

Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses

Author(s): George Baker, Martha Rosler, Richard Serra, William Kentridge, Gerard Byrne, Andrea Robbins, Max Becher, Tacita Dean, Tom Burr, Pierre Huyghe, Silvia Kolbowski, Judith Barry, Douglas Gordon, Liisa Roberts, Matthew Buckingham, Joachim Koester, Nancy Davenport, Nils Norman, Christian Philipp Müller, Renée Green, Jimmie Durham, Luis Camnitzer, Noël Burch, Allan Sekula and Zoe Leonard

Source: *October*, Vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002), pp. 6-97

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/779093>

Accessed: 28-01-2023 22:44 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*

Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses*

Edited by George Baker

The obsolescent, the “outmoded,” the nonsynchronous, discarded forms, marginal mediums: all of these seem to be resources of special interest to many of the most interesting artistic projects today. How does obsolescence figure in your work? Do you mobilize it for critical purposes primarily? What is the critical purchase of obsolescence? Or does it serve constructive purposes in your work—i.e., the making of a new sort of medium or form?

Is obsolescence a site of resistance? Why? How?

Does it provide a model for accessing dimensions of memory and/or history for you? In what ways?

How do you see obsolescence being deployed in artistic projects other than yours? Why is there this interest today?

* These questions were sent to a group of artists in the fall of 2001. Invitations were extended to a large number of artists whose projects have emerged in the past decade, and to artists involved in mediums and strategies crucial to both the contemporary relevance of this topic and to the longer history of the concerns of this journal (photography, cinema, sculpture, institutionally critical practice). Artists were invited to respond directly to our questions, or to submit documentation, visual contributions, or other forms of critical writing. The responses follow.

The obsolete, indispensable. But obsolescence or obsolescence? Obsolescence brings to mind a process associated with manufactured objects, as in “planned obsolescence”: things that have not worn out are rendered passé, outdated by technical or stylistic innovation, whereas obsolescence is the status that results. I address both. In *Capital*, Marx lays out the need for industry to develop new machinery, to lower competitively the costs of labor embedded in the production process; this drives down the price of labor to a point at which it is cheaper to rely on human labor power than on new machinery, a process that in turn drives up the cost of labor, leading to a new cycle of obsolescence, as new machines are developed to increase productivity further. The corollaries of this process include the progressive deskilling and cyclical obsolescence of those employed.

The obsolescent plant is the harbinger of commercial decline. (It is the model of all we do.) In a consumer economy, this tricky obsolescence is a requirement of product as well as of production, driven by technological imperatives—and other causes. What is now called globalization is a factor, to be sure, signaling the reconfiguration of tastes and the discovery of needs and wants that move quickly through populations touched by the scale of modern telecommunications. Staying up to date with high-touch and high-tech goods not only is frequently associated with improved social standing but is also conflated with civic participation, citizenship, or nationalism. Obsolescence here bears a negative valence.

A platitude: Obsolescence afflicts us all, and so far there is no reversal. Such windy sentiments in lieu of metaphysical theology, on the one hand, and the secular religion of progress, on the other, animated much of twentieth-century art (and mine has been no exception). A version of the modernist paradigm has consistently translated the artist-bohemian’s occupation of the low-down (or down-market) corners of life into a search expedition, the well-recognized safari for the bourgeois patrons of the artistic endeavor (*We slum for you!*). We artists have been expected to liven up patrons’ lives by dusting off the discarded, the overlooked, the obsolescent, translating these elements into treasures of taste and allegories of mortality. Exotic objects and moments function as fragments revalorizing the bourgeois course, a Nanook narrative for the modernizing middle-class.

Along with the echoes of European surrealism, Beatniks taught me a sour postwar apocalypticism as a counterpoint to the fantastic proclamations of the conquest of time and space and desire by our civilization. Artist subcultures repetitively looked for a vantage point outside hegemonic discourses of modern, industrialized garrison societies, self-defined by forced regimentation, material comfort, and military might. This interest evolved away from what might be swept under the rubric of “driftwood,” the Abstract Expressionist’s longing for the remains of the “Real” and the natural, the return of the repressed that superseded the prewar preoccupation with the found (discarded, manufactured, low-level)



object. But second nature having already effectively displaced nature in the “life world,” artists turned to the implacable gloss of consumer culture, whose handling by artists was inflected by the passé, by human imperfection. No more search for an outside on our part. (But some still define themselves as outside. Should we see contemporary extremist and insurgency movements as versions of that desire to wish it all away in an instant, to tear aside the curtain of invincibility that is smothering the aggrieved and disenfranchised?) I am stuck with the obsolete commercial object, the discard and its image, and the lowly linguistic cliché, an image or a phrase drained of complexity, reduced to a simple sign.

So here is a venerable cliché: the mannequin. That it is a thing, not just an image, has intrigued artists for about a century now. It inhabits space. (But, speaking personally, I am not terribly interested in the mannequin, only in making my own photographic images of mannequins in situ.) The mannequin is the dilapidated cliché of capitalism’s fetishistic inversion, the automaton/commodity more real than the people who have made it, more vibrant than the world from which it springs. In it we contemplate our own inability to command the processes of production or to knit together the concomitant fragments of a life. If the mannequin is the prisoner of forced choice, we can recognize its neutered body, which we know to be underneath the clothes, as the one whose identity has been forfeited by its inability to purchase a life (a terrible category whose ranks are perpetually being replenished by all sorts of routine events). We jeer and we worship, honoring and despising the fetish, coveting its new clothes while mocking its lack of agency. The shop window and its frozen inhabitants, that *tableau mort*, can only testify to our inability—even in our imagination—to transcend fragmentation and distortion, if not depersonalization. (And of course the mannequin stands in for the artist, as

Above: Martha Rosler. Children. 2001. Above right: French Connection, New York City. 2002.



the clown face did for an earlier generation: we keep the commodities cycling, at the cost of the lost dream of authenticity. When is the last time we heard something denounced as kitsch?)

The obsolete used to call to mind ruins, freighted with romantic longing (à la Rose Macaulay) for their initial plenitude and for the hubris of vanished civilizations; but also with Benjaminian archaeological meanings. Ruins suggest temporality; they function as *memento mori*. They also suggest a “timely” relic, something that has “taken place,” occupying space and time. Ruins remain, or are unearthed, bearing witness to history as failure. The specter of a past nation, a vanished people, hovers ghostlike and attenuated. Its mystery and glory attract, its collapse passes for philosophy. In evoking citizens or subjects, ruins can be seen to justify the present national course, for the decay of the past testifies to the vigor of the present. At one time, civilization gained legitimacy by claiming continuity with the ancient past; at present we have a triumphalist relation to history: we, here, now, are better. (But the doubts are never completely repressed.)

Twentieth-century fashion and design often engineered a look evocative of the futuristic dreams of technological optimism. At present, even science-fiction epics bank on the medievalism of the late British Empire’s imaginary, a known mythic past in which, moreover, the Great Chain of Being reads us the script in advance—and fashion relentlessly courts the present with the look of the just-past, but not without irony (which in fashion as in art may pass for despair). Regarding the objects of style of everyday life, especially clothing, one friend, an African American man, suggests that—here in the United States at least, where the spin cycle of fashion’s obsolescence and rebirth is whirling faster

than we have previously seen, where the obsolete returns with astonishing rapidity, as in “The Seventies (or the Eighties or Nineties) Are Back!”—the obsolescent is a way of reinstituting whiteness, returning us, I interpret, to the days of Farrah Fawcett hairdos or white buck shoes, before fashion emanated from the ’hood. (Hip-hop fashion itself began by appropriating the leisure style of the dead white preps, inserting black bodies into the casual style of unattainable privilege.) In this instance, obsolete elements of daily life assume a positive revalorization for those intent on rescuing the racial hierarchies of the recent past and the certainties that went with them. (The broader but related question of visual symbols of an unfulfilled identity of Otherness, whether of the past or of other locales, or other worlds, whether imaginary or real—I can only mention here in passing.)

I recently saw a trailer for a new Austin Powers movie, played by midget actors. Here is a bizarre deformation of an image of a (white) loser’s sixties counter-culture and its fantasies of sex and power, which one might guess hinges on tacitly acknowledging the cluelessness of those without the aggressive street smarts associated with hip-hop rather than hippie (or mod) culture—the underpowered made littler still. The obverse of this scathing hilarity is the familiar nostalgic longing for lost wholeness, or the fatal and paralyzing realization that it never was any good (*The Ice Storm* [Ang Lee, 1997]).

Is there a rupture in the house? A moment of resistance may (still) be offered by the cast-off commodity—when it first appears, intruding its repulsively worn-out presence into the present, not old enough to evoke nostalgia but only shame. This is not about the reinsertion of clothing styles into the fashion lexicon in imaginary bohémias, but about the moment before. In the “United States of Amnesia” (whose phrase is that?), these objects, not remanufactured but simply reappearing, evoke no positive memories. They are ridiculous. Worse, they point backward. But that constitutes their critical moment: The unease of the present is forced to the surface by reimagining our habitation of these discards. They *are* our past. They reconfigure past personal experiences into a *mise-en-scène* that testifies loudly to a pathetic failure of taste. Their pure dysfunctionality equals trash—or necessity. Useless as stylish accoutrements, cast-off clothing and personal accessories vie with the sad exposure of a previously—or presently—felt need. As pariah objects, they have a stench. If they are not wearables, they still rebuke us with having once desired them despite their clunky over-reach. Their personality emerges as orphans. They remind us of all despised things and people, those who live in the Third World abroad or at home, of the *arriviste* taste our parents or relatives might have exhibited, old-country mentalities, loutishness. Need I continue?

Consider the garage sale. As a social form that is a well-entrenched element of the postwar, nonurban-household economy, it allows for several masquerades: homeowner as recycler, as idiot, as predator, as business-wise householder, as neighbor, as parent of rapidly growing children, as empty nester simplifying the

home. The buyer is not a sucker but a smart deal maker, a connoisseur with secret knowledge, a neighbor helping out. At such sales, people may try to outwit each other one-on-one, while at auctions, especially on-line auctions, the focus is on the competition and the contest increases the desirability of the prize. No matter. With the commodity at the center, the social situation mirrors the larger world of ordinary business dealings. In this context the obsolete object is reborn as a frozen moment of the past, pretending to speak of realities about which it is pressed to testify as witness (note the popular public broadcasting circus *Antiques Road Show*). When I staged various carefully orchestrated garage sales in the 1970s in art locales, they were received with head scratching or dismay by critical types (and with glee by my artist contemporaries), but their exemplary reframing carried its own weight. Now the broad audience is untroubled by



doubts and thinks we are colluding in pretending that these museum events are more than an ordinary garage sale, despite the array of elements suggesting the contrary. Now that “shopping” is (literally) the theme of shows on several continents, as an apparent reading of the collective activity of public space, the artist must contemplate whether the critical power of these events has been strangled by their institutional embrace. The fin-de-siècle great leap forward by museums around the world into digital media, encouraged by go-go high-tech industries, represents the opposite pole of institutional reach, the commodity

Rosler. Traveling Garage Sale, at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. 1999.

moment of a dematerialized future, still without horizon—utopic only in a reading of that word as simple placelessness, or abstract, generalized space.

So I come to my final cliché: speed as metaphor of social progress. The engine of history has been interpreted by many techno-optimists to be the steam engine and the railroads (I am leaving out water transport), including urban railways and subways, then motor vehicles and their gigantically transformative webs of roads, and then air travel. Here social progress is measured not simply by the movement of goods and people but by landscape transformations, the creation of that Lefebvrian abstract space. If I were not interested in entropy (to invoke, belatedly, a thermodynamic metaphor that departs significantly from the humanist overtones of obsolescence and ruins)—as in the entropy of roads and subways—I would not be as vitally interested as I am in the drastic effort to banish its effects and to project a bubble world of absolute and impenetrable efficiency represented by the system of airports and air travel—a collective projection that we mournfully acknowledge is now in tatters.

Great buildings fall, bringing down with them an entire century's self-understanding and calling into question the solidity of a public sphere whose location in physical or virtual space remains unclear to us. Less cataclysmically, urban decay—requiring constant efforts at reconstruction—tugs insistently at our consciousness, by its inconvenience if not its visual offensiveness, reminding us that even the most manifestly solid (whether we are talking about the built environment or social systems) is fragile beyond our imagining. Obsolescence and the obsolete, making their millionth reappearance in this period without horizons (if not of dystopian fears), may represent the effort of the moment to break the hypnotic tranquility of silent assent to the internalized order of things. This is an order that is dictated by what passes for the seamless fabric of ordinary life, but which we intuitively understand is not what it seems. Buyer's remorse means that these contradictions, circling around the promise of remembering and the disappointment of not being made whole, will constantly recur.

MARTHA ROSLER is an artist who works primarily with photography, video and mixed forms. Her work addresses the mythologies of everyday life and the construction of space, from the built environment to virtual projections. She has done work centered on cooking, housing, airports, roads, and subways. A recent book is *Positions in the Life World*. Rosler lives in Brooklyn, New York.

*Rosler. Opposite top: Flying into La Guardia. 1997.
Bottom: Prospect Expressway, Brooklyn. 1997. (From Rights of Passage.)*





Top: Richard Serra. Torqued Spirals (lead models). 2000–2001. Photo: Allen Glattnier. Bottom: Serra. Torqued Ellipses (lead models). 1997. Photo: Dirk Reinartz. Courtesy Richard Serra.

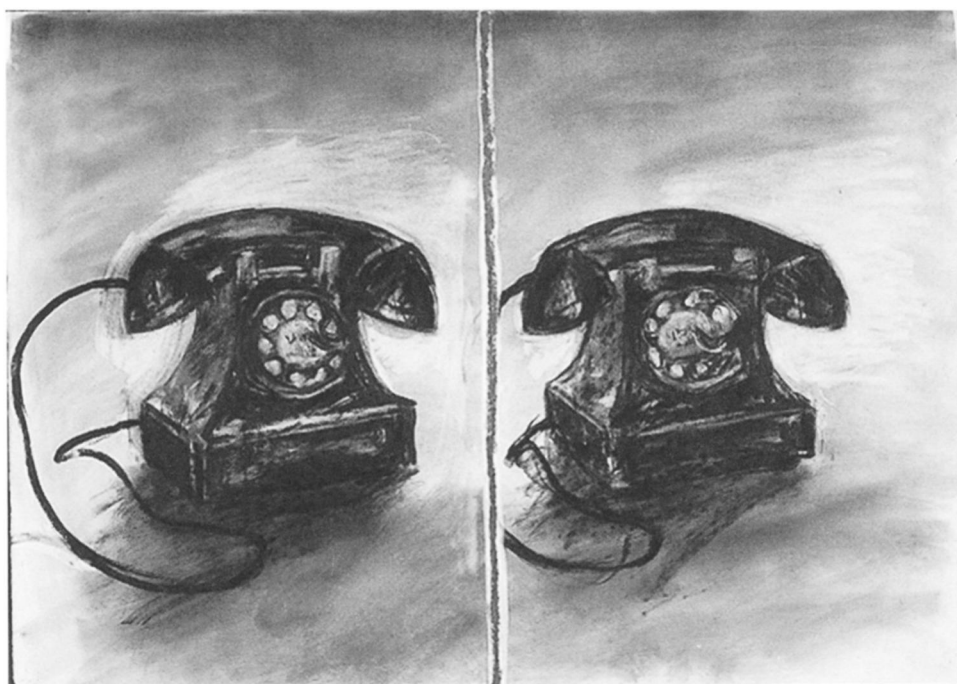
RICHARD SERRA

The obsolescent is not a concept I have ever thought about. I consider space to be my medium. The articulation of space has come to take precedence over other concerns. I attempt to use sculptural form to make space distinct. This requires that I employ industrial technologies and bring the practices and procedures of the industrial process into whatever the context may be. I admit, the work is disruptive. However, I want to direct the consciousness of the viewer to the realities of the conditions: private, public, political, formal, ideological, economic, psychological, commercial, sociological, institutional . . . or any of those combined. Part and parcel of making space distinct is to ground the spectator in the reality of the context. For me, the emphasis is on the work's ability to achieve this in sculptural terms. My response to a context is to use sculptural means that both reveal and are relevant to the connotative specifics of the context. The downward force of gravity and weight specifically when rooted in context—urban or landscape—challenges easy commodification. My sculptures don't reside in a visual, optical space nor can they be transplanted into cyberspace, they demand the haptic experience of a viewer in motion.

I am not a prophet and cannot predict the future. I do not believe in the electronic annihilation of space, time, and medium specificity. You cannot simulate a torqued spiral nor is it the simulation of anything else. My sculptures are not generated by computer programs. I start with questions. Models follow. The models are three-dimensional formulations of answers to those initial questions. I have always worked with models. The basic problems of space and tectonics are worked out in models. Computer technology is only a tool to translate three-dimensional facts into fabrication plans.

RICHARD SERRA is a sculptor who lives and works in New York City and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

OCTOBER 100, Spring 2002, pp. 14–15. © 2002 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



*William Kentridge. Drawing from the film
Stereoscope. 1998–1999. Courtesy of the artist.*

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Some thoughts on obsolescence

Working with an outmoded camera in an age of high-definition digital imagery. Both the medium and the images are prior. I start with the desire to draw an object or an image—something seen, something described, something referred to. Or I have a desire to work in a certain way—to work with paper cutouts, or white chalk on black paper, say—and look for images or ideas appropriate to this medium. Any critical weight these images may bear, any insight into the nature of obsolescence, follows some distance in their wake.

I started working with charcoal animation partly out of necessity (no backers to be found for a feature film I had written, and there was a choice of spending years jumping through producers' hoops, or drawing it myself). This meant that I could work on my own, and did not have to know in advance any of the details of the film, as there was no crew that had to be informed. For similar reasons I continue to work in this way, and have avoided the siren calls of high-tech digital animation—which would involve not producers' hoops being jumped through, but digital technicians being wooed, cajoled, seduced. I have a fear of all their skills and techniques being put at the service of the artist. There is a kind of tyranny in such a situation as well—again I would have to know in advance what the work was to be, in order to explain it. And of course, the very nature of the techniques would change fundamentally the images being made using them. Charcoal and paper has imperfect erasure as an ineluctable part of it. In a digital medium it would simply be a digital effect, one of any number, all equally gratuitous. In the case of this manner of filming, the obsolescence of the technique provides a safe haven in which to work.

