest in thinking about Caro was that I didn’t want to examine the works. I didn't want to look at the mechanics of it and the formalism of it. It was more the idea of it, my memory of it, where it fitted in my personal lexicon. That is what interested me, and still interests me...

PC: So what's the idea?

EB: Firstly they are a discrete part of history, and even though their effect was on one hand to open things up, they also remain fixed to...
their time and represent a moment in history. I enjoy the internal dialogue between the idea of a sculpture, the image of it and the actual work – all aspects have relevant meaning. Why do we like things, why do we remember some things and not others?

Secondly, the sculptural language; that you can make a structure out of separate parts and make them exist in space through the process of welding or bolting. They don’t have a plinth, they’re free standing; they can seem quite monumental. They have a particular relation to the body because you move around them and they create a certain space that affects your sense of physicality as you interact with them, I find this aspect of sculpture continues to be interesting. What I’ve never been interested in is trying to make a sculpture that is ‘as good’ as a Caro, or is ‘as good as’ someone else. That seems to me to be a completely pointless academic exercise. It just closes down possibilities. The question ‘what have I just made?’ seems to be the most bracing kind of question.

PC: And that’s how you’ve been judged to some extent in this show?

EB: Inevitably, yes. Because there are those who don’t like the idea that Joseph Beuys is an interesting artist, or that objects and materials can now have a different kind of life in art.

PC: Or that Caro is still interesting.

EB: It’s OK I suppose, if these sculptures are enjoyed in straight modernist terms. To think that Caro is the high point and that nothing that has happened since then is worth looking at is hard to comprehend. You know, the world (and the world of art) is more complicated and difficult now, whether we like it better or not is another question, but it’s that complexity of knowledge and contradiction that is amazing, and difficult to deal with.

PC: I think that’s the dangerous ground you’ve entered here, because simplistically it looks like you’re trying to rival Caro but actually you’re trying to deal with Caro and do something else too.

EB: Exactly

PC: You mentioned the kind of reception the show has had, and that quite a lot is tied up with older critics who have had a lot to do with Caro in that tradition.

EB: Yeah.
PC: So what do you make of the way it’s been written about?

EB: Well, what I was referring to earlier when we talked was the response to a review that I read online, which is a very supportive, very positive and very well written review, with an intriguing dialogue on a website that included participants who don’t even want to see the work. They want to comment on it without even seeing it...

PC: Seeing the show?

EB: I suppose it represents to them yet another artist trying to do things that they don’t understand or appreciate. That fixed polemic is entertaining though, some of the debate is quite lively, but then I just think, in the end what is the point of this kind of critique?

PC: Do you feel that you’ve laid yourself open to that by casting yourself back into the 60’s, so that it’s been too easy for people to judge you by those standards?

EB: Not really, because I think if you’re going to judge something you have to understand at least what it’s attempting to do. If your judgment is based on something that is closed, you’re never going be able to actually consider the issues that are presented. OK, the response generally has been extremely positive. People have interpreted the works in many different ways, which is interesting, they have approached it in ways I wouldn’t have done.

PC: Can you give us a sense of the range?

EB: Well someone yesterday emailed me and talked about the work in relation to Samuel Beckett and his plays, and talked about ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’ in connection to that work out there, (‘That Turangalila Symphony Really Rocks Man’) and made references to the sublime and the absurd that you see in Beckett. I have no objection to that. I suppose what he is talking about is the use of contrasting materials or the use of a kind of icon. If you take the cube as iconic, then what I’ve done with it is to place a kind of absurd contrast or contradiction within the work. The most absurd or aimless thing has ultimately to be taken seriously, if it is in some way interesting. The subject, as you put it, of trying to deal with Caro etc. is very serious, but that doesn’t mean you can’t play games or be disrespectful with it to make something new.

PC: You mean you’ve always found it unfortunate that people find your work funny?

EB: Well to an extent. I think it can prevent a more complex reading on the emotional side of
things – humour can be a cover all. I remember talking to Claes Oldenburg one time when he was in London. He’d seen some work of mine in Minneapolis and I heard he liked it. I was told to go and say hi when he was here so I went to see him. People were queuing up to talk to him and I had to wait in the queue. All they were saying was: ‘oh I think your work is such fun, you know. I was taken as a child to kind of to jump on your sculptures and I think you’re such an entertainer.’ He just said to me: ‘I’m sorry you had to listen to that. I get it all the time and I have to be polite.’ But all these people mean well but just don’t understand the work because they think it’s just about fun. He said: ‘the work was always as serious as I could make it.’ I think it’s the same kind of issue.

PC: But maybe this time you tried harder to make it serious.

EB: Well, yeah. I mean what a nice space. You know if you’re going to put work in here... This is one of the nicest spaces in London. It is an opportunity to take seriously. Also you get older and you do think a bit more about things. Yeah, possibly.

PC: Before we get too elegiac, to go back to the art school, I presume that you didn’t know about Gilbert and George and Richard Long etc.

EB: I think I knew about them as artists, as recently emerged artists but I didn’t know they were associated with St Martins at the time; I just walked straight into this thing. What I was seeing kind of echoed in a way some of the teaching that I had as a student, which was about a very particular kind of formalist thinking related to Brancusi. At that time I was looking to Europe or America for more experimental things that interested me, and was aware of that notion ‘the expanded field of sculpture’ and Conceptual Art actually happening.

PC: Is it true that the things that you would have seen in the basement of St Martins, the not very good sculptures, the kind that no one wanted to take away,...

EB: Today I probably would have been more interested in those failures! No, it was the degree show. It was a room full of things that all looked the same. They were all made out of cut up bits of steel welded together and I couldn’t tell one student from another. They were all working to a formula. To me it was like walking into Hells... as a student who wanted to experiment with materials, processes and ideas, to have that kind of pressure just seemed educationally absurd to me.

PC: And these are better than those?

EB: Oh, much better, much more serious!
PC: Why are they better?

EB: Oh, I can’t say why.

PC: Go on, but why? I always think it’s interesting that people are very bad at describing why Caro is good.

EB: Right.

PC: So. Never mind Caro, why are you happy with it?

EB: Well I’m happy with them because they open up a range of questions. I’ve not made things like them before, and I like looking at them - they feel right to me...and so I let them out of the studio. I wouldn’t have let them out if I didn’t think they were strong works and they look strong together. I’d be happy for these sculptures to be shown alongside Henry Moore and Caro or Bauys and Kippenburger or whoever else, they would have an interesting dialogue.

Even the first fur sculptures I made took a lot of making because I wanted them to function as sculptures in the sense that they were objects in space and their objectness had to be convincing. Their formal presence and the relationship of parts had to be resolved. I didn’t want them to be cartoons of sculpture, but I did want the playful, metaphorical and subversive content to be active.

PC: If you wanted one of your sculptures to go into a picture book of British sculpture, what would you choose?

EB: That’s a very difficult...out of these, possibly this one (Bobble Bubble) or that one (Greenline). Now that’s an intuitive response, I haven’t really considered it. I don’t know which one is the most photogenic?

PC: ...and looking back longer?

EB: Oh god!

PC: I’m partly asking that question, although it’s difficult because it’s always so clear with Caro. It’s almost obvious which sculpture to choose for Caro.

PC: It’s ‘Early One Morning’ isn’t it?

EB: Yes.

PC: It’s his best sculpture.

EB: Yes.
PC: I just wondered whether you know he made that when he was a very young man. Quite a young man. Sorry, quite a young man not a very young man. But would you go, you know, would you go back? You've made sculptures in very different ways in your career.

EB: Yeah, I don't know you see because I can't look back and assess them objectively as I can with another artist. Other people could maybe do that. I like to try different strategies maybe to deal with the same things. That's why the works I've made have been in groups that may look different from one another. You know, a group of work comes to an end and then another kind of thing happens. I hope what that's allowed is for the work to be as interesting each time, or some of the work to be as interesting each time. So although this work is recent, I think there's a chance that it is as interesting as the best work from any of the other groups I've made.

If you put it in a picture book then maybe what you put in is the work that is the most influential or something. Which is another question, isn't it? It's not necessarily about the best work - it's about what effect that work had on others - though maybe that makes it the best work!

PC: Do you know which that one is?

EB: So I've avoided that question ...well the Dark Style Swan (1985), the furry swan is one that people seem to reference most, 'More Blancmange' because it was shown a lot in the UK... 'The Mind of the Artist at the Beginning of Time', 'Spatial Concept'...I don't know, maybe.

PC: Shall we stand up and move into the next room so that we can see something different? I wrote the exhibition text obviously about those sculptures there and I didn't know that Eric was going to do these two pieces...

EB: Yeah. Well the work that's in there (main gallery) was basically the essence of what was going to be in this exhibition from the start, but I knew I had Gallery 2 to deal with as well. So the option at one point was to put one of those sculptures from the main gallery in here, which I thought might lead to a bit of an anti-climax - you come into a second gallery and there's 'just another one of those' in there! I thought 'Turangalila' might work in Gallery 2 then realized if I could use the central space, it would sit better there. After a lot of thinking, I just wondered if this piece ('The Ghost of Jimmy the Nail') would fit nicely in Gallery 2. Whether it would act as a foil, if you like, for the work next door. So that's how this solution came about as a kind of 'spanner in the works' to the main part of the show.

Eric Bainbridge

Steel Sculptures, 2012

Jenni Lomax; Penelope Curtis - "Eric Bainbridge: Steel Sculpture". Belgium: Camden Art Centre, 2012.
PC: It's almost like two different sculptors isn't it? I'm sure some people think it's two different artists. Do you see that's the way your character is, this kind of two ways of working?

EB: Well I think there are probably more than two ways of working, but because I decided to call the show 'Steel Sculptures' rather than something cleverer, it allows this piece in. Because although the only actual steel is the cable, the title 'The Ghost of Jimmy the Nail' is obviously a kind of steel reference, but in a very different way to what's going on next door...I kind of like that. Continuing a steel theme without directly using steel extends the conceptual breadth of the exhibition, also there are rust stains on the fabric, which might come from blood, or it might just come from contact with iron or steel at some point in its past. So that was another point of contact with this work in the main gallery.

PC: Yeah but it was never a cloth hanging on a washing line.

EB: Well actually it was. It was some fabric that I'd washed, hung it onto the washing line and then the day after I came out and noticed this form. It quite accidentally made the shape of a floorboard nail, which I'd used in an earlier sculpture series called 'Jimmy the Nail ...'

PC: So it began purely functionally?

EB: It was a completely accidental observation. I mean I have slightly tapered the length of the fabric so it narrows to one end in the way the classic floorboard nail does.

PC: So you washed the tablecloth after a party?

EB: Well it has actually a very elaborate story, which I can't remember right now, it would just confuse the issue to go into it. I thought it was just a piece of found fabric...that I'd bought some fabric and washed it. But apparently it has a rather compelling history...but for now it's just a random piece of cotton fabric.

Anon: Although the spots of steel/rust ... I mean were they an accident?

EB: Yes. You see that's something I wouldn't have allowed myself to do... I wouldn't have made the decision to do that myself thinking it would be too contrived a decision. That had to be a coincidental observation, I mean a similar oblique reference. And the piece outside... (moves to the Central space)

...the cube is steel but the recording tape is magnetic. So there's a metallic connection, an iron relationship there too. I wanted to make

Eric Bainbridge

Steel Sculptures, 2012

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another steel structure and I wanted to choose something, as with ‘Jimmy the Nail’, that was a bit different to the work in the main gallery. I decided to make a simple minimal form, a cube, which for me refers to a kind of rationality. Then when I came to install the show and finish the piece here in Camden, I knew somehow that I wanted to use this audiotape - as having a non-rigid physicality in opposition to the steel cube. I'd found a whole load of old tapes and thought of them as material because I now don’t have a player for them. These are tapes I recorded in the 1970’s. So again through the process of the summer, thinking about it, I knew I also wanted to use two of these blankets in this piece to contrast the natural and the synthetic. This tape has on it the ‘Turangulalia Symphony’ by Messiaen and, hence the title which is ‘That Turangulalia Symphony Really Rocks Man’. So I was thinking about contrasts to this cube structure, it’s strength as a structure and the fragility of the tape, but also the linking of the more conceptual aspects: the metallic or magnetic aspect of the tape, to the steel structure. The material contrast between these two blankets and the contrast in the title between two idioms I suppose. The Turangulalia Symphony is a classic modernist symphony made just after the second world war, it has all the characteristic banging and noise.....it's a proper modernist symphony, contrasted with that more kind of relaxed rock music idiom like ‘...really rocks man.’ So that was a way to try and join these two opposing idioms to emphasize the play between the physical contrasts I wanted in this piece.

PC: It's the 'and and', rather than 'either or'...

EB: Yes.

PC: Your work is what allows it to coexist or tries to allow it to coexist.

EB: Yeah. Things that are not meant to coexist I've always wanted to bring together. The other thing that we haven't talked about that I'm somewhat reluctant to do... because I don’t really understand it, is the part of the content that is to do with the mood or the feeling of the work; and how important that can be in experiencing the work. The terms, pathos and bathos have been used often, both of them. My work has always been talked about as containing a sort of sadness, recently it has been said about this work (Turangulalia). Now I find it difficult... I find it harder to talk about that, or harder to quantify, but it does come up a lot. I also think it is an achievement to evoke those responses in a sculpture of this type that has a strong relation to the formal. That there's a kind of choice between pathos or bathos, or maybe you have to move between the two. I'm not sure where I
sit in relation to them but I think that is another aspect that exists in the work. It’s an aspect that doesn’t sit easily within a formalist critique, but it is important in experiencing and understanding these works.

PC: Is it kind of a way of trying to reconcile real life and art life?

EB: Probably. I think it’s... you know, I’ve always been interested in the everyday, and the absurdity of the everyday, and I’ve always been interested in the relationship between the everyday and art, you know, the two things often come very close together. Those are moments when... moments of real revelation or moments of real understanding about the world, when you see these two things collide or coexist; you know, something from up there and something from down there. When they come together there are often points of real revelation, whether hilariously disturbing or whatever, but I’ve always been interested in those kinds of collisions.

PC: I know there was a question... Was it you? Yes.

Anon: I have a question about ‘The Ghost of Jimmy the Nail’. I saw that in Sunderland last year presented as a video (‘Eric Bainbridge Video Show’ at CIRCA Screen 2011) and I just wondered why you chose to present it as a sculpture here instead of maybe a projection, and how you think that effects the viewers experience?

EB: I never thought of it as being an independent sculpture until I had the problem of what to do in this space. The video is a very simple video, it’s just a washing line with the wind very gently blowing the fabric, with the interjection right the way through of ridiculous farm noises. So the video has an amusing soundtrack, which is the ambient noise of the location (rural France). For this show I thought maybe I could show the video on a small flat screen on the wall just by the door to relate the two. Then I thought that might just make the sculpture seem inadequate, because it’s hard to compete with cockerels and cows and dogs and tractors doing their thing. So I decided to just remove it. Fortunately I think it works here as an independent sculpture much better than if it had been related to the video. So they are now two independent works. I also feel this piece has a more somber feel than the video, which is more ephemeral.

PC: I’ve not seen the video but I guess it was summer and air and light and it was moving probably?

EB: It was moving, yeah.
PC: So now it's very still?

EB: Yeah, it's very, very still. Which also is a kind of sculptural thing isn't it. I mean, sculpture... one of the things it's about is stillness because sculpture usually doesn't move. This piece will move a little bit but probably not very much at all. When it has the capacity to move, but is not moving, then the stillness is amplified. That quality of stillness is something that we always identify with sculpture.

PC: I'm sorry, we didn't leave a lot of space for questions, so please do ask.

Anon: But some sculpture moves though doesn't it? I mean a kinetic sculpture is mobile, that's still sculpture.

EB: Yes. That's very true, but I think one of the qualities that a lot of sculpture has is its immobility, its kind of fixed stillness. That doesn't mean that many other things cannot be sculpture.

Anon: Your work has always been a come down, and has an intentional cack-handedness, I mean I'm always kind of curious about that. How intentional is that?

EB: I'm very highly skilled! ...I'm really interested in the point at which things just become acceptable or at the point where things almost become unacceptable. I mean I'm probably talking about that in relation to an educated middle ground taste. I like that, playing on that edge. So there's often a deliberate kind of clumsiness, elegance or cack-handedness maybe. I mean I'm trying to think of other ways to describe it, doing something that is almost wrong, but I am not incapable of doing things well. For example like the way that's joined there, the recording tape to the steel cube, you know that is just literally tied around, that's it. I could have used some elaborate system to connect that.

PC: You chose an expert welder to weld.

EB: Because I can't weld.

PC: So you chose not to be cack-handed?

EB: These decisions needed to be well executed. The way the pieces of steel connect... they're not cack-handed. I mean, I have made more awkward things than these works, but I always think when you make something you do it as well as is necessary or as badly as necessary. I don't like to get involved in over doing it or being overly concerned with aesthetics that aren't
gender driven when they are made. They tend to be intuitive.

**Anon:** I’m interested in the colour, and you said that all the steel was found. The material, I mean could that tea towel have been red, was it red?

**EB:** It was always brown.

**Anon:** ...Was it always a brown tea towel?

**EB:** It has real tea-stains on it. It was from my office. If it had been red or blue it might not have worked, brown seems to fit the feel of the piece.

**Anon:** Right.

**EB:** You know, very often I will kind of pick things to include in a sculpture just because I need something. I look around to find something to use. You know, I’ve made a sculpture that’s had two or three satsumas on it, only because I wanted to have something that wasn’t like what was already there. I had some satsumas in a bowl and they came out and did the job...I think I used the bowl as well. So the tea towel is a bit like that. I didn’t plan it to be a tea towel, it was just the thing that worked when I needed something to work, and I like the fact that it was not planned. It maybe came out of a kind of desperation to find, and accept something unintended.

**PC:** I don’t think there are any other questions. So do I do the thank you or do you do the thank you?

**Host:** No I’ll do it. But thank you Eric, and thank you Penelope.
Eric Bainbridge

Steel Sculptures, 2012

Jenni Lomax; Penelope Curtis - "Eric Bainbridge: Steel Sculpture". Belgium: Camden Art Centre, 2012.
Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge: Collages, 2012

“Between my head and my hand there is always the face of death” Francis Picabia
Since his emergence in the 1980’s Eric Bainbridge has blended the concerns, methods and constructs of Modernism and Conceptualism with everyday culture to create his own unique iconography: often amusing, always persuasive and engaging.

These collages were cut and pasted during 2009 and 2010 in the North East of England, a region of robust cultural identity. Of course Bainbridge has a North Eastern precedent in Richard Hamilton who, forty years earlier made his pop collages in Newcastle, and twenty years before Hamilton - Kurt Schwitters who ‘merz’d’ his ephemera, the result of which was a sequence of proto-pop art pictures. A tradition is in the making.

These small-scale works plundered from the pages of lifestyle and fashion magazines, bring together fragments to create a new truth (a reality that is simultaneously hilarious and alarming) through a deliberate process that seems counterproductive and against intuition – Bainbridge believes in a reconstructed modernism.

Whilst the source material comes from the visual tropes of advertising (the lush magazines have been made with the latest digital technology) it is also true that Bainbridge has carefully crafted these by hand. Through ‘cut and paste’, the old way of doing, Bainbridge creates new relationships between images that have been abstracted and detached from their original source and context of brand and commercial message. Perhaps when we flick quickly through these magazines as we watch the latest reality based show on television, we become complacent of their slickness, as they invade an already overburdened brain, and are passively absorbed without critical thought.

These collages are glistening and playful, even risqué (can images be risqué these days?). A surface fetish is present: skin glows, hair shines and eyes glisten, colour is sumptuous. There is a push / pull of repulsion and attraction, a reverie of confusion in the viewers mind. Bainbridge has looked too carefully at these magazine pages...

