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Art For All People® | Your Link With Hot Contemporary Art | Winter 2013

DANIEL ROTHBART: VESSEL

Interviewed by Michael Corbin

Daniel Rothbart is a New York-based artist who I met online. He works mainly with sculptural installations www.danielrothbart.com and collaborations with other artists. I had a heavy-duty discussion with him about art, his beginnings and the state of art in America compared to Europe. Very cool chat.

MICHAEL: Hey Daniel, this should be a treat. First off, you are a highly-educated and trained artist. What did arts education do for you that you might have missed otherwise? Would you be as good an artist without the formal education?

DANIEL: Thanks, Michael, and the pleasure is mutual.

When I was a student at RISD, I remember being very skeptical of the value of art education. Assignments in foundation design courses lacked personal relevance and the group critiques seemed endless. Looking back, I'm grateful for concrete skills I acquired like technical rendering, drawing from the figure and metalworking techniques. A number of my professors were based in New York City and commuted to Providence, so I learned from their example of juggling other professional commitments to pursue a studio practice.

Professor Mike Fink's film courses exposed me to Dada, surrealist, poetic realist and wartime European cinema, raising many challenging issues that I consider to this day. I also cross-registered and took interesting Shakespeare and Slavic Studies courses at Brown University. My junior year abroad with the RISD European Honors Program was memorable and exposed me to the culture and classical tradition of Italy. All of this was valuable to my creative development.

Graduate school at Columbia was stimulating many ways. I had a huge studio space in Prentis Hall on 125th Street in Harlem where I could work on a larger scale. Art theory and graduate seminar courses were first rate and I had the opportunity to take Italian studies and language courses that have been useful in later life. The program also provided an opportunity to network with visiting critics and a gentle introduction to life in New York City.

Without my art education there would be larger gaps in my knowledge of art history and theory. I would certainly be a different artist without it, but would my work be better or worse? That's very hard to say. Art school professors sometimes try to break students of their former studio habits and focus, which can be destructive. There are certainly advantages to bypassing art school.

MICHAEL: I find it interesting that you've referenced art history and the past when your work - what I've seen of it online anyway - seems very TODAY and contemporary.

DANIEL: Thank you for saying so! Nonetheless, I've always been interested in art history and particularly movements of the twentieth century avant-garde.

Last month I had the misfortune to lose Enrico Pedrini, a dear friend of twenty years and important mentor. We met during my Fulbright Grant in Italy and he exposed me to the Italian conceptual movement Arte Povera through the works of Pier Paolo Calzolari, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Jannis Kounellis. He also introduced me to the international Fluxus movement, including the works of Giuseppe Chiari, Yoko Ono and Larry Miller, all of whom I would later collaborate with as an artist.

I've been interested in Jewish culture for a long time and believe that Modernism drew Jewish protagonists partially because its language of abstraction. I view the second commandment of the Decalogue, which prohibits idolatrous images, and mystical Judaism, which fascinated abstract expressionists like Barnett Newman and Morris, as significant cultural factors. I gave a lecture on the influence of Jewish thought on postwar American abstraction at the US Information Service in Milan that Enrico attended, and, afterwards, he invited me to develop this thesis into a book. This book, titled *Jewish Metaphysics As Generative Principle in American Art*, was Published by Ulisse e Calipso with an introduction by Pedrini and presented to an interesting company of scholars and artists, including Arturo Schwarz at Studio Oggetto in Milan and Michelangelo Pistoletto at the Persano Gallery in Turin.

I think the use of poor and found materials in my sculpture and the collaborative and performative focus of my Meditation/Mediation project were influenced by these movements. Enrico's passion for art and dialogue inspired me to pursue unfamiliar situations in art. He opened my mind to seeking out spontaneous, improvisational collaborations with other artists where I relinquish control. The sculptural vessels I made for Meditation/Mediation represent a space to be filled or, as Achille Bonito Oliva once said, "the concave spaces of art." By working with a diverse group of collaborators, Meditation/Mediation explores a broad range of contemporary issues from poetry and dance to politics and ecology.

