

GalleristNY

When Is a Cat Not a Cat? When It's a Sculpture

By Andrew Russeth 4/10 5:46pm

Today's sculptors are working in a very expanded field.



Right now, there are two burritos sitting on a windowsill in a gallery at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City. About once a week, fresh burritos are brought in by a museum employee, and the old ones are discarded. Sometimes they are placed one on top of the other, and sometimes they are side by side.

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This is done in the name of art; chicken burrito, beef burrito is a sculpture by Darren Bader, part of his “Images” exhibition, which runs through May 14.

Though it sounds like a one-off prank, Mr. Bader’s burritos exemplify today’s most thrilling sculpture, which at the moment can be seen all over town, standing in stark contrast to the muscular, macho, hard-won objects of a John Chamberlain (whose Guggenheim retrospective is up through May 13). The new sculpture is deliriously playful, unstable (it changes over time: living, decomposing, collapsing, or threatening to) and frequently renewable. The readymade has returned in 21st-century rococo clothes, Duchamp’s legacy used for sinister, hallucinogenic and comical ends.

Mr. Bader, 34, has presented as sculpture live goats, a lawnmower, buttered rolls, and cat litter and olive oil. When first viewed, the pieces often shock—either for their seeming banality, or because the work (or its operation) may be hidden in plain sight, legible only with some assistance. Last December, at Art Basel Miami Beach, Mr. Bader drove his aunt’s minivan to Miami and parked it on the grass in front of the Bass Museum. The piece was called my aunt’s car.

This work privileges live experience, and it is often sculpture in only the most expansive definition of the term. Mr. Bader once proposed an art fair booth that included a Foo Fighters song, a Sarah Morris painting and a tarantula in a terrarium. “The artworks would all be sculptures,” the proposal read.

But Mr. Bader is only a single, prototypical example of many artists toying with sculpture and the readymade. Last year, Anicka Yi placed powdered milk, antidepressants, palm tree essence and other materials in a large pot on an electric burner, sending a faint, sweet odor into the air at the gallery Bortolami and the alternative space White Columns. For her debut solo show at 47 Canal in September, she fried flowers in tempura and built an installation that slowly leaked olive oil. Three years ago, at the New Museum, Adriana Lara had a museum guard eat a banana every day and drop a fresh peel on the floor. In January, Klara Lidén crammed old, but still fragrant, Christmas trees into Reena Spaulings Fine Art so tightly that the mere touch of people moving through the space was enough to make the desiccated needles crack and scatter. Also at 47 Canal, Josh Kline offered deformed plastic water bottles—he boiled them in their own water then refilled them, making new work without effectively adding anything but heat.

In 2008, in a dramatic expansion on Rauschenberg’s Erased De Kooning Drawing Mr. Bader wrote to a few dozen artists asking for a work in their “signature style,” explaining that he would present their works as his own, and sell them at his prices at that year’s Art Basel Miami Beach—\$2,000 to \$10,000. The well-established British painter Gary Hume wrote back, in a letter published in one of Mr. Bader’s artist books, “For me to gift to a total stranger hundreds of thousands of dollars is fucking crazy.” At MoMA PS1, Mr. Bader has three cats in a gallery that are available for adoption. (When one is adopted, the SaveKitty Foundation supplies a replacement.) These, too, he says in an artist statement, are sculptures. Next door, an iguana is available, and still another gallery is filled with pedestals bearing vegetables that, twice a week, a museum staffer uses to make a salad for visitors.

In a recent issue of New York magazine, critic Jerry Saltz described Mr. Bader’s work as “late-late-late post-Conceptual Relational Aesthetics,” referring to the feel-good, still-born movement that had 1990s artists engineering miniature events, serving up Thai food and hosting parties as artworks.

Mr. Saltz’s description seems almost willfully mystifying. It is certainly unsatisfying. For many of these other artists, a critical literature is just beginning to develop. So, what is going on here? To be clear, these artists are not a cohesive school. Many are friends or acquaintances. They show at a handful of mostly young New York galleries. Their tactics overlap, but they’re playing many different games, pursuing diverse ends.

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They also share a few clear forebears. Swiss sculptor Urs Fischer, one of today's most successful artists, is one. (Mr. Bader was his longtime assistant.) Mr. Fischer has made sculptures involving apples and bananas, sugar and egg whites, a croissant and a dead butterfly, and candles that look like people, which can be ordered fresh each time they are burned down. When he makes an actual, stable sculpture, it often looks like it is on the verge of collapsing—a piano or bed made of aluminum that is imploding or turning into a puddle on the ground. But Mr. Fischer can often be grandiose—he looks, admittedly or not, to the polished decadence of Jeff Koons. Perhaps responding to that weightiness, these (mostly) younger artists are determinedly light-hearted: out of the Baroque came the Rococo. Instead of huge steel Koons Easter eggs, we get a pair of burritos.

The Italian *arte povera* artists of the 1960s and '70s also provide more distant precedents. Think of Giovanni Anselmo placing a head of green lettuce between blocks of granite—continually refreshed when it wilted—or Mario Merz filling a long spiral table with fruits, vegetables and beeswax, a feast of ephemeral sculpture. And then there was Joseph Beuys, with his fixation on fat, felt and animals, though he advanced a sort of mythology that today's artists sidestep.

Another precedent here is Haim Steinbach, whose shelves of readymade objects welcome vast constellations of interpretation, and prefigure the rogue readymades of Mr. Bader, and even Damien Hirst. Even as critics piled on Mr. Hirst's 11-Gagosian spot painting show earlier this year, many fondly recalled his adventurous early work, like the masterful *A Thousand Years* (1991), a glass cube in which maggots fed on a cow's head, turned into flies and then died by crashing into an *Insect-O-Cutor*. It was a sculpture in motion—readymade materials marching to gruesome ends.

The current crop of sculptors delight in such transformations and materials, like Mr. Hirst (sans his Baroque proclivities) or Dieter Roth (who made a number of artworks out of chocolate) or even Sigmar Polke (who once exhibited paintings in Venice that changed based on the city's notorious humidity). Mutating, traveling and melting away (and sometimes even regenerating), their work takes place over time.