Stephen Snoddy, Director
The New Art Gallery, Walsall
People like to talk these days about how, in the accelerating world of news and entertainment media, print is a dying industry. They don’t know how right they are. But this phenomenon is not just down to the freshness of images and information accessed through glowing screens; newspapers and magazines have always reeked of obsolescence from the moment they left the press. (From when the word is made flesh, as it were.)

Anyone who has visited a commercial printing press will know that the factory floor is crowded with vast metal bins containing crumpled sheets of trial prints and misregistered or misbound magazines. Waste is an inevitable part of the process. The clean ones are packed in boxes and shipped; when they are pulled out again, some are invariably knocked or scuffed. Those that survive the journey will never again be as pristine as they are when first stacked on newsstand shelves; from this point on they are bent and creased by careless browsers with no intention of buying. Many of them will be returned to the distributor, unsold, and then pulped. The ones that find paying owners will either be abandoned, half-read, in trains or waiting rooms, or piled in never-to-be-looked-at stacks in corners of homes. Once in a while the entire collection is hoarded into the recycling bin.

But the medium fights back. It has to. On the glossy pages, images are clarified and amplified (just like headlines) in order that they shout above the visual and material noise of their own dilapidation. Distracting elements – incursions into a neutral background, for example, or blemishes on human skin – are eliminated in the photographs’ intensive post-production. Adobe Photoshop boosts contrast, increases saturation, adds highlights where there were none, titilates wayward hands and dignifies unfortunate hand gestures. It essentially moves an image away from specificity – inscribed by chance – and swaddles it in untroubled generality. Cheryl Cole, when represented in photographs, is shown as looking consistent with every other picture of Cheryl Cole.

There are certain areas, however, in which chance still plays a part, and where chaos blunders in. These points of disruption are all, in one way or another, economic functions of the magazine, the physical corner of these sanitised digital files. Due to the magazine’s thin paper – kept to a minimum to keep down distribution costs while still allowing customers to feel the physical heft of value – images from the back of a page often bleed through onto the image of the other side. ‘Show-through’, as it is known, is feared by magazine designers and, despite their best efforts to anticipate potential clashes, is impossible to eradicate entirely. In its mildest form it results in someone’s porcelain skin being stripped by lines of overleaf text; or rare but delightful occasions strange conjunctions occur with shadowy visages looming palely in the backgrounds of unrelated scenes.

Something similar can happen when images speak to each other across the gutter of the magazine, or when pages peel back or fold so that they come face to face with images from elsewhere in the publication.
It is especially satisfying when the conversation happens between editorial content and advertisements, either revealing clashing divergences of opinion or cozy cooperation.

Reading a magazine, can be, therefore, be a thoroughly active and creative process. In most books, even illustrated books, one is expected to work from front cover to back with the aid of a bookmark, following the unidirectional trail that the author has laid out. The material softness of a magazine allows an engagement that is fluid, and fast; flicking through a magazine is like steering a canoe through rapids of rushing text and images. Umberto Eco recognised the value and contemporary relevance of such a mode of reading, referring to works that encouraged this approach (not just novels but pieces of music, works of art and poetry) as ‘open works’.2 He cited James Joyce’s writing, Alexander Calder’s mobiles, Bronn Gysin and William Burroughs’ ‘cut-up’ texts and Stéphane Mallarmé’s unfinished book Lame among his many examples. A magazine – a stew of commercials, adverstorial, reportage, gossip and misinformation; of agenda management, profile maintenance and image manipulation – when taken as a single entity is as much an open work as any text by Burroughs or scatter art installation.

One evening in 2005, Eric Bainbridge sat down in his Hartlepool cottage with a stack of magazines and a pair of scissors. As he listened to the waves thumping against the sea wall outside, he began to slice out smooth round shapes – like pebbles – from the thin, glossy pages.

A storm beach of paper cuttings gathered on his table. He realised that it was the areas of blankness that tended to attract his attention: areas of faces (magazines are mostly faces) between the features, or patches of indeterminate background where depth and focus become unhinged. He laid out the shapes and began to move them around. He tried pushing two together, overlapping them at one end, and was captivated by what he saw. Against a simple white ground, something horrific and hilarious happened when certain of these shapes connected; they cohered into a single figure, a Frankensteiinian monstrosity floating in space, simultaneously becoming a generic icon and a fiercely specific fragment.

Take, for instance, the one I’m looking at right now. (As if to underscore their interchangeability, they are all untitled.) A brown rub of flesh, on close inspection, reveals itself to be the tanned, deeply pored forehead of an older man, its eyebrow and lateral seams curving upwards (for it is upside down) towards its partner: the milky white skin of a young woman. It is not clear from which part of her body this glimpse derives. Maybe it’s the throat, maybe the inside of an elbow. Part of Bainbridge’s absurdist comedy depends on the oddness of human flesh when viewed up close and out of its bodily context.

Nevertheless, there is much that these scraps reveal. What does it say about contemporary Western society that we can make assumptions about a man’s socio-economic background by looking at a photograph of a patch of his forehead? I couldn’t say. But it is obvious that this man lives quite comfortably, using expensive skincare products and exposing himself to plenty of sunshine (a golfer, probably). Even his

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Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge: Collages, 2012

eyebrow is neatly groomed, and the intimation of a steadfast, unreceded hairline at the edge of the paper hints that, despite his age, he still has the ability to turn heads when he enters a room.

The female side of the equation is rather more evasive. She seems to be further away, and her skin is hidden behind a dusting of makeup and Photoshop filters which render it textureless and blemish-free. Of course she is young, as most models are. But she lives from her looks, and while the older man — though also handsome — is definitely a character and a name, in print she is only an image, probably nameless.

Bainbridge’s politics, the source of a rumbling disquiet throughout his work, are never so explicit as to create “message art” in the manner of angry collageistes such as Marthe Rosler or Linder Sterling. His own path is far more cockeyed and inquisitive. In this body of work, Bainbridge is sailing through the aesthetic and informational waters of contemporary digital print imagery to see what he dredges up.

He is also looking to see whether the world of objects and images that he has created through his work of the last three decades is reflected in its surface. As it happens, the coincidences take many forms. Bainbridge has long been interested in surfaces — veneers, upholstery, false frontages — of which magazines contain plenty, albeit metaphorical as well as actual. The magazine business is also built on the arousal and (superficial) fulfillment of desire in all its guises — not only sexually libidinous, but also materially acquisitive, socially aspirational and geographically escapist. All of these appetites have driven the formal language of Bainbridge’s sculpture since he made his first fake fur-covered giant geegaws in the 1980s. The motif of the blob — the infantile, humorous form, part blimp, part sausage, part faeces and part phallic, that has cropped up in Bainbridge’s sculptures and images — is, in his collages, once again called upon by the artist as a carrier of dubious content. In these works, oafs of skin, of hair, of fabric and of food (or combinations of the above) connect to create floating, globular forms, or are assembled to form goopy schematic faces superimposed over existing headshots.

Formally, the blob’s function in these works (as with life) is to bring something alien into a situation that causes discomfort or embarrassment. It is the guest that won’t leave, the sit on the forehead, or the swell in the salad. In Bainbridge’s collages, disco and lozenges are blockages, or shapes to be inserted easily; they are smooth-skinned intruders, suppositories. In most works, he has cut them so that faint shadows along their lower edges cause them to swell and float in space. Against the décor of ariless and pristine show homes, or the glowing hues of a Photoshopped landscape, his blobs hilariously puncture the flawless skin of the photograph even when, very often, they are cut from photographs of flawless skin themselves. Bainbridge is turning his medium against itself. The artist John Stezaker has remarked, with regard to his own collages, that he sees ‘punctuation of the image as a form of cultural resistance’, albeit one that is destined to failure within the inexorable and seamless flows of the technologised image.1 Perhaps Bainbridge’s practice points to a route out of this cultural one-way system. Certainly, the image of a man with a pair of scissors in the north of England taking on the insidious, dematerialised imaging technology of Silicon Valley is an appealing one.

1 Lisa Phillips et al., Collage: The Unmentionable/Picture, 2007, New Museum, New York, p.11/8

Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge: Collages, 2012

The spatial narrative that Bainbridge imposes onto these agglomerations of paper scraps is in direct contradiction to the tradition of Modernist collage, which used the incorporation of found material to draw attention to the physical flatness of the picture plane. When Georges Braque glued a piece of wood-grain-effect paper to his 1912 painting Compteur et verre (Fruit Dish and Glass), he did so in order to alert his viewers to the immediacy of the subject he had chosen to represent; there was no spatial illusion here, no elsewhere. Bainbridge, in contrast, scaffolds a new illusion of depth over the top of existing photographs; those photographs become flat backdrops as he takes back control of the spatial dynamics. He is a sculptor, and enjoys the irony of giving singular objecthood to bits of images that, in the full bleed, all immersive context of the magazine, are supposed to be edgeless. By prescribing limits, and by turning printed photographs into bodies, he is giving these forms a life not unlike our own and making them mortal, and finite.

There is, however, another possible reading of Bainbridge's collages - and of collage in general - which proposes that when a piece of paper is glued onto another pictorial surface, it creates not an addition but a permanent subtraction, by occluding what is underneath. In this sense, a collage is an amalgam of holes or voids. Writing about Picasso, Rosalind Krauss observed that a collaged element stands in for - and so becomes a depiction of - the ground that it covers up. 'It is this eradication of the original surface and the reconstitution of it through the figure of its own absence that is the master term of the entire condition of collage as a system of signifiers.' In this formalist light, Bainbridge's floating blobs might be seen as a foil for the ghostly absences, blindspots that are only deceptively solid and that are actually formless swatches of pure colour, texture or pattern. They can also become gaps and blindfolds for the faces (their grounds) beneath. A thing is a hole in a thing it is not, as Carl Andre famously said it.

Perhaps it is most useful to approach Bainbridge's collages as a synthesis of these two readings. They are simultaneously gas, and liquid, and solid. If his blobs are vacant of everything except luscious colour or pattern, then that is the nature of the intrusion that pushes tautly into the real spaces he positions them within. If, on the other hand, they are fleshy, physical masses, then their interruption is into the dematerialised, amorphous world of digital representation. Both interpretations work, and both add up to more or less the same thing. They show voids as solid facts, and bodies as empty fictions. They show the promise of decay that seeps through our attempts to maintain images of permanent newness, and the absurdity of even the most glorious, transcendent beauty. They are the truth in the void, and they are all we have.

Jonathan Griffin is a writer based in Los Angeles.
Eric Bainbridge

*Eric Bainbridge: Collages*, 2012

Eric Bainbridge

*Eric Bainbridge: Collages*, 2012

Stephen Snoddy, Jonathan Griffin, 2012

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A Conversation, between Eric Bainbridge and Sam Watson
— Spring 2011

Sam Watson: Why did you agree to do this show?

Eric Bainbridge: I am amused by the concept of isolating my works in video. They are clearly peripheral to my main sculptural activities, so the idea of focusing on them, and viewing them in your programme, alongside other artists who work primarily in video, will be challenging in terms of hierarchy.

In many ways, I think we are particularly interested by the ‘sausage’ videos, which are relevant to the act of looking, at objects, sculpture and video on a number of levels.

When I first showed them, I presented the two sausage pieces at the Gilmour Gallery in London (‘The Cavendish Group’ 1984). It was at a time when I had stopped making the big furry sculptures and I had just spent about 18 months messing about in the studio. So the curator at the Gilmour Gallery wanted to do a show out of these diverse things, that I had been creating in the studio, and I wasn’t exactly sure that these things could be a show, but because I was doing some objects, some drawings, prints and various things — I thought I should have a video. At the time video was just becoming the mainstream. It almost felt like you couldn’t do a show unless it was a video show, so I did it as a deliberate act. I was interested in extending the possibility of an object. I thought if I make a video it would just sit on a monitor on the floor and it just became another way of presenting an object. So that’s how it happened. But I also like the idea that everything at the time seemed to be including video — so it was a deliberate ploy.

Like you say they’re from a time when video becomes mainstream in terms of becoming accessible to artists and therefore moving image is accessible to artists...

Yet nothing moved in them, that’s the contradiction.

Exactly, which is what is so intriguing about those early works — that there is all this new readily available technology timing ‘still’ objects. Movement becomes a possibility but is denied. However, in reality, there is movement because of the technology — the video as surface, as object.

One of them actually does become durational in the sense that the light fades. They were both shot outside and in ‘Two sausages’ (1993) there is a clear sense of the light fading.

That was, in part, the whole point of celluloid — to communicate time. So I think it’s very interesting that video presented that option of freezing the celluloid moment — it didn’t have to be moving image. Particularly in the context of that time, when a lot of narrative work was being made — the idea is that a single object and a still video image presents a narrative as well, and that is extended by the uncontrollable movement and nature of video.

One of the things I always liked about video (and still like about video) is that incredibly early technology where you can have a camera in one room pointing at one thing and have a monitor in another room relaying the image. That simple shift I still find really exciting — it’s like on the tube where there’s a monitor at the one end so that the driver can see what is happening at the other end of a curved platform. I’ve always found these simple things and shifts fascinating. In a childish way.

— A Conversation

Eric Bainbridge
A Conversation, 2011
Sam Watson; ‘A Conversation, between Eric Bainbridge and Sam Watson’. 2011
In many ways the other videos such as ‘The Ghost of Jimmy The Nail’ (2002) and ‘Hedge’ (2006), although on the surface seem very different to the sausage pieces, they do have similarities. The notion of the endless loop, for example...

They are also linked by the fact that they are very much about the relationship with sculpture. ‘Hedge’ is about the sculptural process of maintaining and controlling the form of a 200-year-old hedge. So it is a very direct sculptural process on video and in the background there is this woodpile – which references all the earth art guys. But it’s also just kind of funny – possibly the sausage pieces are also quite humorous. The sausages don’t actually look like sausages – if people are asked what it is, a frankfurter is usually third or fourth down the list. It might be a cigar, Tampons or even an explosive – so there’s that thing about the recognition and identity of an object at play in the work.

I did a whole series of sculptures that started with a piece called ‘The Dilemma of Jimmy The Nail’, which was based on a pressed floorboard nail. I probably did half a dozen different sculptures based upon this. They all had a nose and eyes – these kind of dumb looking objects. And then I was hanging some cloth on the washing line one day, I wasn’t anticipating making an image, it wasn’t until about an hour after that I actually looked at it and said; ‘shit, that’s exactly Jimmy The Nail’s nose’. So there was this series of works that included ‘The Dilemma of Jimmy The Nail’, ‘Jimmy The Nail in Europe’, ‘Jimmy The Nail Bound To Fall’ and the video which has this sheet on a line, a flimsy sort of presence - ‘The Ghost Of Jimmy The Nail’. This adds to a whole unplanned series.

The sound obviously impacts upon our experience too...

The cat piece (Lilu, 2006) has a voice that must have been coming from the TV. This indescribable voice that made into a rhythm with the edit – and that was what that piece really became about; the movement of the cat and this looped sound. It had this sort of Susan Hiller spooky feel to it.

Just to go back to the sculptural relationship we mentioned earlier. It will be interesting to place the work within the context of sculptural artist film, for example Anthony McCall’s Line Describing a Cone – which is literally projection as sculpture.

That, for me, goes back to when I was a student. I’m talking around the late ‘70s when there was this whole idea of sculpture being opened out and examined conceptually, the potential for sculpture to be all sorts of things – was the atmosphere that I was a student in. I was very interested in the fact that a sculpture could be a photograph or video, film, environment or accident – whatever you wanted it to be. So a lot of my early experience of thinking about sculpture revolved around thinking: ‘what else could it be or could it be formed?”. So that’s always in my mind, that kind of questioning of things. I remember a conversation I had with Bruce McLean a few years ago when I was proposing that everything that was interesting in the art world was essentially sculpture or sculpture related. That was partly to annoy painters, because it was always dead easy to annoy painters, but also that idea that sculpture had a kind of link to everything that was going on was exciting. Whether it was pure conceptual, minimalist, installation etc – it all related to thinking around sculpture. Sculpture had spawned all those other possible ways of working – and this way of thinking about sculpture has always been in the back of my mind.

And that is why we feel that this show is an ideal start to our programme because we want to open up this idea of what film and video can be for artists. There’s something about these older works, that are very much incidental things. In contrast to now when a lot of younger artists are working more deliberately with mediums, such as High Definition video or 3D film.

Eric Bainbridge
A Conversation, 2011
Sam Watson; ‘A Conversation, between Eric Bainbridge and Sam Watson’. 2011
Well, that’s really interesting because what I’ve just described is how sculpture might become all these other things – and you’re talking about how that it can now have a relationship back to artists and how it can form new kinds of practice.

We feel that your relationship with video is like your relationship with art in general, i.e. it is complex, simple, humorous, serious.

It is all of these. I like it when a work is almost nothing, or sits on the edge of acceptability as an artwork. Humour and seriousness are often the same thing; humour is a strategy like anything else. What is a joke if it is not funny? It is still a joke, maybe then it involves tragedy.

Did you have any ideas for a title for the show?

No, but I’ve been thinking about this; it seems terribly pompous to call it ‘Video Show’, but I’ll leave that decision to you.

— A Conversation

Running order and list of works

**Screen**

*Two Sausages*, 1993
VHS transferred to DVD; 22 minutes

*Terry Cavendish*, 1993
VHS transferred to DVD; 4 Minutes

*Hedge*, 2005
MiniDV transferred to DVD; 4 Minutes

*Lili*, 2006
MiniDV transferred to DVD; 2 Minutes

*The Ghost of Jimmy the Nail*, 2002
MiniDV transferred to DVD; 10 Minutes

**Monitor**

*Sausage One*, 1993
VHS transferred to DVD; 31 minutes

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Eric Bainbridge

*A Conversation*, 2011

Sam Watson; ‘A Conversation, between Eric Bainbridge and Sam Watson’. 2011
Hair is a messy, uncanny, sexually loaded and pretty unpredictable shape-shifter. It can be "...straight, curly, fuzzy/Straggly, shaggy, ratty, matty/ Oily, greasy, fleecy/Shiny, gleaming, streaming/ Flaxen, waxy/Knotted, polka-dotted/Twisted, beaded, braided/ Powdered, flowered and confetti/Banged, tangled, spangled and spaghettied." And on and on, for the fun of quoting the infamous hairy in the musical Hair (1967). For this exhibition's 110 framed collages, all Untitled. 2004, and with the same dimensions: 21 x 29.5 cm (i.e., the standard A4 paper size), Eric Bainbridge resorted to a large repertoire of fragmented images of hair and the various surfaces it grows naturally upon: rosied, wrinkled or goose-bumped skin and chins, eyelids, shaky arms, legs. As backgrounds, the English artist mostly uses pages of staged celebrity portraits and fashion ads for clothes, makeup, bags and perfumes, torn from Lifestyle magazines and often retaining a monoz of a recognisable logo or title. Occasionally he employs reproductions of single artworks (by Roy Lichtenstein or Kary Moran, for instance). A few of the collages are assembled on the middle of empty white sheets of paper, like primary structures floating in space. They accentuate the formal elegance and exact sense of composition shared by the whole series, where Bainbridge seems to put a personal abstract grammar to the test. These collages are also domestic DIY exercises, carried out with cheap and easily available materials – a recurring theme in the artist's CV.

Bainbridge obscures the original pictures by superimposing on them sets of cumbersome cutout blobs and polka dots of various colours, sizes and shapes, including his characteristic sausage, phallic- and turd-esque elongated ovals. With playful impertinence and a freewheeling sense of humour, he consciously (and literally) decorates all the face. He hides their eyes, mouths, and forcefully cool smiles under layers of unidentified textures, thus marking the appeal of their "face value." It's quite amusing, too, that it takes only a few minutes and the turn of a street corner to walk from Via Monte di Pietà, where the gallery is to, Via Montenapoleone, the quintessential shrine of Milanese fashion, as well as the epicentre of the same 'eternal glam & beauty,' minimalistic rhetoric that Bainbridge loves to delirate. While the ads testimonials are to bodies whose visibility and 'neatness' are extreme, almost obscene, with every inch growing, tanned, shaved, iced, polished and heavily Photoshopped in order to hide all imperfections and signs of ageing, their repressed – but here revealed – furry side subverts such sanitization. Seen collectively, they make you think about the story of John Ruskin, on his first night of marriage, finding the nudity of his wife shocking, since his only knowledge of a naked female body had been based on classical statues of nude lacking pubic hair.

