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Conrad Bakker: Art and Objecthood

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Conrad Bakker: Art and Objecthood

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Conrad Bakker: Art and Objecthood



No ideas but in things.

William Carlos Williams



fig. 5. Lawnchair, 2000, oil on carved wood.

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is pleased to present *Conrad Bakker: Art and Objecthood*, an installation that engages many of the most important aesthetic and cultural issues in the contemporary artworld. This exhibition is part of a semester-long focus at the Sheldon Art Gallery on the significance and influence of Marcel Duchamp, one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. In addition to this exhibition, the permanent collection galleries of the Sheldon Art Gallery include Duchamp's famous *Boite-en-Valise*, an etching of his infamous *Fountain*, and the work of other artists, both historical and contemporary, who have been influenced by this important artist. Finally, I am teaching a seminar in the Department of Art and Art History on Duchamp and his significance on the contemporary artworld, a seminar that will interact with and engage not only the Sheldon's permanent collection, but *Art and Objecthood* as well.

This exhibition's subtitle, "Art and Objecthood," alludes to several important aesthetic themes. First, it refers to the title of one of the most influential critical essays of the last thirty years, written by Michael Fried in 1967, which argued that the "theatricality" of Minimalism ("objecthood") needed to be defeated through the "absorption" of advanced modernist painting and sculpture (art).¹ Second, *Art and Objecthood* refers also to a problem that interested Marcel Duchamp throughout his career, namely, what separates an art object from a non-art object? This concern is seen most explicitly in his "Readymades," in which he explored and exploited the distinction between art object and non-art object. Third, *Art and Objecthood* also refers to the "objecthood" of art, that is, art's identity as a commodity for consumption among other objects and the socio-political implications of consumer culture.

Born in Clinton, Ontario in 1970 to first-generation Dutch immigrants, Conrad Bakker and his family moved to Florida when he was



fig. 6. Exercise Bike, 2000, oil on carved wood.

six years old. He attended Calvin College, a liberal arts college supported by the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After graduating with a B.F.A. in 1992, Bakker studied painting and sculpture at the School of Art at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. With his M.F.A. in 1996, Bakker returned to Calvin College on the faculty as Assistant Professor of Art. Bakker's Dutch-immigrant heritage and his faith community play an important role in the development of his unique aesthetic voice.

The majority of the Dutch immigrants who came to the United States and Canada in the late nineteenth century were conservative members of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands who settled in Western Michigan, Northwest Iowa, and central Canada for economic opportunities. These Dutch immigrants possessed a strong view of God's common grace and the essential goodness of his creation, which enabled them to imbue all of their labors with a sacramental quality. They wanted access to the many new opportunities that prompted their immigration to the United States while preserving their orthodox Calvinist faith and their Dutch identity against the tidal wave of "Americanization." This concern led to building religious and educational institutions, such as the Christian Reformed Church, Calvin College, and Calvin Seminary, all in Grand Rapids, Michigan.² Moreover, it has enabled the Dutch Calvinist community, largely through these institutions, to be extremely sensitive to the tensions of the Reformed Christian world-view—recognizing the blessings and curses of human social life while never succumbing to the temptation toward unbridled "optimism" or "pessimism." Bakker's aesthetic vision bears the subtle imprint of this particularly Dutch Calvinist penchant for recognizing these tensions inherent in "Americanization," whether it be located in "American-style" religion, the commodification of art, or the values of suburbia.

II.

Bakker's relatively brief but active artistic career has been filled with important accomplishments. His work has been included in group shows at Lombard Fried in New York and TOUGH Gallery in Chicago; two-person shows at PS122 in New York and Rudolph-Poissant Gallery in Houston; solo shows at the Bonafide Gallery in Chicago and the Revolution Gallery in Detroit. The Revolution Gallery exhibition, entitled "SIDEWALKSALE," is a "re-version" of one of Bakker's most important and significant projects to date, a Garage Sale installation that took place at his home in Grand Rapids in October 1998.