The Bakelite telephones, and the other dated pieces of technology that appear in some of the drawings, are there largely because they meet the process of drawing halfway. The blackness of Bakelite and the darkness of charcoal seem made for each other. At a second level, there is a way in which all the mechanical technologies are coherent in a way in which electronic technologies are not. So that an obsolete manual telephone switchboard can be a better way of describing the plethora of moments of communication with which we are bombarded than a drawing of an electronic switchboard. There is something directly "drawable" about mechanical as opposed to electronic technology. A third and the hardest point—and here I feel on very uncertain ground—has to do with time and geography. There is a certain familiarity and reassurance in a Bakelite phone, for example, which has to do with the certainties of childhood (the phone that I depict is a phone from childhood). But there is also something else in this persistence of the old. A refusal to move with the times is also a refusal neatly to accept the precepts or preoccupations of the metropolitan center—far off, and

often mistakenly assuming that its concerns and its times are the only ones appropriate to everywhere else.

There is a way in which working with contemporary technologies, either as a medium or as subject matter—cell phone rather than Bakelite phone—becomes very much about fashion, style, and temporality.

This year's phone is noticeably different from last year's phone, video effects from the late 1980s are very different from video effects in the '90s; and inevitably pieces made using cutting-edge technology are stamped as being of and about the era of those technologies.

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE is a South African artist whose work tracks a personal route across the fraught legacy of apartheid and colonialism through an innovative use of charcoal drawing, animation, film, and theater. Kentridge sees his work as rooted in Johannesburg—the city in which he was born and continues to work today.

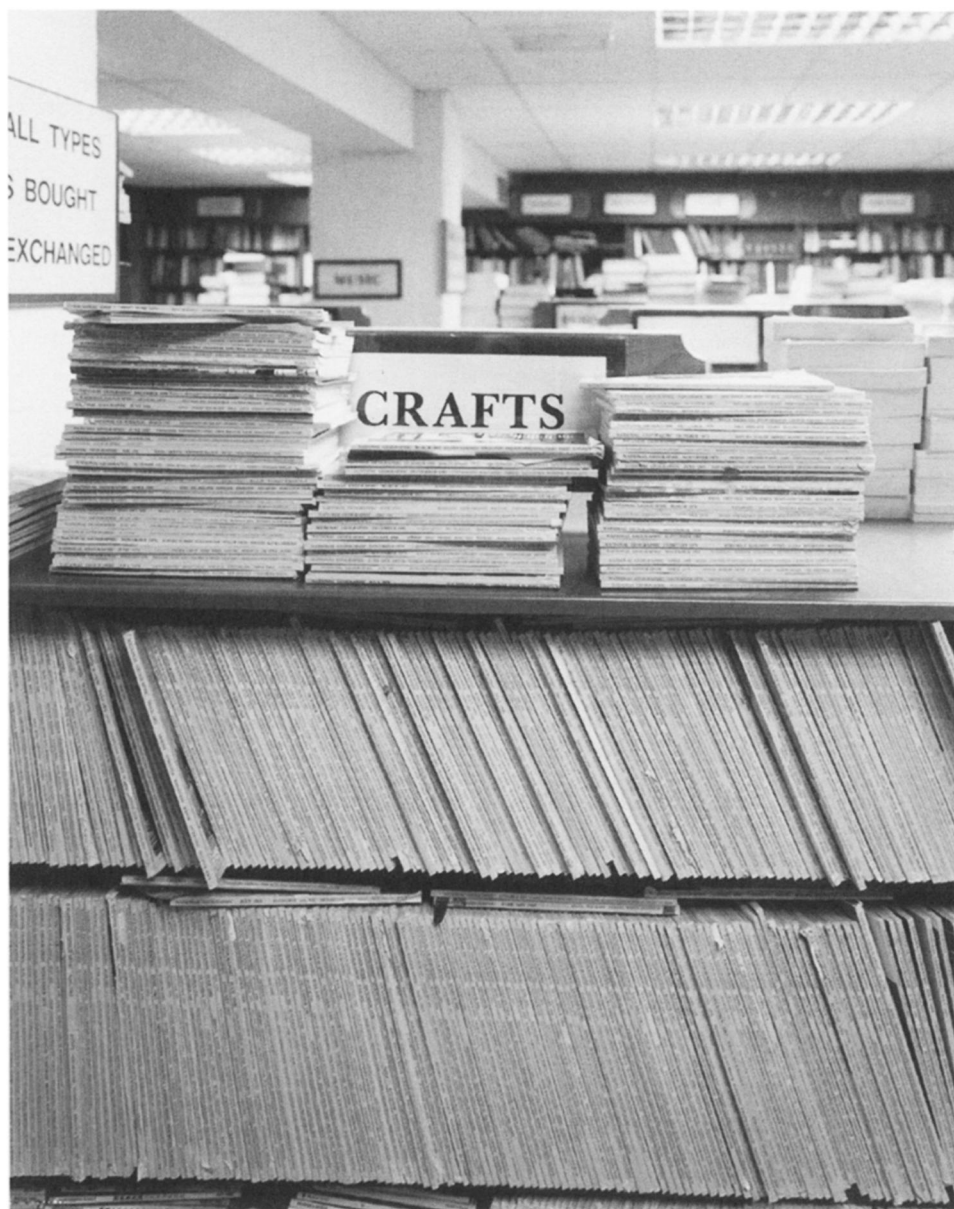
My two-pence worth

1. Undoubtedly, words like *obsolescence*, *anachronistic*, and *redundant* have a currency in contemporary art practices. The *obsolescent* appears not only as an instrumental or critical strategy, something to resist or embrace, but as an unavoidable material condition, a repercussion of the very activity of making things (in small quantities). To what degree the category of the obsolescent is only recently constituted (possibly a consequence of the impact of digital industry on how we relate to clumsy things in spaces), or is rather a defining condition of artistic practice in modernity (a consequence of the fabrication of particular things amid a proliferation of industrially manufactured general *things*) is a question for art history. Wherever its origins lie, to an artist working with photography and film (media that once appeared almost intrinsically current), obsolescence looks unavoidable. My own practice's anachronistic potential became apparent a few years ago when Kodak—a multinational corporation whose ever-expanding product line largely defines the parameters of the photographically possible—discontinued the film I was using. This loss signified the industry's ongoing process of rationalizing traditional product lines; for me at least, the loss of my preferred film stock tainted the remaining nondigital photographic processes still available, and the practices built around them, with the impending threat of extinction/obsolescence. With its commercial value abraded by the less expensive, the easier to distribute, and the chemistry-free, much of what we recognize as photographic practice is fated to be fetishized as "Fine Art" by connoisseurs of the *fine image*.

2. The Euro converter. See page 20.

3. "Pictures." The making of pictures is an obsolete practice. Among artists there appears to be a renewed interest in making pictures. This practice of working with pictures rarely involves appropriation, nor does it carry the same disquiet about "representation" attached to the "Pictures" artists of the 1980s. Instead, in recent photography in general and in the work of artists as prominent and diverse as Luc Tuymans, William Kentridge, and a host of less widely exhibited artists, there seems an almost guileless commitment to, or nostalgia for, a "vernacular" code of representation. To my mind this "vernacular" is a critical response to issues raised by a decade of dismantling the codes of representation. It is not monolithic or universalist, but network-based, provisional, and mediated. While the practices to which I refer involve making and trafficking in pictures—albeit as a degraded or outmoded form of communication—they do so with a fluency that amounts to a sense of craft, what might be characterized as an investment in the idea of practices as medium specific. In modernity, contemporary "craft"-based practices were





defined through ideas of tradition, of specific peoples, and voluntary marginalization, i.e., in apparent opposition to the trajectory of modernity. For many contemporary artists these terms appear to have acquired a critical potential to which they are drawn.

4. In the time between when I write this and when you read this, the currencies of twelve European countries will become obsolete, replaced by a *multinational* currency to be known as the Euro. An air of anxiety surrounds the changeover. At present there are desperate attempts to use up Europe's imminently worthless illegally earned cash. According to one newspaper, cash sales of yachts have skyrocketed in recent weeks, while septuagenarians and octogenarians skeptical of the security of financial institutions (a residue of historical memory) are being urged to come forward with the bundles of hoarded cash that constitute life savings. A curiously oversized type of calculator that can do nothing but convert between Irish Pounds and Euro has been distributed to every household in the Republic. By February 9, the concluding date of the changeover period, it too will become redundant, except for calculations that involve multiples of 1.27 or .79.

5a. "Obsolescence transforms commodities into raw materials." Matthew Bakkom, Artist and Founder of the Canal Street Historical Society, New York, December 2001.¹

5b. *National Geographic* magazines, Chapters used-book department, Abbey Street, Dublin. See page 21.

1. Editor's note: The Canal Street Historical Society is an artist project executed by Matthew Bakkom. It was one of ten site-based initiatives commissioned by Art in General as part of the exhibition "Art in General on Canal," and it ran in this context from October 9, 2001, to February 28, 2002. "The Canal Street Historical Society was created on June 21, 2001, in order to collect, record, and archive documentary material and testimony that bear relation to Canal Street and its vicinity in order to create a centralized archive which might capture the current moment and our most recent past. The Society is interested in a wide range of observational styles—everything from personal reflections to scientific quantification of phenomena. We will solicit and collect submissions from any interested party in the form of drawing, writing, photographs, motion pictures (film/video/digital), audio recording, and objects of reasonable size. The Society will place each object received in its official archive which will be protected by the Society until such point as it can be deposited in a secure institutional setting (such as a university or library). Through this process we hope to create a diverse, participatory portrait of Canal Street for the future use of citizens and scholars." From *The Canal Street Historical Society Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (September 24, 2001), n.p.

GERARD BYRNE is an artist based in Dublin. In spring 2002 his work will be shown at Green on Red Gallery Dublin, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, and *Manifesta 4* in Frankfurt.

ANDREA ROBBINS AND MAX BECHER

Overleaf: Andrea Robbins and Max Becher. London Bridge, Arizona. 1996/2001.

ANDREA ROBBINS and MAX BECHER live in New York City and have been working together since 1986. They photograph cultural dislocations due to colonialism, Diaspora, immigration, and other natural and unnatural processes. They call their larger project “the transportation of place.”

OCTOBER 100, Spring 2002, pp. 23–25. © 2002 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

1831

"New" London Bridge is completed, replacing the "Old" London bridge, which had stood for 622 years.

1862

London city government concludes that the bridge is no longer capable of withstanding the heavy traffic that is gradually pushing it into the Thames river.



LONDON

BRI

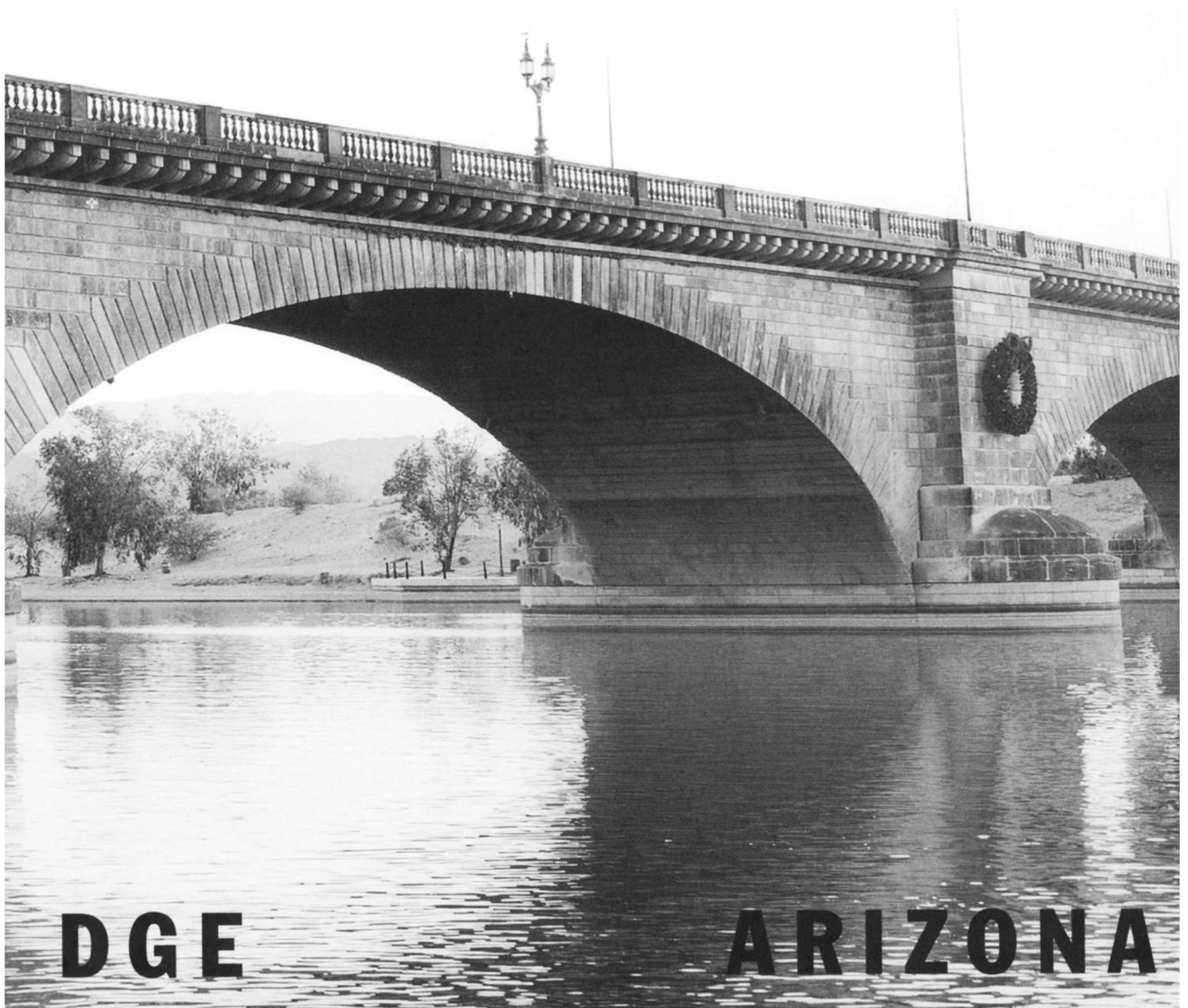
1968

To ensure its preservation as a monument to 19th century British engineering, the bridge is put up for sale. The American Robert McCulloch, of McCulloch Oil Corporation pays the winning bid of \$2.46 Million and transports the structure as numbered granite blocks to the US.

1968 – present

London Bridge is erected in the “barren” desert near Havasu Lake, Arizona. A channel from the lake is dug to the same width as the Thames to accommodate the bridge’s span. The site immediately attracts many tourists. Robert McCulloch develops an English-themed tourist village and a residential community which is approaching its planned population of 75,000.

Andrea Robbins and Max Becher 1996/2001



TACITA DEAN

For me, obsolescence is a state of normality. Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time. The one thing I have noticed is that so often I am attracted to things conceived in the decade of my birth. I court anachronism—things that were once futuristic but are now out of date—and I wonder if the objects and buildings I seek were ever, in fact, content in their own time, as if obsolescence was invited at their conception.

So obsolescence is about time in the way film is about time: historical time; allegorical time; analog time. I cannot be seduced by the seamlessness of digital time; like digital silence, it has a deadness. I like the time you can hear passing: the prickled silence of mute magnetic tape or the static on a record. So obsolescence has an aura: the aura of redundancy and failure; the aura around what has been improved upon.

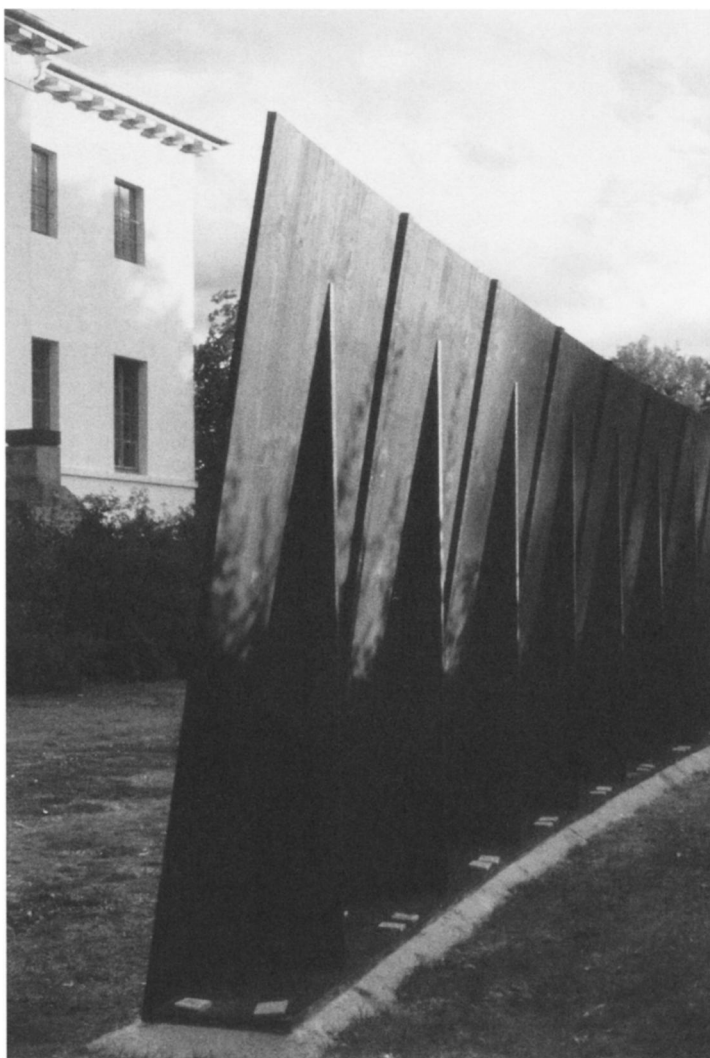
And yet obsolescence hounds my working life. Laboratories close down. Shops no longer stock spools. Brown magnetic tape is unavailable and the musician in the Fernsehturm updates his keyboard. And so obsolescence ends in an underworld of people dealing from dark rooms and flea-market stalls, until enough time passes, so that whatever it was that was obsolete, has now become rare. And rare no longer holds my attention.

