

In a letter to his wife Vera, Vladimir Nabokov once mentioned working on a story "about how we unfairly insult things with our inattentiveness, about how touching are the molded ceiling ornaments which we never look at."

I thought of this line after visiting John Beech's second exhibition at the Haus der Kunst St. Josef in Solothurn. Beech had punctuated the lower portion of the decommissioned house of worship with decidedly un-worshipful objects and constructions, but intact remnants of the church's decorative plaster work survive, touchingly, as Nabokov suggested, far above the eye-lines dictated by the show's installation. Once noticed, those plaster moldings evoke not merely a decorative scheme, but a whole world of belief gone into eclipse. In this way they silently and inadvertently suggested a widening of the intellectual lens through which Beech's art ought to be seen.

For decades Beech has scavenged within the zone of insulting neglect that Nabokov noted, lavishing attention – which can sometimes look like abuse – on some of the belittled, sidelined furniture of our material, mental and civic lives.

Several of the first works by Beech that I saw in the early 1990s are made of the mats that lie beneath the feet of automobile drivers and their passengers as they motor around on errands, vital or frivolous. (To American viewers of them, a joke might form around objects so abject: what's lower than a doormat?)

With his car mat pieces, Beech blithely positioned himself with respect to Carl Andre's canonical metal plate floor arrays, the components of which having a purity – each being uniformly square, made of an elemental metal, and impervious to the artist's touch – that is very remote from the soil-absorbing role of car mats.

Andre has always encouraged viewers to walk upon his plate pieces. Those who do may feel bodily the

forms' or the floor's imperfect flatness, but they also certify the sculpture's emptiness of internal mystery or other dubious content. Standing within an Andre intensifies whatever impulse a viewer may feel to affirm or deny the work recognition as sculpture or art. A blush of heightened awareness may follow, arising partly from having broken the do-not-touch rule that governs most artworks in public settings.

With his car mats, Beech undid signal aspects of Andre's plate pieces: the integrity of their intent, their custom fabrication and their disavowal of their embedding in social reality.

American sculptors of his generation who took Andre's floor plates seriously as a zero degree of sculpture faced the difficulty of reintroducing complexity to their art without pretending that they had never understood the rigor of Andre's eliminative moves.

Richard Serra took the decisive liberating step when he stood square metal plates – the units of Andre's constructions – on edge and began building anew from there, at times reviving the do-not-touch rule with a genuine threat of physical injury. But the complexities that Andre had banished along with various illusions – structural, psychological, sociological – proved harder to reinstate without trickery.

With his floor-bound car mat pieces, Beech made joking, though also respectful reference to Andre, even calling to mind the older artist's famous statement "My idea of a piece of sculpture is a road." Beech's use of objects intended to remain unnoticed as they traveled, broke, at least in a viewer's imagination, the stasis that Andre proposed as a defining quality of serious sculpture.

In a fresh reprise of the found object strategy, Beech brought back into focus things whose customary function demanded that they disappear from their users' awareness. (He would go on to make further

use of the same materials, promoting them to readymade decoration or surrogate painting, as cladding for wall-bound slotted constructions that he calls *Car Mat Sleeves*.) And that move opened, or re-opened, to sculptural opportunity the field of everyday custom, of unthought behavior: a domain electric with potential for comedy and discomfiture.

A line from the late American comedian George Carlin sums up the mute juggling of values, much of it unconscious, that Beech's art frequently re-enacts. Musing on the vagaries of our attachments to things, especially others' attachments to personal property that we cannot imagine sharing, Carlin said "Have you ever noticed that their stuff is shit and your shit is stuff?"

That dialectic of elevation and denigration – in truth, an unconscious negotiation of relationships among people – is central to Beech's practice across media ranging from sculpture and installation to drawing, painting, and photography.

The dumpster, where society's discards, excess and spoilage collect, is a figure recurrent in Beech's work. It appears, blotted out with paint, as if by a censor, in numerous photographs. Like a censor's redactions, those painted shapes intensify and frustrate curiosity, not merely about what is withheld, but about what "significant forms," to revive Clive Bell's nearly forgotten term, we have overlooked, and may yet overlook, in the background of everyday life.

Perhaps not in Switzerland, but in every North American city, and in most of the wider world, refugees from the sanctioned economy can be seen picking through refuse for the makings of survival – the stuff of barter, of re-purposing or even of a meal. At times Beech's work can bring our impolitic awareness of this pantomime of injustice – impolitic even in the company of one's own conscience – uncomfortably close to the pleasure we take in art. The found object, he reminds us, comes with psychosocial baggage attached. Sometimes it can

be ripped clean from its old context for artistic uses, sometimes not.