MICHAEL: When you were a kid, was it your dream to become an artist? Do you come from an artistic family?

DANIEL: I always loved to draw and, as a young child, would observe people and sketch them with line drawing cartoons. One piece I remember consisted of a large man's head, hinged at the scalp line, with a smaller man emerging from within by lifting open the cranium and peering out with a spyglass.

I grew up in Eugene, Oregon, a part of the country that, particularly during my childhood, lacked venues and institutions for contemporary art. My first exposure to conceptual art occurred when my parents took me to visit the Japanese garden in Portland. This garden with all its Zen Buddhist symbolism and elegant Shinto shrines really moved me.

During this visit I saw my first Japanese tea ceremony, which focuses on the ceramic tea bowl. I became very interested Japanese ceramics that have this wabi-sabi 'wisdom in natural simplicity' so important to traditional Japanese aesthetics. I decided to study the craft and for years produced Japanese style tea bowls. They were fired using a process called raku, which encourages crazing of glazes and carbon from burning wood settles into the fissures to produce complex patterns. Though I moved away from ceramics, vessel forms are still central to my Meditation/Mediation project.

My parents Myron and Mary were both Professors of Psychology at the University of Oregon and my brother Michael is gifted in the hard sciences and earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from MIT. That said, my father loves photography and took wonderful, gritty pictures of his native Chicago in the 1950s. He also worked for a summer as a professional fisherman with his brother George off the coast of La Push, Washington, and brought his camera.

While fishing, he shot lavish seascapes and sunsets and documented life at sea through photographs of painting lures and gaffing Chinook salmon. Myron also has a passion for furniture design and cabinetmaking. He took inspiration from American craftsmen George Nakashima and Sam Maloof but produces very original and elegant tables and cabinets that, to my eye, have an affinity with Japanese aesthetics. Now in retirement, he dedicates much of his time to photography, furniture design and woodworking. On my mother's side I had an aunt Alice who, by example, influenced my decision to pursue the arts. She modeled stylized faces in clay and was a skilled draftsman with an evolved personal style. She also produced fanciful artist's books that combine drawing, collage and assemblage.

MICHAEL: When I think about conceptual art, I think ... space, light, air, breathe, quiet, Zen. This all seems Japanese or Buddhist in nature, but it's universal. Everything is really a vessel, especially US. Is this what you try to reflect in your work or something else?

DANIEL: My work with vessels began with an interest in Japanese aesthetics and came back around to Eastern philosophy with Meditation/Mediation. The journey was roundabout though.

When living in Naples and Rome, back in the early 1990s, I became very interested in Jewish metaphysics and particularly a creation story in the Lurianic Kabbalah about vessels. At the beginning of time, ten Sefirot, or divine emanations emerged in the form of vessels from the body of Adam Kadmon, the primordial man. These vessels were filled with divine light but some were overwhelmed by the luminosity of their contents, shattering in a cosmic catastrophe known as the Breaking of Vessels or Shevirat ha-Kelim. Some of the light returned to its source but much remained bound to the Kelipot or shards of the vessels, binding light to darkness. As a result, it is believed that divine light exists in the world around us, often in unexpected places, waiting to be set free through a process of Tikkun Olam or healing the world.

I cast eighteen shallow vessel sculptures in bronze and began to arrange them in public environments. The neighborhood of San Lorenzo in Rome had particular appeal for me with its fabulous Marxist graffiti and history of civil unrest. Once while arranging sculpture I had to talk my way out of a confrontation with a carabinieri, armed with a Uzi, who though I was laying a trap for an incoming motorcade... Photographer Claudio Abate accompanied me on several occasions and photographed these installations. They seemed to work in this gritty, urban setting, absorbing some of the history and energy of the place while also transforming it. The vessel arrangements encouraged passers by to reconsider their environment and see it in a new way.