TACITA DEAN was born in Canterbury, England, in 1965, and studied at Falmouth School of Art and The Slade School of Fine Art, London. Her recent major solo exhibitions have included Tate Britain and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, both in 2001. She is represented by Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

OCTOBER 100, Spring 2002, pp. 26–27. © 2002 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



Tacita Dean. Photograph taken on location for the film Sound Mirrors. 1999. Courtesy Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.



*Tom Burr. Deep Purple. 2000. All images
courtesy of American Fine Arts Co., New
York, and Galerie Neu, Berlin.*

TOM BURR

*Edgar Allan Poe, DEEP PURPLE, and Haus Salve Hospes**

backyards

Sometimes, particularly in the suburbs, or in those areas on the very fringe of urban areas which can't properly be called suburbs (or in certain small towns . . .), large green hedges surround lush green lawns, separating the street from the backyard, the sidewalk from the patio, the pedestrian from the lawn-chair lounge. Often these hedges are planted or trimmed relatively close to the ground so that simply the idea of a separation is enacted by relatively low-slung ribbons of green. But just as often they are grown to greater heights, rising seven, eight, or nine feet from the earth and more, effectively obliterating the ground-level views from one side to the other. Gazing through the hedges remains the only means of visually transgressing such a lofty and well-designed wall of foliage, finding the holes within the yellowed and thinned portions of the hedge and peering inward, into the hedge, and then through to the other side.

within hedges

If a hedge has a certain bulk to it, a depth of a few feet or more, and if it has matured enough to allow for some larger yellowed and thinned patches to develop, it may be possible to enter the hedge itself and to find repose there, however briefly, between the lawn and the sidewalk, or the lawn and yet another lawn. (I've done this myself many times, although not in recent years . . . the hedge I most often explored was a hemlock hedge, which was adjacent to a stand of mountain laurel, and there were endless depressions, cavities, and channels within the foliated structure where I could find space in which to reside.) Within the hedge there is a peculiar *in-between* sensation (as I remember it), a hovering in the middle of two distinct zones, which were intended to be partitioned off from one another, however gracefully, by the presence of the hedge. (The hedge behind the Haus Salve Hospes has a wild, uneven quality to it, with shoots and branches jutting out in all directions. Clearly at one time it was a tamer hedge, trained to a very particular height and depth, and yet now it has grown out and spilled beyond its original geometric configuration. But the earlier design is still recognizable, and the hedge is not in such a state as to be beyond restoration. It is somewhere on a journey from its role as a formal garden wall toward a more bohemian, free-flowing existence.)

* Originally published in Tom Burr, *Low Slung* (Braunschweig and New York: Kunstverein Braunschweig/Verlag Lukas & Sternberg, 2000). The Haus Salve Hospes is the structure that now houses the Kunstverein Braunschweig.

walls

In 1846, Edgar Allan Poe writes: *But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. The wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. The external world could take care of itself.*

walls

In 1981, *Tilted Arc*, 120 feet of Corten steel forged into a slight arc and set at a slight tilt, was first installed at 26 Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan. Among the arguments made against the sculpture and in favor of its removal had to do with the plaza's accumulation of graffiti, waste, and litter, apparently prompted by the presence of the steel arc. In addition, the claim was made by Judge Re, whose office was located in the office tower at 26 Federal Plaza, that an increase in the rat population had been observed since the arc's arrival. He wrote: "We have never experienced a rodent problem of the present enormity in this area. Exterminators are called regularly, at a considerable expense, to rid our Courthouse of this hazard." Additional claims were made during the lengthy court proceedings that the arc was particularly suited to function as a blast wall for terrorists. A federal physical security specialist elaborated that the arc would "vent explosive forces not only upwards but also in an angle towards both buildings." In 1989 the arc was removed.

within buildings

Edgar Allan Poe continues: *It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell you of the many rooms in which it was held. There were seven—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different; as might have been expected from the duke's love of the bizarre. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened.*

outside buildings

Richard Serra has stated explicitly, more than once over several years, that his work has little or nothing to do with decoration, that his works never decorate or ornament the sites in which they are placed. Seen (as I did) in person, or from the many existing photographs, the arc has a highly ornamental quality to it, draped across the plaza like some long, low-slung snake. The snake became particularly

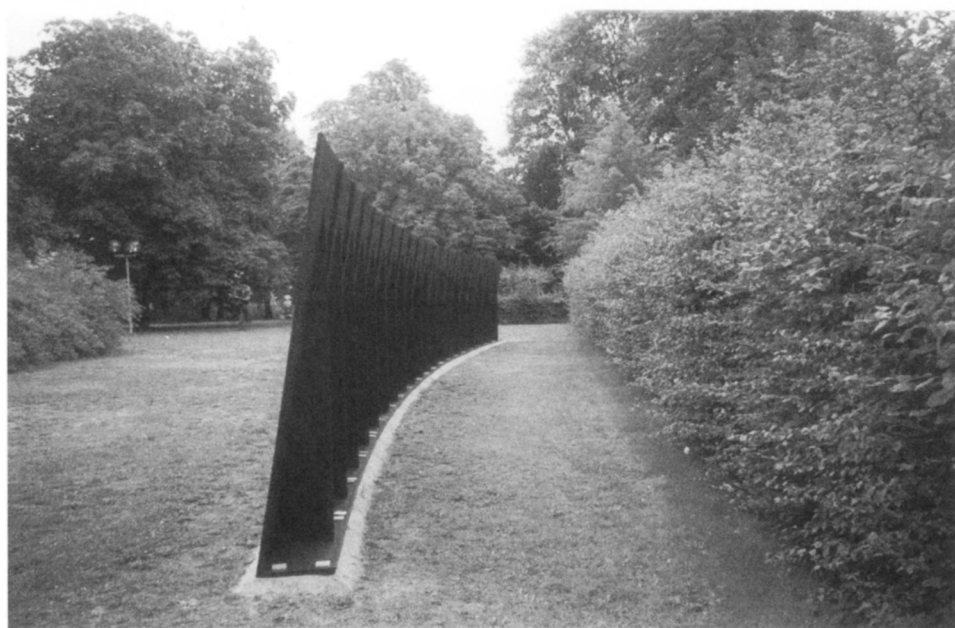
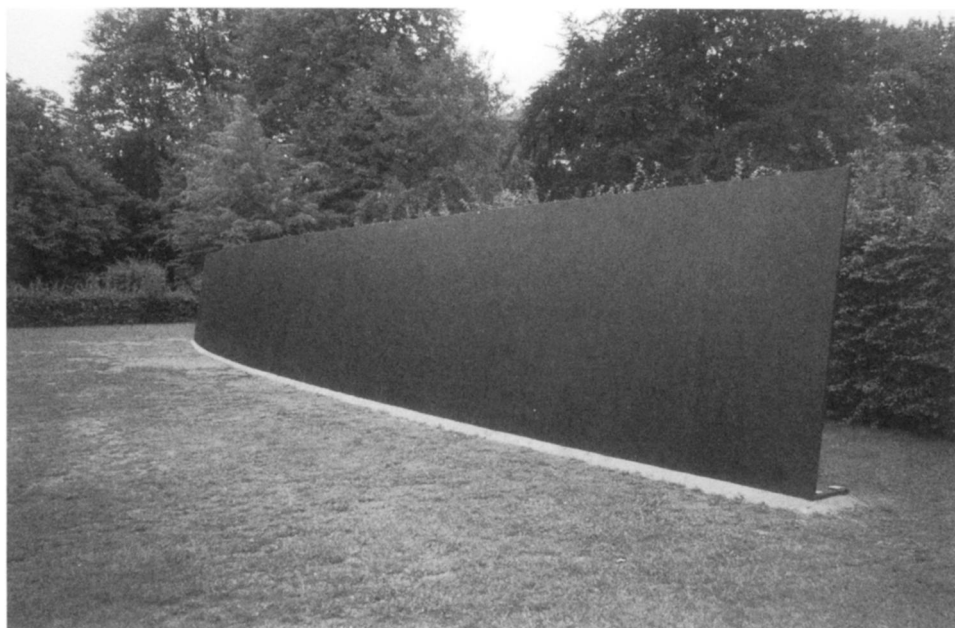
mysterious at night, after the office building at 26 Federal Plaza emptied out, casting long, curved shadows across the plaza. It is then that the graffitists came out (I imagine), perhaps under the mixed light source of a full moon and the obsessively bright night-time flood lights surrounding the area, turning the minimal Corten surface into a Gothic web of words, insignias, and symbols, not all of them pleasant according to reports. (Richard Serra writes: "Several of the speakers complained about people pissing on the sculpture or about the obscene content of graffiti scrawled on its surface.") In addition, the urine could have had a particularly ornamental effect on the Corten steel, which is designed to rust slowly to a ruddy orange as a natural result of its oxidation process.

decoration

and Poe: (. . .) *That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes were scarlet—a deep blood color. Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illuminated the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances.*

backyards

The views from the back windows of the Haus Salve Hospes stretch out across the lawns (which need reseeding), across the hedges (which need re pruning), and into the park lands on the far side of the hedges. The park lands are dotted here and there by large clusters of trees, the occasional full purple beech tree figuring prominently among them. It occurred to me that a fence might be a good idea, set parallel to the hedge, but on this side of the Haus Salve Hospes, in front of the hedge at some distance to allow traffic to flow somewhat steadily behind it if need be. The fence should be portable, I reasoned, ready to be up and moved at a (few) moments notice, and relocated anywhere else in the world where a fence might be needed. It should be made of wood, the most common material for fences that I am accustomed to (besides the classic chain-link fence, which I knew I didn't want), and it should be completely enveloped in purple . . . a deep, dark, Gothic purple. *(But, in spite of these things, it was a gay and magnificent revel. The tastes of the duke were peculiar. He had a fine eye for colors and effects. He disregarded the decora of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be sure that he was not.)*



Above and right: Burr. Deep Purple. 2000.



TOM BURR is based in New York City.

PIERRE HUYGHE

Translated by George Baker

When we try to arrange our representations in order to understand reality, it is rare that this suffices to describe the present that we share. It is hard enough to perceive what we share behind such forms. Contemporaneity is the photogenic aspect of the present; that which does not enter the image given of the present is considered obsolete. Also, any event of which we cannot form an image, or that no longer has one, is expelled from the field of debate, and loses by this fact its very existence. That which is withdrawn from representation must pass through narrative—and thus through a narrator—in order to exist.

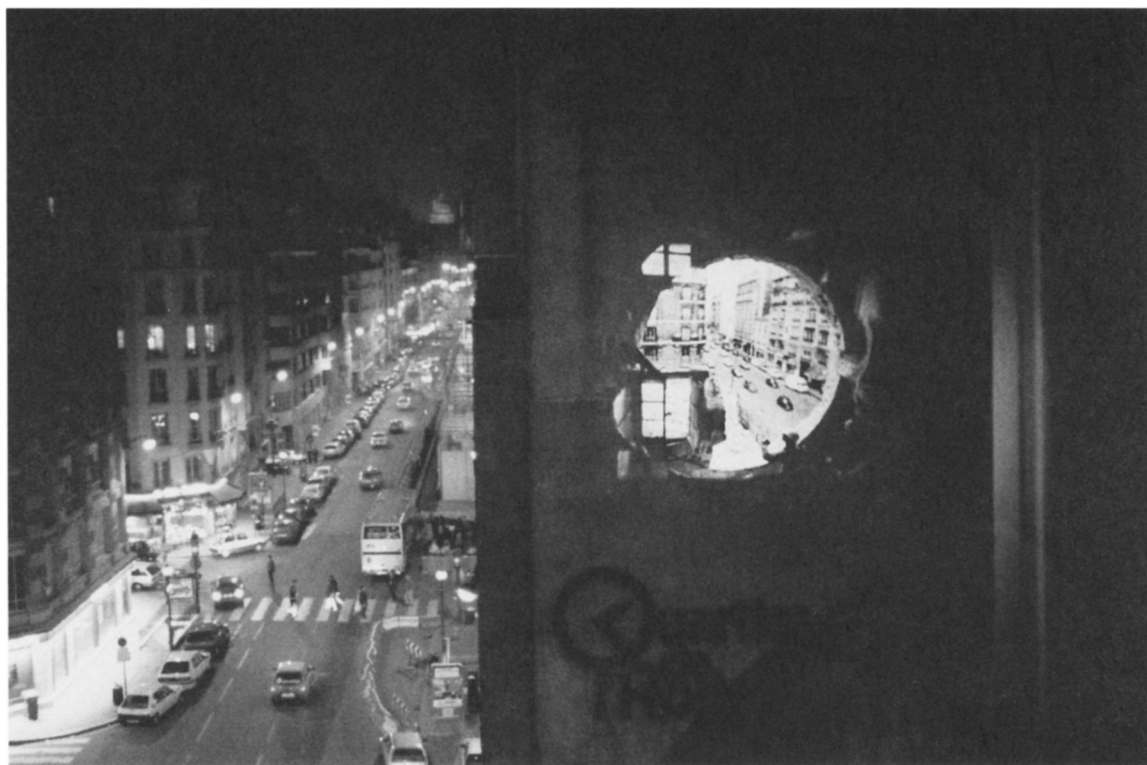
Tired of waiting for the event, commentary has ended up preceding it. It has staged the event and the event has lost its immanent nature. The real, the image, and commentary are superimposed. The duration that separated them has disappeared, and with it the role of the narrator. What happened to the narrative that separated us from an event, and to the duration that was attached to it?

That which is obsolete seems tied to duration. It is actually a question of distance. We must invent singular distances, gaps for observing the dynamics that cross such a space. Obsolescence is a frame, an instrumentalization of the gaze. Where information seeks to annul the distance that separates us from the event, to bring near that which is far, the narrator seeks to cross such distance, to traverse distance itself. It is a problem of displacement and of re-memorization. This non-mediatised space that exists in the folds of information is attached to sensation, to affect, and to what Roland Barthes called the “third meaning,” the obtuse sense. Its reception is inevitably very different.

Everything that resembles a narrative refers to an elsewhere, an elsewhere that is also a before, where things had a real existence. The situations and forms that were produced moved through utopias, negotiations, and failures. That which one seeks to make is the history of a narrative, and of its current parallel scenarios in the shadow of the image and of use. And to actualize this narrative, we must inhabit it. In itself, narrative is never obsolete—what is, however, is the way we look at it.

PIERRE HUYGHE lives in Paris and is represented by the Marian Goodman Gallery. He had solo exhibitions in 2001 at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, and at the French Pavilion in the Venice Biennale.

OCTOBER 100, Spring 2002, pp. 34–35. © 2002 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



*Pierre Huyghe. Light Conical Intersect. 1996.
(Anti-event [Paris], digital print poster.)
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.*

Artist note: *Conical Intersect* is a project by Gordon Matta-Clark that took place in Paris in 1975. Matta-Clark cut a conical negative form out of a condemned building as an anti-monument. In 1996, at the site cut out by Gordon Matta-Clark, a cutout in light (produced by the film *Conical Intersect*) was projected on the building that took its place.

Fourteen or fifteen years ago, I was invited by a student of mine to visit an exhibition of her work. The work was comprised of projects dealing with colonial and postcolonial, stereotypical representations of African “woman.” My memory is that the theoretical writings that the work engaged were of recent date, but I clearly remember that the forms that the projects took utilized a kind of craft vocabulary, consisting of handworked materials of various kinds. These methods looked as though they were from another period of history—preindustrial and certainly predating the advent of several technical media used by artists over the previous half century. And I remember commenting to the student that the employment of anachronistic media and methods failed to take into account the modern history of the aesthetic practices which were her personal and public context, and failed to take into account the particular aspects of how that history (which is always both multiple and singular) interacted with the role that certain techniques and media played in a larger social arena. This detachment from such developments, I remember saying, seemed to me to create a kind of unintended marginalization that hampered the critical aspects of the work.

I don’t really know how I would respond if a student showed me such work today, but it is clear to me that I made those comments with a certainty backed by my ignorance about the future of technical developments already in motion then. The subsequent technological progressivism of much art (and architecture) in the nineties and later would make me wonder about the significance of moving at a slower pace. And the situation is complicated today by a recent return in art to low-tech media in projections and videos and films, while at the same time the digitization of these media proceeds apace. And sometimes, as in works I’ve recently seen in museums and galleries, the imagery in these seemingly low-tech works is a kind of throwback to the simple actions or processes or narratives engaged by earlier art film and video works. But they also engage the seamlessness of digital techniques. So that we get to have both the nostalgic reassurance of the past and the *jouissance* of high-tech manipulation. Artists with critical intent, it seems, currently have to navigate a conceptual and methodological minefield—not even vaguely comparable, of course, to the real minefields that have been created in various countries, but minefields of some historical significance nevertheless.

Is there an inherently critical medium or method or form? If we’ve learned anything from poststructuralist theory, it is that no form is transparent to the meaning of a work, and so form always matters. There is an urgency to making history an active part of a present without memory, but there is, in a general sense, no form or medium or method that is particularly suited to that effort. Because, although the incorporation of the obsolete can sometimes imbricate history and question the “evolution” of technology and aesthetic forms, culture



*Silvia Kolbowski. Self-portrait (ca. 1989/1991)
with outmoded clothing. 2000/2002. Courtesy
American Fine Arts Co., New York.*



*Kolbowski. Self-portrait (ca. 1982/1992)
with outmoded clothing. 2000/2002.
Courtesy American Fine Arts Co., New York.*

moves so fast these days that a form that is critical or resistant one minute can be read as acquiescent or compliant the next. And so we always have to watch where and how we step. And even then, one never steps outside of various economies. In artist Phillippe Parreno's brilliant high-tech animation short, *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000), Ann Lee, the anime character he bought for 46,000 yen, a figure with no past to speak of, puts the dilemma succinctly when she asks how she can sell a product, when she IS a product herself?

