



Art, Inspiration and Residency: Daniel Rothbart

LaNapoule

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Alumni, Interviews, Residency, The Château, Tributes

Tonya Barber in conversation with Daniel Rothbart

Today we welcome nine Resident Artists from around the world to Château de La Napoule for their Fall 2015 Residency. To celebrate this new group of LNAF Resident Artists, we spoke with Daniel Rothbart, 2002 LNAF Alumnus.

Here's what Daniel had to say about his art, inspiration, and his Residency at Château de La Napoule.



Daniel Rothbart, *Oculus*, September 2015, mixed media, Rumsey Street Project | SiTE LAB entry for ARTPRIZE 2015, curated by Paul Amenta, variable dimensions, Grand Rapids, Michigan

What inspired you to become an artist? Do you remember a moment when you dedicated yourself to art and creativity as your life's work?

As a child, I enjoyed observing people and situations from the vantage point of an outsider. I would draw line-based cartoons that ranged from satire to surrealism. These notations, filtered by sensibility, felt like a psychological vehicle for self-discovery and growth. Childhood drawings were my first foray into art making and helped determine my path in later life.

What motivates and inspires you to create now?

My studio practice is multidisciplinary, and encompasses object making, installation work, performative collaborations with other artists, and media work. I also write about art and other subjects. Personal growth and self-awareness are still

important for me but so is my relationship with the public. Dialogue with collaborators is also an important part of my creative process. Today my work often explores themes of spirituality, metaphysics, and ecology. Several recent works have sought to restore the respectful relationship between people and urban water sources through rituals.

[On your business card and website, it mentions "Semiotic Street Solutions", and *The Phoenix*; What's the story here?](#)

I first began doing Street Works during my post-Fulbright sojourn in Italy in the early 1990s. At the time I was producing medium-scale sculptural objects in cast-brass that were informed by growth forms in nature. I took inspiration from those tough trees and weeds that can thrive in a fissure of the sidewalk or even split concrete to emerge toward the light. I began



Daniel Rothbart, sculpture in a Roman street with graffiti circa 1993,
photo credit Claudio Abate

to install the sculptures in commonplace public spaces like the market of San Lorenzo, a working class neighborhood of Rome. I viewed the sculptural objects as signifiers in flux because their meaning was highly mutable, depending on chance encounters with passers by who included market-goers, school children, *carabinieri*, etc. I titled these volatile *tableaux vivants* "Semiotic Street Situations."

The Phoenix was my artist's book that was published by Ulisse e Calipso in 1999 with an introduction by Richard Milazzo. The premise of the book is cycles of destruction and reinvention. I selected a group of collaborators and gave each of them a digital collage print that I had created with the request that they destroy and transform it in some way. Tom Eccles rolled his collage into a corked bottle and cast it into the East River. Francine Hunter McGivern folded hers into an airplane and sent it soaring from a Tribeca rooftop. Riccardo Notte devoured his print in Naples and Melania di Leo bathed with hers in a clawfoot bathtub in New York City. For Enrico Pedrini, the collage sparked an affinity with Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, the godfather of Italian Futurism, who was once described as, "the caffeine of Europe." So for me, the Phoenix represents an important value of creative resurgence.

Empty vessels have featured in your work and have done so since (or even before?) your 2002 LNAF Residency. Why empty vessels?

Empty vessel sculptures have been part of my work since the early 1990s when I lived in Naples and Rome. They were influenced by a cabbalistic creation story about vessels that contained divine light and which shattered, sending sparks into the void. As a result of this rupture, sparks lie dormant and hidden in our world, awaiting discovery by someone who can return them to their source. This process is known as *tikkun olam* in Hebrew, or "healing the world."



Daniel Rothbart, *Cirque Zavatta, Elephant 1*, March 2002, c-print, 11 x 14 inches, Mandelieu-la-Napoule, France

At the time of my residency at LNAF, however, the vessels were also influenced by Buddhist thought. My wife, Francine Hunter McGivern, and I lived very close to the World Trade Center and witnessed their collapse on 9/11 from the streets nearby. In the months that followed, our neighborhood was steeped in tragedy from the smell of smoldering buildings to myriad faces of victims posted by hopeful families and loved ones who had not yet resigned themselves to loss. The trauma of that experience had shaken me profoundly and the act of creating new work seemed irrelevant in the face of such an immense catastrophe. Though I wanted to work in the studio, I was unable to do so.

