

## “Spork Used As Knife”:

The gallery moves in with the apartment,  
and Dave Sherry carries a bucket of water about for a week.

By Melanie Kress

When I first founded CONCRETE UTOPIA, a self-identified apartment-based gallery and project space, my intention was not to question, subvert, and replace Brian O’Doherty’s critiqued “White Cube” gallery model with my own domesticity-asserting, capitalism- and modernism-confronting mode of exhibition. Nor was it to offer an alternative to the now-traditional New York nonprofit gallery model, which began for the most part with a series of organizations founded in the 60s and 70s on varied but similar organizational models for supporting the arts. My intention was much more personal, and self-centered, with both a practical and a personal goal. First, at this point in my life I cannot afford the rent of both an apartment and a gallery space, no matter the size or location. Second, having turned down the gallerista job I was offered, I wanted to move forward, starting my own exhibition space, over which I had absolute creative control. “If not now, then when?” I repeated.

I understand that the space of display colors all work that enters the space, whether through the intended modernist neutrality, a stance that though thoroughly critiqued, still holds of power of the denial of political intention, or a living room filled with the personal possessions and domestic aesthetic choices of the curator herself. However, though viewed as an alternative space of display, I do not seek with the exhibitions mounted in the apartment to open up a discourse about the changing nature of artwork when it is viewed in a domestic space; I do not wish to explicitly, through the work shown, open up discourses about current failures of the art world and the spaces and organizations available for the support and exhibition of art. Yes, with each exhibition I think about the interaction of the space with the artwork, which rooms of the house each piece belongs in, and probably more than a curator would in a traditional gallery, e.g. will the work will be more affected by being in the kitchen, bedroom or living room? I do not deny that aspect of the curatorial process. Regarding politics, however, I believe that the space will, on its own, bring about these conversations: about the limitations of exhibition in white-wall galleries, the tiredness of certain nonprofit models, and as I have heard in so many conversations with myriad organizers in the arts, the necessity for new models of display. Only six months after founding UTOPIA, and looking forward to our third and fourth exhibitions, I finally realized that, while tacitly avoiding the question of alternative modes of display, we have begun just that. And it’s growing. And out of a selfish desire to refrain from theorizing myself and my space too soon into an over-determined box within which I will constantly view the space in the future, I am offering instead an investigative critique of a work of Dave Sherry, soon to be exhibited in an upcoming exhibition, “Spork Used As Knife (and other disconcerting events)” opening April 1 at CONCRETE UTOPIA. I also, thankfully, think and hope that the work exhibited in our space will be more aesthetically, critically, and theoretically interesting than the space itself. And I will leave the question of the relationship of the apartment-project space open to interpretation as it relates to Transposition.

## “Carrying a Bucket of Water About For a Week”

From the artist, Dave Sherry:

This was an existential prop that gave me an interesting perspective on an otherwise ordinary week. By applying mild altercations to my own life I am able to expose settled patterns of communication and the systematic processes of day to day life. In making a work like this I feel and felt gratefully out of step with everything.

The time period for which Sherry carried this bucket around with him immediately implicates the cyclical, and the inherently quotidian. The bucket of water immediately connotes the burden of carrying around a child – in that every action you take on, which was once an unthinking part of your daily routine, now becomes a task to be surmounted. The bucket of water also acts as a metaphor for the burden of self-sustenance, the necessity of feeding and watering oneself, the definitive human condition. The amount of water we carry around in our bodies is already equal to about 60 percent; the bucket of water brings externalizes the weight we carry without thinking, as well as the constant reminders of hunger and thirst.

The bucket of water, in a potentially sideways move for parsing Sherry's piece, can also open up a metaphor for the “vessel.” It brings to mind a personal anecdote involving living with my brother and four other 19-year-old boys in a large apartment in downtown Manhattan, myself at the time being a 23-year-old female searching desperately for a professional job in the arts. As one can imagine, in this sort of a living situation, despite the existence of a relatively new and functioning dishwasher – a rare occurrence in most New York apartments, or at least any that I could imagine living in – there was always an overabundance of dirty dishes. In addition, if we abide by the OED's standard of language defined by usage rather than intention, the sink was more often a trash can/recycling bin than a sink, and the industrial-sized trash can next to the sink more often a percussion instrument than a trash can. That scene set, it was only a day after I had moved in to this apartment that I heard bellowing from the kitchen my large, endearing roommate Mike:

“Yo! You get me a bowl-a-watah?”

To which my brother replied, “Sure, dude.”

I walked out into the kitchen to find them sitting in armchairs at laptops, each with a large bowl of water in his hand from which he would sip occasionally. Now, for whatever reason, this house happened to have enough bowls to support three times as many residents as it housed, and as such, the bowl came to function in the place of most of the other dishware that was perpetually dirty. The boys had also taken on the hilarity of “bowl-a-watah” with an enthusiasm only capable of 19-year-old males, and any person walking out of his (or her) room with the slightest suggestion of a hangover grimace was enthusiastically offered up a large bowl of water in the hopes of a quick recovery, which was effected more often than not through inescapable camaraderie rather than hydration.