Bakker set up this installation in his driveway, having the "opening reception" on a Saturday morning, announcing the reception through signs nailed on light poles around the neighborhood, following the ritual of the typical Western Michigan garage sale. The "sale" consisted of over one-hundred items, including boxes of Hardy Boys mystery books, baseballs, frisbees, a plunger, a Dutch Boy can of paint and other typical objects one finds at a

neighborhood garage sale, including a coffeemaker and styrofoam coffee cups for potential "customers," a calculator, and a cash register. All of the objects, including the tables on which these objects were displayed, were carved out of wood and painted by Bakker, with varying degrees of accuracy and distortion that serve ultimately to "break down" their identity as "copies." Indeed, Bakker is not interested in simply "imitating" mass-produced objects. "I try not to let my work be about replication as much as what happens after that process (using specific objects, connections, contexts, and narratives)" (fig. 2).³ In fact, Bakker's intentional distortions also serve to "break down" the illusion in order to gradually shift the viewer's attention from the artist's technical ability to reproduce a mass-produced object to the conceptual ideas and challenges, both cultural and aesthetic, he is posing.

The garage sale culture, in which he and his family enjoy participating, was an opportunity to explore issues of growing interest through his evolving aesthetic vocabulary. Bakker observed, "A garage sale is a basic consumer interaction which is also a community interaction."⁴ For Bakker, the garage sale reveals the depth of commodification of American society in which one's own personal goods—and the memories attached to them—are trotted out for scrutiny and sale. However, it also represents an activity that rehearses, reaffirms, and otherwise sustains "community." In this way, Bakker's project embraces both the positive and negative aspects of the garage sale culture, presenting it for our own reflection.

The most recent of Bakker's projects involves the creation of a mail-order catalog that features images of his artworks. Bakker received a grant from Creative Capital, a new arts organization in New York, in support of photographing fifty objects to be included in this "art catalogue." About this project, Bakker explains

I am fascinated by mail-order catalogs. Catalogs are essentially collections of images that represent objects, and these objects are presented in such a way as to convince us that our lives would be better if we owned those things. I am interested in the context of desire that surrounds these objects and images, how it is generated and what it says about us.⁵

Typical of Bakker's perspective, this project embraces the contradictions and tensions inherent in a consumer culture that has made consumption even more efficient through the aesthetic of the mail-order catalog. Bakker continues his critical (although not completely negative) exploration of American consumerism through the visual culture of the mail-order catalog, which is intended to create and sustain desire. Both the garage sale and mail-order catalog projects have allowed Bakker the opportunity to explore alternative means by which art engages and interacts with diverse audiences. The humidifiers, remote

controls, nose hair trimmers (fig. 3), and other objects that Bakker carves serve to explore the aesthetic of the art and non-art object, the consumerism of the artworld as well as that of the larger American culture.

III.

In his essay "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried argues that authentic modernist painting and sculpture must, in his words, "defeat" the theatrical challenge in Minimalist sculpture, a theatrical challenge that promotes the literal objecthood of the work as an object confronting, "hounding" the viewer. Against this "theatricality," Fried argued that modernist painting and sculpture advance "presentness," that is, an aesthetic quality that relies only on the "internal" elements (syntax) of the work and not on the environment or context within which the work interacts with the viewer. For Fried in 1967, Minimalist sculpture attempted to revel in art's objecthood, its likeness to other objects in the world that we encounter. But "authentic" painting and sculpture emphasized art's autonomy from and uniqueness among a world of "theatrical" objects.