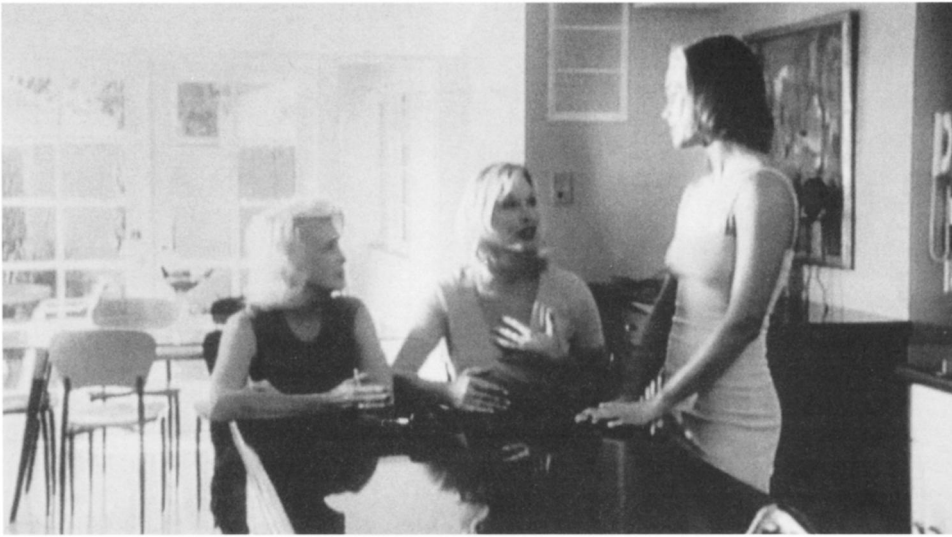
SILVIA KOLBOWSKI is represented by American Fine Arts Gallery, New York, where her project "an inadequate history of conceptual art" (1998–1999) was exhibited. "an inadequate history . . ." was also exhibited in the 2000 Whitney Biennial, the Oliver Art Center, Oakland, and Western Front, Vancouver. In 2000, "seven x 7," a video about the recent transformation of Orchard Street, New York, was exhibited at the boutique Seven, located on Orchard Street. She teaches in the Department of Architecture at the Parsons School of Design, and is currently working on a project about shopping and other things.

As an artist with no signature style, I use a variety of critical approaches in thinking through the issues in my work. Both the form and the content of my work derive from a research methodology that produces a number of different and often competing strategies. While none of my works are solely about one idea, I have found that the notion of obsolescence as it is defined here as “the outmoded, the nonsynchronous, the discarded, and the marginal” (I have rephrased your description somewhat) has been a generative node around which to launch my inquiries. What is appealing about this construct is that it contains traces of other histories and memories while simultaneously allowing for the possibility of transformation and for the unexpected.

As an artist who also works in the discipline formerly known as “institutional critique” or “site specificity,” I often choose sites to investigate that are marginal spaces—interstitial locations that, in fact, serve as transit zones. These “naked spaces,” to use Manuel Castell’s term, are places where nothing happens, where you are not expecting anything, but where something can suddenly manifest itself. Perhaps my most obvious use of this type of space is in the location of *Not reconciled*. This ongoing series of “as told to” stories is often sited directly within the architecture such that it underscores the relation of the site to the subject matter of the stories. For *First and Third*, my contribution to the 1987 Whitney Biennial, I located this video projection directly on the limestone walls of the fourth-floor stairwell alcove. The large disembodied heads, each recounting a story about immigrant expectations and U.S. ideology, seemed to appear out of nowhere, tell a story, and then disappear. Furthermore as each face was projected directly on the walls in such a way that only the face and not the frame of the projection was visible, it seemed as though the walls themselves were speaking. This dematerialization within the architecture called attention to the demographics of the Whitney Biennial and emphasized the content of these stories in particular. They are about those other Americans—not white, not male, and not often represented in the Whitney Biennial circa 1987.¹

For *border stories, working title, from one side to another*, produced for INsite2000, I chose an abandoned building at the edge of San Diego’s rapidly gentrifying Gaslamp District to mount a series of stories about life along what is increasingly a permeable border between San Diego and Tijuana. The stories play across several billboard-size windows, seeming to keep up with pedestrians as they walk along the street. The installation functions as a broken fence running alongside the viewer, mirroring the interwoven story lines of cultural difference and the non-specificity of place. In doubling the fence—as border, as window, as nonplace—on a site which itself is an outpost, I hoped to provoke a confrontation between the

1. See my artist project “Not reconciled,” *October* 73 (Summer 1995), pp. 55–70.



Judith Barry. border stories, working title, from one side to another. 2000.

viewer and what Mike Davis has characterized as the most difficult boundary of them all: the border in the mind.

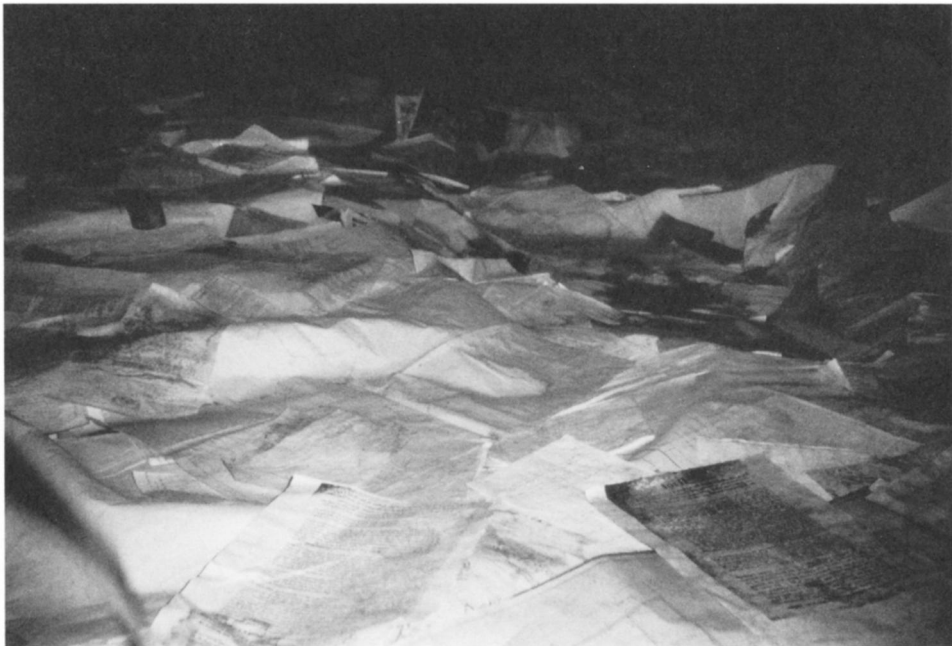
Although the term “site specificity” implies that subject matter and site are conjoined contextually (particularly for the viewer), in fact my process proceeds through investigation. It is not only that I interrogate the notion of “place” from a variety of critical perspectives, but also that within this exploration I consider how the many histories of a site have produced its present conditions. Inevitably this leads directly to “the obsolescent” as defined here (by *October*’s questions) and beyond that as well. Each time I encounter “the obsolescent” in my research, it must be rethought specifically in relation to a series of questions that are currently in circulation. Discovering what is obsolete, discarded, marginal, and outmoded within a particular site traces a path that I may chose to analyze further.

Each project of necessity then produces disparate relations to notions of the obsolescent, as the nature and context of each work is very different. For instance, for *Dépense: A museum of irrevocable loss*, the site was the city of Glasgow, and the work was produced within the framework of the fact that Glasgow was the “European City of Culture” for 1990. My research led to infrastructure questions that circled particularly around the unemployment rate (then at 46%), and the hundreds of abandoned factory buildings dotting the landscape even at the heart of the urban core.

These factory buildings, full of thousands of unwanted documents—the ship plans, bills of lading, shop drawings—were the sites that had produced Glasgow’s former industrial might. I saw the documents as evidence of the work that had transpired in this place and in relation to two issues that seemed unavoidable in contemporary Glasgow as it was the City of Culture. Briefly, I read the abandoned sites with their useless documents as evidence of how a theory of what Georges Bataille called “*dépense*” might be put to work in Glasgow. And I also saw that the relationship between these documents and the endlessly circulating images of Glasgow’s glorious industrial past—in old films and photographs that were continuously on display within the City of Culture—was a demonstration of the power of the aura of images in Walter Benjamin’s terms. The images have exchange value but the documents were declared worthless even by local historical societies, regardless of the fact that they were beautifully crafted.

The installation became a staging ground for these concepts—a way of spatializing the materials I was working with as well as the ideas—such that the reading or experience outlined above might be produced by a visitor to the site of the installation. I was intrigued by Bataille’s notion of *dépense* as a theory of a *need* for loss, in Denis Hollier’s words, rather than a theory of loss strictly speaking. This is a theory that, Hollier writes, “responds to the need to believe that there is a pure loss, that there is a difference between consuming and consummating, that there is lost time and that there are waste lands, unproductive expenditures, things one never gets over, sins that cannot be redeemed, garbage that cannot be recycled.”² This is a

2. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. xiv.



Barry. Dépense: A museum of irrevocable loss. 1990.

theory that considers why not to build in a city, which asks if we need space in the city in which the past might be accepted, rather than mourned or even celebrated?

Obsolescence here signaled a breakdown in the convenient relationship between work and leisure, where leisure might be considered a part of work and culture its product (particularly as this project was for Glasgow as City of Culture). I wanted to make a place in the city for that which no longer has a place, for the idea of waste. For in this rush to replace, to retrofit, to transform, to gentrify, to rebuild, it seems that more than ever cities will not tolerate that which is disused, unproductive, not consumable, just as they silence those who have no acknowledged space within the ideology of production. Conjoining obsolescence and *dépense* was a useful wedge into these utopian social models, still the dominant order for all city planning. I also saw the differences among the examples that I was contrasting—the dematerialized images and the materialized documents—as a further elaboration of this idea of waste in relation to place and in relation to space, in addition to the primary reading I mentioned above about value. This is just one of the many ways I have considered obsolescence. I am mistrustful of generalities, and yet—or perhaps precisely because of this fact—I find that I cannot consider the implications of the notion of the “site specific” without also including an analysis of how obsolescence functions within that site and in relation to the set of questions that are revealed through this inquiry.

JUDITH BARRY is an artist and writer who lives in New York City. Currently, she is working on a book about art and technology, researching several new installation projects, and designing a Web-based work. Recently, she was the recipient of the Kiesler Prize for Architecture and the Arts, and the “Best Pavilion” award at the 8th Cairo Biennale.

“Outmoded,” “nonsynchronous,” and “marginal” do not suggest anything near my interpretation of the obsolete, or the obsolescent. Obsolescence implies a state conditioned by “peer” factors, a despotic political climate for instance, or negligent supervision on a more “domestic” level. This depends upon which side of the political fence you have fallen into recently.

Obsolescence is decided by others—by those not participating in the field.

I sat in a bar last night, in Glasgow, while some people at the next table discussed exactly this issue. My friend got so irritated with the discussion that he leaned over and into the conversation.

He recalled a story.

We were sitting in a crowded gallery somewhere, in 1991. Lawrence Weiner was talking to whoever was there. Someone asked a question about art, artists, responsibility, society, industry, and the whole problem of getting up in the morning and feeling—FEELING—that one’s activity was worthwhile, i.e., not obsolete, in fact, as perceived by political and economic theorists.

Weiner answered: “If you wake up in the morning and you have a toothache, wouldn’t you rather go to a real dentist and not to an artist who makes work about what it might be like to be a dentist?”

Obsolescence is not a practice, it’s only a question. The people who ask the questions are sometimes not participating in the field.

*

As for “discarded forms.”

Someone asked me about my facility, or lack of it, in regard to “new technologies.” I had just spent weeks trying to press a twelve-inch vinyl record. I wondered if gramophone players were ever called “new” or even “technology.”

When did they become “antique”?

*

One of the most memorable moments I spent in high school was watching, and copying, a teacher mix egg with pure pigment. This may not be new, or obsolete, but I had never seen it before and never again since.

*

I suppose I can understand what you mean by “resistance” and I like to fantasize about the politics and positioning of what that term implies. However, I like to think that the artists I respect and look toward are working with the means

available to them. If this means that Pierre Huyghe's works look politically positioned because of the technology they use, rather than their site, subject, and mediation, then I would not bother to participate in anything other than the kit list that accompanies the work. This is not obsolescence.

If I or anyone that I respect are offered the means to work with more sophisticated technologies then I think I would say . . .

Maybe.

James Coleman chooses distinct means and methods to pursue a representation as close to the original idea as possible. This is not obsolescence.

Most works I know, or have wandered through, which may appear to use the obsolescent idea that you suggest, I find difficult to deal with. I agree that they do exist. I tend towards the opinion that a practice (consistent) as opposed to a work/idea (temporary), which adopts a "style" or "accent" in order to communicate, can never escape the trappings of the fact that this is THEATER, not art.

This is a language-in-action issue.

The dialect and the accent of a work should be honest.

Actors who mimic badly are unable to carry a story.

Art works caught in formal pre-conditions or instructions for installation can quickly become "antique." No one wants to find the meaning of an antique, rather one is interested only in who owned it before and what it is worth now.

Certainly there is an argument to be made for your idea regarding memory or history. However, I find it very difficult to get beyond the fact that the term "obsolescence" implies the technology utilized in the realization or presentation of an idea. I should stress that the realization and presentation of an idea are of secondary or tertiary interest to me.

Ideas *über alles*.

When I first saw Campus's work in Los Angeles I saw the work. Not the means by which . . .

Works that I have seen, recently, that employ a re-creative environment in which to view images, I find apolitical, ahistorical, and a hindrance to the aspects of memory and recollection that interest me. The nostalgic fog floating around the various sofas, armchairs, and wallpapers make it impossible for me to engage in any dialogue other than with the "taste" of the artist.

You ask: "How do you see obsolescence being deployed in artistic projects other than yours?" Perhaps this is where we have a critical difference. On the first reading of your question I saw "employed" as opposed to "deployed." The idea of employment seems to me to imply a certain responsibility and engagement. An agreement between both parties, in effect. The term "deployment," like my perception of your use of the term "obsolescence," implies a detached, despotical position.

Troops are deployed. Civilians are employed. Choice is the critical difference.

Technology is assessed as new, current, or obsolete.

Perhaps these terminological differences say something, if not "it all."

DOUGLAS GORDON is an artist.

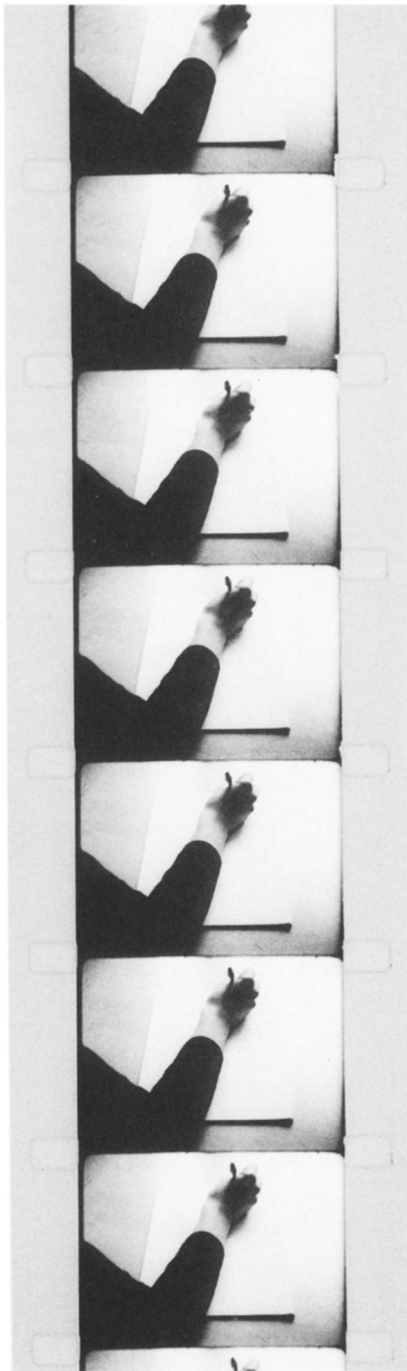
How does obsolescence figure in your work?

More than anything when I try to answer this question, I find myself confronted with a paradox. It seems to me that what is here termed “obsolescent” figures in my work in ways that could actually be in opposition to the idea of the outmoded or the nonsynchronous. On the one hand, the material and structural realm within which I have chosen to work might easily be seen as one which is obsolete; on the other hand, it is precisely through the deployment of these methods that I strive to foreground a connection to the “real” and to presence, albeit perhaps not to the contemporary. Somewhere within this contradiction is where “obsolescence” figures in my work—excavating empirical experience as a source of worldly information that resists instrumentalization and the separation of time from space, with all of its complexities.

Materially speaking, I have engaged the medium of 16mm film in a number of works. In the context of these works I specifically chose to use film as a medium rather than more “contemporary” digitally based mediums to propose a redefinition of “sculpture” as an object neither autonomous nor outside of ourselves. I was interested in accessing the specific characteristics of the medium of film, particularly because of its relationship to photography and thus its structural tie to an index, or what would at a certain point have been an “actual” space and moment of time. I was also concerned with film’s antiillusionist construction of a moving image based not on the simulation of real movement, but produced by the physical reality of one image following another at a given mechanical speed. In these works, the image projected would be a whole created from a series of parts, which includes but does not attempt to correspond to an actual past. At the same time this past would create an empirical reality in the present, through an attention to the materials that produce the image at that moment when it is seen, as well as within the film’s inherent structural link to the space of its visibility. My choice of material then was guided by its relationship or attitude to the world, not by any specific information it could contain.