Bainbridge, here, is also playing a subtle game of cross-references within the history of art, ranging from the most notorious icon of Surrealism, Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup and saucer. Object (1936), to, say, Piero Manzoni's soft, fluffy and hairy white Achromes from 1961 and 1962. (Notably, the gallery is also one street away from Via Fiori Chiari, where Manzoni had his studio). Most of all, though, when one thinks back to Bainbridge's own signature pieces, such as the everyday objects lined with glued-on synthetic fur that he used to make in the 1980s, the impression one receives here is of an artist sedulously targeting his own history.

Barbara Casavecchia.

Eric Bainbridge
Tales of Everyday Madness, 2009
Jonathan Griffin
Frieze Magazine cover and feature, Issue 123, May 2009
Tales of Everyday Madness

For three decades, the influential British artist Eric Bainbridge has been fascinated by surfaces and disguises, the exotic and the mundane by Jonathan Griffin

I worried for weeks about where to meet Eric Bainbridge. I envisaged talking to him in surroundings that are significant for him and his work, somewhere that might lend our conversation an unexpected but fruitful direction. Should I travel up to Harlewood, the town in the north-east shoulder of England, near where he was raised, and where he now lives for part of the week in a cottage by the sea? Or would it be better to visit the art school in nearby Sunderland, where he has taught for the past few years, and where his office currently doubles as a studio, allowing cups of tea and urgent visits to drift into his sculptural combinations? When this became too complicated to arrange, I considered something closer to home: a stroll through London’s second-hand shops, where I imagine he finds much of his raw material, or a trip to an out-of-town DIY store. It turns out that Doug Hillyard already had this idea for an essay he wrote on Bainbridge’s work in 1995. Perhaps a market would be appropriate, or, given his interest in the global circulation of goods, a spot on the Thame estuary where we could watch cargo ships dock and unpack their colourful metal containers.

Eventually, pragmatism won out, and I met him at a quiet café near Liverpool Street Station in London. The walls were unpainted, the bare plaster tapping a ‘truth to materials’ stately chic. Ironically, we had ended up in an anti-fauve environment. This is an artist who, since the late 1970s, has concerned himself with surfaces and disguises. Whether it’s the synthetic for that he glued onto sculptures based on grotesquely enlarged found objects in the 1980s, or the wood-effect laminated chipboard that he...
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Eric Bainbridge uses cheap materials because they 'elicit a kind of sympathy ... an identification in the viewer that this is what we are'.

has used in more recent works. Bainbridge is frustrated by the post-industrial age's compulsion to dress things up as something else, and in that way our attempts to connect ourselves in a state of perpetual newness tend to fray and unravel at the seams.

Bainbridge's work has been hugely influential over the past three decades — as, for instance, Hans Haacke acknowledged in a catalogue essay for Bainbridge's recent exhibition at Middlesex Institute of Modern Art — it is perhaps not for these formal reasons so much as its deployment of humour as a weapon against itself. "Puncturing pomposity is a phrase that has become something of a cliché in discussions of his work. In fact, he himself uses the expression early on in our discussion. I ask him what kind of pomposity it is that he fears: the sameness of the autonomous object safe behind its barricade of academic discourse, or the hurricane-like pomposity exhibited by any number of sculptors that, for one reason or another, look like a sausage or a bottle of Noilly Past vermouth? Equally, could the pomposity belong to a self-satisfied bourgeois museum visitor, or is it rather the self-regarding, patricianising parts of the art world that are the targets of Bainbridge's scour?" All of the above, he replies. "That mostly, it's my own."

Eric Bainbridge was born in 1955 into a mining family in County Durham, in the highland industrial north-east of England. When his father was singled out for a managerial post at work, they moved from an estate to a superior semi-detached house nearby. The Bainbridges' new house had a picture window and a plastic door-chime that resembled a miniaturized Ben Nicholson sculpture — aesthetics are not usually subject to social aspiration. The young Eric despised this culture of petty snobbery, which he later developed into a code for all his art. His early work was physical manifestations of philosophical ideas, but were nevertheless informed by an emphatically formal sensibility — an abandoned sofa-piled high with scabby turf (Couch, 1977). For example, some curious objects formed from clay (Large Head with Hennessy, 1986). He was also clearly influenced by the Surrealists, and by the potential for mundane objects, through unlikely combinations or nightmarish disruptions in scale and material, to be hilarious as well as alarming. He looked (and still looks) more to European and American artists than to his contemporaries in the UK. While his work was often shown alongside that of British artists such as Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow, he felt more affinity with the Arte Povera of Mimmo Rezzetti, the drawings of Joseph Beuys, or Julian Schnabel's 'last gasp', heroic attempt to deal with the madness of the modern world. "I must be the only person left in the country who still likes Schnabel," he says, "I'm taken aback. Surely Schnabel is the very epitome of pomposity in an artist? "True," he replies, "but, like so many things that are important to me, I have opposing and conflicting feelings for him. This is an example of the restless and troublesome duality that runs throughout Bainbridge's work and thinking. If there is a sense that he works with certain materials, forms and cultural references because he finds them ridiculous, repetitious or pathetic, there is also the sneaking suspicion that he is drawn to them because he acknowledges their qualities in himself. As he says, he uses cheap materials because they 'characteristic of our current state as a nation' — an identification in the viewer that is what we are. We talk about Jeff Koons — and how his engagement with American kitsch would be less convincing if he himself did not claim to be in thrall to its dinky charms. Where Bainbridge first took what he saw as his international style of sculpture to New York for an

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WORKPLACE
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exhibition in the early 1990s, he describes feeling utterly divorced from his work at times and a sense of alienation. When, in 1994, he exhibited at London’s David Gill Gallery, a group of works that broke away from his literalist signature, he covered sculptures, the piece was slammed as being by the Cawoodis Group. Each work the media of which ranged from bronze and plaster to a bed frame and hotdog) was attributed to one of four artists: Trampy Driewohl, Trampy Fronteerd, Trampy McAnally and Kevan G. The names were, of course, all made up. Dodging and dispersing responsibility for this eclectic new work was Bainbridge’s way of trying to occupy what little terrain he had gained in an accompanying wall text: “the common mind, We don’t all choose our neighbours but they affect us. We don’t always choose our thoughts but they also affect us.” One series, “Eight Brainless” (1991) was a line-up of eight diminutive bronze casts of wax models based on a swan, a butterfly, a trolley, a plasticine figure, a miniature cardboard box, and three roughly formed before applying the word BUM. The last two objects, a doughnut shaped and a stack of four small spheres, were titled Bum and Biff. They might well have been drawn from the news mind” via his invented artists, but the sly selection, as with the colours, names and forms of the invented artists, was entirely Bainbridge’s.

'I have imagined spending whole days doing exactly the opposite of what my intuition tells me,' he says. 'What would happen?'

This exhibition was the point in Bainbridge’s career when style became the second front of his work. He describes his delight at realizing that Grand Entrance (1990), a giant brown fabric frankfurter atop a chipboard plinth, is ‘a smashed up animal sitting on a mushed up tree’. For Bainbridge, this is complex reasoning. Usually, the organic and sexual jokes in his work are obvious, but it seems necessary to acknowledge them, let alone analyse them. After all, why is a sausage funny? Is there really no more sophisticated reason than that it is shaped slightly like a penis, and slightly like a poop? And that we find this a suitable shape for something to eat? I can’t think of one.

Two years later, Bainbridge began work on a series of sculptures made from scratch of chipboard, and a tiny blackboard. Despite setting out to produce a series of abstract constructions ‘without thinking’, he was surprised to notice that each one bore within it the basic elements of a face. He was still more surprised when he was forced to admit that the face they most resembled was his own. I suggested to him that perhaps he was making self portraits before his series of Self Portraits (1996), that the only way we have of telling when a work of art attains harmony, when it is finished, when it is right, is when it starts to resemble an image of ourselves. He agreed that this might be the case. We talked about other decisions that inform the production of his work. The objects on which he bases his furry sculptures are often mass-produced knock-offs he finds in junk shops or in markets—a swan-shaped soap dish, for instance, is nothing unusual. He particularly enjoys it when objects become stranded from their original use value—a detached doll’s head, for instance, is a part of a toy. Once they are enlarged and uniformly covered with the fabric, they often start to resemble sculptures by mid-century artists such as Henry Moore or Barbara Hepworth. In fact, Bainbridge says, the harmony that these artists strove for is of limited interest to him. What’s really engaging is the mysterious logic in the form of a piece of polyurethane that once carried a television or a fridge, for example, without its contents (the packaging is purposeful and deliberate but off-putting). A determined but insidious force set against the wind. More to the point, the objects are often insidious. He talks to me about working as a refugee collector in Chingford when he was a student. He came to design, on his way home, a range of objects described in the right place.
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Eric Bainbridge
Forward Thinking, 2008
INTRODUCTION
GAVIN DELAHUNTY

At an early point in the preparations for this project, Eric Bainbridge described the following scene to me: 'The other evening I was sitting on Heugh Breakwater, Hartlepool, with a choc-ice for company. Watching a constant stream of cargo ships I was reminded of Felixstowe and the thousands of freight containers that deliver to its Port. I imagine that inside are shiny, standardised, machine-made merchandise bound for stores all over the country'.

I was immediately held by this imagery. The colour-coded containers, the cargo ship's broad bow, the never-ending horizon line of vessels, the slick, homogenised items they carry, and the enthralled artist sitting quietly, watchful of his tasty companion's erratic decomposition.

In a similar way to these ships, Eric has managed to transport a whole plethora of customised shapes, synthetic materials and discrete messages to our attention over the past thirty years. The exhibition, Eric Bainbridge: Forward Thinking 1976 – 2008, is a celebration of this, bringing together for the first time a careful selection of works that pinpoint key developments for the artist.

The exhibition includes his unforgettable use of fake fur fabric in the 1980s, notably Dark Style Swan, 1985 and The Hole Through which all Things Must Pass, 1987, the turning of his unique camouflage technique on its head with works such as Mirror, 1990 and Grande Bretagne, 1993. A radical and confident decision to abandon the application of fabric altogether for a more candid treatment of materials, Board, Bored, Bound, 1994 and Clad, 1997. The handling of this material-information laid the foundations for what have become some of the most refined, poignant and exciting sculptures of his career, Bangkok Flower, 2006 and Flowers for Cologne, 2008. The selection charts a specific vocabulary of forms and illuminates the recurrence of certain motifs throughout his career. Complementing these works are a set of thirynine drawings: still employed as a point of reference by the artist today, they illustrate a tremendous sense of playfulness and freedom and provide further insight into the early stages of many of his signature sculptures.

'There is always some cheap, pleasant thing to tempt you', Eric once remarked, defending the eclectic nature of his artistic oeuvre. His comment, both confessional and enlightened, reveals how his visual and material lexicon has expanded over the years. It is moreover a perceptive observation on how as a society we have experienced a sea-change in styles, outlooks, codes, prejudices and wisdom over the last three decades. mima is delighted to present this comprehensive show by an individual of exceptional imagination, freshness and vigour.

Additionally you will find in this publication five unique contributions by five influential thinkers, Phyllida Barlow, Ralf Brog, Ryan Gander, Melissa Gronlund, Daniel Silver and Richard Wentworth. These contributions have been invited to recognise the past twenty years or more in which Eric has offered his knowledge and experience as a teacher and professor in London and Sunderland. Personal and distinctive, these thoughtful contributions shed further light on this artist's wide-ranging career.

Eric Bainbridge
Forward Thinking , 2008
THE DOUBLING OF OBJECTS
MELISSA GRONLUND

What does it mean to turn something inside out? In the early 1980s Eric Bainbridge was prominent in a group of young British sculptors who reacted against the monumentality of artists such as Anthony Caro and David Smith, wielding kitsch and farce instead of metal and wood as material. Bainbridge’s Pop-inspired sculptures were assemblages of shapes drawn from everyday life; they referenced such objects as pink plastic flamingos, pen-holders, wine openers and cheap reproductions of the Loch Ness monster. Rendering these in large scale, Bainbridge covered the sculptures in gauche, louche fake fur; not that of a leopard but that of the slightly rarer ocelot. The meanings or significations offered by the assemblages were not just illogical but perhaps dyslogical: the elements they allude to are purposefully heterogeneous and, taken together, adamantly refuse to resolve into one whole. His sculpture Dark Style Swan, 1985, for example, is a Noah’s Ark of inhabitants: a faucet, rose, blood cell, ship and kidney sit neatly in a swan-shaped boat dish. Bainbridge mentioned that the critic, Stuart Morgan, found a unifying theme of this work to be fluids / water—a pointedly narrative conclusion, derived from associations given to each individual component. ‘Water’, that is, draws a constellation between water as the substance a swan and boat sail on, what a rose feeds on and what spills out of a tap. However I would suggest that the equaliser—the linking theme among the parts— is not so much the identity of the constituents, but, hiding in plain view, their apparent sameness: the lengths Bainbridge went to in order to present them as one, cloaking all the disparate elements in brash, hard-to-miss animal fur.

Though Bainbridge had become well-known for his use of animal fur covering, for a 1992 show at the Salvatore Ala Gallery in SoHo, New York, he turned this signature camouflage inside out and wrapped his objects in nondescript, off-flavoured beige. Comedy objects such as sausages, mirrors, poles and large-scale doorknobs came near the sobriety of discrete, almost specific objects, clad in what appeared to be the beige coloured cotton of a Gap ad—‘nothing happened in the 90’s’, Bainbridge said later. The drab upholstery was, in fact, the inverse of the ocelot fur he’d been using all along. The camouflage of the ocelot, which previously disguised earlier forms, became itself the hidden object, turned inwards to touch the skeletal structures of the objects in some sort of material privacy. While the works continued to mock modernist claims, most notably that of form and function, with the postmodernist visibility of Bainbridge’s earlier works, they became mirror-images, reflections of the multi-valenced ocelot fur sculptures. They became neither monumental nor mocking: like a straight man performing a comedy routine written for Boy George. And, seen in the context of his wider practice, they highlighted his ambivalence towards the unitary form that extends from the fur sculptures to Bainbridge’s work in the present day.

Bainbridge has a taste for the ridiculous that runs alongside an almost melancholic regret that the ridiculous should be so. His comic and ‘low-art’ quotations—the swan-shaped boat dish, for example, or the mirror covered in upholstery— are locked in combat with the desire to valorise these objects, creating a constant dynamic between high and low, pathetic and bathetic. One comic figure...
The ‘joke’ is that Bob is trapped: not only because he has no legs, but because he is in a room with no exit (or, vice versa, trapped because he is in a room with no outlet, while in any case he has no legs). The figure’s infinite and wretched interiority, facing a blank wall, stuck in this box, is lorded over by the viewer, who stands superior to the long-nosed statuette. The pathos in Bainbridge’s means of expression is startling and combines with its startlingly lucid explication of how a joke functions. It forces an unmasked-for identification between the viewer and the anthropomorphised, named figurine in the drawer, doubling the viewer and making any laughing at or commiseration with the figure a laughing at or commiseration with ourselves. In such a manner Bainbridge elevates the muck of humanity—our kitschy soap dishes, our wrong decision to manufacture fake ocelot fabric, our need to have sex—to artworks that confront us as equals, or as ourselves. The ambiguity of this position—for example, the tetchiness of the fabric, which makes you steer clear of touching it, or the comic failures of the assemblage sculpture series Bainbridge later titled Self-Portraits, 1996—suggests an inability to come to rest that is also inherent in the endlessly oscillating self-irony of Baudelaire’s laughter. The series of reversals that can be traced throughout Bainbridge’s career brings us near to the problem of laughter, this cutting apart of a single soul into one who jokes and one who is the object of the joke. Bainbridge’s enactments of this self-divisibility not only enact this scenario, but more importantly evoke the pathos it involves.
Dear Eric,

Loitering in the ever so grounded structure of Terminal 5 at London’s Heathrow, in advance of departure for China, I reveried about writing to you in advance of your forthcoming show.

Most days, the Tourette-ish demand Where. Do. Shapes. Come. From? is one of those questions my mind asks me. In your case I think it’s the tristesse of half-deflated, gated party balloons a few days past their moment, or the punctured tyre darkly trapped beneath the dead weight of a motor.

I rehearsed my ten-hour jumbo flight, putting you top of my list of things to do. I imagined devoting time to writing about popcorn and bubble wrap, carpet tiles and candy floss, the architecture of the brand new leopard-skin pillbox hat, and whether Carl Andre ever owned one of those rugs made out of a dead tiger’s pelt. Over France I fell asleep, over Siberia I woke up. I touched down in Beijing.

In cities I like walking alone without a map, reacting to cues to generate my propulsion, getting purposefully lost. On a couple of occasions in Beijing I adopted you as an imaginary companion. We discussed colour, something I only see as a factor of material, but my guess (and envy) is that you know how to disconnect it. The funny greens of vitreous glazing, the orangeness of vinyl, injection moulded pinks, the yellows of the urethanes, the reds of Chinese print, the hum of pixels, the brittleness of LEDs and the evasions of bright grade stainless steel.

The entire city is being made show-ready, a curtain-up metropolis – the unsightly is screened, all seams caulked, the unseemly licked with paint (choice of five colours). A rude panel system of back-lit vacuum-formed commercial signage is being applied like a continuous datum wherever you look – a kind of red and yellow acrylic girdle.

In English language words, the breaks fall in unusual places, TRANS / ATING, CON / SULTING. On the most important street, the generic golden twin arched ‘M’ had floated free from its franchise and attached itself to ‘Pierre Cardin’. The hybrid read M PIERRE CARDIN.

Within the long history of how cities have dramatised themselves, I cannot say how the imposition of this signage does a different job from the red flags, slogans and sashes of forty years ago. How will it fare when exposed to ultraviolet assault? What will I value most – the shine of the spanking new, next year’s softer complexion indicating worldly experience, or the sun-stroked degradation of years to come?

A couple of months ago, Claes Oldenburg said to me, ‘Well, there’s just a few of us interested in decomposition.’

Once I get wind of what you’re showing, let’s go for another walk.

Richard

*Children’s joke, the sound of a car travelling with a flat tyre.
SHOULD I CALL HIM ERIC OR SHOULD I CALL HIM BAINBRIDGE?
A JUNCTION
RYAN GANDER

The first exhibition I visited as an artist was that of Eric Bainbridge at Cornerhouse, Manchester in 1997. By ‘visited as an artist’ I mean that it was the first time I’d visited an exhibition and felt like an artist. I had just begun a three-year degree at Manchester Metropolitan University, a consequence of my not being offered a place at any of my desired art schools (Goldsmiths, Chelsea, The Slade). In retrospect, being on the periphery, or rather outside London, shaped me in unimaginable ways. Too much exposure to art often results in mimicking, whereas, if there is little around you to mimic, there’s space instead for true idiosyncrasies to develop and unravel. So, of all the years spent experiencing art through secondary sources, like art magazines and rumour, with only a handful of shows available to visit in the flesh, it was Bainbridge’s show that I saw.

As a child, like many aspiring working-class suburban children, my bedroom was furnished in MFI flat-packed melamine. This was standard for all my friends who were galloping into their teenage years and desperately longing to grow the extra inches that would convince their parents to replace their 3/4 scale bedroom suites with full-size ones. The full bedroom suite consisted of desk, bedroom cabinet, bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers and bookshelf. It came in white, black or grey. White was by far the most common. At my school, grey and black bedroom suites constituted about 5% of the total. My friend Matthew Lowe had black. Black was more rare for 1980’s boys’ bed-rooms, which gave it a certain kudos.