Back in New York in the mid-nineties, I made a new series of eighteen vessel sculptures in cast aluminum that were more

directly inspired by the form of Japanese winter tea bowls. They didn't take an important role in my studio practice again, however, until 2001 with the 9/11 tragedy. My wife, Francine Hunter McGivern and I, lived very close to the former World Trade Center and viewed the attacks and their consequences from her nearby Tribeca neighborhood. One of my vivid memories of the days immediately following 9/11 was a Buddhist monk, who was chanting at Ground Zero, among the twisted wreckage of fallen buildings.

I was badly shaken by the experience and had difficulty returning to the studio. Francine had introduced me to her Buddhist practice years earlier and I began to reflect on the Buddhist significance of vessels and how some monks go out into the world with begging bowls, living from whatever sustenance they find. This has to do with a lack of worldly expectations and the value of non-attachment. It also seemed like an interesting premise for art making to me. That is, seeking out unexpected situations and collaborations in the world and filling the vessels with what temporary meaning you find rather than creating an object to be imposed on a space.

In 2002 I had the good fortune to win a residency at La Napoule Art Foundation outside Cannes, France, and brought the aluminum vessels. I began to carry them with me in a rucksack to environments in and around the Côte d'Azur. When I found a suitable place, I would install the vessels and photograph them. At one point, I crossed paths with a small traveling circus and photographed the vessels with circus performers and memorably an animal handler who served his elephant an apple from a vessel. One year later I was invited to do an exhibition at the Fondazione Baruchello in Rome where I invited artist collaborators to realize short performance interventions with the vessels that I videotaped. That's how the Meditation/Mediation project came about.

MICHAEL: You live in NYC, but you've also travelled a bit. Do you feel New York is the center of the art world? How does the city affect you and your work?

New York is certainly the center of the international marketplace for contemporary art. From my perspective though, it is only one of many cities around the world that have important art scenes. Italian modern and contemporary art strongly influenced my development along with dialogues I was fortunate enough to have with scholars and theorists like Enrico Pedrini (Genoa) and Riccardo Notte (Naples) and artists like Sukran Moral (Rome).

New York is blessed with an extraordinary community of talented and ambitious artists and I've learned a great deal from fellow artists Francine Hunter McGivern, John Perreault, Mel Kendrick and many others. New York City is very expensive and competitive so artists almost invariably have to do other things to support themselves (like often working full time). The effect of a day job can be favorable as artists acquire new skills and mix with a variety of people from outside the cultural milieu.

France is a country that has traditionally supported its artists and cultural institutions through public infrastructure. Government funds acquire work directly from artists for accession to museums, old factories are renovated to provide subsidized artist's studio space, etc. Many French artists, as a result, develop myopia and fail to see beyond the provincial cultural politics of France.

This certainly isn't the case for major artists like Bernar Venet, Ben Vautier, Christian Boltanski or Sophie Calle, but many younger artists succumb to this mentality. Italian artists who lack public support in their native country, seem much more likely to travel and engage international community. At times, I believe hardship can be beneficial to artists.

I often collaborate with foreign artists and have found contemporary art scenes in Naples, Rome, Milan, Nice, Tel Aviv, Herzliya and Belgrade to be particularly lively. At this moment, if I didn't live in New York, I could see myself in Naples or Belgrade tomorrow. New Orleans is an American City that has interesting young artists. Beyond the cultural scene in New York, I'm attracted to the city's energy and diversity. The frenetic rhythm of life here feels invigorating. Even if I don't always go out to an event or an opening, I feel as though I could. It's a city that's constantly changing, and offers new potential and possibilities.

MICHAEL: Have you found differences in how Europeans view art compared to Americans?

DANIEL: I believe there are strong differences. The Europeans have uninterrupted millennia-old traditions of art making. As a result, art, culture and history are firmly integrated into their daily lives and a source of pride and identity. A European living in Rome or Paris is surrounded by architecture and public art dating from antiquity through the present day and is graced with the presence of world-class museums and cultural institutions.