Do you mobilize it for critical purposes primarily?

The digital and electronic means of communication that have become more prominent than film or other archival mediums are less a means of delivering information and more a direct network of communication. They are less invested in a relationship with the world as we know it and more with creating a parallel world and a new set of parameters within which to participate. By fictionally erasing differences and, by extension, self-awareness, they allow for the possibility of sharing time and space over geographical and temporal divides, and therefore doing away with the need for any kind of informational transla-



tion of experience to be passed on from one location to another. They dedicate themselves to availing us of immediate and simultaneous communication.

Without links to any empirical realities, the passage of a day or the duration of a week becomes one eternal present. Such a constant present cuts ties to an organic environment, and effectively eliminates the capacity of time to participate in the creation of space by separating one moment from the next. Paradoxically, this uninflected present simultaneously creates the heightened need to assert difference and cultural identity, while doing away with temporality.

This is why I am interested in an activity that reflects on the time of the image and the effective use of such a time as a critical tool.

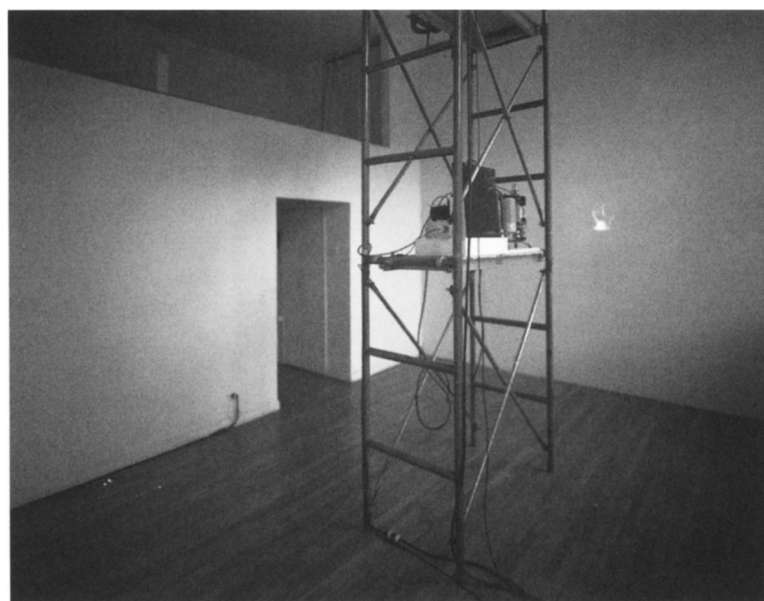
What is the critical purchase of obsolescence?

By working in ways grounded in an empirical relationship to surroundings, I can work both in and with existing circumstances. This allows for the possibility to be tied to the flow of the present, and to the unfolding of time in time and with time as a process of creation rather than actualization. The latter implies a preexisting model or plan, a schematic past, which is carried out and in which time becomes artificial in relation to events. I am more interested in the process taking place within and due to the particularities of events.

Or does it serve constructive purposes, i.e., the making of a new sort of medium or form?

Certainly, I am trying to find a way within the framework of representation in which to create a self-conscious present that could constantly resist nostalgia.

Liisa Roberts. Stills from 9 Minutes of Form: A Sculpture by Liisa Roberts. 1993. Courtesy Sammlung Goetz, Munich.



Roberts. betraying a portrait. Top: installation view, 4:59 P.M., December 16, 1995, Janice Guy, New York. Bottom: installation view, 4:59 P.M., January 27, 1996, Janice Guy, New York. Photos: Greta Olafsdottir.



The main challenge for me is to try to create a form in which a film or a document, for instance, is not a readymade frame into which one might fit a narrative or an image. Rather—in the process of creating its own image, and at each stage of its process—it is a potential framework for future actions. This form would be one that is both happening and being documented at the same time. While it is happening so as to be documented, this does not mean that the event is not *true*. The activity during the making of the image, on the other side of the camera, is equally important to those activities in their recorded and projected form. This recognizes the social space before the image and links that space, over the image itself, to the social space of reception. I would like to try to achieve this linking both through encountering an image that already exists, and through the creation of another potential image that emerges as a result of this exchange.

Is obsolescence a site of resistance? Why? How?

In the context of a project that I am currently developing in Vyborg, Russia, I have proposed the use of the Alvar Aalto Library, which is a “left-over” from Viipuri—the name of the city during its Finnish period—as a lens that sees and thinks the city of Vyborg today. As a city that historically lived the fate of a border town and that structurally has no ties to any single national identity, Vyborg was once a former cultural capital of Finland of great Finnish historical and mythological significance. Located between St. Petersburg and Helsinki, however, the city was annexed in 1944 by the Soviet Union. The Aalto Library, while in use as the Russian city’s central library, is also currently under a

*Red Square, Vyborg, 1967. Photo: B. Fillippova.
Courtesy Leningrad Region State Archive.*



process of restoration to its “original” form by the Committee for the Restoration of the Viipuri Library.

In a way similar to the parameters of the “image” of film, the parameters of this “image”—the Aalto Library—allow it to exist in two different and perhaps opposing ways within the same form. Through its design, which structurally incorporates the context within which it is located, the library resists being contained solely within an “identity” gleaned from a utopian vision of its modernist and Finnish past.

For example, in its embodiment of functionalist ideals, the library was designed to exist harmoniously with its surroundings and to respond to the context of its users. Therefore, it follows that if one were to propose a restoration of this library today, it would necessarily have to take into consideration its current Russian, and more precisely post-Soviet, context. Such a requirement of course creates a highly paradoxical situation in regard to its identity as a Finnish monument. On the one hand, the building tries to maintain its “pictorial” parameters within the process of the restoration, but at the same time the form of this library has allowed me to conceptualize it as a medium for creating a documentary which—not unlike a documentary made in film—does not only reinforce the medium’s pictorial parameters. Like the medium of film, both the history and use of the library make it a filter of information both past and present, because of which it functions like the celluloid of film, picking up everything that surrounds it and constantly transforming this into a reflective present.

The condition that I am describing is a result of the library’s characteristic of use. Paradoxically, due to the building’s current state of disrepair, the

*Alvar Aalto Library, Vyborg.
1993. Photo: Sergey Kravchenko.*



Top: View of speaker's lectern and lecture platform in discussion room, Alvar Aalto Library. ca. 1935. Photo: Gustav Welin. Bottom: Still from Lilia Khalikova's TV report, showing participants of What's the Time in Vyborg? in Alvar Aalto library, 2001.

library's functionalism might be thought of as its most obsolescent feature, and yet this is precisely what turns the "library" into a living organism.

In turning to these contradictions, the library in Vyborg cannot be framed in the past, like a distant object of desire. Rather it exists as a participatory space that synthesizes multiple places and temporalities, multiple fictions and realities as these are lived and experienced within and outside of Vyborg today.

Does it provide a model for accessing dimensions of memory and/or history for you? In what ways?

When you truly experience the present you also experience the past. My project at the Aalto Library takes the form of a kind of "parallel restoration project."

The art work includes and began with a series of events which have developed from a creative-writing workshop for local teenagers taking place in the library auditorium, entitled "What's the Time in Vyborg?" This has been a process of communication and exchange that, within the cultural conditions of the context where it is based, and the historical issues that are involved, has become very palpable. As a form, it works specifically against a logic of objectification as it confronts the longings and desires for the newly independent Finnish cultural capital of 1935 implicit in the architectural restoration project. The kind of focus that accompanies such feelings are here countered not only by the fact that the object of restoration is history, but that this history is also still under construction. This process is then materialized in different forms within which the project is naturally embodied in various public contexts within the city itself: a series of short TV spots developed by a local youth news program, brief reports incorporated on the local radio broadcasts, a domain within the local Internet server's site, and of course the regular presence of the group and their work within the library as it is experienced by both the incidental and occasionally invited public. After all Vyborg is a place where people come to "look"—at their roots or at their cultural history—maybe even to "look for" something, just as, perhaps, an audience does at a museum. In this case they encounter the question "What's the Time in Vyborg?"

Actually, even though you could say there is a "final" object that we hope to make through this long term process—a film which shows Vyborg as it is imagined and scripted by this group of contemporary Vyborgsonian teenagers—even this film has always been intended as an insertion into the ideological systems of perception of identity both in Finland and in Russia. It could function as a counter-image to frozen nostalgic images of the past and as a catalyst for altering perceptions towards a reconciliation with and a realization of the truly international history and possible future of this location. Rather than following a model, then, as one does in a traditional restoration project, this film formulates potential as well as significant structural changes to the library itself, and has even initiated them.

One of these changes is a proposal for a cinema to be created as part of the library auditorium. The proposal not only contributes to the present restoration of the library but also recalls an intended design for the auditorium during the Soviet period. The design would be carried out within the framework of the project by former Town Architect Alexander Mihailovich Schver, who was responsible for restoring the destroyed library in the Soviet Vyborg of the 1950s.

—Helsinki, December 2001

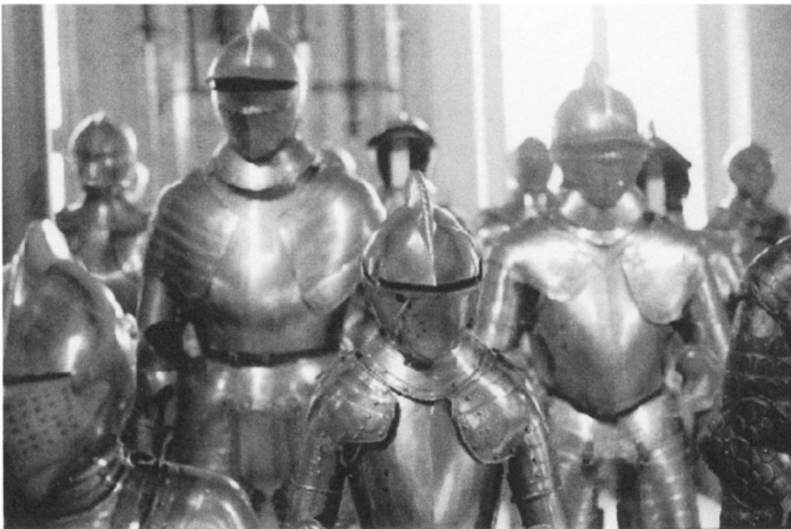
LIISA ROBERTS is an artist based in New York, currently a resident of the DAAD program in Berlin. Her work has been exhibited widely both in the U.S. and abroad in exhibitions such as *Mirror's Edge*, *The American Century*, *Apertutto* of the Venice Biennale 1998, and *Documenta X*. Her recent project *What's the Time in Vyborg?* was initiated with a project grant by the Malmö Konstmuseum, Malmö, Sweden.

MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM AND JOACHIM KOESTER

*Points of Suspension**

Armor

In 1712 Louis XIV gave his great-grandson, the five-year-old Infanta Luis, prince of Asturias, a child-sized suit of armor as a present. It was lined with red velvet to minimize the clattering of the young prince. But if the Sun King's gift was intended to perpetuate the tradition of armoring the body it failed; the Infanta Luis's little suit of armor was the last one produced in Europe. Even before it became obsolete, armor was one of the first objects collected purely for symbolic value. Courts, monarchs, city- and nation-states created elaborate displays of captured enemy armor to impress their citizens and prisoners.



Musée de l'Armée, Paris.

Photo: Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester.

Civic and military histories are inextricably intertwined and few social values or actions are so abstract that they fail to be reflected in material forms. "Empty" or indeterminate spaces are often the most revealing. Today the second most popular

* This contribution on the subject of obsolescence is excerpted from the five-channel video installation *Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State* by Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester, first exhibited at the Statens Museum for Art, Copenhagen, March 16 to May 18, 2001.

tourist attraction in Copenhagen, after the bronze statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, is the 1,200-person anarchistic squat located on the site of a former military base now known as the Free City of Christiania. Since 1971 it has existed as a police-free social experiment, self-governed under a direct-democratic process where all major decisions are made by unanimous vote. A sign posted at Christiania's main entrance declares: "You are now leaving the European Union."

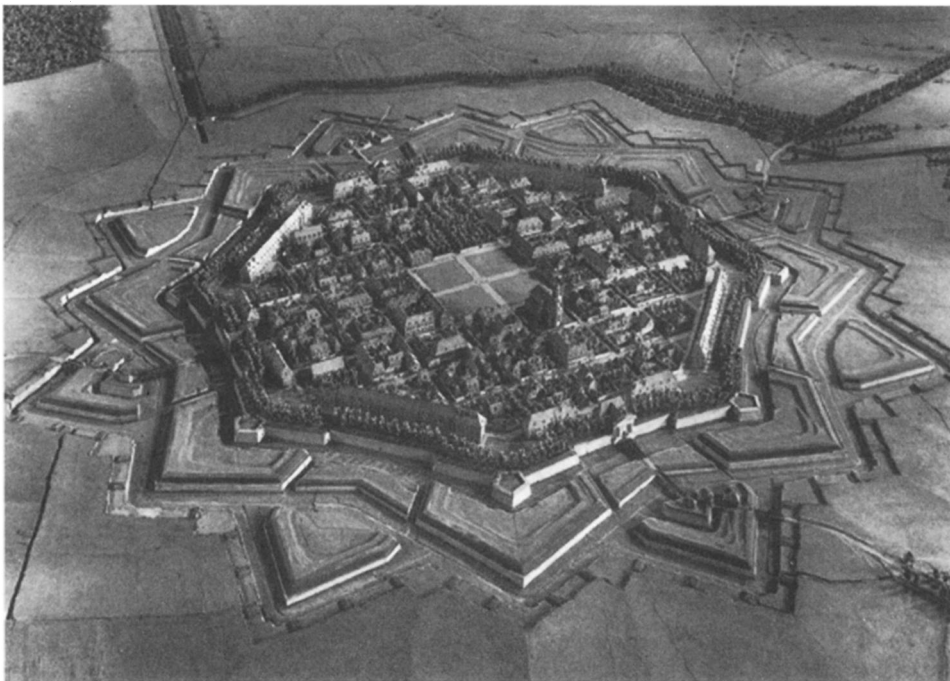


*Top: Squatters in front of the Peace Ark, Christiania. 1971.
Bottom: Soldiers in front of the Boatman Street barracks. Late 19th century.
Photos: The Royal Library, Copenhagen.*

Star Cities

States have made wars and wars have made states. After 1500 many cities in Europe were shaped exclusively by cannon fire, real or imagined. Missile trajectories intersecting with defensive sight lines gave birth to fortifications constructed as a series of diagonals, emanating from old city centers out across the countryside. The objective was to place great quantities of defensible “empty” space between the city and the enemy to keep hostile fire power out of range. The resulting pattern of interconnected angles, composed of ramparts, moats, and bastions, created star-shaped cities all over Europe. Fortified communities became urban ecosystems, but, like suits of armor, the new city walls also constricted, and sometimes paralyzed, urbanism. Expanding towns were forced to build up instead of out. When not under attack, temporary use of the protective free space was made. In Copenhagen, civilians built windmills on the bastions, fished in the moats, and grazed sheep on the ramparts.

As the European arms race continued into the nineteenth century these artillery defense earthworks slowly became obsolete as well. The strategic empty spaces surrounding Copenhagen were discretely sold off to the private sector in pieces small enough to keep real-estate prices high. Profits from this financed



*Model of Neuf Brisach, on the Rhine. Archetypal example
of late 17th century European city-fortification.
Photo: J. Feuille/Spadem.*

an entirely new modern defense preparing Copenhagen and Denmark for war in the age of machines. Some portions of the old ramparts were reserved and converted into parks or became building sites for state museums. One section of the old city wall was retained, however, for continued use by the Danish military as a drill ground and army base called the Boatman Street Barracks.

Forbidden Land

Historians of ideas usually attribute the dream of a perfect society to philosophers, but there is also a military dream of society, a dream that depends on artificial kinship relations that can be created in military bases. Spaces like this are not meant to be perfect social environments, but, instead, places in which society itself can be perfected.



*Soldiers in the Boatman Street Barracks. Early 1960s.
Photo: Polfoto.*

After serving this function for over a hundred years, even the Boatman Street Barracks lost its value for the Danish military and the site was abandoned in 1968. Having been a part of the city defense since the twelfth century, it was unclear whether legal title to the land belonged to the city of Copenhagen or the state of Denmark, so the barracks remained vacant until 1970 when a few young people began a secret collective there. They had a silent agreement with the night

watchman, who, like so many gatekeepers before him, gently surrendered to circumstances. They lived safe and sound. The outer districts of the base were only for the brave and the adventurous—the ones who wanted to live alone in a deserted place on forbidden land.



Ramparts, Christiania.
Photo: Buckingham and Koester.

In 1630 there were four types of cities: national bureaucratic capitals, international trade metropolises, mixtures of these two, and pirate cities. The anarchical military republics on the coasts of Algeria and Tunisia, living on plunder—the outlaw cities of the “golden age of piracy”—were extreme versions of their contemporaries, the maritime city-states like Venice and Cordova. Copenhagen was the third type of city—a centralized government combined with salt-water imperialism. To King Christian IV the North Sea was a connection to, rather than a barrier from, the rest of the world, a potential trade highway. To capitalize on this he created a separate tax-free port, autonomous from Danish rule. Ramparts were built to include the new harbor within the protective ring of fortifications surrounding the city. These were the ramparts that would later become Christiania. The rifle houses with their gun ports aimed at Sweden, now known as Air-Condition, Autogena, Fakir School, and Cosmic Flower, were built on the bastions originally named after royalty and real and imaginary animals: Elephant, Lion, Tiger, Panther, and Unicorn. After a group of housing-rights activists known as the “Slum Stormers” declared the army base “free and open,” hundreds of squatters broke down the walls and moved in. The founders of the Free City made King Christian the namesake of their new community and created a flag to represent themselves: three yellow dots on a red ground. “The Christiania

Guide,” a free publication for visitors, explains that the dots are taken from the three occurrences of the letter “i” in the word Christiania.