It wasn’t rare because of scarcity; parents simply weren’t inclined to buy black due to the knowledge and fear that, once their child had flown the nest, they’d be left with a black bedroom suite that wouldn’t make the best furniture for a guest room. Hence, white was standard. I had white.

Secondary to the suites were additional bedroom items, in which there was a bit more choice and hence the addition of that personal touch. In my bedroom I had: a Playboy duvet cover with matching pillowcase, white logo on a red background, a brilliantly red Sony digital alarm clock; a bright red desk lamp; a dazzling red bedside lamp complete with spotted lampshade; a 40 x 30 cm poster of a Porsche rendered with an airbrush on a matrix grid background framed within a red plastic frame; a fish tank containing two fish, one of which was considerably faster than the other; a red plastic and metal folding chair; a glossy red perforated metal mesh wastepaper basket; and, lastly, a black, white, red and grey Playboy rug. Again my friend Matthew Lowe had a variation on this theme, but with red, white and grey diagonal patterning on his rug, curtains, duvet cover and pillowcase, which aesthetically worked with the black bedroom suite to create a dynamism. He also had a larger white wastepaper basket with a small basketball hoop above it. Grrrrr.

The final stage of furnishing the bedroom was to personalise it with small objects and decoration, to truly ‘make it yours’.
With a teenage income, you had to be very creative and adaptive. Posters played an important role, as did glow-in-the-dark stars and things hanging from the ceiling. I also remember on occasion drawing and painting on my own and on friends' bedroom walls. Above all of these decorations, however, I remember stickers. Stickers were rife at my school, highly sought-after and collectable in any shape, form, colour or subject, with any provenance and any slogan. Simply what made it desirable was it's being a sticker—the self-adhesive back that made it a sticker. My bedroom door and all of my MFI melamine furniture were plastered with stickers.

These stickers included advertisements for takeaway pizza restaurants, 'Well Done' stickers, gold stars, unicorns, a sticker from The Beatles Story Museum in Liverpool, from Chester Zoo, from Ellesmere Port Boat Museum, all stuck on my bedside cabinet next to my bed. There was a sticker to advertise a motorcycle shop, I can’t remember the name of it now, but I remember falling asleep many nights attempting to make cryptograms and anagrams from the letters of the title. I think it was called Ville something? I can see the image now of the motorcyclist rendered in primary colours, visor down, attempting a corner at high speed.

Stickers are something that I think about a lot. In fact, subsequent to seeing the Bainbridge show in 1997, that single characteristic of his work, his use of the sticker, has plagued me and followed me resentfully through my practice. As broad as Eric's practice is, I am always brought back to the constructions like 'Untitled (city)', 1996, or 'Untitled (wardrobe door)', 1996, made from what appears to be found, broken bedroom furniture. These works are interrupted by the odd, strategically placed sticker, the odd small sausage character sitting aloft ruling the roost, coupled with a souvenir or a knick-knack bracketed by a domestic fluorescent tube. There's an illogical humour in these works, many of them looking like they fell together through happenstance.
Bainbridge touches on something magical yet ephemeral that is embedded in the cultural makeup of my peers, my friends and myself, in the same way that our stickers and posters were. How culturally bound this is I’m not sure. I can imagine similar images and narratives all over the world, but I see a dominant aesthetic, a sort of ‘London Blue Peter style’ in many works being made by young artists surrounding me. I think this is the legacy of Bainbridge, just as much as the influence of our childhood bedrooms.

When I think about making work, I am often brought back to the sticker and the idea that it is a great device for the transfer of meaning, especially in sculptural practice. The sticker is a vehicle to associate an otherwise seemingly subjective, sculptural object with a given subject, as a logo or motif on a washing machine or even specialist motifs on a hot hatch might. I am not interested in the sticker alone as a thing, but in the alchemy that occurs to an object when the object and sticker collide and become singular. The sticker is one of a million vehicles that may consume an artist’s pallet at any given moment, but one that specifically can’t avoid but tell a back-story and key into the narrative of the object’s production or at the very least give a nod and a wink towards a place, time and realm from which the object came (or from which the maker wants the spectator to believe it came). I’ve never really managed to use the sticker as a device; it’s something I’ve tried and abandoned. And indeed it’s still something I am struggling with today. You see, whenever I close my eyes and concentrate on the use of a sticker, I envisage works by Eric.

A couple of weeks ago I met Bainbridge for the first time at a dinner in East London, almost exactly a decade after seeing his exhibition in Manchester. Eric was quite unlike the person I’d expected. It got me thinking about whether there were two of them, the Bainbridge in my imagination and the Eric of reality. The former was a hard-edged, slick, confident Germanic figure. In reality Eric was a kind, considerate bloke, accompanied by his family and happy to talk. The distance between an artist’s work and an artist’s persona is always a bit of a conundrum. It intrigues me. I wanted to ask him about the stickers, but I didn’t get the chance. I wanted to know specifically how they got there; I wanted to know if the stickers were already on bits of broken white melamine chipboard found in pieces on the street or if they were remnants of one of his son’s bedroom suites; I wanted to know if the stickers were chosen with resolve, to deviate the spectator’s reading and stuck to purposefully broken bits of melamine manufactured in the studio. I’m glad I never got the chance to ask him: one methodology would probably be that of Eric and the other would probably be that of Bainbridge. Work and life can’t merge so seamlessly, we all need separation.
POSTWURSTSENDUNG
RALF BRÖG

In the following short text I would like to disregard just for a moment Eric Bainbridge's celebrated sculptures, if only to direct our focus towards two recent photographic works, namely Professors Room, 2002 and French Garden, 2003. I have chosen these works as they are not easily aligned with their predecessors yet conversely offer me with a clearer illustration of the timeliness of Bainbridge's artistic position.

In addition I would like to propose this timeliness might be in part due to the fact that his thinking has developed, to a certain extent, independently of the art market and the customary routine of gallery exhibitions. Instead he has sought intellectual and conceptual exchange in the context of his work as a teacher and professor, with colleagues as well as with students.

In an oeuvre, which has been steadily evolving for over three decades Bainbridge's work is highly varied, incorporates a wide range of media, and yet displays a high degree of resoluteness. When encountering the work you are struck by a careful interweaving of biographical and art-historical themes and motifs that in various ways are anchored to the topicality of the times in which they were created. Despite his feigned playfulness with materials, formalisms, symbols and titles, we are not confronted with an inflationary or arbitrary set of meanings rather the arrangements indicate compositional precision and clear intent.

Bainbridge's work is distinguished by his complex reflection, not only of his own past creative work, but also on the arts as an inclusive cultural phenomenon. His open minded and generous way of thinking is a significant quality of this reflection. He is an artist interested in the condition of modernity. Despite describing himself as a sculptor, his will to continually widen his repertoire and resist the temptation to conform, has meant his work has long spoken a language that defies media-specific categories, while displaying a finely honed ability to formulate his artistic statements with a contemporary pitch. This said pausing to take a look back at his career we are able to distinguish certain groupings. Such as his installation work in the 1970s and renowned fake fur sculptures in the 1980s and early 1990s. As the 90s progressed the lines defining these classifications quickly become blurred. Sculptures become more abstract, less monolithic and the objet trouvé or readymade is introduced. The modelling of sculptural form tends to take a back seat to a more abstract, increasingly arranged and more conceptual method of operation. By the millennium sculptures are radically paired down referencing minimalist and architectural idealism as well as the everyday or are more speculative in their use of media such as French Garden, and Professor's Room.

In French Garden, a photograph has been enlarged by means of an inkjet printer to depict a spacious garden, which I propose as a notional exhibition space. Various objects stand or lay strewn about. Amongst the usual components of a garden such as trees, hedges and a lawn is a football goal, an abstract something, a deck chair, a plastic ball, another toy-like plastic object and a rectangular inflatable pool.
Further catching the viewer's eye, a second rectangular shape, a withered patch of grass, is cut off by the margin of the picture. It is obviously not an elaborately staged quasi-painting in the manner of a Jeff Wall, nor is it a casual snapshot of a random situation trouvé. The pictured elements show a complex interaction that has developed over time between the matter of fact, and compositional arbitrariness. In this case, the viewer is asked to determine what kinds of relationships the depicted elements have with one another and to what these elements and their various relationships may refer.

Evidently some of the motifs gathered here are carried over from some of Bainbridge's earlier works. For example similar geometric shapes have continually appeared since the 1970s, indeed the variety of shapes which Bainbridge has developed is striking. He has employed sausages, fluorescent tubes and rings, spherical objects of all kinds, alone and in clusters, donuts, knobs and "I-Tems". In French Garden, we see a plastic ball, whilst, being a trivial object it makes us wonder if it simply belongs in the football goal, or if it is meant to achieve hallowed transcendence by passing through the posts.

The possibility of transcendence leads us to the ponderous topic of abstraction, which Bainbridge has reformulated into the somewhat more nimble question 'Is abstraction only measured by what we consider to look abstract?' This question has already been addressed in earlier works such as Untitled (Red and White), 1996, Wall Construction, 1996 or Abstract Sculpture, (Aargh...the future), 1985. It is found again in the centrally located white object on the lawn, which with its 'abstract-art-in-the-garden' look recalls a faded version of Kubrick's monolith in his seminal science fiction film 2001: A Space Odyssey, calling into question notions of abstraction in art. At which point may I suggest we move on.

Movement or progression, and relocation are undoubtedly of importance for this artist. In French Garden the shape of dried grass left by the repositioned inflatable pool and the vacant deck chair bring to mind two possibilities: slow lazy advancement or quite the opposite, a quick departure from the frame. The imaginary protagonist in French Garden brings to mind the established vertical-horizontal motif of a figure in a landscape. By which I mean he/she appears to have resorted from a relaxing horizontal position in the deck chair to a vertical posture in order to take the photograph.

The character 'Bob' visible throughout Bainbridge's work performs the same vertical-horizontal action while at the same time functioning as 'alter-ego' for the artist. In various degrees of precariousness, Bob appears, straddling the line between humour and gravity, monumentality and bric-a-brac, sublime grandeur and triviality. Although not visible in person in the photograph French Garden his object presence nevertheless exists here. In fact we find him not far away in Professor's Room, in which a version of French Garden is placed on the office wall. Zooming in to a close up view, we see "Bob" standing on a garden table, not completely of his own accord but accompanied by a female hand. From this we can deduce that the artist here considers the importance of positioning his artistic self-image within the work.

I am tempted to consider Eric Bainbridge as a post-gallery-artist, comparable to the fashionable post-studio-artist, and asserting the post-gallery-artists position as the core of an independent, self-updating contemporary practice. His complex visual compositions, constructed with apparent case offer a wide array of cultural references and materials, which the viewer can engage with either in an art-historical context or as part of an ongoing dialogue.

Translated by Ted Green

Eric Bainbridge
Forward Thinking, 2008
A MUST HAVE FOR EVERYHOME
PHYLLIDA BARLOW

The following fictional exchange has been assembled by Phyllida Barlow and is based on a number of conversations with Eric Bainbridge since their first meeting in the mid 1980s.

Phyllida Barlow: What is it?
Eric Bainbridge: What do you think it is?
P: Natural or manmade?
EB: What’s the difference?
P: It’s got to be from somewhere.
EB: In the earth.
P: Or laboratory.
EB: Could be both, manmade and natural.
P: And it’s heavy. Rounded and lumpy, blistered, like acne, or like spotted dick—a pudding—plum pudding.
EB: That’s ridiculous.
P: No—it’s delicious.
EB: Well taste it then—or put it in the oven and cook it... could be good.
P: It’s irrefutably itself like your sofa.
EB: Fake leather and fake stone; couldn’t be better.
P: And opposite to each other. What else? Tea cups...they’re Pyrex—such a fifties material—and a stepladder.

EB: They’re not so opposite.
P: Stepladders can be shelves, that’s why.
EB: But it’s not a stepladder—it’s a slide projector stand, from the 1960s.
P: Of course! It’s too fragile for a stepladder. But if, whatever it is, and the cups are related hereditarily—Pyrex and Formica must be the same family.
P: At the RA Summer Exhibition a furious couple stood beside this projector stand / cups sculpture and declared it the worst work in the exhibition, then paused and declared, no, the worst work ever.
EB: Probably right!
P: Because it looked like something left behind during installation—forgotten, out of place—that’s its perfection. And, like so much of your work, it is a succinct declaration of sculpture, but under cover of being something else. It fulfils everything a sculpture can fulfil. It is both freestanding and a plinth. Formally dynamic, balanced, without function, different from every point of view. ‘Too small to be a monument and too big to be an object’ (that famous Tony Smith quote misquoted) and it has air flowing all around it and through it, so it references the hole in sculpture without actually using that device...the list is endless.
EB: And to think Duchamp was doing this 90 years ago, with the same response.
P: An object is always objectionable.
A Must Have For Everyhome | Phyllida Barlow

EB: Unwanted.

PB: But may have been, once.

EB: Once what?

PB: Wanted—like tea cups, stepladders—no, projector stands and urinals—and like the bubble gum you told that Brighton student to use to join together her sculpture.

EB: That's more about surprise and banality, things being in the right and wrong place at the same time.

PB: Like the craze for fixing upturned polystyrene cups to the hubcaps of London buses—that delight in the perfect fit of such a chance discovery. Or finding chewing gum stuck to the underneath of a canteen table, or a lost glove fitted onto the spikes of railings...

EB: It's necessary to hold onto banality but reverse its expectations.

PB: You did that literally with the fur fabric, turning it inside out.

EB: No—that was more to do with formalism—to soften the plywood structure beneath the upholstered surface so that its minimalist style became kitsch. Making the corners rounded and the surface spongy—minimalism with a soft touch, literally, yet seamless and right.

Eric Bainbridge

Forward Thinking, 2008

PB: Is upholstery always kitsch, whatever the fabric or material...

EB: 50s, 60s and 70s designers were concerned with the formalism of pattern. Bold acts of theft from high art became translated into mass-market devices for the household—curtains, crockery, furniture, carpets, wallpaper.

PB: But you have fused something of those surfaces and decorative qualities from mid-twentieth century design with ‘real’ kitsch—cheap fairground pottery figures, which used to be given as prizes. The hole in the base of those cheap pottery figures, required for firing the clay, fascinated you as a parallel to the ‘hole in the sculpture’ you identified with so much modernist, twentieth century sculpture—Henry Moore for example.

EB: Maybe there’s a need to find out what sculpture is when there is so much of it about, but unclaimed, in pound shops, or as bric a brac, or discarded on streets. So much stuff, so many things, so many objects.

PB: Back to Duchamp’s Fountain.

EB: Yes and no, that’s all so 20th century.

PB: Old school?

EB: Old school and academic—appropriation, or whatever you want to call it, is material. It’s only stuff. It’s that simple and is not a moral issue or an art issue.

PB: Using some materials could become a moral issue, like wood, stone, paint...using up valuable resources.

EB: Let’s not go down that route. Choosing this and that from car boot sales, Oxfam shops, eBay or the internet is anything but using valuable resources. It’s taking chances, salvaging and re-cycling. It’s about making choices and exerting particularity, being exact and precise, even if you don’t know what for or why.

PB: It could all be very nostalgic. Why isn’t it? Your work, I mean...

EB: It might be, but exchange is a straightforward way of getting a job done. Exchange means adapting—finding the shortest route for getting that job done and making necessity be inventive. Nostalgia, even aesthetics, are not my priorities.

PB: Is it like this—must have a flat surface; OK, inspect that lot of Formica kitchen worktops dumped on the street; choose the best one. That’ll do the job...

EB: But they would not be Formica—that’s far too classy. It would be, and is, some cheaper equivalent.

PB: From kitchen units to high sculptural form, with a twist.

EB: Sounds like an exotic cocktail.

PB: The Bangkok glowing light is a bit of a cocktail, pastel shades merging one into another. It completely disarms the formalist rigour of the structure it inhabits.

EB: That’s the second time you’ve used the word ‘inhabit’.

PB: It’s because the work uses a series of inhabitations, one within another: there’s the relationship which the components have with each other within the work, and then the relationship the work as a whole has with the space it is in. It is all crucial and demanding and uncomfortable. It makes the space very restless, and the work, i.e. the sculpture, does become an obstacle, something to be avoided...that’s the beauty and the thrill.

EB: The glowing light bulbs are so smug.

PB: More than smug...they’re a coup d’art.

EB: What does that mean?

PB: It means that they are an unbeatable...
found or readymade or appropriated object for the use of making an art object...it will be in the Oxford Dictionary as a new 21st century art phrase. Everybody’s using it.

EB: Not in Sunderland.

PB: It began in Sunderland. Back to these lumps. Where did they come from...they’re perfectly moulded, a kind of ultimate lump...they’re also a coup d’art. They are hybrids, things between a useful and a useless object/thing.

EB: The sea washes them up. They’re concrete and aggregate pieces broken off from the sea walls, which have been rolled around by the sea to become smoothed out lumps. The salt water must be a perfect abrasive.

PB: They taste good, especially uncooked... Lumps and light bulbs, Pyrex and tangerines. This particular but disparate set of objects, materials, things lie around and seem to be lost, or not to have a place. They, and you, seem content to let things hide their time. Piles of paper work, catalogues, administrative stuff all co-exist with a huge store of sculpture as well as images, prints, drawings, stacks of fake Formica surfaces, tacky 70s crockery—all seemingly indifferent to not having the right place such as a desk, filing cabinet or table. This room—both your office and studio—allows anything to happen in a way which a proper studio might not. A studio screams out ‘Make art!’ whilst an office is the last place where art might be made.

A Must Have For Everyhome | Phyllida Barlow

EB: Things just happen. That’s a very upright structure there, a work in progress...I don’t know yet how to finish it. I come in here to do one thing and end up looking at it. I will not be thinking about it, but it will be at the periphery of my vision and then I might know what to do. It’s having it around and being able to look at it casually that helps me make decisions.

PB: There are so many paradoxes: place and non-place, formalism and kitsch, structure and casualness, decoration and solidity. There is something of the circus—spinning plates, juggling with fire—within the work. There is the integrity of ‘revealing all’—truth to materials—combined with a sleight of hand—the con artist and his ‘Find the Lady’ three card trick...

EB: Are you saying my art is a con?

PB: Sort of...but that’s its triumph. The tangerines are captured on the Formica surfaces as if caught as they fell. The sculpture is performing a sleight of hand. Its serious, minimalist, Caro-esque stance and Picasso-like posture (like his 50s ‘Bathers’ series) are spoofed by these three tangerines. They are the Jokers in the pack. There’s this bravado and flare to play with sculpture as a very formal inheritance from the 20th century, yet there is also the trump card. Playing around with very familiar, often domestic stuff and re-presenting it with a designer’s precision, as if these sculptures could be functional. A must have for every home.

EB: Not in Sunderland.

PB: But I told you, it all began in Sunderland.
Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge won the People's Choice Award at the Northern Art Prize 2007, with his installation "A new work in progress: Eric Bainbridge".


Workplace
Eric Bainbridge
*Art in public spaces or a commonplace and its curse*, 2002
Essay by Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, Koln
Site 6, Haus Am Meer, May 2002
P. 10-17
Translation by Stephen Reader, Gerhard Wittmann
Eric Bainbridge
O Pas La, Suprising Spaces, 1999
Exhibition catalogue
curated by Aude Herail Jager
Text by Christopher Kool-Want
L.A.C. Lieu d’Art Contemporain Hameau du Lac 11130 Signean France
10th April til 30th May 1999
Breaking the Mould
British Art of the 1980s and 1990s
The Weltkunst Collection

Eric Bainbridge
Breaking the Mould, 1997
Richard Cork; Penelope Curtis.
'Breaking the Mould: British Art of the 1980s and 1990s - The Weltkunst Collection'.
ISBN: 0853317445
Eric Bainbridge
*Breaking the Mould*, 1997
Richard Cork; Penelope Curtis.
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ISBN: 0853317445
Occurrence on an endless column
1997
Mixed fake fur, wood, steel and plaster
140 x 63 x 131 cm

Occurrence on an endless column is one of many sculptures by Eric Bainbridge that consist of forms of everyday objects rendered on a different scale and covered in fake fur.