Bakker's art reveals this debate to be two sides of the same aesthetic coin, a currency used to trade in pure neo-Kantian "aesthetic experience" without necessary attention to the cultural and sociological contexts that inform our experience, contexts that constitute those objects with which we invest meaning and significance.⁶ For Bakker, art's inherent value is not located in its autonomy or separatedness from social and cultural environments but in its ability to embrace and engage critically those very social and cultural conventions through which we attach meaning and significance to certain objects. Bakker's ironical twist of Fried's argument is seen in the artist's use of advanced art to comment on the importance of the many objects that constitute our material culture—a material culture that includes the visual arts, even Fried's "modernist painting and sculpture." Far from being "pure" formal syntax suitable for sustained "aesthetic perception," Bakker's works reveal the "theatricality" of all objects, even those that are considered "high art." In fact, Bakker quipped, "I bask in the theatricality that Fried detests."⁷

The theatricality that Bakker basks in consists of his recognition and celebration of the complex role that material culture—both art and objects—plays in our social, cultural, political, and religious lives. Asked about the social meaning of his work, Bakker responded, "There are a lot of subtle ruminations on suburbia, but only so far as the idea of suburbia mimics other institutional paradigms (like art and religion)."⁸ Bakker's art is not only "about" suburbia, commenting, critiquing, problematizing, it is also about art as an institution which, like "suburbia," draws from the same font of consumerism. It is Bakker's interest in the visual arts as an institutional paradigm among other institutional paradigms, consisting of established social practices and beliefs and the traditional means of display, that his "Duchampian" perspective is revealed. Bakker's aesthetic vision, which relies on the tensions of "art" and "objecthood," forces the

viewer to reflect on certain aesthetic expectations that have been frustrated by his “spatial fictions,” that is, narrative or pseudo-narrative situations within which his objects function meaningfully. Consequently, Bakker’s objects make extremely difficult a “pure” aesthetic appreciation of “significant form” treasured by the gallery and museum culture.⁹ Like Duchamp, Bakker relies on this and other institutionalized expectations on the part of the viewer, including the ideological power of the exhibition space to create and sustain this tension. However, unlike Duchamp, Bakker does not simply “accept” the structure. Bakker does not see art as a place from which to critique other social and cultural institutions, he regards art to be implicated within the institutional paradigm of “suburbia” and thus a possible object of critique. It is as entangled in and defined by the values of suburbia—in this context “consumer culture”—as religion and other forms of social practice. Far from pure, then, Bakker recognizes and critiques the institution of art, within which he is a willing but cautious participant, to be a unique and quite powerful expression of “American consumerism.” Bakker’s garage sale and mail-order catalog projects are not simply skeptical critiques of American consumerism, but pose the question, “how is the artworld like a garage sale or a mail-order catalog? How really different are they?” (Bakker’s religious commitments do not blind him, however, to the consumerism and escapism that informs institutional religion in the United States, as his installation of dozens of hand-made Gideon bibles for a recent exhibition in Chicago attests. “God’s authoritative and infallible Word” is thus turned into a slick, easily recognized commodity to be handed out, as if the free exchange of this commodity constitutes the effectual call of God himself.)

IV.

Art and Objecthood focuses particular attention on objects that refer in one way or another to American “success,” objects that connote both “convenience” (blessing) and “excess” (curse). The life-jacket is a symbol of weekends and summers at the lake house (fig. 4), the garden hose and sprinkler (fig. 1) refer to the maintenance of a big and well-manicured lawn, the folding lawnchair with saggy straps (fig. 5) suggests backyard leisure, and the exercise bike (fig. 6) refers to the suburbanite’s concern for physical health and appearance. The large folding table with several “everyday” objects presents the accouterments of affluence. But the large slotcar racetrack complete with car controllers but no cars, suggests a deeper (and perhaps even darker) interpretation of *Art and Objecthood*. This racetrack is in the form of the cul-de-sac community. Bakker’s installation focuses aesthetic and ideological attention on the iconography of the cul-de-sac, as the familiar form of suburban planning takes on a surreal and even terrifying dimension in which a community is artificially formed, a community that also creates and fosters isolation because of its artificiality. For Bakker, the cul-de-sac becomes a visual metaphor for both suburban success and desperation, a “dead end” masquerading as the “American dream.”

