

## Peter Culley / Notes on Tom Burrows: CONTRADICTION & DOUBT

Through a deceptively simple set of strategies, the recent sculpture of Tom Burrows negotiates a provocative and complex circulation of images and ideas. Moving from the iconic to the personal, from the alchemical to the political, the works oscillate within a charged frame of reference located between the sculptural traditions of totem and metonymy. In sculptural metonymy, an object "stands in" for another object or concept; in this way, for example, a horse can "mean" military power, gold mean wealth, a certain physical gesture represent "temperance" or "grace." In a Marcel Broodthaers construction, for example, mussel shells might represent both the waste product of material culture, and through its national dish, the Belgian soul. But in either case, the shells *as objects* are secondary to their place in a system of interpretation.

Conversely, the totemic in Burrows' work insists on the immutability of the object itself. All references and significations which are able to be derived from it are secondary to the sacredness of its corporeal reality. Like the alchemists, who did not recognize the atomic fixedness of matter, Burrows does not recognize the need for the elements of his sculpture to adhere to any formal principle of objecthood. In this way the viewer's choices and emphases become conduits through which the final construction of the work takes place. The work itself remains an open system.

Burrows' *Ewe Guise* is a construction devoted to a brutal subversion of personal iconography. The work consists of a stuffed sheep, its face replaced with a lead life mask of the artist, which rests on blocks of salt inscribed with both the title of the work and a redundant "explanation" of its bad pun. This self-portrait of the artist as sacrificial victim seems at first to heap ridicule upon an entire genre. From the groan-inducing pun of its title to the obviousness of its reference to Rauschenberg's goat, the work scores its satiric points early and well. But at the point where the joke begins to wear off, one is drawn to the genuine anguish on the face of the life mask. Whether it was the discomfort of the process or a genuinely enacted gesture, the expressiveness of the mask seems at odds with the facile irony of the work.

A similarly ambivalent vision of artistic and personal masochism underlies *Story of "Oh,"* which is basically a life saver constructed of lead and concrete. Lead here undergoes one of its many transmutations within Burrows' oeuvre; from base metal to "art" material to dead weight. The genteel, literary masochism of Pauline Réage's book is brought to a bizarre, if somehow fitting, conclusion: capitalist culture's ultimate gift to the artist, the last Canada Council grant. One begins to await the appearance of lead balloons and zeppelins in Burrows' work. But the title's doubling of the letter "O," underscored by the words "RIGHT, RIGHT, RIGHT, LEFT" inscribed on the work bring into focus the work's stolid circularity, and circularity's promise of comfortable eternity. Once again one enters a joke only to emerge with one's laughter strangely qualified, hollowed out. The circularity of *Story of "Oh"* suggests a deeper one within the work as a whole—a continual circulation within systems of apprehension and belief.



The "victims" in the two works just mentioned—the sacrificial sheep in *Ewe Guise* and the drowning masochist in *Story of "Oh"*—are both identifiable as female. A male artist grafting his melancholy onto images of female suffering—however gnominically—is problematic, to say the least. But Burrows forces this issue even further in *Lead Roses for a Blue Lady*, *Norma Genes* and *Transverberation*. In these works Burrows transforms an iconography of female suffering into a transcendent historical principle.

*Lead Roses for a Blue Lady* consists of three blocks of blue salt resting on a small bed constructed of concrete and lead strewn with lead roses. The shade of Duchamp, never very far from Burrows' work, is invoked by the "Appollinaire Enameled" inscription at the bed's head. The foot of the bed is just that—a jutting lead foot. There is a lot of dense punning, both linguistic and sculptural, going on here, but perhaps that arch punster and clown Duchamp can offer a way through. Lot's wife, in turning to salt, seems also to have been transformed into Duchamp's bride, and no bride could be stripped more bare than this one—three chunks of blue salt and a disembodied foot. The roses scattered for her reception seem a hollow gesture of conciliation until one recognizes them as an *hommage* to Rose Selavy, Duchamp's "female" alter ego. If in



Burrows' sculptural transvestism there is a broad element of Duchampian play, the dark, mechanistic sexuality of the *Large Glass* bachelors is operative also, giving the humour in *Lead Roses* a bitter, sardonic edge.

In *Norma Genes* the icon of female suffering is Marilyn Monroe, whose image is inset into a lead ironing board. An enormous bone is draped over the ironing board. The words THE BONE IS PLASTIC are inscribed on the construction, the word BONE appearing on the object it signifies. This sculpture becomes a device for articulating different orders of imprisonment; the plastic bone a symbol of fakery and stifling male sexuality, the ironing board the domestic drudgery from which "Norma Jean" was "rescued" when, transformed into "Marilyn Monroe," she offered herself on the altar of stardom. Monroe's own masochism is muted in this work, subsumed within the paralytically narrow set of choices it was in her power to make. Once again, Burrows is able to make sculptural gestures respond to social realities. Disjunctive orders of objecthood (a lead "ironing board," a plastic "bone") are reflective of social orders that are similarly arbitrary.