Driven by a sense of fun, Bainbridge covered an animal form in spotty fur fabric and was fascinated by the way the original form was concealed by the thickness of the fur while the spotty pattern made the contours less legible:

‘So I realised I’d a very different object. It was the potential for the skin to disguise the form underneath, also what was interesting was that fake fur was a quintessentially synthetic twentieth-century material’. 8

The forms themselves in Occurrence on an endless column are from various sources. The two animal forms are based on actual objects – small souvenirs – and these are contrasted with some seemingly abstract forms. The square element, however, was derived from part of a child’s building-block game:

‘In this work the thing that is highlighted is the play between things that are very figurative and seemingly abstract.’

Occurrence on an endless column is a reference to the famous Endless column by Constantin Brancusi. The notion that this might be merely a section of an endless column or that this kind of activity could go on forever interested the artist. There is a deliberately obscene aspect to the work. The donkey ‘mounts’ his companion but there are no holes to allow for the completion of the sexual act. Paradoxically the abstract forms are holed – a reference to earlier work in which connections or their absence was a theme. Instead, what is offered here is what Bainbridge describes as ‘an impossible kind of coupling’.

‘I think the element of taste is something that interests me a lot which is related very much to the idea of the reduction of traditional quality [in art]. I think I’m interested in a kind of equalising of things. I tend to believe less and less in the quality of high art. I’m less interested in preserving those attitudes. I think a toy or a souvenir donkey is not necessarily less interest than anything else, simply because of its supposed lowly position. I think we don’t look at it, we kind of recognise it for being part of a category and then deal with it. It’s more problematic when one actually starts to look at the languages, looks at the ideas of idealised nature that are depicted in these kinds of things.’

Eric Bainbridge

*Breaking the Mould*, 1997
Richard Cork; Penelope Curtis.

‘Breaking the Mould: British Art of the 1980s and 1990s - The Weltkunst Collection'.
ISBN: 0853317445
Edward Allington
Art & Language
Eric Bainbridge
Hannah Collins
Grenville Davey
Richard Deacon
Willie Doherty
Rose Finn-Kelcey
Hamish Fulton
Douglas Gordon
Antony Gormley
Damien Hirst
Shirazeh Houshiary
Anish Kapoor
Michael Landy
Avis Newman
Julian Opie
Vong Phaophanit
Jacqueline Poncelet
Veronica Ryan
Richard Wentworth
Rachel Whiteread
Alison Wilding
Richard Wilson
Hermione Wiltshire
Bill Woodrow

Irish Museum of Modern Art

Eric Bainbridge
*Breaking the Mould*, 1997
Richard Cork; Penelope Curtis.
‘Breaking the Mould: British Art of the 1980s and 1990s - The Weltkunst Collection’,
ISBN: 0853317445

WORKPLACE
Eric Bainbridge

'Play Between Fear and Desire', 1992
Review by Charles Hagen
Art In Review, New York Times, 8 May 1992

'Play Between Fear and Desire' Germans Van Eck Gallery 420 West Broadway (near Spring Street) SoHo Through May 23
Eric Bainbridge
*The World is So Weird Now*, 1991
P.p.36-40.
Eric Bainbridge
Eric Bainbridge Riverside Studios, 1991
Review by Marjorie Althorpe-Guyton
Artforum International, Volume 29, Issue 6, P. 140
We thought it would be good to look at a few objects, some materials, and ended up at a do-it-yourself superstore on the outskirts of London. Just head for the suburbs, drive a mile or two west and you can take your pick. There are maybe five within view of each other, giant warehouses emblazoned with punchy names: Texas, B&Q, Do It All. They all carry roughly the same range of goods, displayed in their own house style. If you can’t find something you want in one, you can drive to another but you have to learn to find your way round. We chose one to go into, and parked. Cavendish said these places depressed him. You only ever go when you’re desperate, get caught up in all that they promise and usually leave feeling more desperate. Not only can you not find what you want, but you walk out carrying something you don’t. We passed from bright sunlight into bright fluorescence, through the turnstile. It was all there, everything; so much of it that you could hardly see where it ended. The goods were organised, categorised under clearly labelled headings like ‘Plumbing’, ‘Electrical’, ‘Wall Coverings’, to make things easier to find. We weren’t looking for

Eric Bainbridge
Do it All , 1990

Exhibition catalogue, Riverside Studios, London, 1990
Eric Bainbridge
Style, Space, Elegance, 1989

Among the recent acquisitions to the Stedelijk Museum’s sculpture collection is a work by the Englishman Eric Bainbridge. When I first saw his work in the Milan gallery of Salvatore Ala in 1987, I was instantly captivated by its unusual form and use of material. The work of this rather young and still relatively unknown sculptor impressed me so positively that I considered the possibility of a small exhibition of his work and I decided to acquire Disguise style swan.

Due to his choice of forms, based on objects from daily life, Bainbridge is clearly representative of his generation of sculptors, especially his English colleagues Cragg, Woodrow and Wentworth. Yet, through his preferences for certain materials: wire netting, plaster and now fiberglass as well, all covered with artificial fur, Bainbridge has broken free of the confines of English sculpture long dominated by Moore, Hepworth and Caro, and has closed ranks with American and European artists. For today’s generation of sculptors as a whole, the work of Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, has had a profound significance. The way in which Bainbridge isolates organic forms, tourist knick-knacks, and throw-away merchandise, by blowing them up enormously and assembling them in playful combinations remains a highly personal artistic adventure. The latent humour in his work seems to be connected to existential fears, which are heightened by his use of fake fur, striking a resonant note in the onlooker by their disturbing qualities.

For the realization of this exhibition I would like first of all to thank the artist. The Stedelijk Museum is also deeply indebted to Salvatore Ala and his staff, who gave invaluable assistance to the organization of the exhibition. Salvatore Ala, moreover, was willing to contribute to the project financially. Without his aid as well as support from the British Council we would not have been able to bring the project to fruition. We also wish to thank Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton whose contribution to the catalogue places Bainbridge’s work in a larger context and Marja Bloem who organized the exhibition and produced the catalogue.

Wim A. L. Beeren
Last year when I visited Eric Bainbridge’s studio for the first time, one of the things which intrigued me most was a cabinet full of odds and ends; Shelves crammed with small, strange, almost unrecognizable little objects ranging from toy animals to religious statuettes, souvenirs to fittings from an ironmonger’s. An exhibition organizer is by nature, interested in an artist’s sources, and, it is obvious for anyone who looks at art that since Pop Art it is no longer possible to conceive of a vocabulary of art without items of daily use that are part of prevailing popular culture. Yet the form in which familiar materials are used in sculpture varies continually.

As with several other English artists of his generation, Bainbridge removes the objects from their usual setting to couple them, enlarged or otherwise transformed, in unusual combinations. In this way the objects lose their usual identity and acquire new significance. Bainbridge makes what he selects enormously large, reinforcing the magnification by covering form and volume in artificial fur. In his first works the fur was printed as the skin of beasts of prey: tigers, leopards or ocelots. It summoned up the feelings of warmth, security, and ‘hugability’ conveyed by the stuffed animals of our childhood. Yet these hides of hunting beasts also evoked associations of concealment, for the skin of hunters in the wild protects them from harsh weather and sharp thorns, but also provides camouflage. Fake fur at the same time alludes to man’s predatory instincts, the hunter and his prey at large, including the ‘untamed’ female in her fur coat. Not to mention the evidence of wealth a fur coat represents – stylish and elegant – although it often is tinged with an aura of cheap kitsch. Owing to these associations, artificial fur has become a prized material in contemporary fashion, and its use is frequently so bizarre that the influence of art on fashion shouldn’t be underestimated either.

In his more recent work Bainbridge uses solid-colour furs, with, alternately, the inner or outer surface exposed. The fur may be without spots or stripes but has sheen and depth, highlights, patterns which make the surface tactile, a sculptor’s medium. In his ‘paintings’ Bainbridge uses ‘impossible’ colours or applies with acrylics, a single bold geometric image or imposes a kind of flattening caulk over the fur with brushstrokes which follow the pile. The furs in solid colours particularly evoke aversion and even mild disgust – but this characteristic is why there is such a strong demand for artificial fur. As material for sculpture, fur is surprising but not without precedent. In the 30’s Meret Oppenheim made a teacup out of real fur. It was startling, but, for the surrealisists, shock was something they strove to achieve. With Arte Povera no material was excluded, especially if it had no immediate association with art. In addition to Bainbridge there are others who clothe their sculptures in tiger-skins and other furs, for example the Italian artists Parmiggiani and Pascale.

The idea behind this exhibition was to display work Bainbridge has executed during the past few years, the period when he decked his forms with artificial fur. It was, incident-

Eric Bainbridge
Style, Space, Elegance, 1989
ally, interesting for me to see earlier work as well: Couch, 1977, for instance, a sofa which appears entirely ‘dissolved’ under the unchecked growth of nature. Bainbridge had found an old couch tossed to moulder in a patch of woodland. He dug out sods of grass which he then heaped on the sofa seat where the grass continued to grow. The couch thus was reconciled with its surroundings, earth now occupying the space where humans once sat. Shortly thereafter he fashioned a series of clay heads on slender necks. They were displayed upside down because the thin necks couldn’t support the weight rightside-up. The necks seemed to be fragile handles certain to break if anyone should be rash enough to use them to lift the heads. Then and now what appealed so strongly to him about the heads though, was their ‘duality”: recognizably human, at the same time they were dumb lumps of clay, inert, insensible objects, presences which owed whatever articulateness they possessed to form, substance, volume. In fact Bainbridge’s heads provided the impetus to his starting to use the form of other human organs in his own work. In Disguise style swan, 1985 which the Stedelijk Museum purchased in 1987, it is the form of the human heart that is readily identifiable. Together with Bainbridge’s interpretation of a cheap, wrought-iron candlestick and soap dish, the piece truly resembles a floating swan, although the absurd hat with its unsteady rose to some extent invites a laugh. Humor, playful associations, enrich the complex structure of meanings expressed in Bainbridge’s illogical combinations. Once in an interview Bainbridge said he was less interested in form than in expressing his fears. “That leads to my making things that at first astonish and surprise. The dominant idea is for me to follow the lead of my intuition...” It is accurate to say the works in this exhibition astonish and surprise, but at the same time there is a development tending to a more abstract, less anecdotal, narrative style. This in no way diminishes the feeling of recognition which the pieces provoke, often unconscious because although the form is familiar it can not immediately be given a name, nor the sense of threat which they convey despite their playful, humourous side. On the contrary, the safe, cuddly fur seems totally to undermine a sense of security.

Marja Bloem

Eric Bainbridge
Style, Space, Elegance, 1989
The pile was long, off-white and from the bedroom door gave a fleeting impression of goatskin. The label read Vierge Acrylic. New for Old; value is a movable feast. The fake, the surrogate, is invested now with the truth, the authenticity of the original which recedes further and further from view. In any case we have come to love the fraudulent; perhaps we find it less of a threat. The pleasurable and the disturbing qualities of Eric Bainbridge’s sculpture spring precisely from this realisation: that objects are deceits, that they conceal more about us than we care to admit. Yet conditions of waste and of excess, are now so critical that we are forced to scrutinise our relations with objects and by default with ourselves. Bainbridge’s view, then, that what we think and feel about things seems more significant, in terms of our behaviour, than what we feel about each other, is compelling in a contemporary Western culture whose ideals are self-evident. But it is a view that is hardly borne out by mainstream British sculpture where the concern has been and persists, the human body and landscape and whose forms - through Hepworth, Moore and Caro - are lent a grandeur that transcends the quotidian complexity of the contemporary world. While this great and authoritative tradition has been deeply disturbed, if not forever sullied, by the material, psychological and semiotic adventures of a younger generation of British sculptors, none have pushed so far from British shores as Eric Bainbridge. Indeed the search for a patrimony for his funny, overweight and often painfully funny sculptures, could extend far from the more anomalous of British artists, to the United States and to Europe. It is the resistance of his work to easy categorisation and the sense of disquiet, of slippage in Bainbridge’s contemplation of style, which amounts to some-thing like the pink marshmallow syndrome identified in some new architects, where old forms are infected with alien outgrowths which locate inherent dilemmas in building.

Bainbridge acknowledges this uncertainty. He knows he is no hero; that the late century artist can only be aporetic, incredulous and must simply bear witness to the event. That the art, so undefined, may become unsteady, even dangerous, is only too clear in his work which does not banish the gargantuan vulgarity of our culture, nor distance itself in a display of classiness and knowingness. He finds no difficulty in citing the title of an early work. In putting on a brave face, he wears the muddle of the times with an insouciant disregard of strictures of taste and value. His work not only interrogates form - the grand narrative of sculptural tradition, especially British - but it reveals a fine sensitivity to differences and to the blurring of differences - in age, gender and class.

There is no ingenuousness in Eric Bainbridge’s difficulty in dealing with the world through the work. Nothing could be more straightforward than the imagery of two early paintings on paper: Idiot against a dark landscape, 1981 and Man with Oxygen on his back against a dark landscape, 1981. These blind, inadequate heads, whose brains seem to have shrunk, must rely on some kind of inner eye, the beam from which casts the only light in the encircling gloom. Likewise, Large head with vision, 1981, a monstrous lump of clay, alien like a polyp on a stalk, is somehow guided by an inner luminance which glooms at the forehead. There is a sense in these mildy self-castigatory works of the need to forget, to slough off hard won lessons and to approach a condition which Picasso, master of the art, described so happily: ‘But there’s one thing a few will experience perhaps, a feeling of something completely new, a feeling of pleasure, of forgetting that you have to think and to know to enjoy something.’ Bainbridge’s decision in 1984 to make assemblages covered in fake ocelot, was a seminal act of courage if not defiance. To plunder a material which so perfectly fulfils the function of a simulacrum is timely.
but to tighten the alliance with the headless body of Kitsch is asking for trouble.

Fake

The use of a cheap stuff has a distinguished sculptural lineage: the kapok-filled vinyl objects—cigarette butts, hamburgers—of Oldenburg, the stuffed hessian of early Flannigan, the felt and fat and fur of Joseph Beuys and the work of the Arte Povera artists with which both Beuys and Flannigan were associated. As Renato Barilli wrote, on Arte Povera, in 1986, "poorness in this sense can mean a disposition to accept everything that is given today as it is given, without filtering it in order to sublimate it or to pull it down into a gratifying, vitulistic, abstract inferno. The trivial world of technology can be a paradise, if one has the 'know-how' to make it so. One can obtain fabulous things from the dregs and most anonymous materials of absolute mediocrity and without having to make violent efforts and transpositions." Of course Beuys's ideas about sculpture and material drawn from his German childhood and early scientific interests were far in advance of the sixties. Similarly Bainbridge's Head 1984 has deeper roots than even the "fake sculptures" of the quick witted Finn Pascali. Bainbridge's child is much more a human nature, the head sprouting from a tuber or heart like the vegetable grotesqueries of the Renaissance Milanese painter Archimboldo. Although, again, Picasso springs to mind with the Montrée paintings of the twenties (as well as Picabia's quips such as 'the head is round so that thought can change direction').

Picabia delighted in dissolving categories; the anthropomorphism of the machine pictures, the monster and transparency paintings, are a dense confusion of human, plant and animal. This blurring, this suppression of identity, is at the heart of Bainbridge's compulsion to use the camouflage properties of faux fur. This synthetic plastic derivative is both attractive and repellent; now the darling of the fashion business, it is also the ubiquitous tease and comforter, from the cuddly toy and car mascot to domestic furnishings. With fiascos as banal as this, few artists would have felt able to sustain its use. The continued attraction for Eric Bainbridge of faux fur is that it has little or no high art lineage—unlike the laminates used by Artchwager, or the veneers appropriated by Jan Voorhees which echo the conceptual properties of Cubist collage. Bainbridge also uses (and abuses) his material because it stretches not only our pain threshold, our aesthetic limits, but also his own.

Equally important is fake fur's ability to distort form, so that volume goes in and out of focus. The shrinking yellow fur of the square pedestal of The hole through which all things must pass, 1987 transmogrifies, say, the bulk of a Hepworth to the shallow relief of a Nicholson. It gives, then, endless scope to play with modernist sculptural and painterly language, but more importantly it raises less accessible, psychological questions of identity. Bainbridge knows, as well as Koons and Oldenburg and others before them, that we all have 'the itch for Kitsch'; but unlike these most visible of American artists, Bainbridge does not attempt to upstage the banal but to explore its darker recesses.

Where Oldenburg made icons, monuments to
trivia and Koons pumps it up, as he maintains
'to increase the power base of art', Bain-
bridge is intent on unwrapping this thick,
protective, cultural coating. Koons' attitude
to the objects he takes up is indifferent
and perfectly judged: Koons' Kitsch is more
accurately described as camp — cool, sophisti-
cated, elitist.

The Brancusi Bunny, stainless steel, high-
tech, is brilliant Ad Man's art: a perfect
image, photogenic, infinitely appealing.
A winner, Eric Bainbridge's Occurrence on an
endless column, 1987 ironically also quotes
Brancusi, but it is as far removed from
Brancusi's formal purity as it is from Koons' rep-resentation of objects. A central concern
in Bainbridge's juxtaposition in the works of
this period, 1984–1987, is the way in which
bodily functions are shared by animal and
machine. Taxonomies and hierarchy are dis-
turbed by 'unnatural' couplings. Bainbridge's
hyper-trophied nursery animals, by no means
benign, serve not to simply mirror, a never,
never world of adult fantasy, but to uncover the
plump worm under the bourgeois skin.
In his use of the fake and the mundane Bain-
bridge does not waver in the language of
Kitsch: cliché, sentimentality, spectacle, but
shows it to be false, a cover-up for what is
feared most—death and the loss of identity.
The critical sculptural property of the fake
pelt, which is somewhat crudely applied on a
wire, wood and plaster carcass and recently
on fibreglass, is to decompose the volumetric
and the monolithic. In short it castigates: the
contours melt, scale and vertically are under-
mined. The sculpture retains a powerful sense
of image which nonetheless is constantly
under threat as the piece is circumnavigated.
Recognition dims, throwing the viewer into a
more complex relationship with the work.
The fur may be fun, but it is bogus. And there
is a bogus bravado about these works which
bely a deep melancholy, most acute in the
five 'tributes to Jimmy the Nail, whose
ascent, dilemma and demise are played out in
ocelot pieces of diminishing volume and
scale. The piece The demise of Jimmy the
Nail, 1985 is a confused, oddly lumpen totem
which can barely stand up. This emasculation

of the sculptural monolith is most wittily
pointed in Implement, 1987 where the form
and acid green fur parody the agrarianised
totemic 'male' bronze of David Smith of the
fifties — The hero, 1952. It is the machismo in
the sculptural tradition which Bainbridge
both quotes and ironizes. In this, he is not
alone. The sculptor Alain Kirili argues a
compelling case for Medardo Rosso as the
ancestor of Arte Povera (and of Joseph Beuys)
'Rosso dreamed of suppressing the limits
between painting and sculpture. His contours
faded away as if the figures, perceived fleet-
ingly, could resist memory and space: all that
remains is a vague and melancholy impres-
sion... All modern sculpture that rejects the
notion of the monolith in the round thus recognises in Rosso an illustrious predeces-
sor. In Rosso, volume is transformed into
relief. And the art of relief will become
virtually synonymous with the strand of
sculpture that is afraid of verticality; which
desires, in fact, to destroy it, to knock it
down. Carl Andre explained his sculpture by
saying that he was turning over Priapus...'
While the late nineteenth century, delicate
and plaster heads of Medardo Rosso are for
removed visually from Eric Bainbridge's fur
pieces, there is a conceptual link in the
emphasis on skin, on surface — 'Rosso has
elaborated an eschatological art of sculpture:

Eric Bainbridge

Style, Space, Elegance, 1989

seduced by the pictorial dimension statutory dies. 11 Bainbridge does not wish to eliminate the statue but to reinvent it. As Meyer Raphael Rubinstein and Daniel Wiener rightly observe 'Bainbridge seeks to resurrect statutory's narrative and memorial functions. This is a case not of appropriation but of reapropriation – taking back what has been stolen. 12 Thus the notorious inversions and surprises of Bainbridge's Statue of Tommy Fezdecky, 1986, whose name is that of a childhood bogeyman, echo Miro, both his painting and sculpture and even the more bizarre of recent animated film, in an Svankmajer's Alice, for example. 13 Bainbridge staunchly takes an Arte Povera position that 'coherence is a dogma that must be violated...' and that man is a physiological and mental fragment. 14 Nothing could more aptly describe Monument, 1985 where male and female forms, infant and adult, jostle for supremacy and in the end co-exist, just. In Bainbridge the public becomes the private and the personal, we enter a domestic space where a sense of human experience is no longer excluded. Patriarchy is weakened and the joke, as Stuart Morgan succinctly puts it, 'is the permanent, triumphant emergence of the infantile'.