Bakker grew up in Florida during the housing boom in the seventies and eighties, which also had an important impact on shaping both his critical and nostalgic views of the cul-de-sac. In addition to reflecting on the blessings of affluence, *Art and Objecthood* also reflects on its curses. Bakker’s objects provide ample visual metaphors for the inability of suburban culture to fulfill our deepest desires. The “knotted” gardenhose, the lawnchair worn from slothful overuse, the out-of-date stationary bike that suggests the passing fads of exercise for a culture addicted to external appearances, a life-jacket that refers to its use as a means to prevent drowning, and the hoserack and sprinkler, which all suggest obsessions with keeping up with the Joneses.

Bakker further tightens the critical screws through his critical exploration of the suburban ideology manifest in the art museum exhibition space. *Art and Objecthood* implicates the art museum as a powerful—if under-recognized—instrument of American consumerism and the dichotomies of the cul-de-sac, forging communities as well as encouraging isolation. With its “blockbuster” exhibitions, gift-shop sales, fund-raising dinners, and other “outreach” activities, the art museum has become a ubiquitous cultural site where the rituals of suburbia are enacted around the spiritual and the aesthetic value of art, to its ultimate debasement.

Bakker’s objects force us to reflect critically on the role that art plays in the politics of consumption, a role that might not be all that far removed from the role that other objects play as well. Certainly, if mass-produced objects can take on the “aura” of providing fulfillment, certainly the symbolic value of art has been utilized as a commodity in similar ways, often under the red herring of “aesthetic” value or wrapped in the cloak of “museum quality.” Indeed, “aesthetic value” has become one of the means by which art is “consumed” by the contemporary artworld, which softens its social-critical-political edge. Bakker’s art and the “theatrical” sites he constructs offer opportunities for us to reflect positively and negatively on the multitude of objects that constitute our material culture, the institutional rituals that sustain them, and what they say about us.

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator

Notes:

1. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Selected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
2. See James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) and James Schaap, *Family Album: The Unfinished History of the Christian Reformed Church* (CRC Publications; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).
3. Conversation with the artist, July 27, 2000.
4. Quoted in “Creating a Catalog,” Calvin College News Release, April 17, 2000.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*
6. See Walter Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1939), in *Illuminations*, intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) for the most influential argument regarding art’s “aura.” Contra Benjamin, see David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Morgan argues (rightly) that an object’s aura is not the product of any inherent value, but of the value attached to it by an interpretive community which “uses” it.
7. Conversation with the artist, August 1, 2000.
8. Quoted in “Garage Sale,” Calvin College News Release, October 1998.
9. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), for a discussion of high art as art for “disinterested” aesthetic contemplation.

fig. 4. Lifejacket/hoserack, 2000, oil on carved wood.



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(All works courtesy of the artist)

1. RACETRACK/SUBDIVISION (WITH WATERTOWER), 2000
Oil on carved wood
Dimensions variable (total 4" x 20' x 14')
2. LIFEJACKET/HOSERACK, 2000
Oil on carved wood
35" x 22" x 7"
3. EXERCISE BIKE, 2000
Oil on carved wood
42" x 44" x 24"
4. LAWNCHAIR (with oblong roll of duct tape), 2000
Oil on carved wood
34" x 25" x 24"
5. GARDENHOSE (KNOT) WITH SPRINKLER, 2000
Oil on carved wood
29" x 54" x 24"
6. UNTITLED, MAIL ORDER CATALOG, 2000
(6 selected items, folding table)
Oil on carved wood
Objects' dimensions variable (table 30" x 8' x 4')



fig. 3. *Nosehair Trimmers*, 2000, oil on carved wood.

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one-person exhibitions by nationally-recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who has contributed to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

The Sheldon Solo series is supported in part by the Nebraska Art Association, an independent charitable organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska through educational and cultural enrichment opportunities. Nebraska Art Association programs are supported in part by a Basic Support Grant from the Nebraska Arts Council, a State agency.

Additional general operating support is provided to the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and a lifetime of learning. Sheldon Gallery is fully accredited by the American Association of Museums.



fig. 2. Installation photograph of "Sidewalksale," Detroit, MI, July 14-15, 2000.