Modernism as a reaction against the devastation war and the classical tradition makes immediate sense in Europe. Art has been produced in America too throughout our short history, but didn't start to acquire its own unique identity until the

Second World War. Following the rise of Nazism, the exodus of artists from Europe to New York City included André Breton, Piet Mondrian, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst and many others, not to mention Marcel Duchamp who had arrived earlier. I believe that it was through dialogue with these artists from the School of Paris that abstract expressionists developed their own fresh and distinctive voice.

Serge Guilbaut wrote a fascinating book entitled *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. In it he describes how Abstract Expressionism became a tool of American foreign policy after World War II. During this period, in the wake of fascist ideology, America was concerned that several European countries and particularly France might adopt Marxist leaning forms of government. To demonstrate the cultural primacy of capitalism, the United States Information Service produced numerous costly exhibitions of abstract expressionist art with the agenda of winning over Europeans.

The United States also applied its Hollywood star system to the art world by celebrating the work of a select few artists and heavily commodifying their works. The vast majority of working artists were disenfranchised by this system and largely ignored by the American public for whom contemporary art is considered a rarified hothouse flower or smacks of elitism. In Europe you have the small collector who is driven by passion and sensibility rather than speculation. In general, I think artists are treated more respectfully in Europe than in the US and we've already discussed how certain European countries invest monetarily to nurture emerging artists.

MICHAEL: Contemporary art seems to be moving toward more conceptual work and even staging of events. Do you think painting could ever phase out?

DANIEL: What an interesting question. My feeling is that painting will always have a place in contemporary art. It's such an ancient tradition that extends across cultures through to the present day. The terrain of painting has been thoroughly mapped and explored but occasionally a contemporary artist like James Nares will surprise us with a powerful, new and distinctive vision.

I think painting also has to do with craft, which is something people crave. So much of our experience and communication nowadays is mediated by technology. People spend their day in front of a computer and later socialize online. Painting is a direct experience we have with paint and canvas. It is physical, visceral, cerebral and immediate. For the studio artist the mulled pigments and fragrance of linseed oil are a connection to the past as well. There's a purity about it.

My own studio practice involves creating sculptural objects and I can certainly appreciate the allure of making a painting. Personally, however, I'm drawn to making objects that exist in the world from multiple perspectives and that can be animated through performance collaborations with others. The world is a varied place and the picture plane, sheltered in a gallery or collection or museum, seems a bit withdrawn from life.

I'm very interested in Conceptual Art and much of my work is conceptually based. In the studio, however, many of my decisions are governed by intuition and sensibility. One visual decision leads to others in the complex, decidedly non-verbal evolution of an artwork. To my mind the deeply personal nature of this process affirms potential for future development and relevance of painting.

MICHAEL: What do you think it'll take to get more people aware about contemporary art in a real way?

DANIEL: This would require a broad shift in American cultural priorities.

As I mentioned before, Europe really invests in the arts and has, despite hard times, created the world's largest arts-funding initiative consisting of \$2.4 billion. America, by contrast, invests only \$146.255 million and much of that goes to the performing arts. What the Italian government invests in its largest opera houses represents ten times the current operating budget of the National Endowment for the Arts. Winston Churchill was asked to cut arts funding during World War II and his response was, "Then what are we fighting for?" I do wish that Americans appreciated this mindset. Some struggle and involvement in the working world is healthy for artists but utter neglect is another story. Government funding for the military is astronomical in this country. America allocates 1 – 1.4 trillion dollars to the Department of Defense.

Thankfully we do have private collectors and philanthropy, but they are the purview of wealthy individuals and organizations. Other than occasional moments through Pop Art and Graffiti, high and popular culture rarely connect and I think most Americans regard contemporary art with suspicion. America has a very interesting history but artistic innovation didn't come to prominence until after World War II and, unlike the Europeans, we are not surrounded by good art of the past. Secondary education would probably go a long way in at least familiarizing people with issues in contemporary art. If young people were prepared with art appreciation courses, I imagine they'd be more likely to seek out contemporary art and get involved.