*The flag of Christiania.
Photo: Buckingham and Koester.*

Dots

Symbols, like monuments, attempt to fix meaning against the flow of time. But Christiania's flag seems to do the opposite, marking transience and fragmentation. In the Free City one is surrounded by these three dots; enormous and tiny flags carrying the symbol blow in the wind, and the dots are printed on stickers and cigarette lighters, painted on buildings and bicycles, and posted on signs everywhere. The three dots resemble an ellipsis, or “points of suspension,” the typographical mark that indicates an omission, faltering speech, or an incomplete thought in a printed text. Wherever one of these ellipses appears, it seems to interrupt its surroundings—punctuating it with doubt.

The individual dot “evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure or decided goal?”¹ This aspect of the dot is made explicit when it is multiplied by three,

1. Robert Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 94.



*Top: The Peace Ark, Christiania.
Bottom: Entrance to The Lice, Christiania.
Photos: Buckingham and Koester.*



creating the ellipsis. A period, or full-stop, demands an ending, but three points together imply infinite points, making endings impossible. The ellipsis marks the indeterminate, but it also has the ability to join any two sentences together, and any ellipsis can potentially be connected to any other ellipsis, forming an endless chain of possible thoughts. This is what makes these three dots a horizon line—a limit that is not a limit—because it is always receding into the distance. Empty space urging us onward, reminding us that the vanishing point of history is always the present moment.



Bibliography

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Story Teller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Boyd, William. *Armadillo*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- Braudel, Fernand. *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*. Trans. by Miriam Koch. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel. "Space, Knowledge and Power." Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- Frantzen, Ole L. and Bjørn A Nielsen. *Københavns befæstning*. Copenhagen: Tjhusmeseet, 1986.
- Hohenberg, Paul M. and Lynn Hollen Lees. *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Maagensen, Bjarne. *Christiania—en længere historie*. Copenhagen: Gunbak and Kaspersen, 1996.
- Marin, Louis. "Frontiers of Utopia Past and Present." *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3, 1993.
- Nickel, Helmut. *Arms and Armor*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.
- Parker, Geoffrey, ed. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Sheikh, Simon. "Networks of Anti-Discipline: Christiania—a Case Study," in *Oberhausen Film Festival*. Oberhausen: Oberhausen Festival, 1999.
- Smithson, Robert. "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art." *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.
- Wigley, Mark. "The Architectural Cult of Synchronization." *October* 94 (Fall 2000).
- Wilson, Peter Lamborn. *Pirate Utopias*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995.

MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM is an artist living in New York. Recent projects include the installation and artist-book "Subcutaneous" which examine physiognomy in western culture. He is currently working on a project about European contact with indigenous peoples of the Hudson River valley. He is represented by Murray Guy Gallery, New York, and Galleri Tommy Lund, Copenhagen.

JOACHIM KOESTER is an artist living in New York and Copenhagen. Recent projects include "Nordenskiöld and the Ice Cap," a slide installation dealing with the exploration of the Greenlandic Ice Cap, and "Anna Karina," a series of photographs of the French New Wave actress. He is represented by Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, and Gallery Jan Mot, Brussels.

Opposite top: Truck, Christiania. Photo: Buckingham and Koester.

Bottom: Peter Isaacs. Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark. 1615.



Nancy Davenport. Stills from May Day. 2001. Animated screen saver, 30 second loop.

May Day was the first in my ongoing series of protestor screen savers. It depicts a beautiful young man, isolated from the crowd of protestors at last year's May Day parade in New York. He wears a Che Guevara T-shirt, twirls around in an endless loop, waving a red flag and raising his fist again and again in the classic revolutionary gesture. As a screen saver, the "May Day" protest begins and continues to generate itself during periods of computer idleness. The computer terminal, the most vital site of recent political organization and dissent, perpetuates a cycle of endlessly repeating nostalgia when there is a suspension of work.

This series had its origins in the examination of hours of footage I had accumulated from filming and participating in various protest marches and demonstrations. The monotony of conventional protest strategies, the repetition of generic chants and nostalgic symbols, struck me as extremely sad and significant. By isolating single protestors from various marches and creating short screen-saver loops, I intended to embody my feelings of ambivalence—the conflict between acknowledging that certain political strategies are exhausted while still strongly believing in the necessity of protest.

The screen saver seemed a perfect medium to embody this ambivalence. It is a uniquely marginal space, suggesting both absence (becoming activated when you take a break from work or step away from your desk) and presence (putting in an appearance for you as a personalized choice of desktop). The screen saver also seemed to me the only appropriate form for this video imagery because of its history. It is certainly considered to be one of the most debased and outmoded phenomena within the world of computing but it has not followed a straightforward trajectory to obsolescence. Although the screen saver's evolution has been dependent in many ways upon the accelerating development of the personal computer, it has followed its own spiraling path of strange reversals, contradictions, and redemption.

Consider the little history of the screen saver:

In 1968, a single line of text that read "Take Me, I'm Yours" was programmed to run on the time-sharing system at Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence Lab. Originally, it functioned to signal that a terminal was available for use, but after some time it was noticed that the message was being burnt into the screens. To solve this problem the text was programmed to move periodically to random positions on screen. Throughout the early seventies, other screen savers were invented and reinvented at different research facilities. In 1973, based on their own requirements and observations, the researchers at Xerox Parc designed various randomly changing images (bouncing cursors, zooming starfields) to prevent the shadow of the default windows from being permanently fixed on the inner face of the monitor. By 1981, there existed programs like Brush DMT, which allowed programmers to use a single bit-map editor to create an image, specify the style of

movement, and display it as a screen saver. The first product—"Pyro," a graphic fireworks display—was released in 1989, followed closely by "After Dark" by Berkeley Systems. The "Flying Toasters" and "Fish Tanks" of "After Dark" dominated the market and were listed by the *New York Times* as one of the best-selling software products of the century. In 1998, screen savers declined sharply as a product category and quickly became engulfed by advertising and promotion. Companies like Microsoft began giving them away in bundles with software packages and an enormous amount of promotional screen savers became available on the Internet for free—plugging movies, TV shows, and other products. They fell out of general usage at this time also because monitors and operating systems began incorporating stand-by or power-saving modes, which greatly limited the chances of screen burn-in.

Interestingly, even in the early stages of the screen saver's commodification, they were no longer needed to save screens. The problem of CPU burn-in had actually been addressed as early as 1977 (U.S. patent 4,127,796) and monitors had by the late eighties incorporated a more robust phosphor coating on their screens. The potential for burn-in was extremely slight if not impossible by the time their sales peaked in 1996, but they were still marketed based on their utilitarian function. According to Joan Blades (co-founder of Berkeley Systems and VP of marketing): "It was primarily a way to make the computer beautiful or fun . . . but people liked having the practical justification for buying them."

It is only now, after they have been discarded as a popular phenomenon, that screen savers have been reborn with a new role. In a project that was pioneered by the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute, they are being used on thousands of Internet-connected PCs, bringing enormous collective power to bear on large computing problems. SETI's first scheme (Project Serendip) involved using screen savers to process radio receptions from space. This project is still in progress and it is possible for any computer owner to participate by downloading free software from the SETI@home site (<http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu>). Like any other screen saver, this program takes advantage of unused computer cycles when there is a lull in activity, and it shuts down when you return to work. But this particular screen saver processes a chunk of reception data captured by Arecibo (the world's largest radio telescope) with the excess cycles. The results are sent back to the Serendip research team and combined with the data from other participants. By February 2000, 1.6 million PC users in 224 countries had contributed over 165,000 years of computing time to this project. Although the same scheme has recently been adopted for other investigations, Serendip is so far the largest computation ever done. Here, the formerly wasted capacity of computer cycles is being put into service—looking for signs of intelligent life.

While outmoded in terms of its original function and discarded as a kitsch diversion, the screen saver has returned to its origins in research. But it has returned by way of the opposite end of research—by channeling the collective energy of ordinary computer users. At this point in its history, the screen saver

not only evokes a new melancholy of accelerated obsolescence in this culture, but also an older (perhaps obsolete) optimism regarding both the potential of new technologies and the latent possibilities of collectives.

NANCY DAVENPORT is a New York-based artist whose work is represented by the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery. Her work was also recently exhibited at the Rockford Art Museum in Illinois and will be included in the 25th Biennial of São Paulo.

I don't really like hippies, but when I can I use flower power (recycled vegetable oil) on a magic bus (mobile library/greenhouse) that I have. It's a waste product that can be reused in all diesel engines, it's as efficient as normal petroleum diesel, produces 90 percent less pollution and is 100 percent biodegradable. If I had enough money I would use a hydrogen fuel cell, the next new thing.

In 1893 in Augsburg, Germany, the inventor Rudolph Diesel ran the first diesel engine. He wanted to make a new independent and adaptable motor for working people that could be powered inexpensively with a locally produced fuel (vegetable and seed oils). The prospect of vegetable oil as a serious competitor to petroleum was doomed and its dismal fate sealed by a highly effective publicity smear led by the DuPont petrochemical company and William Randolph Hearst. At around the same moment engineers at General Electric saw the potential of increasing sales of flashlight lamps by shortening their life span and car engineers first proposed limiting the life of automobiles for the same reason. It was the advent of the product "death date," "planned obsolescence," and mountains of waste.

Planned obsolescence is the constant reinvention and conceptual recycling of exactly the same product. Manufacturers make us believe that what in reality is a totally healthy product is now useless and must be upgraded. Audio CDs have





Left: Nils Norman. The Geocruiser. Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Above top: The Geocruiser. Peckham Library. Above bottom: The Geocruiser (Interior). 2001. All images courtesy Institute of Visual Culture, Cambridge, and the artist.



Norman. The Geocruiser (Interior). 2001.

lasted about twenty-five years, cars now last about two years, and computers last about as long as it takes to get them home. Some products, like batteries and toothbrushes, even tell you when they are ready to be binned.

Oil supplies will run out, but before they do British Petroleum perversely insists on promoting a “holistic approach to green forecourt retailing.” Meaning you can fill up your gas-guzzling, four-door utility vehicle from a solar-powered petrol pump. “Sustainable Retailing” and “Planned Obsolescence” are the kind of opposites that Slavoj Žižek describes as directly coinciding.

The obsolescent figures in my work in different ways: from resurrecting obsolete models like the Geocruiser mobile library (a redesigned bus that has a built-in library, reading room, greenhouse, solar-powered Xerox machine, and laptop), to helping build autonomous experimental microinstitutions that have an intentionally preprogrammed “death date.” Grave digging social history and resuscitating previous experimental corpses, largely perceived as failures or embarrassingly dated modes of thinking, is a deliberate route chosen for reaccessing dimensions of memory and history discarded by the market. Recontextualizing and critically investigating past experiments stems from a desire to see if they might work a second time around within a different political/social scenario, and allows us to ask, “What went wrong?” Developing this practice while worrying on the ethical edge of possible exploitation is an interesting dilemma of conscience but old think in most art worlds.

Economic depressions promise more interesting art worlds: the rabbit size stiffens in its bucket, galleries close, and “alternative spaces” sprout like magic mushrooms in the moldy primordial marsh of artists’ ideas. Creating networks of discourse and then closing them down again is an important method of mobilizing ideas before some of the more rapacious curator types and boring cash-driven artist-entrepreneurs consume them. But once out on the enforced evolutionary golf course of the “Art World” most artists and their class structure/social scene obsolesce and become recycled every five years. Remember (re)remember Brit-Art? Chill-out spaces, artists’ corporations, “group work,” Context-Kunst, urbanism, video projections, scatter art, painting, early ’90s Cologne, etc., etc.

Being invited and responding to these questions for *October* registers my oncoming obsolescence or my already becoming obsolete. Luckily this is a blessing because it means my recycling will happen soon.

NILS NORMAN is an artist living in London.

CHRISTIAN PHILIPP MÜLLER

Portrait of the Museum as a Chair

*Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des
Aigles: Sauvez les meubles!*

—Marcel Broodthaers¹

In fashion everything comes back with a vengeance. “New” trends seem uncannily familiar to anyone older than a teenager. In design one can observe the same tendency.

How far removed into the past does an artistic style need to be in order to obtain this bonus of being recycled? “Institutional Critique” seems to be a perfect candidate for inclusion within the condition of obsolescence.

Benjamin Buchloh: So you say the critique of institutions is a banal idea by comparison to your critique of urbanism. Can you explain that a little bit?

Dan Graham: It became very stupid. I think museums are great places. I realized that a museum could be a social space and I fell in love with the empty lobbies, the gift shop, coffee shop, areas where people could relax. So I did work like the *Three Linked Cubes/Interior Design for Space Showing Videos* (1986), where teenagers could lie on the floor. I think what I did was to discover the tradition of the museum instead of pursuing the stupid idea of Institutional Critique.

Buchloh: It wasn't always stupid. It became stupid. But only as a result of the overall transformation of museum culture to become part of a larger project of leisure culture and the tourism industry.

Graham: All my work is about city planning.²

Recent shows like *The Museum as Muse* tend to mix critical work (in the tradition of Institutional Critique) with pictorial work produced in museums around the world. The resulting shows send the message to the public that dealing with museums is just another genre, not unlike landscape or the portrait. Critical practices are thus transformed into aesthetic gambits. And with this development, one now also observes a simultaneous recurrence of “classic” conceptual approaches,

1. Marcel Broodthaers, *Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute* (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1972), vol. 2, p. 53.

2. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Dan Graham, “Four Conversations: December 1999–May 2000,” *Dan Graham, Works 1965–2000* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2001), p. 78.



Rows of audience chairs at the National Museum of Art, Osaka. 2001. Left: "Rattan chair C317" by Isamu Kenmochi. Right: "Panton H type" by Verner Panton.

especially in the tradition of Michael Asher, by younger artists.³ Has enough time passed all of a sudden to make Institutional Critique look new again? What I wonder about is the seamless continuation of such practices, as if one could ignore and block out the artistic developments of the last thirty years, as if all the ways in which conceptual approaches have been transformed and altered in these years could be erased as well.

My recent invitation to participate in a show at the National Museum of Art, Osaka entitled *Museum as Subjects* made me wonder how I could come up with a coherent idea in such a situation. How can an artist educated in Germany and living in New York make a valuable work within the context of a Japanese institution, a contribution that could be understood by the local audience?

On my site visit in March 2001, I found the museum filled with Egyptian antiquities on loan from Cairo and long lines of visitors admiring all the mummies and pharaohs. Neither this show nor the museum's collection caught my interest. But I almost could not believe the colorful collection of designer chairs that were casually lined up on all floors of the institution to accommodate exhausted visitors. I quickly learned that the previous director liked design and collected it quite extensively for the museum. The current director does not share this interest and stopped collecting design. Outstanding as well as ordinary chairs can now be found in three separate domains within the museum: in the permanent collection (not on permanent display), in the exhibition spaces for use by the visitors, and in the office spaces for

3. For example: Maria Eichhorn, *Money at the Kunsthalle Bern* (Kunsthalle Bern, 2001). Eichhorn researched the finances of the Verein Kunsthalle Bern, published her report in the catalog, commissioned repair work with her exhibition budget (and some additional funds put away during two years for that purpose), and left the Kunsthalle otherwise empty during her show. Another example: Elmgreen and Dragset, *Taking Place* (Kunsthalle Zürich, 2001). The artist-duo used the period from one director to the next (Bernhard Bürgi to Beatrix Ruf) to reconfigure the existent architecture according to Ruf's wishes. Construction meant literally knocking down walls, and visitors were welcome in all areas, including offices and storage.



use by the museum staff. For *Museum as Subjects*, I decided to construct an auditorium consisting of a typology of all the chairs in use at the museum.

Japanese aesthetics are taken as a fetish of "good design" in the West. But the place of Western design within the National Museum of Art, Osaka, presented a scene of great initial disorder for an outside visitor. Many chairs now prized in Western countries were haphazardly placed throughout the museum, not to be preserved, but

actually used. By contrast, the Museum of Modern Art in New York not only proudly displays its chairs within a design collection that was founded as early as 1932, but also now gives their audience the chance to take them home from their gift shops. Insecure customers can get the MoMA certification of good taste as well as museum-quality furniture. Collectors with limited floor space can concentrate on the pricey miniature chairs designed originally by Modernist Masters. As the Museum of Modern Art Holiday 2001 Gift Catalog proudly states, "The products in this catalog reconfirm our belief that well-designed products improve the quality of our lives."



*Top: Miniature chairs, the Museum of Modern Art Holiday 2001 gift catalog, page 27.
Bottom: Christian Philipp Müller. Portrait of the Museum as a Chair. 2001.*

The institution of the “fine art museum” and the custom of sitting on chairs were both introduced to Japan at the beginning of the last century at the moment of its opening up to Western traditions. The National Museum of Art, Osaka, is located between the Museum of Ethnology and the Museum of Applied Art in the “Expo-park,” on the site of the World Expo that occurred in the seventies in Osaka. My installation made reference to these three different types of institutions.

With the help of an assistant curator, I was able to track down a total of fifty-four different chairs, ranging from Charles and Ray Eames to Harry Bertoia to rather obscure sources. We even found some of the original catalogs of manufacturers like Herman Miller Inc., from which the National Museum of Art, Osaka ordered their furniture. I put the chairs in chronological order by the date of their purchase (1977–2001) and used color codes on the display structure to label not only the different years, but also the users or the destination of the chairs (distinguished in three categories as audience, collection, and staff). The chairs were lined up in six rows, each of which were nine chairs wide. Charts were available in Japanese and English that contained information on the name of the designers, the producers, the year of production, and the name of the chairs, as well as their positions within the museum, their users, and the years of their purchase. I used a quote from 1923 by D. J. De Pree found in a catalog from the seventies as the motto for my chart: “Furniture must bring a feeling of well-being to the user and aid him in furthering his creative abilities.” Curators, bookkeepers, the director, as well as cleaning personnel gave up their chairs and plastic stools for the duration of the show and were seated on different chairs. This aspect of the work—invisible to the visitors of the exhibition—is the most important to me.