AARGH... The Future

The English are known to be especially fond of animals; they are not so enthusiastic about children, or anything which does not seem 'grown up' and serious. Which may explain why Bainbridge's work, which conflates a familiar formal syntax with libidinal and subliminal imagery, has attracted more comment in the United States where therapy is a national pastime. More importantly the American critic is not afraid of seeing work within a wider cultural context. Holland Cotter comes straight to the point when he talks of Bainbridge's works as 'the Looney Tunes versions of Klingsor's garden (a rather darker agenda, surely, than any Oldenburg ever can have entertained), in which decay is sugar-coated and the worm at the heart is sad old adult desire. 15 Even Donald Judd wrote of New York in 1973 'It's the world's greatest producer of fresh schmutz. 16 Which is perhaps why the American artist since Warhol and the American critic are so alert to the centrality of kitsch in contemporary Western culture and recognise its power – benign and malevolent. Even the sacred citadel of American childhood, Disneyland, is at the mercy of the cultural theorist: (it is no surprise that The New Yorker film critic, the inimitable Pauline Kael, felt impelled to talk of 'Disney's nature porn'). 17 The international appeal of Disney (when Europe is about to have its own Disney World just outside Paris), is that it appeals not only to the industrialised working class but to a middle class whose culture, as Judd so aptly characterises, 'seems too empty to be a culture, but is of course a lousy one'. 18 It is within this broader notion of a culture, where national and certainly local difference is weakened if hardly surviving, that Bainbridge's work must be placed. It is the world where Made in Hong Kong, the title of a particularly 'schlock' piece by Bainbridge, is ubiquitous. (Although perhaps this should be updated to Made in Japan).

That Eric Bainbridge's work seems more American than British, is because it is more European. It is sometimes overlooked, although Donald Judd consistently reminds us, that American Modernism must be subjected, not only to Greenbergian analyses but to other, European discourses – Freudian and Jungian. European Surrealism left an indelible mark, especially on Abstract Expressionist sculpture, most powerfully in the work of David Smith of the forties and fifties.


The grand narrative of Modernism, even the sacrosanct temple of Minimalism, is shot through with other histories. In spite of all attempts to re-energise Nationalism in contemporary art (for example the series of twentieth-century surveys staged by London’s Royal Academy), New Art is overwhelmingly international; as Judd writes ‘It’s one of the many art historical clichés that the place is responsible for common characteristics.’

The interest of Bainbridge’s art is that he is so Janus-faced. In Portrait of the Artist as Tommy Cavendish, 1987, a six-part ‘canvas’ of white fake fur with acrylic painted stripes, he plays with the aporia, the questioning of Jasper Johns, for whom the flag was neither surface nor subject. In the sculpture The twentieth century, 1988 he nods unwittingly towards the German born Max Ernst whose collage The voice of God the Father, 1930 has a woman about to open a weighty volume bearing the cover title The twentieth century in large capital letters. Bainbridge’s dollish, blind and hollow toy ‘horse’, covered in a fake white hide, pairs with Ernst’s altogether more devilish The elephant Celebes 1921 whose title is said to be derived from a scatological schoolboy couplet.60 Decades of technological advance separate these two equally prophetic creatures, yet Bainbridge’s mock-white charger seems just as stuck to the ground and as impotent. While it is possible, ignoring the fur, to see this work as closely related in its formal structure to a Caro assemblage, it is hard to escape its metonymical allusions. Likewise the seemingly abstract hollows, inner cavities and cubic volume of the large, white, seductive Package 1989 are resolutely real: their shape mimics that of the finely moulded polystyrene packaging of ‘white goods’, so hard to throw away because it is so insistent in its presence and seeming use value. The piece touches a raw nerve and like the earlier Abstract sculpture no 1, 1985 mocks the claims to non-referentiality of Minimalism.

This parallels a distrust of extreme intellectualisation which Bainbridge shares with Joseph Beuys who described the male intellect at its farthest intellectualised peak as a ‘cold, hard, crystallised, burn-out clinker’.61 Beuys’s ‘male’ bronze sculpture Mountain king, 1961 has a counterpart in the wood Wet washing virgin, 198562 which is echoed by Bainbridge’s hieratic, ocelot covered and pierced cylinder Vertical extension, 1987, wittily supported by the most banal of domestic objects, a cheap wooden table. Likewise the earlier piece Disguise style swan, 1985 seems more than a Post Modernist joke, even an allusion to Beuys’s use of the imagery of the swan. While Bainbridge’s embrace of synthetic stuffs is antithesis to Beuys, he nonetheless still shares with Beuys a persistent focus on the order of things. The paradox presented by the work of Eric Bainbridge is that it both contains Beuys and outgrows him. Much as the world has, Beuys said that we live in a time of unfulfilment, of expectation and that ‘we haven’t arrived at art yet’.63 Bainbridge says that we cannot afford to wait. We must deal with what we have.

Eric Bainbridge
Style, Space, Elegance, 1989

Occurrence on an endless column 1967
for fabric, plaster, wood, steel
202.5 x 225.5 x 139.8 cm

Eric Bainbridge
Style, Space, Elegance, 1989

Eric Bainbridge

*Born Again Objects*, 1988

Eric Bainbridge

_Born Again Objects_, 1988


Born Again Objects

Whether found or fabricated, the works of British sculptors Edward Allington, Richard Wentworth, and Eric Bainbridge grew out of the assemblage mode popularized by Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow. All three share an interest in tradition, popular culture and the poetics of decay.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

A few years ago, word began spreading in the art world about a group of British artists whose amorphous material objects had begun to appear in collections across the world. At least in part, this was due to the embarrassment of the formal austerity of the mid-1970s and the rise of the New British Sculpture movement, which emphasized materials and processes over form and content. These artists, known as the "New British Sculptors," have since been hailed as leaders in a new direction in British sculpture.

In 1988, Eleanor Heartney wrote about the "New British Sculptors" in her article "Born Again Objects" in Art in America. She described how these artists, including Edward Allington, Richard Wentworth, and Eric Bainbridge, were working with found and fabricated materials to create objects that were both aesthetically and conceptually interesting. These objects were often characterized by their use of industrial materials such as plastics, metals, and textiles, and their focus on the relationships between form and material.

Heartney's article highlighted the way in which these artists were responding to the changes in the art world, and the ways in which their work was influencing the development of contemporary sculpture. She argued that these artists were helping to redefine the boundaries of sculpture, and that their work was an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the nature of art and its relationship to the world around us.

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Eric Bainbridge, "Born Again Objects," 1988


These artists regard their outcast objects with an affection bordering on nostalgia; they see them as carriers of our cultural memory.

As Eleanor Heartney observes in her essay, "Born Again Objects" (Art in America, March 1988), these artists see their outcast objects as carriers of cultural memory. "These artists regard their outcast objects with an affection bordering on nostalgia; they see them as carriers of our cultural memory.

The essay discusses the works of various artists who have created art from outcast objects, and how these objects carry cultural memory. The essay also explores the concept of "Born Again Objects," which is a term used to describe the process of giving new life to these outcast objects.

The essay concludes by noting that these artists are not simply reclaiming these objects, but are also transforming them into something new. This transformation is not only a physical one, but also a cultural one, as it recontextualizes the object and gives it a new meaning.

In conclusion, the essay emphasizes the importance of these artists in preserving and reinterpreting our cultural memory through their art. It highlights the significance of these outcast objects as carriers of our cultural heritage and the role of these artists in recontextualizing them.
Eric Bainbridge

Born Again Objects, 1988


Eric Bainbridge

Born Again Objects, 1988


If there is a dark side to the British sculptors’ work, it is the danger of Dionysian excess, and not the threat of empty form.

If there is a dark side to the British sculptors’ work, it is the danger of Dionysian excess, and not the threat of empty form.

Simple yet poignant is the photograph of the two sculptors’ works in their exhibition in London. The sculpture, a large, abstract form, is seen against a dark background. The title of the work is not visible in the photograph, but the sculpture appears to be quite large, suggesting its scale.

The photograph captures the essence of the exhibition, which is described in the accompanying text. The sculpture is a significant work, and the photograph helps to convey its impact.

The text also mentions that the sculpture is part of an exhibition in London, and that the exhibition is noteworthy for its inclusion of a range of artists. The exhibition seems to be a significant event, and the sculpture is a key part of it.

Overall, the photograph and the accompanying text work together to convey the importance of the sculpture and the exhibition. The sculpture is presented in a way that highlights its significance, and the text provides context and background information. The combination of the two elements creates a powerful and engaging presentation.
Pervading Eric Bainbridge's work is a sense of fecklessness gone awry, a polymorphous sexuality replete with multiple orifices and protrusions.

It is tempting to view the New British Sculpture address of electronicized, mechanized, and deanimated sculpture in light of their historical context. The works of Alighiero, Warhol and Dado—taking center stage among these—were ceiling-height, and in their own way, visually arresting. They also were a moment in which sculpture and a fascination with clay and distortion were exhilarating by contrast. Laurent Giblet has suggested that the work of the American artist, sculpture—tridenticon France, Stockach and McClellan—emanates a robust in atrocity that is "noselessly American." Indeed, in their work, the multi-proboscis object, resilient to its immediate exception, seems to be reverting for a state of envelope. But the accounts that Mr. Giblet suggests, in the United States, the British artists are too bent out of joint—a fall that seems to have many American artists thus far managing the art object in a state of liberalism perfection, the American object sculptures seem to have reached a point beyond which further action is impossible. While for the British—ever keen on developments that announce the culmination of a historical tradition—art remains theirs.

The focus of the demand for the American and British object sculptures is not the (former as implied) to Sculpture's various, the present as (Art in America - March, 1988.

Eric Bainbridge

Born Again Objects, 1988


Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge at Salvatore Ala Gallery, 1988
Review by Holland Cotter
ARTS Magazine, October 1988, P.81.
Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge at Salvatore Ala, 1988

Review by Christian Leigh

Artforum International

October 1988, VOL. 27, No. 2
Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge at Salvatore Ala Gallery, 1988
Review by Michael Kimmelman,
New York Times,
17 June 1988
Eric Bainbridge
Art in America: Salvatore Ala, 1987
Eric Bainbridge
Cultural and Personal Recovery in an Era of Reaction, 1987
Article by Meyer Raphael Rubinstein, Daniel Wiener.
Rembrandt: The Unvarnished Truth?

Arnold Newman’s Portraits of the Artists

Beverly Pepper: Woman of Steel

Eric Bainbridge
Britain’s 'New Generation', 1987
Article by Judith Higgins
ARTnews, Volume 86, Number 10, P.118-122
Simulism in Barcelona • Simon Linke in the Twilight Zone
Andy Warhol's Feelings • Hannah Collins' Heart and Soul

Eric Bainbridge
*Eric Bainbridge’s Implement, 1987*
Mention in the notes by John Miller.
ARTSCRIBE International, Summer 1987, Issue 64, P.8
Eric Bainbridge

Occurences / New York, 1986
P.p. 8 - 9.
Frederick Ted Castle

This year there were an unusually large number of New York shows of artists residing in Britain, although it was not an "invasion" on the scale of the French, Italian, German, Swedish, Swiss, Austrian etc. alia invasions of recent years. One factor is the opening of a new gallery in Wooster Street by Albert Totoah, Edward Totoah's cousin. Another factor is Salvatore Ala, who has galleries in Milan and New York, but who includes five British residents among his ten or twelve regular artists. As some will recall these artists were featured at Ala's space in the latest London Art Fair, a different artist on each day of the affair.

Marlborough held the first big show of R. B. Kitaj in New York in years. Gamboling through Kitaj's œuvre in an erratic manner (a few old paintings, a recent series, a few new paintings, some drawings), the show was badly arranged. It was almost as if the gallery were unable to get some of his better recent work and so made do with some older works in their own or others' collections. While this probably did not take place, the show had an improvised quality. Since we seldom see Kitaj here in his native land, it would seem they might have done better by him. I was personally somewhat disappointed in the most recent works, which seemed hostile or in some other aspect ill-defined. Karin Faure-Walther has canvassed about 41% of her show already seen at Gimpel Fils in London and The Arts Centre in Darlington to Gimpel Westenhoff's new space on Fifth Avenue. Due to some good fortune, Susan Hilger and Glenys Johnson (along with Tony Bevan who was not in the show) appeared at the opening. Whether it was because the show was reduced to one work by each artist or because of the vagueness of the original concept ("Between Identity/Politics"), it was entirely unclear why such trouble had been taken to import the work of 17 artists, some of whom live in Europe. Nancy Spero, who lives in New York, was also in it. The work did not hang together easily, although there were some interesting

Eric Bainbridge
P. p. 8 - 9.
Eric Bainbridge, Dark style swan, 1986, at Salvatore Ata, New York

They are rather apocalyptic as well as cryptic. Churches appear as ruined shells, the full moon is reflected in water, unlikely figures appear in dreams. The paint is applied masterfully, but also it seems quickly, with a poster-like flair that gives some of the work a 'political' cast which is more evident in some of the subjects, particularly Religious Visitor in which a scarecrow-like figure appears in ruined churches with scared crows about him.

Antony Gormley had another show at Salvatore Ata of his elaborately constructed figures whose surfaces are usually covered with carefully segmented pieces of lead. Not seen here before were a number of pieces or parts of pieces made of reddish clay evidently shaped by hand and baked but not glazed and seeming much like mud itself. An innovation was a large figure of gigantic proportions about 9 feet tall. Since he usually makes figures with his own body as the model, when asked how he modelled this one he replied that he 'thought big'. There was also a very small one tosed on his son. But in other ways, this was the most fantastic show of his work to date. One figure's hands make a basin in front of an unnatural hole about an inch in diameter in the middle of the chest. The artist stipulates carefully that this hole should have water in it when you put your curious finger in it, but that there should however be no water in the basin-shaped hands. One figure has a tube protruding from his mouth about ten feet ahead of him as he lies on the floor. And a playful or rather toy-like lead armadillo is placed near a small clay house too small for the animal to enter. There is an air in this work of transcendent meaning which is also hermetic or not wanting translation into words.

Eric Bainbridge, another British sculptor represented exclusively by Ata, shows a different kind of weirdness. He makes non sequiturs covered in fake fur. These undoubtedly witty pieces that inevitably satirise animals even if they're not in animal shape just because of the fur, are not as hilarious as a description of them might make them appear. While they are ridiculous, like our pets, they are not ridiculous, they are loveable. These 'pets' are more monumental and static than usual, perhaps more contrived, but they bring to mind how truly contrived natural animals may seem to be if one removes the spell of the natural which specifies itself and alienates the strange. But there is no project to create whimsical species or ersatz pets here. There is a commentary on the normality of the weird as well as on the weirdness of the normal, and it is not quite a joke at all. Although it may well be wrong to generalise from such an accidental mangle of work as happened to be shown here recently, I think we see in several of these artists - Hunter, Bosshard, Gormley, and Bainbridge at least - an imperative to point up the weird strangeness of ourselves, our thoughts and our projects usually so cleverly disguised in language. Whether this has any national significance is doubtful, but it is good to see art provoke a thought.

The Poster and the Counterpublic

John Roberts

'the poster and Revolution', a survey of German art from the Weimar years organised by Willy Gutmans and recently at the Sainsbury Centre and Milton Keynes, was one of those historical shows that break no boundaries in terms of scope and material, for most of the work shown was familiar, but highlight an aspect of our cultural politics currently overlooked or ignored. In this case it highlighted how under-valued the poster is as an expressive political resource. The poster! Of course! It was as if something we all thought had long gone away had suddenly been discovered alive and flourishing.

Although agitational posters date back to the Communists their most coherent use was during the Weimar period, when photomontage techniques were brought into the public sphere. Most subsequent poster art since has taken those initiatives - particularly Heartfield's work - as exemplifying cultural activity off the gallery/museum axis. In the early to mid Seventies, at the height of post-war art's theoretical retreat from the market and the 'academic' object and with May '68 still fresh in mind, the poster became a favoured resource. One only has to read Studio International's 'Art & Social Purpose' to see how mechanical reproduction plus work out of doors was the natural horizon of political practice at the time. As Jonathan Miles, then a member of the Poster Collective, wrote in that issue: 'the development of organisational relations with political groups enables us to reach a mass audience without the mediation of art situations. The particular form this work must take is centrally through the production of posters, which become directly linked to the ongoing agitation and propaganda of political organisations'.

This is a classic defence of the poster as a democratic and mobile form of political intervention. It is also shot through with the idealism that made 'Art & Social Purpose' a paradigm of voluntarism and technological determinism: the idea that access to a lot of people guarantees political effectiveness and that mechanical reproduction can finally democratise art. Perhaps the poster artists of the time never strictly believed in such a view, but nonetheless the validity of their arguments rested on a concept of clear disenfranchisement from bourgeois forms of consumption and exchange.

Eric Bainbridge
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Eric Bainbridge

*Eric Bainbridge at Walker Art Center, 1986*

Eric Bainbridge at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Review by Mason Riddle


XXV
commentary on art’s excites, it is a stunning view comment on the genius as a second-class er is quite different in the case of two huge, chunky, scale operates on a the size of the shoes it won’t be easy to fall in this mode, Jackson a sculptural relief of the in a web of brightly column, as if to point out the sense, which is in his works, remains steadfast, ness that is jarring and unresolved personifies a emotional inflections in his latest sculptures is addressing an issue that —the possibility of nu —Armstrong makes public deformed heads that are comic, clay, which its found state yet rigid to be said to mimic the clear exhibition on the in continuing to extend and rich history as a sculpture has transformed porosity material, once that forming some of the real caricatures I’ve tion is not a one-note of his detractors would be made. Punk John in the limits of his ma as his subject matter a s him a powerful artist, and a necessary one. His sense of ur —JOHN YAU

Chicago
Anita David
Artemisia Gallery

Good taste—what “good” is it, anyway?—abounds in Anita David’s recent series of paintings. The seven monochrome works that comprised this installation function as emblems of esthetic seriousness, 48-by-48-inch squares of pulp gray, made using an inventory of painterly effects. The names that embellish their surfaces are also filled with associations of a particularly tasteful sort: “Gucci,” “Bloomingdale’s,” “Comme des Garçons,” and so on, an impressive roster of department stores whose nominative presence sabotages the dignity of these painted fields.

The humor of this conceptual exercise is obvious—equating paintings with purses, scarves, even designer shopping bags, as sites for the reifying logotypes of high fashion. Less apparent here is an examination of structural sufficiency, the sort of surface necessity to make each work signify painting rather than stage backdrop, to be seen as itself rather than in the guise of, before consideration of the words each bears attacks this substantive claim.

Tiffany & Co’s boldfaced serif type is relatively small, appearing in the middle near the bottom of a canvas dappled with gray acrylic lezigns. Neiman-Marcus’ gaudy scribble runs from edge to edge, superimposed on faceted arcs of paint that could have been applied with a trowel. In Gucci, moments of vivid magenta underpainting show through a play of brushstrokes vaguely reminiscent of David Salle. Indeed, there are nods in the direction of Larry Poons, Jules Olitsky, and Darby Bannard, although specific references to these painter’s tactics could only compromise David’s intent.