Beech's 2014 Solothurn exhibition included a large, bin-like construction titled *Container (Dark Green Interior)* (2014), open at one end and at the top, built of a speckled insulation material of uncertain weight that Beech found while trawling the town's supply stores for creative promptings. He painted one of the container interior's ends, part of one interior side, and part of its floor forest green, leaving the work looking both abandoned and as if it might have been intended in the first place to enshrine a monumental painterly gesture.

Behind that ambiguity, and the big structure's wobbling between object and architecture, pulses the thought of materials or the energy for their deployment potentially running out: a faint echo of pervasive contemporary anxiety over resource depletion as a threat to societies' and our planet's livability.

Counterpoint to the whiff of depletion that some of Beech's work exudes is an equally anxious comic vision of surplus, materialized in pieces such as *Rolling Platform (Cube)* (2010) and *Rolling Platform (Sea Gray)* (2012). They so bristle with attached wheels as to make the thought of a stampede override that of functional convenience.

An allusion to minimalism may also lurk in *Rolling Platform (Cube)*. Looking at it, any viewer familiar with Tony Smith's canonical cubic steel sculpture *Die* (1962) will recall that work as a monument to immobility.

The overabundance of wheels in some of Beech's works, or their misplacement in pieces such as *Client #1* and *Client #2* (both 2010), were foreshadowed in a series of *Bumpers* from about a decade earlier: slightly distorted painted wood replicas of concrete parking space bumpers, markers of arrested progress.

Occasionally, Beech appears to sharpen the allusive aspects of his forms, as in *Orange Container* (1995) or *Foam Block* (2007), which seem to refer directly and irreverently to Donald Judd's early work. The simpler sculptures of Franz West can hardly be kept out of mind for a viewer of Beech's painted plaster *Kenchi* series, although these pieces make claims on an observer's attention – and space – very different from West's.

Many artists of Beech's age find the unavoidable appearance of art historical allusions constraining. And blockages, barriers, interruptions, frustrations, and interference occur frequently as thematic undertones in Beech's art. We might see such experiences evoked in a comic key in works such as *Rolling Blanket #6* (2007) or *Floppy Rolling Beam* (1999), with its Oldenburgian air of sexual panic. They manifest differently in works such as the 2014 *Closed Paintings, Intra #4* and *Intra #5*, whose closure in the Haus der Kunst St. Josef setting brought to mind hinged altarpieces in a shuttered state.

The *Closed Paintings* also enact the idea, long exploited by American artist Richard Jackson, of a painted canvas as a painting tool. But the notion pervades Beech's oeuvre that tools and what they make or unmake might exchange roles freely. Strips of tape that might serve to suspend a picture or repair a damaged one proliferate to become the aesthetic main event of a piece (see *Tape Drawing (Madrid)*, 2012.)

Accumulations of incidental marks or of accidents mingled with decisions get promoted to the status of finished, or at least avowed, works, as in *Tape Rag Balls* (2009) or *Cardboard Painting* (2012–13), with its pleasing reminiscence of Dieter Roth's *Tischmatten*.

Despite how frequently Beech's work references obstructions and possibly derailed, deflated, or wildly opportunistic constructive ambitions, he celebrates the current conditions of creative life

with a rare exuberance. He shows again and again how promptly and simply what looks like incipient failure or overworking can yield an astonishing and unforeseeable richness, all by dint of the openness won for art – or for the right sort of creative temperament – by the 20th century's turmoil of theory, advocacy, and studio production.

Where many of his contemporaries perceive an exhaustion of received ideas, Beech sees a liberating mutability of materials, tools, methods, gestures and values. The key his work strikes most often is one of redemptive, unmapped richness.

Rather than produce sculptures, paintings, or photographs as ends in themselves, Beech treats them as means – means of turning the shit expelled by history into the stuff of a world to which we might develop attachments. As Carlin's wisecrack implies, that conversion has the potential to permeate barriers – of class, education, age, and cultural background – among people.

How often we realize that potential, or see it realized, is not the artist's problem.

I see all of Beech's work as that of a sculptor because he shows us how to discern the sculptor's fundamental problem – to determine where things belong – wherever we look. Where do marks belong? What belongs in the spaces of representation, or the new realm of the virtually real? What belongs in our thoughts and how do we rearrange what we find there? What belongs within the bounds of private property and within a shrinking commons?

The contemporary sculptor's problems are everyone's problems. We are lucky to have Beech helping us work through them.

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