Postscriptum

Cesar Pelli designed the new building for the National Museum of Art, Osaka, which will replace the existing museum that dates back to 1970 and the World Expo. The National Museum of Art, Osaka became an “Independent Administrative Institution” in April 2001. Nobody was able to tell me if the chairs from the old site would move with the museum’s holdings to the new museum in 2003, whose entire exhibition spaces will be underground and artificially lit.

CHRISTIAN PHILIPP MÜLLER is an artist who lives and works in New York and Zurich. His most recent publication is *Branding the Campus: Art, Architecture, Design, Politics of Identity* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2001). The artist book *Portrait of the Museum as a Chair* will be published by the Bawag Foundation, Vienna, in summer 2002.

*Detail of Müller. Portrait of the
Museum as a Chair. 2001.*

Obsolescence = Mutation Unrealized?

The excerpt below, written last year, can be viewed through the filter of now, which means every now that will be or is when someone reads these words. The words were written with the anticipation that time would affect their meaning. Events as demarcations—despite the speciousness of this tendency—continue, additional scenarios can be written, and what seems passé reappears in variable forms. The notion of something new resembles rather what appears more to be a shift in matter, or in what matters, a mutation of what previously existed, including perceptual shifts, about matter and what matters for a number of different players.

*From "A Contemporary Moment: Thinking Art Encounters"*¹

Some of what can be observed at this moment are returns and references to these varying returns. This has been said of other times. Is history repeating itself as farce? This does not always seem to be the case. There are a number of repetitions, for example the renewed importance of painting after several previous periodic assertions of the "death of painting." It seems evident now that many things continually return and coexist. Assertions of "neo" anything at this point seem inadequate. How to describe now?

Each time I'm tempted to create a description of the current moment in contemporary art—which looms as a daunting and highly subjective task—rather than attempt to create a factual survey, I instead feel compelled to produce a fiction. This could take the form of a novel, with the option of becoming a screenplay, with the possibility of various merchandising prospects. This thought arises often when walking through Chelsea in New York or while attending various gala events, such as the opening of the Tate Modern, and while engaging in conversation at smaller gatherings in numerous settings in their aftermath. Even this reflex seems particularly indicative of now. What does it mean to desire to shift the live scenario of an art event almost immediately upon encountering it into a fictionally represented one, as if in reflex to the encounter one has in the present? Why this desire to mediate it via a popular form such as a novel or a film? These are questions I repeatedly ask myself. The fictional scenario so far has remained in my head where I can embellish and alter it continually. Fixing it into a form with a precise beginning and end leads to fears of creating a satire that might appear dated by the time it was published or produced.

This fear is linked to the acknowledgment of the rapidity of change now and the limited attention that is given to any moment today. These circumstances in turn

1. The complete essay was published originally in French as "Un moment contemporain: penser les rencontres artistiques," in *multitudes* 4 (March 2001), pp. 65–73.

reflect the proximity of art and fashion at this time. Fashion—as in style or what is in style, or in fashion—and that which is presented as art have become interwoven in a shared consumerist frenzy, where obsolescence is necessary in order to keep the cycles of capital in motion. This aspect has taken on a pronounced relevance in recent years. This turn was noted in an article in a section of *Artforum* entitled “Critical Reflections,” by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, which appeared in January of 1997. Since that moment, Buchloh’s pronouncement seems not merely a melancholic reflection, but appears as an inescapable fact. The pages of *Artforum*, as Buchloh mentioned, and since then many exhibitions, demonstrate this phenomenon. Armani at the Guggenheim, but of course. . . .

Somehow the reflex to represent a contemporary moment in relation to art as a fiction continues. What might a synopsis of the novel-to-become-a-screenplay include? It would focus on interlocking stories. Action would occur in New York’s Chelsea, Williamsburg, Long Island City, London’s East End, Bankside, Berlin, and various Biennial locations: Venice, São Paulo, Kwangju, Johannesburg, Havana, etc. More cultural capitals would pop up simultaneously in unassuming cities around the world. All of the following would be interwoven:

Various emerging exhibitions in Eastern Europe. Award ceremonies, i.e., Hugo Boss emceed by actors. Exhibitions involving car manufacturers and fashion designers. Scandinavian initiatives and cultural bridges. Political unrest amid cultural production. Massive demonstrations against the IMF and World Bank, with Situationist and Conceptual art strategies comprising some of the repertoire of attacks. People from many nations attempting the miracle model, i.e., the Scandinavian miracle, the Swiss miracle, the Prague miracle, etc. Miracles designated by national or regional allegiances as marketing devices to move into more prominent international economic and cultural positions. Contradictory positions. Progressive projects sponsored by corporations with multiple and conflicting interests. The divisions between powerful commerce and liberal sentiments would be blurred. Contradictions would multiply throughout the book-to-be-a-movie. Alliances between people of widely divergent interests who shared the need for monetary survival and who meet in an international art-academic-media circuit of symposia and exhibitions would be common. Pop culture would be a main referent. Movies would be the main stimulant, in addition to new restaurants, fashion designers, and real estate. Actors would be the most prized people. Tributes would be paid to film directors for giving people a way to fill their time and by extension a reason for being. This would have a special significance for those aspiring wanna-be directors who were for the moment laboring in Web-design sweatshops.

RENÉE GREEN is an artist, filmmaker, and writer who lives in New York and Vienna. Her exhibitions, videos and films have been seen throughout the world in museums, biennials and festivals. Her books include: *Between and Including* (Vienna: Secession/Cologne: Dumont, 2001), *Shadows and Signals* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2000), *Certain Miscellanies: Some Documents* (Amsterdam: De Appel/Berlin: DAAD, 1996), *After the Ten Thousand Things* (The Hague: Stroom, 1994), *Camino Road* (Madrid: Free Agent Media/Museo Reina Sofia, 1994), and *World Tour* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993.)

He said that they did not feel the need for shelter for themselves so much as they felt a need for a special, private place for their possessions, as pathetic as those few things were.

But another guy, Takao Suzuki, explained that pronouns in the Japanese language change periodically. This is because they are relational instead of being isolated units, such as “You,” “Him,” “Me.” Japanese pronouns change in the situation: “Eldest daughter,” “Teacher.” (One can refer to oneself as “Teacher.”) What makes so many pronouns become obsolete, however, according to Suzuki, is that what begins as honorific quickly becomes commonplace by constant use, and then after a while becomes pejorative and insulting.¹

French has monumentalized its strangely bourgeois clichés to such a degree that in normal speaking it is hard to know where communication might begin. (How can one be “desolated” by every tiny faux pas? How can one be “enchanted” by every brief encounter?)

The phenomenon that language itself is a monument is one of the primary reasons for visual arts.

I don’t like movies, and didn’t even as a child. They *come* at you. They leave you no choice, and no time. I see them, now and then, of course, and a few years ago I began to notice something that is really irksome; every animal in the movies must make a sound. As though we might not “believe our eyes.” But the sounds are almost always inappropriate, that is, the animal would not make that noise at that time. The noises are also fake, usually, made by sound-effects guys. Sitting in the cinema I imagine the smug, self-satisfied look on the face of the sound-effects guy when he hears his own voice imitating a dog’s.

Film is a monument. Like architecture and the highway system. So I don’t want you to act stupid and say, “Oh, I really like some movies.” Television is another monument. Published books, or “literature” are not, although “print” in general is a monument almost as grandiose as language itself. It took print and highways a couple of thousands of years to become monuments, but film and television were born that way.

Karlotta Blöndel said that expertise about the history of film is itself a possession, a collection, among the “guys.”

Gabriel Orozco said that he does not like “thrilling” art. But I bet he likes thrilling movies; because they’re all thrilling—even Godard’s. What is so thrilling about watching moving images of people much larger than ourselves?

We are thrilled by architecture. We have silly excuses and fictions about

1. Takao Suzuki, *Words in Context* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2001).

architecture. In what sense, without rocket power, could a Manhattan “skyscraper” be “soaring”? How could it even seem to be soaring? A stack of boxes. There is no movement in architecture, in monuments.

Someone, Flaubert, I think, said that the reason art has become so lost and so bad is that its father, architecture, is dead or dying. Of course, I see the gangster histories of how art grew from the twin towers of Belief and Architecture in Europe, but I suddenly saw an essential difference between “Western” art and my own work. I have no subliminal architectural foundations.

Since, like every other artist, I make money by making and selling objects (Carl Andre said that art is a “cottage industry”), I suppose that I have always made more or less portable things that would not easily function as furniture.

My favorite museum is the Prado. Its bosses think that a painting done by a member of the academy in the old days is art by definition, so one can walk for kilometers, chamber after chamber after chamber, and see one bad painting after another that has no relation to art at all, simply the cliché, the framework, let’s say, of “framed oil painting on linen.” When one arrives at paintings by El Greco, what a flash! Even painting can be art!

Carl Andre was talking in 1975 about art as a cottage industry. It is now becoming simply an industry, like the “film industry,” wherein artists will be similar to actors. (And curators dream of becoming directors.)

If in this case there is an element of monumentality, it is not on the foundation of the museum but upon commerce. (The funniest museum in Europe is the Thyssen Collection, next door to the Prado: one maniacal collector’s stupid mistakes.)

Maybe (I hope) commerce used to be a system that artists could use for distribution and sustenance—really different from a cottage industry because artists have so often seen their work as being closer to poetry or literature than to lace or candles.

That can still be true but commerce has its own purposes much larger than the artist’s purposes.

As Museum, Commerce is, of necessity for moneyflow, very quick. It then must buy museums and collectors alike.

It must also promote and rely on signs, especially the marketable signs of sophistication (like fashion) and “new ideas.” So, Commerce as Museum must promote its own version of obsolescence.

I made lunch for Jenny Grönvall and brought it to her studio so that we could have time to talk. She said something important but I took insufficient notes; only this: “the right to dismiss.”

—Berlin, 2001

JIMMIE DURHAM is an artist, writer, and poet. In the 1960s he was active in theater, performance, and literature in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and from 1973–80 was a political organizer in the American Indian Movement, the Director of the International Indian Treaty Council, and a representative at the United Nations. He has exhibited work at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Gent; the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels; the ICA London; Documenta in Kassel; the Hamburg Kunstverein; FRAC in Reims; the Wittgenstein Haus in Vienna; the Whitney Biennial; the Kunstverein in Munich; and the Venice Biennale. A comprehensive survey, *Jimmie Durham*, was published by Phaidon Press in 1995.



Luis Camnitzer. Leftover. 1968. Adhesive label.

I never paid much attention to obsolescence, partly because it is a functional term, one that is measured relatively against some equally relative, but hegemonic, standard. Obsolescence allows us to climb the ladder of progress, reaffirming a rather suspect ideological process.

I encountered the word “obsolescence” for the first time about half a century ago. At the time—still innocent of John Kenneth Galbraith’s work—I associated it with “new car smell,” something I had heard about, but that was unknown experientially. The ability to represent the quality of newness and desirability in objects in an olfactory manner sounded like the product of an act of magic. To prolong the experience by means of an aerosol can made magic wands real. Obsolescence could be sprayed away.

The sniffing of objects to inform acquisition never was particularly important in my creative process. I felt that the differences between accessibility, possession, and ownership were much more relevant. Accessibility depends on communication, where both erosion of information and decoding time should be reduced to a minimum. Possession depends on understanding, the ability to pick up evocations, and memorization; all of which are stimulated by the object and effectuated by the viewer. Ownership is defined by the exclusion of all of those who don’t have it, so I tend to not sympathize with it.

To favor accessibility and possession over ownership became something of a credo for me. If obsolescence means endurance devoid of usefulness, it doesn’t fit here. Didactics, which I consider important, often are or need to be ephemeral. Ephemeral is fine, useless endurance is not.

I wouldn’t even know how to build obsolescence into my work. Invisibility, hermetic coding, banality, and lack of interest are all easy things to accomplish. But to make forgettable art—a product that at first seems very important and then quickly disappears from memory—is not. As far as content goes, topical information ages quickly, as do political statements if they are treated as topical information. However, political resistance as an ethical stance can only be defined as obsolete in Utopia.

If it were possible to build in added obsolescence into the art product, it wouldn’t be of much political consequence anyway. It may screw the owner of the object, but it doesn’t sabotage the market. Claes Oldenburg, Jenny Holzer, and the poor-rich-girl production of much of Arte Povera all testified more to the adaptability of the market and to its ability to affect the artists’ production than to their power to disrupt and effect social changes.

Finally there is a different kind of obsolescence, our own, defined as an antonym to the immortality we crave. Obsolescence in this sense becomes an issue only if we see ourselves as working for posterity, with the hubris that our work should be of relevance for future generations and that they should remember our

name. In that case we are dealing with the problem of how to achieve a brand recognition that outlives us. I can live with this notion of obsolescence as the antithesis of hubris. Those who can't might want to develop a "new art smell" aerosol that prolongs the desirability of their production.

I must confess that after rereading your letter I am not sure if I am answering it appropriately. It may very well be that I have an obsolete understanding of the word obsolescence. It could be that, following the example of Borges's *Pierre Menard*, you have decided to substitute the word obsolescence for the richer and more insightful word obsolescence. In that case I would be out of the loop, submerged in the swamp of misunderstanding.

Meanwhile, from a nonbuzz perspective, I probably should endorse obsolescence, for it suggests there will be much less waste on doomsday.

LUIS CAMNITZER is an artist from Uruguay who has lived in the U.S. since 1964. A professor emeritus at SUNY Old Westbury, he is currently the curator of the Viewing Program at the Drawing Center, New York. Beginning in 1966, Camnitzer, along with José Guillermo Castillo and Liliana Porter, produced works under the collective name "The New York Graphic Workshop" and initiated the promotion of "Fandso." Fandso was an acronym standing for "Free-Assemblable Nonfunctional Disposable Serial Objects." These mostly took the form of a series of mail exhibitions, culminating and concluding with their contribution to the *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970. Camnitzer represented Uruguay at the Venice Biennial in 1988 and participated in the Whitney Biennial in 2000. He is the author of *New Art of Cuba* (University of Texas Press, 1994) and coordinated the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* with Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss.



Camnitzer. *Obsolescence*. 2001. *Project for a bumper sticker*, created for October 100.

Our film is about globalization and the sea, the “forgotten space” of our modernity.

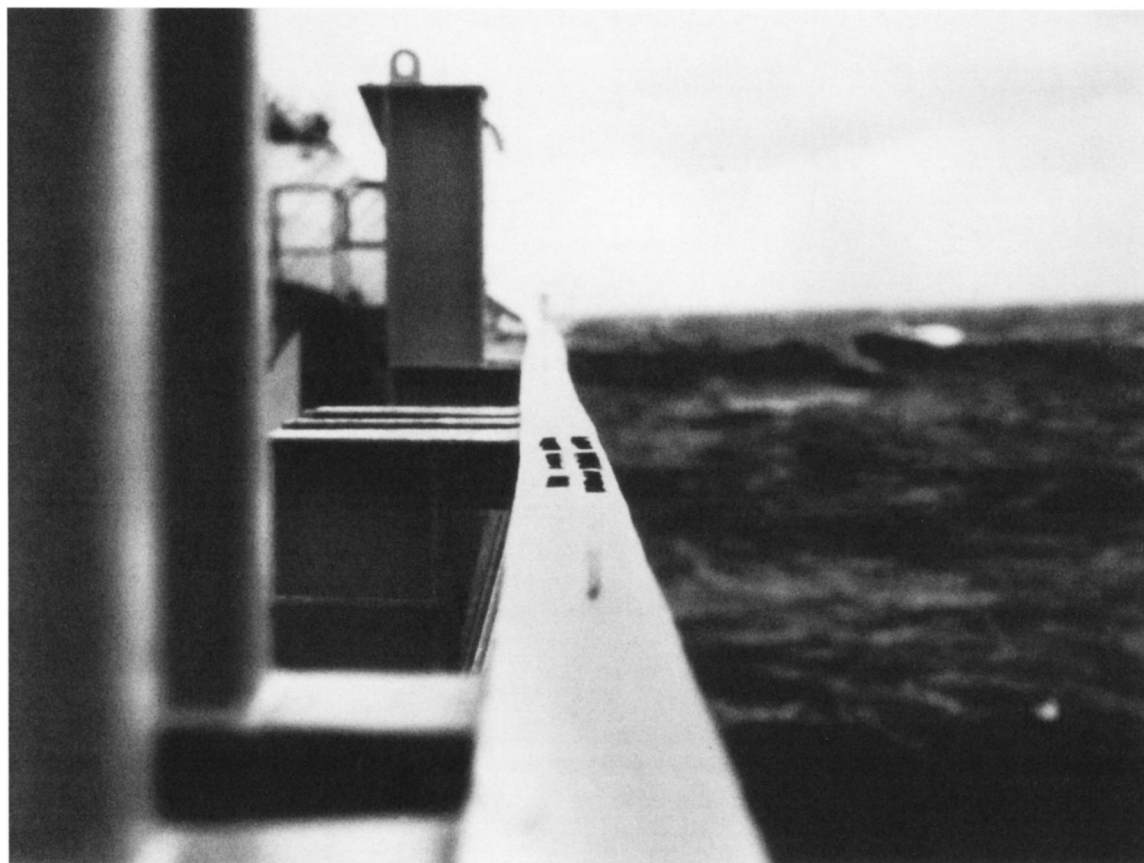
First and foremost, globalization is the penetration of the multinational corporate economy into every nook and cranny of human life. It is the latest incarnation of an imperative that has long been accepted as vital necessity, even before economics could claim the status of a science. The first law of proto-capitalism: markets must multiply through foreign trade or they will stagnate and die. As the most sophisticated of the seventeenth-century defenders of mercantilism, William Petty, put it (in *Political Arithmetick*, 1690): “There is much more to be gained by Manufacture than Husbandry, and by Merchandise than Manufacture. . . . A Seaman is in effect three Husbandmen.”

The contemporary vision of an integrated, globalized, self-regulating capitalist world economy can be traced back to some of these axioms of the capitalist “spirit of adventure.” And yet what is largely missing from the current picture is any sense of material resistance to the expansion of the market imperative. Investment flows intangibly through the ether as if by magic. Money begets money. Wealth is weightless. Sea trade, when it is remembered at all, is a relic of an older and obsolete economy, a world of decrepitude, rust, and creaking cables, of the slow movement of heavy things. If Petty’s old fable held that a seafarer was worth three peasants, neither count for much in the even more fabulous new equation. And yet we would all die without the toil of farmers and seafarers.