The names, lettered in by a professional sign painter, are reasonable facsimiles of each store’s trademark typography. There is a credible resemblance, established through our familiarity with prior usages. But how about the painting itself? Its claim to authenticity resides in an attention to surface inflection which is thoroughly generic. Too close an approach to another artist’s techniques risks incorporating an extra persona in the work, as an actor whose presence brings along precisely the reference to mise-en-scène David seeks to avoid.

The effectiveness of David’s installation depends on a delicate sequence of perceptions, assumptions, and contradictions. For the most part, the paintings live up to their names. They are sufficiently well executed to serve both as simulations of artworks and as situations appropriate to the presentation of their fashionable labels. Less successful was the extra device of a price list tacked to the gallery wall. The paintings were priced in descending order of status, with Neiman-Marcus and Gucci most expensive, down to a “bargain basement” tag on Macy’s. Funnily? Yes, but only at some cost to the believability of the works themselves. —BOZZ SPACCTOR

Minneapolis

Eric Bainbridge
Walker Art Center

Upon entering Eric Bainbridge’s show of five fake-fur-covered sculptures, one felt a bit like Alice when she tumbled into Wonderland and swallowed a pill that made her grow small. Looming up to 11 feet in height and comprising disparate forms whose identities are often obscure, the works are at once humorous and disconcerting. A low-slung dinosaur with a disjointed tail wavers on its back a daisychipper ship, and a human head, a colossal swan laced with a faucet, a rose, a ship, and two bulbous forms that look like hasty haystacks. Uncomfortably distorted and abnormal in scale, the works by this young London artist represent more a Wonderland gone awry than a recent development in the tradition of 20th-century British sculpture.

Constructed from chicken wire, plywood, and plaster onto which the fur fabric has been stapled and glued, the earliest works from 1985 are dressed primarily in oak. The 1986 pieces are sheathed in a fashion parade of animal skins, including tiger, ermine, and leopard as well as black, purple, and candy stripes, and assume a more rakish air. In the most recent work, Handle, 1986, made in Minneapolis for this show, Bainbridge painted huge purple spots on a taupe-colored fur. Regardless of fur type, the individual components of each work were inspired by either human organs or the cheap mass-produced items that threaten to overrun
capitalist society. In Dark Style Swan, 1985, the not-so-graceful water fowl was modeled after a banal soap dish, a kinschy vase in the shape of a man in insulated elements of Statue of Tommy Frazzle). 1986 Salt and pepper shakers and a metal mold of bambi were the geniuses of Handle. Bainbridge's simplest and most puzzling composition to date. Bainbridge's obsessive scrambling of objects and organs—dislocating heads from bodies, combining utterly incongruous objects—thwarts our attempt to recognize individual forms or to decode a piece. The fussiness of the work further obscures their meanings. Like a sensory deprivation device, it homogenizes detail and inhibits a clear reading of form. Moreover, the multiple associations we bring to the work—stuffed animals, parade floats, fake-fur coats, animal-skin rugs, and real animals—are never ascedged. Bainbridge's sculptures are, in fact, all of these things, but only for the brief moment before they transmute into their actual abantial selves. Like Alice trying to comprehend her shifting surroundings, we are never able to grasp the specific content of a piece.

Each is an intuitive response to the ideas, objects, and situations that encompass the artist. Their odd components coalesce in a subconscious manner and are not meant to be neatly understood. In its ability to subvert the conventional notions of fine art through materials and the use of common objects, Bainbridge's work is an eccentric synthesis of Dada, Pop, and arte povera. In the spirit of Pop, he gently mocks the formalist sculptures of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore by punching holes through some of his forms. Unlike most Pop sculptures, however, Bainbridge's possess a dark, slightly perverse quality underneath their humorous skins, which links Bainbridge more directly to Joseph Beuys than to Claes Oldenburg. And like both Beuys and Marcel Duchamp, Bainbridge endorses the notion that any use of a material or object is possible.

Bainbridge's sculptures clearly straddle a fine line between being psychologically loaded forms operating on multiple levels and absurd 80s-style art gimmicks. The danger of their becoming the latter obviously derives from the false fur and the work's refusal to release specific information. Ultimately, however, the enigmatic closure of these pieces and their ostensible promise of information make them seductive.

-MASON RIDDELL

Fort Worth
Greg Reser
Fort Worth Gallery

If one could generally say that Minimalism and its discontent dominated the '70s, then I think at this point in time it is fair to say that a kind of "layerism" has dominated the '80s. This layering of multiple images from diverse sources is a technique that may most readily be identified stylistically with David Salle, but certainly did not originate with him. A common fascination with both the popular media and beaux arts sources stands firmly behind this trend, but the commonality of the work ends there. Layered work can be either abstract or literal, or both.

Greg Reser is a young painter whose work falls well within the boundaries of the literal camp. The referential images in his paintings are both stacked and juxtaposed side by side, usually combining colorful art-historical references with distorted black-and-white drawings of figures derived from the stock advertising images of the '50s found in the book Clip Art (1984). On a purely visual level, Reser's layering technique creates a play of deep and shallow space. For example, Between Two Coasts, 1986, is unequally divided into two adjacent rectangles: on the left is a blue sky clearly reminiscent of the horizonless space of Edward Ruscha's work; on the right, an excerpt of a painting by Edward Hopper of a shingled two-story house. The endless space of the sky vibrates between flatness and infinity, whereas the deep illusionistic space of the quoted Hopper picture penetrates the picture plane. Both become sets for Reser's distorted and floating Clip Art figures, who like images in a fun-house mirror or science-fiction characters disappearing into a time warp exist in a space without defined perspectival depth. All we know is that they do not belong to our space, and they do not belong to the spaces defined by their appropriated backdrops.

In the context of a group of works that all use the same kind of visual interplay, Reser's intentions become clear. Whether specific quotes, like the Hopper and the Ruscha, or more general art-historical references, his choices of images seem designed to instruct. Between Two Coasts, for example, is a visual metaphor for the West Coast artists from an establishment. Man appropriation, these three scribe the broadness of Likewise, the sketchbook has been chosen for the mean- ing: all are involved in the pointing and explanation of generic teachers, or art intermediaries between.

Reser is just 23, and impressionistic means of search for his own voice. His under-graduate art student by the same name, although white, has not begun to cast a shadow. His work is not yet a nook to be despised by art worlders. His paintings are beautiful and radiant, fully composed. Reser's images retain the purity of their original context, yet all are interpretation and feel.

-SUSAN FREUDENHEIM

San Francisco
Bill Dane
Froenkel Gallery

Well, it's a fantasy for a Sunday comic strip fan and a window partition in one's hair, though the dressing view (Shreve 1982) shows a big teddy in blue and sp

Eric Bainbridge
Eric Bainbridge at Walker Art Center, 1986
Eric Bainbridge at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Review by Mason Riddle
Artsforum International, November 1986, Issue 3, P. 142-143. XXV

WORKPLACE
Eric Bainbridge

*Eric Bainbridge at Walker Art Center, 1986
Eric Bainbridge at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Review by Mason Riddle

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COLOGNE’S GREATNESS

THE MYTH OF INTERNATIONALISM

WHAT IS MODERN SCULPTURE?

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Letters to a Wound, 1985

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STUART MORGAN

LETTERS TO A WOUND

An address prompted by recent exhibitions of work by Joseph Beuys, Eric Bainbridge and Julian Schnabel.

Eric Bainbridge
Letters to a Wound, 1985

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P.32-37.
H. Auden's *Oranger* contained a prose poem called "Letter to a Wound." Writing to it in the way that most people speak to a lover, the narrator tells it about the difference it has made to his life, recounts the history of their relationship and looks forward to their living together for many years to come. Critics have raked their brains to find allegorical interpretations for the wound. But in vain; the answer is too simple. In communicating with his pain in this way the man is addressing his own identity.

The wound remains a secret. In life, most do. In art, almost all do. The only exceptions are crucifixion scenes, where the blood of Christ streams visibly from rents in His flesh, the outward and visible sign of a catharsis which involves the fate of the whole of mankind. Nowadays catharsis goes on in private. People talk about their analysts and try to estimate their own progress towards some lost unity. In art, it would be surprising if new schools of wound painting were to spring up overnight. The fact is that some things can be more easily suggested than rendered; they can be summoned up by avoiding the entire topic or even by changing the subject. That does not mean that wounds are not there, even as subtexts; simply that our relationship to our bodies is obscure. But they can be discovered, even in the oddest places. Admittedly morbid-butchering is out of fashion. These days no one writes essays called "The Egg in Art." But how easy it is to crave the reader's indulgence when one's subject is so concealed, so fugitive, so literal an absence.

The atmosphere is oppressive. A gallery has been lined with felt—two tons of it, brought from a factory in Bavaria and provided into place with pitchforks. With the windows and doors covered, the place resembles a prison or a bunker vault. Light, freedom, sonority have all been reduced. In spite of this the space is safe and warm. If it looks like a padded cell, it is also, in the true sense of the word, an asylum. Three other objects complete the installation: a grand piano with the lid closed, and on it a thermometer and an empty blackboard.

As his ubiquitous hat demonstrates, Joseph Beuys and felt are inextricable. At least two monographs offer biographical reasons for this relationship. When his fighter plane crashed into the snow of the Russian steppes during World War II, Beuys has explained, he was rescued by nomads who coated his burns with honey and wrapped his body in felt. Whether or not this is true is irrelevant; Beuys makes and remakes his life-story at will. What is undeniable is that he has made a felt television, a felt suit, based on his own size but with the arms and legs extended, a series of Felt Sculptures—piles of felt with thin metal covers—and actions such as Infestation Homoegen for grand piano: the greatest contemporary composer is the hundred-day child, in which a piano, the instrument Beuys would always choose to play at Flictray concerts, was wrapped and sealed in felt in order to prevent its being used and, symbolically at least, to blot its sound. Yielding yet resilient, marred but chaotic, felt insulates, warms and muffles. Above all, as in the plane-crash legend, it heals.

The concept of blemish or rupture occurs frequently in Beuys's thought. As might be expected of a soldier who earned the Golden Stripe medal after his fifth set of injuries, the word "wound" has a heightened significance for his art. "1921 Exhibition of a wound drawn together with plaster" is the first entry on his fictional curriculum vitae. If it is to heal, the wound must not remain a private hurt; as in psychoanalysis, reciprocity may provide an answer. Yet Beuys does not underestimate the problem of urging people to reveal their frailty. It must be made properly acceptable to people that it is interesting to expose themselves fully with all their...
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abound: fullness and emptiness, hollow vessels and tubes through which liquid might flow, nature and machinery, blood and water. Visual coincidences supplement these: the swan’s neck echoes the base of the tap, while the stem of the rose and the veins protruding from the kidney reveal a family connection — resemblance. The beginnings of a neat reading? Undoubtedly. But not of Dark Style Swan, the work in question. As usual, it has been clumsily modelled out of plaster and chicken-wire, then, equally clumsily, covered in fake fur fabric. Hard and soft, warm and cool, are confused. Edges are softened — even the thorns on the rose — and spots, stripes and shading contrast with the masses below them. The badness of the making has a tragicomic aspect. That swan’s neck has turned stiff and goitrous. It is more than faintly obscene: from some angles it looks nothing like a neck. In the course of a stroll around the sculpture Gestalt is lost, recovered, then lost again. Identities are already confused. The swan is based not on a live bird but on a plastic scarecrow. And who knows what a blood cell looks like in three dimensions? As soon as we think we have it in our sights, it escapes. It would be hard to imagine a more irritating object. Indeed, it is so unacceptable that it might pass for a deliberate subversion of the current British vogue for tasty neo-formalism. The title Dark Style Swan may refer to reggae, but the effect of the work more closely resembles “scratching”. There are other ways of considering it — as a belated, eccentric footnote to the Tony Cragg argument by which taxonomies represent aspects of the sorting in which culture entails, or even, oddly, as decoration. The latter is less improbable than it sounds; on a purely formal basis, Bainbridge opts for the pendulous, the overstuffed, the streamlined and the organic. Yet the sensual objects on which these forms are based are too obviously loaded, his linkages too directly physical, for the genre to be in doubt. At his best, Bainbridge is grotesque. Anti-symbolic, anti-sublime, grotesque: it romps blithely in the effal of existence, reminding us that at best we are only mobile bags of guts, that our heads are body too — not “brain,” not “spirit” — and that life is brief, simple, impulsive and threatening. Bainbridge’s early works on paper testify to this vision. In Idiot in a Dark Landscape, Man in the Night of Man with Oxygen on his Back against a Dark Landscape, heads appear as if X-rayed, while organs separated from the rest of the body rest on top of the skull, linked to it by spindly pipes. As the appearance of a fire-extinguisher in another Untitled drawing proves, the body has renounced its conventions of Renaissance symmetry and closure to become a study in growths and removals. Centres of life are sucked by parasites, which establish themselves as master, almost independent units. Almost but not quite without that fragile connecting tube they would soon die. The fire extinguisher provides a model for both sides of the bargain. It is a complete entity with an available nozzle, akin to the sharpened head Bainbridge would go on to make with necks like fragile handles or stalks. Yet it is also a revered hanger-on, with a pipe-line no longer in use. The overtones prove indubitably sexual: in terms of connections, Bainbridge offers no middle ground between the useless appendage and the tight fit. His system contains protrusion and introflex, which either engage or not. Some recent works are even made with empty slots for attachments to be fitted at will. By now, perhaps, it has become a lunging matter. One earlier, floor-based structure treated in the deadly earnest.

Wound consisted of a clay torso with a long, deep, almost voluptuous incision. Obscure (fear of sex and death mingled in this armless, legless trunk, as dead as it was drawn apart like the reptile’s mouth. In terms of the plug-and-socket motif, it had been disconnected. But it was scarcely eligible for such life-support. Among Bainbridge’s other works is constituted an

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The wound itself, an absence, can scarcely be captured by art. Like so much to do with sickness or death, it seems to gravitate naturally towards metaphor, as a necessary avoidance.

obscenity, all the more shocking because of its neo-classical elegance. Later, when Bainbridge’s process consisted of enclosing emptiness and concealing it with layer upon layer of material, when snapped tendons and snapped veins were stanchied and covered, as if to advertise the claim that they could break loose, that they could pass without comment among more even forms, the full reaction to that gaping cut was evident. One skin after another, patted and smoothed like ointment, stretched like bandage, quickly, even haphazardly, could not quite do the trick. You can’t camouflage a wound.

Interestingly, another early work was called *Putting On A Brave Face*. 

**Viscera and machinery, the prized and the rejected are confused in Dark Style Swan. What should stand alone is sublimated, what needs protection is left to fend for itself.** All this is stuff for satire; the parvenu nature of the mock fur gives the lie to a society where everything can be bought — from nature to ornaments to open-heart surgery. Yet satire is not the result. More exactly, it is the feeling that systems collapse, that concealment solves nothing and that there is a lot about ourselves that frightens the hell out of us.

Forget the orange horizontal and the landscape suggestions towards the bottom of the picture. Forget the thick root. Forget the dark grey linearm to the pink and white specks. What matters is that fibreglass cavity with its rough edges and glutinous texture, and the hessian stuck over it as if it is adhering to an open, weeping wound.

In Julian Schnabel’s painting the wound is almost a convention. It was only a matter of time before he dramatized it. For Schnabel the meaning has nothing to do with the successful transmission of clear statements; some accident always occurs in the gap between artist and viewer. And Schnabel’s techniques for disorienting his viewers frequently involve superimposition or elision; the flow of perception is disrupted by clogging the surface with information or by shifting its levels, building it up or incorporating inset areas, celebrating or undermining it.

Threats of laceration featured in imagery of swords and knives in the late 1970s culminated in a key work, *Actionone* 1978, in which literal and metaphorical laceration were brought together. Made on a wooden structure thick enough to contain a roughly cut slot resembling a letter-box, which created a ledge without cutting a hole through to the other side, it shows on the left a male torso flexing itself on a plinth, its muscles scored viciously in white on red, the red colours in the painting. Musculature is so studiously ignored that the strokes resemble slashes. Oddly, the idea of the distinction of parts of a painting is conveyed by the application of paint rather than its removal, while (impossibly) the other side of the picture offers a literal demonstration that canvases can never be effectively captured because the image in painting is thrown onto a screen where holes make no real difference.

Elaboration in the form of adding paint or altering the picture-plane only serve to reassert the primacy of luck the skin of paint as a metaphor for human skin which was a staple of mid-1970s minimalism. (In Brice Marden the reading was reinforced by the famous invitation card showing a photograph of his wife’s bare back.) The frisson which a Marden of this period gives us is a result of the proximity of two ideas: the possibility that this is representation and the existence of the painting as sheer material. Can both be sustained only by such extreme means? Schnabel decides not, then proceeds to exploit a human trick — not totally dissimilar to a hocked tree — lopped and dripping. In *Confrontations of a Man* Yukio Mishima fantasizes about taking a sword and drawing it around the muscles of young men be admired, the result being a human artwork, presumably more appealing for its being urged, gradually, sardonically, towards death. No such eroticism is evident in *Actionone*, where wounds are no sooner made than they heal, in which material and metaphor are both possible as long as image is asserted, and the ground is literally removed from beneath it. Then the impossible becomes possible and the viewer, like St Thomas slipping his hand into the cleft in Christ’s side, can be persuaded of miracles.

If *Actionone* can be interpreted as a secular crucifixion, *Avoiding Open Heart*

Surgery (Chest Cavity) 1985 can be regarded as a revision of that earlier stance. This time the prevailing colour is brown. No blood is visible or even suggested; the wound heals permanently without forming a scar. Schnabel's recent paintings often involve fiberglass elements which alter the picture plane. Their shapes are more or less obscene: faces, sexual organs (both male and female) and bones are suggested. The shape in this painting is far more ambiguous than these, though it is the most obviously descriptive. It is as well to beware of this: like Pollock, Schnabel often gives a title to a painting simply because it has to have a name in the outside world. The wound is too raw to engender meditation, too gross to employ as a basis for generalization, too specifically itself to rise from its predicament as substance... Indeed, any description of it has to be couched as a catalogue of negatives: the residuals which render it problematic. Something can be learned from this. It is as if Schnabel has taken all the features — notably that medley of osteologies — which Accedone embodied, and pushed them to a limit. The result is neither narrative nor Milne, though it reveals aspects of both. As a sequel to Accadone, Avoiding Open Heart Surgery perpetuated the comparison so prevalent in German cultural history, between sickness and art. He ends by performing not a miracle but a kind of conjuring-trick. Locked in an eternal present, both art and nature continue, dying. Yet that is only one reading among many. Rather then offering realistic display, Schnabel chooses to touch off many stimuli at once. Above all, the painting is a work of abstraction.

Iconography is based on the assumption that images persist while the meanings around them alter. How easily, in trying to cope with our deepest fears, we resort to almost medieval habits of thought. Three women would cope differently. For men, the state of incompletion is connected with other disparate experiences — of real or imagined inadequacy, fears of abandonment, age, impotence and inability to provide. Behind these lies some great, if unarticulate, archetype — not a heavenly Father who bestows or withdraws power from a Son but a wounded king on a bier, hovering between life and death, his land infernal, his people desolate, his only hope a stranger with a ritual task to perform. The humiliation of being replaced by another male is a late stage in a lengthy process. How hard it is even to begin by admitting defeat. The wound itself, an absence, can scarcely be captured by art. Like so much
d to do with sickness or death, it seems to gravitate naturally toward metaphor, as a necessary avoidance. Susan Sontag wrote that the most truthful way of regarding illness, or even of being ill, was the "most profoundly altered, the most resistant to, metaphoric thinking." Describing the condition of aspection, Julia Kristeva writes:

A wound with blood or pus, or the sticky aereal smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified deaths — a flat encephalography, for instance — I would understand, react, or accept. No, no in true theatre, without make-up or masks, refuse and corpse show me what I permanently threat aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands... There I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body exercising itself, as being alive, from that border.