Around this time I was blessed with an acceptance letter for a residency at LNAF, which led me to consider different approaches to art making. I decided to bring twelve aluminum vessel sculptures with me to France in a rucksack, approaching the residency as an opportunity to fill them in different ways. Certain Buddhist monks carry begging bowls out into the world each day, hoping to fill them with sustenance that people provide during encounters on the path. Similarly, I would take my vessels out each day around the Côte d'Azur in search of compelling environments or encounters with people who might intervene to fill the vessels with temporary meaning.

How important is the viewer/public in your art?

For my Semiotic Street Situations and performance collaborations, the viewers and public become a critical and even integral part of the work. Beginning with my residency at LNAF, I began to select people with whom I wished to collaborate on performative interventions with my sculpture. The following year this evolved into "Meditation/Mediation," a series of collaborative performance vignettes with my vessel sculptures at the Baruchello Foundation in Rome. A public of viewers watched the performances unfold in the garden as I documented them with a video camera. Though I had conceived the project and its broad parameters, my role was between that of a spectator and full participant. Conversely, members of the public felt moved to intervene with spontaneous vessel performances. So the relationship between artist and public became increasingly interconnected. In the years following LNAF and the Baruchello Foundation project, I had the wonderful opportunity to explore issues around performance, artist's theatre and spectatorship in dialogue with John Perreault, an important pioneer of the Street Works movement in New York City of the 1960s.

You have years of experience living, working and collaborating with artists and the people of Italy and France. What differences do you notice in the relationship between the artist and society in France vs. the US?

Over the years I have noted strong differences between the way French, Italians, and Americans relate to contemporary art. The French greatly value art and culture, including its more experimental expressions. This translates into massive state support for the arts through agencies like the FRAC (Le Fonds régional d'art contemporain) and DRAC (Direction régionale des Affaires culturelles). Work by young artists is regularly acquired with state funds and exhibited in wonderful state-endowed museums. The French government also renovates former industrial buildings to provide subsidized studio space for its artists. Americans are generally more suspicious of contemporary art and the state doesn't invest in the well being of artists at all. It is often said that the annual budget of the Rome Opera House is greater than the annual budget of the American National Endowment for the Arts. Military spending infinitely trumps public cultural investment in the United States. Last year I was walking in Nice and happened on the rue Meyerbeer. In America, this street would more likely be named for a general.

You were in La Napoule for your Residency in 2002. How did your Residency affect your work? How have you developed as an artist since 2002?

My residency at La Napoule was important for my creative and professional development in many ways. Enrico Pedrini, the Italian art theorist and collector, first took me to visit La Napoule in 1998. I met Patricia Corbett, its director at the time, and

viewed an exhibition of work by artist Alfredo Romano that she had produced in collaboration with the Galleria Giorgio Persano of Turin, Italy. I was completely smitten by the beauty of the château and intrigued by the work of its American benefactor Henry Clews.

The residency enabled me to see more of my friend Enrico, who owned a summerhouse in Cagnes-sur-Mer. Enrico had a long history in France, having worked closely with Pierre Restany, Bernar Venet, Ben Vautier, and many others. From my picturesque room in La Napoule, we discussed my work, Conceptual Art, France, and French culture, or made sorties into and around Nice for studio visits with Ben Vautier or younger artists of La Station collective. He was intimately familiar with cultural institutions of the Côte d'Azur from the Fondation Maeght in Saint Paul de Vence to the Espace de L'art Concret in Mouans-Sartoux, so he exposed me to interesting, challenging art in the region. And of course the Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain (MAMAC), Villa Arson, Galerie des Ponchettes, and other vibrant cultural institutions of Nice.

Enrico also introduced me to gallerist Christian Depardieu who had founded Art Jonction, an important fair of contemporary art in Nice that was frequented by Leo Castelli, Giorgio Persano, Yvon Lambert and other international gallerists. Christian invited me to do the first solo exhibition in his new gallery that was located across from the MAMAC off the Place Yves Klein. I've continued to show regularly with the Galerie Depardieu and Christian presented my work as a solo project at the VOLTA Art Fair in New York in 2013.