There is something profound about this bowl-of-water anecdote, however, in that most often when I would try to explain my living situation to friends and colleagues, I would start out by explaining that I was staying for a stint with my brother and his four 19-year-old male friends, and beyond this fact all I would need divulge was this bowl-a-water anecdote to receive nods of understanding. To expand, many an American college student has experienced buying a bottle of wine, and getting home to realize that you have nothing to put it in but mugs. Uncomfortable at first, one slowly comes to realize that the mug-of-wine is pretty much par for the course as far as college dinner parties go.

The implicit absurdity of the mis-attributed vessel – that houses the same

amount of water, or wine, with the same capacity for hydration or inebriation, and perhaps a somewhat inhibited grace due to the difficulty of actually drinking out of a bowl, they both serve the function of carrying the liquid from tap or bottle, to mouth. When one moves wine from a glass to a mug (the ceramic kind), water from cup to bowl, you mark both the context of the vessel and the larger context in which you are finding both.

To offer another metaphor, I remember being struck in my first foreign language class (French) with the explicit differentiation between different vessels for drinking. Wine goes in a verre, water in a tasse, coffee also in a tasse, and so on. I wrote it off at first as a French particularity about beverages and language, until one day I was confronted with explaining to a Spanish-speaking coworker that they thing in his hand was in fact a glass, not a cup, and that even though the vessel I was holding was also made of glass, it was in fact a mug.

Let us contemplate the importance and power of the linguistic vessel. For example, the concept and address of the English second person plurals “you,” “ya’ll,” and “y’ins guys.” These are “proper” English, southern English, and Pittsburgh English, accents with even more nuances privy only to the locals of each of these regions or dialects. With each changing articulation, the “vessel” of the message, if we are thinking of language as a structured carapace for the transference of meaning (and maybe if we can imaginatively dream of something like “pure content,”—though we understand language to be a conglomeration of intention, chosen structure, context, articulation, background, etc.—let us for the moment simplify and imagine language as the vessel by which thoughts, or pure content, are carried from one person to the next) then the change of the vessel from “y’all” to “y’ins guys” to “you” marks both speaker and the context – geographical location, the level of formality in the relationship, hierarchy between speaker and addressed. There enters here a larger issue beyond the scope of this essay, which questions the social implications of language barriers and marking across race and socioeconomic class, or international relations across the board. With a nod to this field of linguistic study, we will unfortunately have to leave a more in depth discussion for another day.

To return to a more local, accessible, and surmountable level, let us return to “Carrying A Bucket of Water About For a Week,” relieving the bucket for the moment of its potential metaphorical baggage. Let us contemplate the many contexts this performance inhabits, from home to grocery store, to artist’s website, to gallery, and eventually full circle to CONCRETE UTOPIA gallery, and thereby my apartment. There are many moves enacted by Sherry that take a bucket, water, and an average week from just those things to a reprinted text and low-res image in a gallery that cause a serious contemplation of the meaning of daily life in viewers. For those familiar with the history of performance art, a few pieces come to mind: Vito Acconci’s “Following piece,” in which the artist followed strangers on the street until they reached a private space, or Bas Jan Ader’s various “Fall” series, in which the artist films himself falling in different contexts, from rooftop to riverbank to street. What is the difference between following and Following, between falling and Falling? Promotion, I learned recently, is the name for the editorial mark that tells the author to turn a lower case letter to an uppercase. Two lines underneath the first letter of the word that turn it from a noun to a Noun, an action to an Action, an Intention, a Metaphor, or a Statement. Where does this change occur? Is it a simple capitalization, the promotion of a letter from lower to uppercase that transform your ordinary activity into a work of art? Is it merely the transposition of the action in question from the street to the gallery that turn it into the work of art? Or is it the receiver and their rubric of projected theory, desires and

expectations?

The history of performance art begins by causing a rupture, a rebellion, a changing of the guard, an articulation of new media for the morals—both artistic and political. As RoseLee Goldberg states in her history of performance art:

Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the convention of established art. Such a radical stance has made performance a catalyst in the history of twentieth-century art; whenever a certain school, be it Cubism, Minimalism, or conceptual art, seemed to have reached an impasse, artists have turned to performance as a way of breaking down categories and indicating new directions.... Performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture.<sup>1</sup>

Is the ability of performance to be mobilized for revolutionary means a definitive and inescapable characteristic of the medium? Is this rapturous, uproarious quality inherent to any explicit action, done with purpose beyond its own momentary action?