I'm a believer in the value of public works projects for contemporary art, but I'm also drawn to more covert, guerilla art

interventions in public spaces. Yesterday police in New York City arrested Takeshi Miyakawa, a Japanese artist who was installing plastic I “Heart” New York bags with LED lights in them on trees in Brooklyn. The police thought they were bombs. Perhaps this wasn’t the most extraordinary project, but it seems to me that art out of doors works more effectively when the viewer is caught off guard. All of a sudden, in the middle of Williamsburg, you’re confronted with an assisted readymade hanging from a tree. Who put it there? Why is a plastic bag lighting the path? I think raising consciousness for contemporary art through public works is difficult because official art smacks of rules and building permits and sanitation. Effective art usually challenges rules and expectations and cannot do so effectively when closely aligned with civic authority.

MICHAEL: I always say that I write about art in MY world, the ART world and art and how it functions in the WORLD at large. You seem to be most concerned with art and how it functions in the world at large ... as opposed to tangible art product.

DANIE L: I do believe that Art and the art market are two very distinct things. In my mind the art world isn’t monolithic either, and one could instead refer to numerous art worlds that sometimes cross paths and sometimes don’t. The art market follows logic that I’ve never been able to grasp. Why is a Damien Hirst worth \$50,000,000 and a Carolee Schneemann worth \$5000? There are certainly many valid and important artists who have found a niche in the art market but there are others who do substantive and meaningful work but who, often by design, remain at its margins.

My art world consists of many friends with whom I enjoy dialogues and pursue collaborations. Sometimes I seek people out, though I don’t know them personally, because I respect their work. Often, however, the most interesting performance vignettes result from projects with friends and friends of friends. For the most part, my Meditation/Mediation project has evolved in a personal and intimate way. I carry the vessels with me when I travel, and benefit from numerous chance encounters and dialogues with strangers on the road. As the Buddhists say, “Be mindful of who crosses your path.”

How art functions in the world is complex and fascinating to me. How does one arrive at the creative alchemy to produce art outside the studio? I often go into the field without knowing who will engage with the vessels or how they will approach the collaboration. The outside environment also interacts with the performance / intervention / situation. This is inevitable with Streetworks and adds another layer of complexity and interest. Who will pass by and how will s/he respond? The result is often instructive to me, enhances my perception and informs my work in the studio.

MICHAEL: Has your life turned out to be what you imagined as a kid? Are you happy or is it even about "being happy"?

DANIE L: I’ve been blessed with friendships, relationships, dialogues and the ability to pursue my art, all of which have given me much happiness. As the American dictum goes, I pursue happiness.

My life definitely hasn’t turned out the way I’d imagined it as a kid. Having grown up in Eugene, Oregon, which is a vibrant college town but no center for contemporary art, I didn’t have great expectations for myself. I never imagined that I would have the opportunities that I’ve had. Therefore, I consider myself extremely fortunate.

I first visited New York City as a child with my family in 1976. We stayed with my uncle George and aunt Ingrid who lived (and still live) in a former industrial loft that they renovated and brought up to code in NoHo. This is long before NoHo was an affluent enclave and you had to be vigilant when walking to avoid muggers. It was a dirty, gritty New York, with lots of graffiti and pungent smells in the air. But I remember being strongly drawn to it. I came back on numerous occasions and first lived here as a graduate student. But perhaps the greatest thing about New York is its continual state of change and ability to reinvent itself.

It was in this city that I met Francine Hunter McGivern, my wife of fourteen years, who has brought great happiness, turbulence and interest to my life. Like New York City, where she was born at Polyclinic Hospital, Francine thrives on change and even her artwork addresses themes in the I-Ching. Over the years, Francine has pushed me to move outside my comfort zone and I can always count on her for an honest appraisal of what I’m doing. So, as an adopted New Yorker and husband of Francine, my life is certainly not what I expected as a child and that’s the beauty of it. Not knowing what the future holds and maintaining an openness to growth, change and experimentation at times lead me to that fleeting condition of happiness.

MICHAEL: And on that note, thanks Daniel. Great chat. Check out Daniel’s work at www.danielrothbart.org.