In *Transverberation* Burrows subjects Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* to a complex set of interrogations and disruptions. The figure of Theresa, revived in the counter-reformation, is one whose hyper-sexualized vision of Christianity-as-penetration was in direct contrast to the austere, body-denying edicts of Luther and Calvin. Nowhere was her ecstasy more vividly enacted than in Bernini's great work, which besides being an icon of masochism is a central work in the history of sculpture. Bernini's use of sculptural space to depict extreme emotion reverberates throughout the Baroque and presages Mannerism.

*Transverberation* uses sculptural space to undercut emotion, to reveal it as constructed and administered. Mounted on modernist brass stands, emerging from the U of the word BUT, Bernini's Theresa is represented by five glass plate transparencies of different details of the work, each surrounded by a halo of wire. A tiny print of two opposed skeletons rests ominously on the floor. Thus emotion is geared to mechanical reproduction, ecstasy reduced to a discrete series of transparent gestures, transubstantiation becomes transverberation, the soul becomes the body. Burrows' recasting of female masochism as a hidden but persistent cultural force ends by being a rejection of male melancholy—an insistence that pain is out there,

other, that patriarchal systems insist on the masochism of others as an assertion of power. Lot's wife, Norma Jean and Theresa's desire for pain is merely the diminished echo of dominance.

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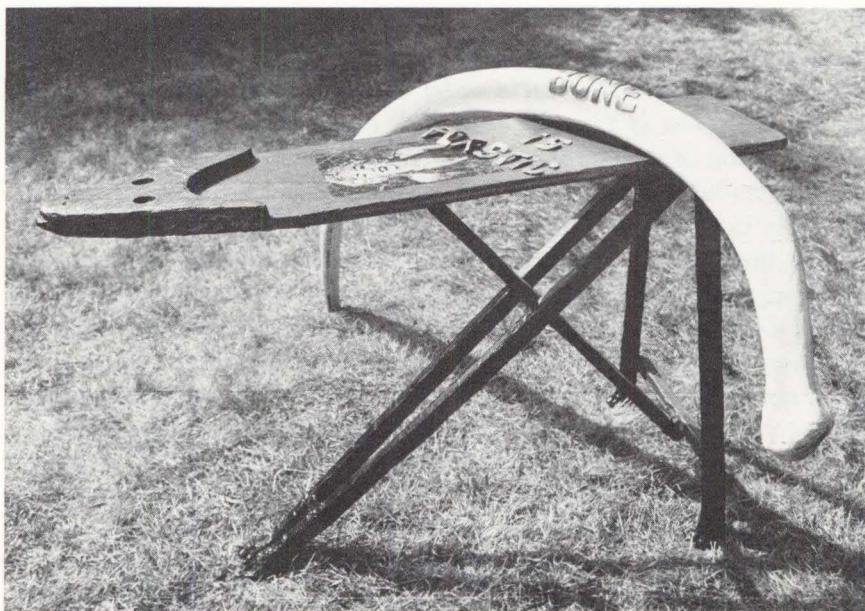
Burrows also makes assemblages that address issues of social justice unambiguously. He uses a complex vocabulary of materials to express simple social truths in order to render the didactic reverberant. *Out of Site, Out of Mind* is a ladder made of lead, the top rung of which extends into two outstretched arms framing a framed xerox of a man stretched sleeping on a subway grate, his crutches beside him. The ladder is reminiscent of those Renaissance hierarchical charts with hell at the bottom, heaven at the top, with the temporal world fixed with certainty between. Inscribed on the rungs are the words ON/SUBWAY GRATES/SLEEP/WARMTH. Burrows forces us to imagine a world where temporal certainty does not exist, where mere warmth can take the place of heaven, where the outstretched arms of help belong to no one and nothing.

*Bhopal Tar & Feather* is a diptych, one half of which is a backlit transparency of some Indian youths taken near the site of the Union Carbide disaster. One of the youths wears a plastic "leather" jacket of which he seems quite proud. The jacket, transformed by Burrows from "leather" and plastic to lead and tar, is re-imagined as a dark spread of angel's wings and inscribed with the words ANGELS CAN FLY BECAUSE/THEY MAKE THINGS LIGHT. The plastic of the jacket is linked metonymically with the products of the chemical factory, which inevitably dispenses death along with "better living." The angelic youth are innocent of the horrifying consequences of industrialisation, content with its shoddy offerings of fake style. In this work, Burrows reveals our pact with the material world as alchemical, Faustian, with no gold and no trip to heaven before the final curtain.

But Burrows can also offer a temporary, if ironic, respite from the darkness of the preceding works and something of a summation of all of them. *Organ Transplant* is a model of the human heart, constructed of welded steel. The dense interior muscle becomes an airy vessel of light. A lead band surrounds the heart with a typically Burrowsian pun — MANS LAUGHTER MANSLAUGHTER — describing at least two of the events said to issue from it. Positioned thus in contradiction, it is all the heart can do to stand upright. In



its dense punning of language, image and material, the work of Tom Burrows inhabits contradiction and doubt, allowing the viewer the painful luxury of choice and discovery.



*Norma Genes, 1987. Lead, tar and xerox on wood and plastic, 4' x 3' x 1½'.*

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*Transverberation*, 1988. Brass, hydrastone, glass-plate transparency, 6' x 6' x 6'.

Photographs: Bob Cain, unless otherwise noted.