I state these theories as questions for two reasons:

First, I am myself only now posing these theories both to myself and the reader and second, I choose to pose them—and perhaps here we will begin to come full circle back to CONCRETE UTOPIA – in an artistic and curatorial context, one that I define as a space of exploration and when most fulfilling, a place for the production of questions.

Perhaps, then, it is this pairing of the uncanny tracing of the daily acts of life with the predicated questioning space of art that creates the through-provoking, humorously arresting quality in this performance work. As there are too many definitions of the functions and expectations of art, I will use the first person here to say that as I find myself in the context—or marked “vessel” —of art, I hope to be confronted with questions. One of these questions that I find in work such as Sherry’s is the question of the performativity of identity and social roles, whether or not this is the intention of the artist. Perhaps the transposition of falling to Falling, or here, carrying about to Carrying About is enacted when one acts with another, “true,” identity hidden: with Sherry what we find is a person “performing as ‘artist’” “performing” as “person.” It is perhaps the self-reflective articulation of the performance of an already defined role, e.g. the grocery shopper, that questions the level of performativity already ingrained in the quotidian role: by acting as an artist performing as grocery shopper, performing as an artist who is also often a grocery shopper, we wonder as to what level we are ourselves performing when walking down the aisle of the supermarket. Which of these performative identities do we choose to internalize and/or formalize, and how do we make those decisions for ourselves? Do we make them for ourselves?

The answer, or one answer, to the question of the power of performance art I found sitting right under my nose for the past few weeks, as I immersed myself deeper into the questions of the function of performance. It has been on the cover of every newspaper, on each morning’s homepage from the New York Times to reddit. The strongest political statement that can be made, once all other possibilities of been exhausted, is the protest, the demonstration, and, as we saw most recently in Tunisia with Mohamed Bouazizi, martyrdom. This comparison is meant by no means to align the power of martyrdom and political protest, especially as the world has seen these last few months, with the potential political and artistic power of performance art. It is rather to think about the power of the gesture of the human body, and the fact to us as human beings, the physical gesture of placing one’s body in the public sphere, outside of its expected daily course, is more powerful a gesture than any document,

speech, or law. In this way, it is performance art's mobilization of the body as medium, and the focus of attention being placed on the body and person as explicit actors that offers its potential and power.

By performing in the public space, the artist marks, or highlights, the previously subconsciously accepted role. Like in so many episodes of *House*, wherein the doctors cleverly inject the mysteriously dying patient with a magical dye that colors the malignant cells or bodily chemicals to chart their course, tracking and watching for rhyme, reason, source and pattern in the hopes of diagnosing the patient's disease. This is what we find in the work of the artists featured in "Spork As Knife": a reflection, tracing, and mimicry of everyday life, which charts, if you will, the most basic aspects of the human condition. And they do so in a medium closer to the original "Real Life" (with which we are all too familiar with through unending popular American television), than fine art and popular media, that, through its proximity to "the real thing" generates an absurdity and, often, humor.

Like the uncanny of the twin, the doppelganger, "too close for comfort" –or, to move to the context and question of humor, "too soon." The joke, or the mimic, the mirror, comes too soon after the subject of parody or copy: too close, too soon, too true. Humor makes the work all the more accessible. It opens you up to an informalized accessibility. It breaks the promoted Art barrier. Or at least punctures it, bursting the bubble of pretension, and the inaccessibility effected through the distancing of higher education's art historical training.

One need not for our purposes walk through a full functional theory of the laugh—one that immediately invokes Freud, psychological theory, and constructions of the theory of humor that I do not believe necessary for this show. Only a working understanding of humor is needed—a personal, individual experience of comedy, jokes, one-liners, knock knocks, crassness, sarcasm, and silliness. They help you take yourself less seriously, while simultaneously with the contextualization of the critical and self-critical nature of art, allow an analytical entrance into the mundane, allowing it as subject matter. If the everyday is marked as the subject of absurdity, and as the subject of art, we are allowed to think about it seriously, while simultaneously laughing at our own seriousness.

With all this in mind, in transferring the vessel of the art exhibition and fusing it with my own domestic space, I have learned more about the domestic space than I have about art, and I believe that the re-contextualizations and shifts undertaken in work such as Sherry's are more interesting and provocative than my financially-necessitated transposition of art from a white walled space to my own living room. The space lends a comfort but simultaneously looses the capacity for thoughtful contemplation of and engagement with the work. Without becoming decorative or decoration, two buzzwords or art criticism and visual analysis, they begin to fuse with the space, and become environmental.

Thus, my hope with "Spork Used As Knife" will be to challenge the relationship between the space and the work, by, first, introducing more foreign media—video art isn't usually mistaken for the newest antique store find—and second, introducing a subject matter that directly reflects and resembles the non-art activities found—or performed—in the house. Or maybe in the show it will all—dishwashing, showering, napping—become Art.

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