Addressing a wound is a way of redefining what it means to be alive. It involves a loss of bearings, a drift towards an object which challenges identity. Yet of course it is not an "object" at all, but rather what Kristeva calls "a wellspring of a sign for non-object." Straying toward the boundary line at which it exists in our minds, the wound summons up other boundaries: between our state and that of animals, between our reasoning and thinking faculties, between our settled definitions of ourselves and our own creative forces working to disturb and redefine that state, between the tangible and the hallucinated, pulled apart specially for the purpose. On this boundary reason holds little sway and a permanent condition of openness prevails. It occupies an uncertain area at the very boundary of the self.

Notes
5. Analyzed in detail in the author's "Drau". H. Eric Bainbridge's "Letters to a Wound"

Stuart Morgan, 'Letters to a Wound: An Address Prompted by Recent Exhibitions of Work by Joseph Beuys, Eric Bainbridge and Julian Schnabel',

Eric Bainbridge

Letters to a Wound, 1985

December/January 1985/86
Eric Bainbridge

_Eric Bainbridge: Dumb Insolence_, 1985
Stuart Morgan, ' in "What the Butler Saw: Selected Writings by Stuart Morgan".
ISBN: 0 927414 07
Eric Bainbridge:
Dumb Insolence

Published for an exhibition at the Air Gallery, London 1985

An Eric Bainbridge sculpture is an exercise in taxonomy, a lesson in camouflage, the rehearsal of a formal repertoire; above all, it is an act of defiance carried out with unexpected weapons. ‘All the good things I’ve done have been made despite my intelligence,’ says Bainbridge. Certainly his career so far cannot be plotted as a succession of neat formal tricks. On the contrary, it constitutes a series of impasses; at each stage the problem of how to continue has been compounded rather than solved. His work is not anti-intellectual. For him stupidity is not a message but a point of view – a way of scoring points against ‘civilised’ values.

Inexpressiveness appeared in an early work called Putting on a Brave Face (1981), which comprised two boxes, both of one-inch thick plywood with another box on the inside, so heavy it took four people to lift each one. The first was tightly packed with padded rectangular units, just below a glass top was a neon hieroglyph in the shape of a curve which partly resembled the simplified form of a head but which, considered abstractly, hovered between male and female identities. Wedged midway inside the second box was a five-foot square photograph of a man whose expression was part grimace, part smile. The ambiguity of the situation and the noncommittal, tragicomic reaction to it made a closed circuit. Dramatised by restricted visibility, contrasts of scale, brilliance and, most of all, by the faulty placement of the single object in one box and the fixity of the blocks in the other, the ‘brave face’ itself was a legitimate response to an enigma.

The problematic engagement of the self with a world which might be out of reach of the senses subsequently gave rise to three large paintings on paper:

Eric Bainbridge: Dumb Insolence, 1985
Stuart Morgan, in "What the Butler Saw: Selected Writings by Stuart Morgan".
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Man in the Night, Man with Oxygen on His Back Against a Dark Landscape and Idiot Against a Dark Landscape (1981). Loosely rendered in dull colours varied with pinks, yellows and limes, they showed cross-sectioned profile heads with ‘vision’ beaming from the eye and brightly outlined, unspecified organs located outside as well as inside the skull. Expanding on the crisis of perception — paradoxically internalising it and rendering it theatrical at the same time — the three figures showed a precarious hold on perception, even on life itself. An entire phase of the sculpture resulted from these works: two-dimensional, wall-mounted wooden cut-outs leaning on sticks which protruded from their eyes; faces made from hand-sized lumps of ordinary clay, with features formed by poking fingers quickly into them; a large box of these heads; and most significantly, large, upturned heads, again of solid clay, their necks thin and elongated like handles with which they could be wielded.

In combining two approaches – the head as heavy object, a solid lump of matter, or as a vessel so fragile that not even its vital components would be retained, these tangible caricatures suggested permanent disjunction. To focus on the rift between perception of matter as either dead or alive, between gross flesh and insubstantial spirit, between feeling and non-feeling – Nietzsche said ‘Things are the boundaries of people’ – permits an examination of these margins. At the same time Bainbridge was aware that they could only be summoned, not displayed; Wound (1982), a limbless torso with a deep incision, employed bulk to frame an absence.

After being portrayed within the work itself, the response to an existential crisis had been explored in terms of contradictions which characterised existence itself: the relation between disunited elements in our own make-up – physical, emotional and intellectual. A play of opposites also marked the new approach begun in 1983, an approach he continues to adopt. Objects built up singly out of chicken-wire, supporting layers of hessian scrim and industrial plaster, are covered in cheap fur fabric, then assembled into complexes. Though the modelling is rough and the application of the fur makeshift, these tensions are partly assuaged by a full-scale structural principle which has come to govern his formal choices. The determining factor is a doltish classification system which disrupts deep-seated beliefs and challenges our culture, itself a sorting system. For the tone of mute opposition is heightened, not dispelled, in these nonsense anthologies.

From harping on unendurable tensions Bainbridge turns to constructing them for himself. High meets low, ideal and abnormal rub shoulders, above all
humour and fear are brought together. That which should be kept apart is condemned to coexist, forming a hybrid with no generic description. So in Monument (1985) a hair slide, a music-centre, an exhaust pipe, a ship and a child's soft-drink container are thrown together—in other words a vessel/tower which contains air and repels water; a plastic, air-repelling container of liquid which is sucked; a tube for the passage of gases, complete with two nipples and a phallus; a slide/sword of no value nor of any heraldic significance, all resting on a nondescript box of value and technical sophistication. Sucking, blowing, penetration, withdrawal, luxuries and rubbish. Interfering with this cross-referencing are three opposing tendencies: metamorphosis, camouflage and a kind of poetic licence. Walking around the sculptures it is possible to recognise shapes from some angles but not from others, with the result that they loom in and out of recognition independently, establishing a permanent state of dissonance within the work itself. Weight and scale are subject to adjustment. Most obvious of all, the bogus animal pelts throw misleading shadows over the masses, denying and complicating their true shapes. The 'fun fun' serves to advertise the insistently 'animal' associations of the forms while joking about the taming of these instincts. The joke is the permanent, triumphant emergence of the infantile.

Two pressures counter each other in these works. One is the sheer vitality and invention, encompassing a wide range of reference. The Dilemma of Jimmy the Nail (1984) parodies the predicament of earlier heroes, with their brave faces and idiot grins. Combining visual cues—the zigzag cipher which denotes infinite extension in technical drawing, the face of the actor Jimmy Nail, who plays lugubrious North Country blockheads—with verbal ones, like the fact that his local football team were called 'The Steelmen', Bainbridge creates a mascot whose jauntiness belies his state of imprisonment. (The Ascension of Jimmy the Nail (1985) affirms his status as a captive whose only hope is divine intervention.) Similarly, Pelouche (1984), a deadpan rearrangement of the features of a human face, parodies modernism in the same spirit Tony Hancock did in his film The Rebel. It was designed as a belated footnote to that film—the prop that was never included, the sculpture that such an artist, with his total faith in his own ability to make masterpieces, should have made. If Bainbridge's energy seems to reach out into the world, drawing it into the purleau of his art, he is equally responsible for an opposite pressure. Severed connections—chopped heads, liberated lungs, kidneys on the run—become muffled and dry. Their furry wrappings protect them from each other. By stages the imagery has
been removed from its origins. Despite the fact that the title refers to reggae, for example, the swan in *Dark Style Swan* (1985) was modelled on a soap dish from an Oxfam shop. By the time of *Disguise Style Swan* (1985) its neck has grown into an ornamental bracket from a kitsch candleholder. Perhaps it was inevitable that Bainbridge would embark on a series called *Abstract Sculpture*; his complaint about the defunct British formalism he was taught at the Royal College of Art was its irresponsible approach to the images it removed from the world. His eventual attitude, however, seems equidistant from Caro and Cragg, nearer in aim to the recent Cragg, with his attempted relocation of early modern concerns.

His suggestion, supported by the oversize scale and the furry texture, is that the entire activity is a form of play - not without its more sinister undertones, as Categories disintegrate, male and female merge and separate, bottles grow faces, nails sprout wings, dinosaurs develop skyscrapers instead of warts. All this occurs in an area of easy transference where limits between the natural and the civilised are abolished and permanent discontinuity is the norm. Behind grotesque is myth. Behind myth lies the id, which follows what Freud called 'the inexorable law of ambivalence'. Operating on boundaries between classifications, which are the rules we live by, Bainbridge proffers a vision of the possibilities of an unfallen world, a way of understanding our fallen nature. The oppositional stance of work like his is obvious. The only way to reach it is by rejecting norms and laws, by embracing stupidity and proclaiming that embrace. We need art as dumb and insolent as this.
What the Butler Saw contains essays and interviews by Stuart Morgan, one of Britain’s leading art critics. Opening with a group of essays on American artists such as Robert Smithson, Alice Aycock, Dennis Oppenheim and William Wegman, the collection moves on to European art of the eighties, with particular reference to art in Britain and the legacy of conceptual art. From interviews with figures as diverse as Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Christian Boltanski, Stephen Campbell and Richard Prince, the essays proceed to younger artists: Steven Pippin, Rachel Whiteread, Miroslaw Balka and, in a previously unpublished text, Damien Hirst. The selection also includes the performance art of Anthony Howell, the cartoons of Glen Baxter, and the self-exposure of Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons and Madonna.

‘Stuart Morgan’s writing goes down as easily as an iced drink and leaves satisfaction, not questions, in its wake. This collection presents an amazingly insightful entrée to the art of the eighties and early nineties. Morgan surely is an example of a critic whose work is art-like in its combination of sensitivity and sensuality. His style is elegant, inventive, and suave. His prose is often frankly beautiful.’

from the foreword by Thomas McEvilley

Stuart Morgan has been editor of Artscribe (London) and consulting editor of Contemporanea (New York). His writing has appeared in many catalogues and magazines, including Artsforum, Artscribe and frieze. He has curated ten exhibitions; his latest, curated with Frances Morris, was ‘Rites of Passage’ at the Tate Gallery, London.

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Eric Bainbridge

Eric Bainbridge: Dumb Insolence , 1985

ISBN: 0 927414 07
As a student Eric Bainbridge showed a large, open box full of clay heads. Made by repeating the same hand movements again and again, they looked like unplugged sockets; eyes, mouth, ears and neck had lost their reasons for existing and the useless lumps that resulted seemed embarrassing and unmistakably focal. "Thick", we call stupid people, our metaphor of solidity intersecting, but not contradicting, more obvious metaphors of emptiness. (Ironically, Bainbridge's paintings of the time depicted the same head as a generator of energy.) Since the overriding theme of all student work is the very fact of being a student, that box and its contents could easily have been interpreted as a satire on intellectually impoverished, conveyor-belt education, where insistence on the production of objects is motivated by the teachers' need to justify themselves and their methods. In retrospect, however, the strange head form takes its place in a repertoire of images of dysfunction, dehumanisation and decontextualisation applied as much to the body as to objects. In subsequent works, Bainbridge would isolate organs, even make a
sculpture of a wound. The resulting combination of humour and
disgust, sympathy and repulsion has become a characteristic response
to his work.

Yet in the case of his art, responses are seldom direct, because the
cues that determine them are so indirect. In a second phase,
Bainbridge's chosen material became cheap fun-fur, with which he
covered his sculptures. The fabric unified surfaces, blurred edges and
served to camouflage the familiar but magnified objects he chose to
remake. His technique had become one of systematic bafflement.

Dwarfed by overblown, woolly but somehow familiar shapes, the
spectator wandered, intimidated by the new self-assurance these
artefacts had acquired. Nursery playthings which invited touch while
simultaneously repelling it, these works were so insulated against the
assaults of reason that perception of them remained in its initial stages
for longer than usual, resisting the onset of logic. The passivity and
manipulability of the early heads had been reversed. And items it
would normally be impossible to concentrate on for more than a
second had expanded alarmingly; in stage two of Bainbridge's career,
a toy dinosaur incompetently covered in nauseating fur fabric might be
scaled up to the size of an armoured car. Though his motives differed
from theirs, he had succeeded in conveying a truth only the best
contemporary "simulationists" had managed to communicate: that
everyday objects are infinitely mysterious. "Because they are infinitely
coded," Bainbridge might add.

Western thought has preserved polarity as a habit of mind in an
attempt to maintain an increasingly outmoded way of thinking. Them
and us, it and me, here and there, he and she, yours and mine ...
Repeated ad nauseam, the litany of putative divisions resembles an
anthem of anthropocentricity. Man is unique, the chorus runs, ranks
above animals and his (always "his") edges, property and body are all
clearly distinct. Blurring of edges and contours in stage two of

Eric Bainbridge
Tactics, 1985
Stuart Morgan, 'Tactics', 1985
Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Air Gallery, 11th September - 6th October, 1985
Bainbridge's work was less a decorative decision than a statement of intent. While the early sculpture dwelt on division - the fake ocelot phase proposed a socio-cultural background for what had previously been couched in existential terms. Coloured now, and muff led, those lopped human heads had turned into cursize adult playthings, which is to say "art". In second-stage Bainbridge, taboos play hide and seek as consumer culture meets radical infantilism. In retrospect it was easy to interpret Wound as also forming lips and a vagina. Indeed, both play their part elsewhere, when a standing man vomits a cartoon speechbubble and a sculpture is titled The Hole Through Which All Things Must Pass. (Critics keen to mention Bainbridge's debt to Surrealism have a habit of leaving it unexplained, however; love, death and language were the three prongs of the Surrealist assault on conventional society.) Hacked and anonymous, Wound looks like what we eat every day, except that it is obviously human meat, a point that would not have been lost on certain members of the Surrealist fraternity. Food as animal booty becomes a child's toy as Bainbridge's train of thought is more and more preoccupied with the way that division is glossed over, when soft, pretty objects are presented as palliatives and bribes to populations whom advertisers treat exactly like babies. Manipulation means treating the public like a box of empty heads. Instead of analysing this process logically, Bainbridge pondered the complex of attractions and repulsions engendered by imitating this process in an unsophisticated, large-scale way. This turned into a meditation on design.

"They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order." Michel de Certeau's description of consumers has a hopeless air; statisticians can explain nothing about the currents in this sea, he argued, because the categories and taxonomies they employ correspond to those of industry or...
administration. What they count is what is used, not how it is used. In contrast, he proposes a distinction between “strategies” and “tactics”. Strategic rationalization seeks above all to separate the place of its own power and will from the “environment”. Typical of science, politics and military strategy, it constitutes “an effort to delimit one’s own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other”. On the other hand, a “tactic” takes place “in the space of the Other”, having no proper locus, it must play in a territory imposed on it by a foreign power. Overall planning becomes impossible, nothing that is won can be kept. In fact, like poaching, it could be termed “an art of the weak”. Perhaps things have changed in the two decades since these words were written. Perhaps de Certeau knew that they would, but a walk through any shopping mall in the world – and they are not so different – reveals the designers’ growing awareness of consumers and the architects’ constant attempts to seduce and trap them.

“Design” may be too grand a word for what planners do, just as it was too grand for spades and chairs, cups, kettles and other anonymously designed artefacts as old as time. They know that they need to guard the exits of supermarkets and patrol them – by video, not on foot. Within these narrow perimeters, the brief is to allow shoppers to browse, to let their minds wander, for then they are at their most suggestible, at a point where products, however foolish, may come to seem necessary. So music is played – not Beethoven or heavy metal but “easy listening” – and their route is punctuated by stalls with vendors, demonstrating new products and distributing free gifts. Some shops offer membership cards and hold private shopping evenings with wine and food, when customers can chat to staff and enjoy previews of next season’s goods. But what passes for clever marketing was already under way. The unmarried often meet prospective partners more casually and happily in a shop than in their
local singles bar. There are always excuses to touch or begin a conversation. In future weddings may be held in supermarkets, in the department where the couple first met, with organ music blaring over the speakers and a resident vicar wheeled in on a trolley. The pattern is just as Certeau predicted; forces of control blocked head-on by underdog manoeuvring. "an ageless art which has not only persisted through the institutions of successive political orders but goes back much farther than our histories and forms strange alliances preceding the frontiers of humanity". By which, presumably, he means to compare tactical activities with animal behaviour. When not taking the form of sports and games, what we now call "leisure" corresponds to the practice of letting thought float free, a luxury in that condition of constant warfare which animals sustain and which early man may rarely have been able to escape. The reason why strategy is permanently defeated by tactics, it seems, is that the secret weapon of the former is the escape-route of the latter. Design must be brought low because of the "designs" it has on us. What surpasses design—the shape of cups, the way a wooden spade handle fits into place—stays as permanently on our fingertips as in the backs of our minds.

The function of advertising is to persuade us that a food mixer can possess this near-mythic rightness, though the truth remains that only the simplest, most basic objects engage with us in this deep way because they can be looked through while being capable of infection with every major emotion and aspiration in our lives, not least the need for Gemütlichkeit.

Once camouflage meant saving one's skin. Nowadays it means saving one's face. In his classic History of Manners Norbert Elias traced "the advancing threshold of shame" which leads to greater censorship of our own instinctual behaviour². Politeness is defined by exclusions. How to interpret these exclusions is another matter. To Elias, table-manners include not opening the mouth too wide, so that food cannot
be seen to be chewed or bitten. Canetti interprets this edict as an
invitation: dinner-parties, he announces, provide a good opportunity to
show off your teeth for reasons of seduction. If concealment serves
only to generate curiosity about what is concealed, then taboos remain
taboo. In Bainbridge’s latest works a preoccupation with enclosed,
empty space has been dramatised by turning the fur fabric inside-out,
so that the viewer is convinced that secrets lurk within. On one side of
In Heliotrope, for example, a magnified version of a plastic
air-freshener, the bastardised fleur-de-lis-shaped hole from which the
object emits its fragrance appears as a furry cavity. In the same way
the title From the root of my mouth to the tip of my tongue forces
us to rethink the external staircase of a block of flats in a way few
architects have.) Beneath the blank configurations of pseudo-
Modernist architecture and industrial design lurk physical, if not
aesthetic, truths, Bainbridge seems to be suggesting. Inflected
constantly by forces of sexuality and competition, those truths are
manifested in positive and negative ways – sexual self-advertisement,
for example, or, conversely, not wanting to be noticed by attackers.
Yet “design”, especially the lowly variety, tells the truth, even though
we may not understand it. Bainbridge’s inside-outside-in working
pattern, shifting from stage to stage, can be read as a ritual act, just
like the palindromic tendency in the inscribed canvases. The aim is
public invisibility, a prolonged refusal to collaborate with the enemy.
Both words and logic have failed us; in daily life, it seems, the
“consumer” is precisely the one who is consumed. The solution is
low cunning, from Anglo-Saxon cunning: to know something inside
out. No collaboration is possible. Bainbridge will never mould his own
plastic ducks in order to investigate the wound that automatic
moulding creates, time after time. Perhaps turning himself into a
human conveyor-belt as he sat and fashioned these “stupid” heads of
the proletariat, or painting the far-seeing head of the artist – always.

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insistently, the same head - cured him of production-line aesthetics for ever. Third phase Bainbridge returns to the metaphors of dissociation by showing how faceless teams of men, sadly, try to put our broken world back together. He returns to the truth of the body and to images, however debased, of jungle existence. That free-floating, suggestible train of thought that the shopper is intended to experience in a supermarket can never be completely controlled, so experts say. Art evokes something like it, traditional aestheticians tell us, but in the cause of freedom. Can some of the impersonality and alienation of the modern city be evoked and healed by art? Can wounds be bandaged? Can we keep a low profile and withdraw from the fray while still pushing that same trolley through that same supermarket twice a week? We have only our instincts to fall back on. And our will to survive.

Stuart Morgan

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