Our premise is that the sea remains the crucial space of globalization. Nowhere else is the disorientation, violence, and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest, but this truth is not self-evident, and must be approached as a puzzle, or mystery, a problem to be solved.

The factory system is no longer concentrated in the developed world but has become mobile and dispersed. As ships become more like buildings, the giant floating warehouses of the “just-in-time” system of distribution, factories begin to resemble ships, stealing away stealthily in the night, restlessly searching for ever-cheaper labor. A garment factory in Los Angeles or Hong Kong closes, the work benches and sewing machines reappear in the suburbs of Guangzhou or Dacca. In the automobile industry, for example, the function of the ship is akin to that of conveyor systems within the old integrated car factory: parts span the world on their journey to the final assembly line.

* The following notes are taken from the proposal for a film, cowritten and codirected by the authors, based on Allan Sekula’s exhibition and book project *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag/Rotterdam: The Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1995).





The function of sea trade is no longer a separate, mercantilist enterprise, but has become an integral component of the world-industrial system. We are distracted from the full implications of this insight by two powerful myths, which stifle curiosity. The first myth is that the sea is nothing more than a residual mercantilist space, a reservoir of cultural and economic anachronisms, fit to be viewed only with nostalgia. The second myth is that we live in a postindustrial society, that cybernetic systems and the service economy have radically marginalized the “old economy” of heavy material fabrication and processing. Thus the fiction of obsolescence mobilizes vast reserves of sentimental longing for things that are not really dead.

Our response to these myths is that the sea is the key to understanding *globalized industrialism*. Without a thoroughly modern and sophisticated “revolution” in ocean-going cargo-handling technology, *the global factory would not exist*, and globalization would not be a burning issue.

What began in the mid-1950s as a modest American improvement in cargo logistics, an effort to achieve new efficiencies within a particular industry, has now taken on *world historic importance*. The cargo container, a standardized metal box, capable of being quickly transferred from ship to highway lorry to railroad train, has radically transformed the space and time of port cities and ocean passages.

There have been enormous increases in economies of scale. Older transport links, such as the Panama Canal, slide toward obsolescence as ships become more and more gargantuan. Super-ports, pushed far out from the metropolitan center, require vast level tracts for the storage and sorting of containers. The old sheltering deepwater port, with its steep hillsides and its panoramic vistas, is less suited to these new spatial demands than low delta planes that nonetheless must be continually dredged to allow safe passage for the deeper and deeper draft of the new super-ships.

Ships are loaded and unloaded in as little as twelve hours, compared to the laborious cargo stowage practices of fifty years ago. The old waterfront culture of sailor bars, flophouses, brothels, and ship chandlers give way either to a depopulated *terrain vague* or—blessed with the energies of real-estate speculators—to a new artificial maritime space of theme restaurants, aestheticized nautical relics, and expensive ocean-view condominiums. As the class character of the port cities changes, the memory of mutiny and rebellion, of intense class struggle by dockers, seafarers, fishermen, and shipyard workers—struggles that were fundamental to the formation of the institutions of social democracy and free trade-unionism—fades from public awareness. What tourist in today’s Amsterdam is drawn to the old monument commemorating dockworkers’ heroic but futile strike to prevent the Nazi deportation of the Dutch Jews?

If the cargo container represents one instrument of maritime transformation, the companion instrument is not logistical but legal. This is the *flag of convenience* system of ship registry. Here again, the Americans were in the lead, seeking to break powerful maritime unions in the wake of World War II. If globalization is understood by many in the world today as *Americanization*, the maritime world gives us, then, these two examples of the revolutionary and often brutal ingenuity of American

Overleaf: Allan Sekula. 31 December, 1999. Off the Albanian coast. Diptych from TITANIC’s wake (1998–2000).

business practices. The flag of convenience system allows for ships owned in rich countries to be registered in poor countries. These countries sell their flag for a price. This explains the often mysterious and obscure banners that fly from the sterns of vessels: Malta, the Marshall Islands, Liberia, Panama, and so on. The system was created to obscure legal responsibility for safety and fair labor practices. Today's seafaring crews are drawn from the old and new Third Worlds: Filipinos, Chinese, Indonesians, Ukrainians, Russians. The conditions they endure are not unlike those experienced by the lascars of the eighteenth century.

A consequence of the global production-distribution system is that links between port and hinterland become all the more important. It is not just the port that is transformed, but the highway and rail system, the very transport infrastructure of a country or a continent, as evidenced by the Betuwe line in Holland, or by the frequently catastrophic pressure of truck traffic on Alpine tunnels.

The boxes are everywhere, mobile and anonymous, their contents hidden from view. One could say that these containers are "coffins of remote labor-power" carrying goods manufactured somewhere else, by invisible workers on the other side of the globe. We are told by the apologists of globalization that this accelerated flow is indispensable for our continued prosperity and for the deferred future prosperity of those who labor so far away. But perhaps this is a case for Pandora, or, better yet, for her more clairvoyant sister, Cassandra.

Our film moves between four port cities: Bilbao, Rotterdam, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. It visits the industrial hinterland in south China, and the transport hinterland in the heart of Holland. Of the four port cities, three can be classed as "super-ports," the largest in the world. Here we encounter functional hypertrophy. Bilbao, a fading port with a brave maritime history, has become the site of radical symbolic transformation of derelict maritime space. In Bilbao, functional atrophy coexists with symbolic hypertrophy, a *delirium* of neo-baroque maritime nostalgia wedded to the equally delirious promise of the "new economy."

The challenge of responding adequately both to this symbolic overload and to the sheer mute giantism of the functional maritime world has led us to imagine a film that is, first and foremost, a "documentary," precisely attentive to the materiality of social processes and testimony, and, at the same time, welcoming to the hyperbole and carnival of the puppet show, animation, and the staged micro-drama. . . .

NOËL BURCH is professor emeritus in film history at the Université de Lille III (France) and maker of documentaries, including *Sentimental Journey—Refuzniks USA* (1994) and *Red Hollywood* (with Thom Andersen, 1996). His most recent book, in collaboration with Geneviève Sellier, is *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français, 1930–1956*. In preparation is *De la beauté des latrines—pour une poétique matérialiste du cinéma populaire*.

ALLAN SEKULA teaches in the photography program at the California Institute of the Arts. His most recent books are *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972–1996*, *Deep Six/Passer au bleu* in the series *Calais vu par . . .*, published by the Musée des Beaux Arts et de la Dentelle, Calais, and *Five Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*, co-authored with Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair. His recent project, *TITANIC's wake*, was last shown in its entirety at the Project Room of the Centro Cultural Belém, Lisbon. The complete version of his extended work *Fish Story* (1989–1995) will be shown in Documenta 11, Kassel.



Zoe Leonard. TV Repair Shop. 2001.

A friend of mine lives up on the Yukon River. For many years he lived with his family, his wife and their two children, in a remote spot about ninety miles from the nearest village. There was no road, the only access was by river. They built a cabin in the woods by a lake and both kids were raised there. They fished and hunted and gardened. There was no electricity or indoor plumbing, most things in their lives were handmade. They used an outhouse and heated with wood.

When the kids were around seven and nine or so, they went on their first trip to Fairbanks. They stayed with a friend. It was the first time the boys had seen indoor plumbing. When the younger son used the bathroom, he was disgusted. He just couldn't believe that anyone would shit inside their own house.

*

It occurs to me that obsolescence is less about time and more about context. About what makes sense in a given circumstance. Our ways of doing things, or making things, reflect the larger direction our society is taking. New technology is usually pitched to us as an improvement. And attachment to old things is often seen as regressive: nostalgic or sentimental. But progress is always an exchange. We gain something, we give something else up. I'm interested in looking at some of what we are losing.

About three years ago, I began taking pictures of storefronts in my neighborhood. I grew up in New York, on the edges of Harlem as a kid, and moved to the Lower East Side when I was sixteen, in 1977. There was a kind of beauty I lived with for years that I had never really noticed as beauty. The dried fruit and nut stores, the pillow makers, Gus's Pickles. The crush of different languages, the bodegas with handwritten signs and "tropical products," the creaking metal signs on Orchard Street with worn-out paintings of men's suits, the corset shops, the dense visual quality of these streets. I loved it. But it was all so familiar, I didn't bother to think of it as beauty. As anything worth photographing.

A few years ago, the slow creeping pattern of gentrification sped up, and as it spread below Houston Street the shops started closing, the pillow man and the quilt-maker, the bodegas, the butcher, the linoleum store. New stores opened up: clothing boutiques, an antique store, a hair salon, a lot of bars.

It was only as these old shops began disappearing that I realized how much I counted on them—that this layered, frayed, and quirky beauty underlined my own life. I felt at home in it. Where I grew up, on the corner of



Leonard. Meats Meats Meats. 1999.

Claremont and La Salle, there was a typewriter repair store and a Chinese laundry downstairs—on the corner a liquor store with an open counter, and then later with a thick Plexiglas wall and a drawer to pass your money through.

I liked the way my neighborhood grounded me in the world—with physical evidence of the past—of who and when and how. With language. Spanish overlaying Hebrew, Chinatown inching over. . . . And with other kinds of language, an urban vernacular: signs in store windows. “We accept food stamps,” “*aceptamos WIC*,” pawnshops and check-cashing places. A shop offering: “immigration, divorcios, traducciones.” The wedding stores on Clinton Street, the dairy restaurants, the old kosher Chinese restaurant on Essex Street. The ubiquitous presence of the Lotto man: the poorer a neighborhood, the more you saw of him. I liked the way it was all so visible. I felt located—centered in a migratory pattern of generations of immigrants, centered somehow in history.

And I loved the humor, the personality: “MEATS MEATS MEATS FRESH EVERYDAY.” “Serve yourself and save.” “Fancy Pharmacy.” “Hard to get items.”

I began to realize I would miss all this. So I started taking pictures. I wanted a record.

There is something more here than quaintness, or nostalgia. It is a feeling of connectedness to the rest of the world: to language and economy, to history and struggle—to the endless supply of human solutions to the problem of survival.

A few weeks after I started with those pictures, I went on a trip to France, then Spain, and Morocco. As we traveled, I kept thinking: Why does a book of matches look different there than here? Why do we love these foreign matches, these sugar packets? As souvenirs, yes, to remember our trips, our holidays. But something more. Each detail of a restaurant in a foreign country tells a whole story: the salt is chunky and gray, hand-gathered on a northern island; the candles are soft and burn quickly; the honey is crystallized. What is the story of a book of matches? Who mines the sulfur? Where does the wood come from—or the wax or paper? Who prints the cover, assembles the boxes? Why in some countries does the wood splinter, the sulfur fall off? It takes six matches to get a light.

That’s it, I thought. If I photograph every single product in the world, every item we have extracted, refined, manufactured, every item that is bought and sold, the pictures would contain the story of who we are, what kind of society we have become. All would be revealed in this—the political alliances and trade agreements, the stories of slavery and sweatshops, the stories of rubber plantations and sugar plantations, of coffee and tobacco and cotton plantations—the endless story of human progression from subsistence economies to capitalism. From hunting and gathering to Kmart and Target. From isolation to trade, from imperialism to colonialism to globalization.

I remember thinking: This is going to be a pretty hard project. Photographing every single thing in the world, salt and oil and wood and diamonds, coal and bricks and lime and steel I beams, potatoes and oranges, soap and clothes and



Leonard. We Accept Food Stamp. 2001.

handbags. Everything we mine or extract, or farm or collect, everything we pick or package or sew or assemble.

When I got home from that trip, I saw a connection. I began to see that the urban language I'd been trying to record, this history of my own city, held the key to what I'd been wanting to record globally. I began to see New York as a kind of fulcrum or hub. All these goods and languages and money pass through here. My own neighborhood is filled with signs of a local economy being replaced by a global one: small businesses being replaced by large corporations, multinationals taking over.

The deeper I look, the more I realize that in looking into these shop windows, I am also looking out at the rest of the world—out to the Dominican Republic and China and Poland. I am seeing evidence of specific people, their handwriting, their hand—the way they arrange their window displays—but also of trade agreements, labor conditions, cultural and economic realities in other places. We are connected through coffee and tuna fish, through sugar and cigarettes.

These pictures examine remnants of other eras, hint at other ways of living: typewriter repair shops, flophouses on the Bowery, hand-lettered signs for Mandel Tobacco Co. on East Twelfth street, “suckling pigs sold here” on West 125th. Around the corner from McDonald's, Starbucks, WalMart.

I remember as a kid how excited I was to learn the word anachronism. I thought it amazing that an object could be out of its own time—that it could actually carry another time with it. So these pictures are about place and time. They are pictures of here and now, but also pictures of there and then. They look across place and across time.

I got interested in how signs of the U.S. show up in other countries, and how other countries show up here: a Coca-Cola awning in Meknes, Morocco. In Havana: Bridgestone tires, Marlboro cigarettes, Kodak film. (If it's illegal for U.S. citizens to *spend* money here, why is it legal for them to *make* it?) At an outdoor market in East Jerusalem: an ancient limestone wall hung with purses and bags—Bugs Bunny, Calvin Klein. A table piled high with shoes: Nixie, Phila, Adidos, misspelled rip-off logos.

*

Walking down the street in Trinidad, Cuba, we come upon a row of four or five wheelbarrows. One is lined with a large pink pillow. On the pillow, a big television. Why is the television in the wheelbarrow? I realize we are in front of a TV repair shop. This must be how televisions get delivered to and from the repair shop. Something is out of sync here: a place that has television but not a delivery van.

Trinidad has electricity, and it has roads, but traffic is restricted in the old town. To quote the guide book: “Its status as a UNESCO-declared World Heritage Site has ensured that . . . its marvelous architecture has remained unspoiled . . . there is a completeness about central Trinidad's cobbled, traffic-



Leonard. Fin de Siglo. 2001.

free streets, its jumble of colonial mansions.” The designation does protect the colonial-era architecture, but it also ensures that Trinidad will be reliant on tourism. And, indeed, it is. From the same guidebook: “One of the island’s foremost tourist attractions . . . Trinidad attracts more tourists than many of Cuba’s larger cities.”

So the TV could be in the wheelbarrow because of the World Heritage designation, or it could be that the owner simply can’t afford a car or a van. Or that this is the quickest, easiest way to get around in a small busy town. The way riding a bike in Manhattan is quicker than driving a car. I didn’t stay in Cuba long enough to know the answers, but I could see that there is a story here—a long and complicated one that involves Castro and the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Philosophies and economic systems, corporate and political players far from here, all put the TV in the wheelbarrow.

You cannot see all that in the photograph, but the picture does give you some clues. You know you are in a place where things get repaired. And that things get repaired in places where it is cheaper to pull them apart and fix them than it is to buy a new one. Places where things are used, reused, adapted, and then broken down for parts—a final usefulness extracted from the metal, the screws, the wire, the glass. Places where people have time and labor is cheap. Or places where shipping is expensive and factories and goods are far away. So in New York, you throw your TV out. In Trinidad, you repair it.

*

I’m interested in the traditions of Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. In their tradition of archiving. Both had such a keen eye for signs of the human hand, a love and respect for the distinct voices of anonymous individuals. Each had a specific view of the time in which they lived, and a clear understanding of the value of their work in history.

Atget’s photographs provide a record of Paris, but they also document the shift from a handmade world to an age of mechanical production. I think he understood that something irrevocable was going on during his time—during his *fin de siècle*. His archive provides us with a view of a world now completely altered.

We are now witnessing such a specific moment in history—the end of the mechanical age, the beginning of the digital era. I think this is a unique moment to document, and an important one to archive.

I have been working with an old Rolleiflex. I like that the camera is a leftover from the mechanical age. I like using this tool, looking at a new world through an old lens.

I’m equally interested in the traditions of Flemish and Dutch still life painting—in the idea that a grouping of objects can be a portrait, or an allegory, that the owner can be described through his objects, that the assembling of



Leonard. Two Pairs. 1999.

these possessions reveals his or her class, profession, interests, education, religious beliefs, his or her status and place in the world. And that objects can be arranged, symbolically, to relate a story of the fragility of life, the temporal qualities of life.

In both traditions, the archive and the still life, objects and places are employed to tell the stories of their owners and inhabitants. This is a constant thread in my work, this kind of archaeology. I'm interested in what we make and what we leave behind. I want to see the clues and signs, the flaws and beauty. I know the world will never look quite this way again, and I feel that I want to look closely, to hold it near.

In a market in Warsaw, blankets spread with goods: old alarm clocks and radios, crucifixes and porn magazines, dolls and stuffed animals, eyeglasses, hammers, wheels. On a small square of pale-blue plastic, two pairs of brown shoes. One with laces, one without, the imprint of the former owner's feet pressed into the insole.

Certainly, our cultures are recorded through the purposeful and self-conscious mediums of literature and art, but many stories and histories are told simply and clearly by pots and pans, ax handles and foldout couches, glass beads, satellite dishes, and Styrofoam cups.

*

I lived on Stanton Street at the corner of Ludlow for twenty-two years. It was an old tenement building. My apartment had five rooms and many doors between rooms, and windows and transoms and airshafts to "borrow" light and air. At just about eye level, every door frame had a crusty, raised outline of a mezuzah. The mezuzahs were gone—removed and taken to other homes, years ago. But decades of painting and repainting had left a distinctive slanted imprint in each doorway.

It's a New York real-estate story. It was a rent-controlled apartment. When I moved, my landlord planned a gut renovation. A capital improvement so the rent could be raised, the apartment deregulated. The bathtub in the kitchen would be pulled out, the walls and doors torn down and replaced. The morning after the move, I went back and took pictures of each door frame.

ZOE LEONARD is an artist living and working in New York City. Her work has been exhibited extensively both in the United States and internationally, and is included in numerous public collections. She is represented by the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City and Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, Germany.