Living at La Napoule, relatively free from pressures of the outside world, I was able to focus intensely on my creative practice. As an American in France, my otherness was often cast into sharp relief, prompting me to look inward, and question cultural assumptions. During my wanderings with the vessels, I was struck by the deep creative potential of seemingly ordinary people and situations. All that was needed was some form of catalyst, like the sculptures, to release this energy. If sparks of divine light reside in everyday situations, there is surely a luminous caché in and around La Napoule.



Daniel Rothbart, *Natural Selection*, September 2015, aluminum, installation view in *Potential Fields... a meandering algorithm* curated by Francine Hunter McGivern, variable dimensions, Clermont State Historic Site, Germantown, New York

Does this quote from Henry Clews resonate with you as a fellow artist?

“The artist – the poet – is a constant problem; a perplexity...The artist never really finds himself, nor does he seek to find himself....he instinctively knows that he has chosen the steepest, the most solitary and the most dangerous path; a path which differs from all others in that it is without resting place, guide, or goal; and that his only compensation can be found in his pangs and joys of creation.”

I agree that many substantive artists represent a problem or perplexity to the societies in which they live. Still today, many artists live at the margins of society and challenge prevalent values of the cultures around them. Of course Henry Clews lived and worked during a very different time, when the field of art making was less diverse than it is today. Mega-galleries, contemporary art fairs, and the booming international art market weren't yet on the horizon. MFA programs didn't prepare young people for a career in the arts. Nor had the internet united global villages of likeminded creative practitioners. Art making certainly remains a difficult path on many levels – from finding one's voice and creating meaningful work to survival and continued relevance over time. During Clews' lifetime, Marcel Duchamp challenged the notion of pangs or joys of creation with his Readymades as an antidote to “retinal art.” Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons raise interesting questions about authorship and the role of the artist despite having attained rich worldly compensation. The difficulties facing an artist today differ from those of the past, but Henry Clews, through his generosity and foresight, continues to nurture artists and their diverse approaches to furthering cultural discourse.

What do you remember most about Château de La Napoule and your time there?

My time at La Napoule was memorable in so many ways. After the hardships of 9/11, its grand halls nourished an important period of creative growth and development. My artist wife and frequent collaborator Francine Hunter McGivern visited from New York and contributed to the residency through discussions with other artist fellows and studio visits. Dinner table conversation with LNAF residents was often thought provoking and some of these dialogues have continued over the years through social media.

I remember Henry Clews' studio with its plaster maquettes and the fascinating pantheon of mythological creatures that he sculpted to grace architectural details of the château. The dreamily beautiful exterior of La Napoule, with its honey-hued walls extending to the water's very edge, is unforgettable. The placid, turquoise Mediterranean, viewed from the battlements of the La Napoule, is etched in my memory. To leave this magical place in the morning with my vessels and return in the evening, to reflect on the day's events with others in the resident community, was unique in my life.

From an earthier perspective, the food, provided by a local caterer, was sublime, and every meal offered new delicacies. I would be remiss without mentioning the delectable *soupe de poisson* to be enjoyed in restaurants around the château or the ethereal rabbit that I dined on with Enrico at a restaurant in nearby Provence.

What advice would you give artists embarking on their LNAF Residency?

I would suggest that incoming fellows practice their French or take the opportunity to begin learning. Mandelieu-la-Napoule is well connected by rail to other towns of the Côte d'Azur and Nice, which offer world-class museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions. The Château de La Napoule is a very special and alluring place, but I would avoid becoming cloistered. Apart from the wonderful opportunity to develop studio work, a residency at La Napoule presents occasions for cultural exchange and bridge building in France. I would recommend coming to La Napoule with an open mind. Many new experiences doubtless await them and should be encountered in the right spirit. Henry and Marie Clews fell in love with La

Napoule when they journeyed south from Paris. As artists, they both engendered a metamorphosis of the ruined castle. I suggest that new residents embrace this spirit of transformation, growth, and change that have long been part of La Napoule.



Daniel Rothbart, *Sea-Change*, 2012, performed by Marina Markovic, video still, Jamaica Bay, Brooklyn