

Hainley, Bruce, "Rough Around the Edges: Evan Holloway in conversation with Bruce Hainley," *Evan Holloway*, London: Ridinghouse, 2012, pp. 27-31

Rough Around the Edges

*Evan Holloway in conversation with
Bruce Hainley*

BRUCE HAINLEY: *Some of your earliest works had a performative impulse that, I would assume, came from punk as much as from Robert Morris or Charles Ray. A work like Drum Box (1997; p.52), for example, yoked intense bodily action, sound, and sculpture, while Smell Oven (1997; p.53) proposed art as a jerry-built contraption to move the odor of frying bacon away from its source. Could you talk about a) your relation to the music scene (punk or perhaps even grunge) in the Pacific Northwest, b) your earliest sculptural influences, and c) your concept of "performance" – to shorthand it – as a component in your most recent works or thinking?*

EVAN HOLLOWAY: Loud guitar music meant a great deal to me, and it was in the so-called "grunge" era, when my studio was in Tacoma, that I began to connect the physical and tactile elements of these sounds to my sculptural interests. This music was intensely physical: tube amplifiers filling small spaces with vibrations so thick it felt like you could climb on them. The sounds themselves, very particularly crafted by the unorthodox treatment of the equipment, were a kind of assemblage. They were the result of extremely tactile and carefully constructed repeatable "chance" events, when the gear would scream, overdrive, and feedback in real time. The bands themselves, in particular the completely unknown regional ones, were like temporary sculptural constructions of personalities and sounds built as much out of limitations as talent. As artworks

that acted on the body, I completely understood these things, because that's how I trained myself to look at sculpture. I had an experience at MOCA in the late 1980s, with a set of Peter Shelton sculptures that hung in space so that they would arrive spatially at your mouth, anus, navel, etc, as well as some Bruce Nauman works of 1966–67 that set me in this direction – works like *Eye-Level Piece*, *Six Inches of My Knee Extended to Six Feet*, *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body*, and *Collection of Various Flexible Materials Separated by Layers of Grease with Holes the Size of My Waist and Wrists*. Probably in the same building, maybe in the same show or just a few months later, I saw things by Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois and Mike Kelley. So, the stage was set for me to read all work in relationship to my body, my tactile sensations, and my suburban experience, and I set out into the world and subsequently applied this to misreading all kinds of things. So, looking at Minimalism, or Light and Space, or anything I saw at this time, with this kind of kinaesthetic reading, I arrived quite accidentally at what has become my method.

I've always privileged the way the work is experienced over its purely visual elements. In works like *Drum Box* or *Smell Oven*, I moved a different sense organ to the foreground in a really obvious way. So, while I don't know if the word "performative" is the best way to describe my work, it seems to be a by-product of this way of working. I'm always crafting experiences as much or more than I'm making "visual art."

Warm Branch

2012

Bronze, paint

79 × 38 × 22 in | 200.7 × 96.5 × 55.9 cm

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BH *When you come across an artist you like or one whose work you've never seen before and which sticks in your craw, do you track down catalogs and/or essays to suss things out?*

EH In 2000, I discovered Ree Morton's work in a section of the slide library at UCI identified as the Melinda Wertz Collection. I became a little obsessed with finding out more about her work, and there weren't many resources at that time. A few other artists have aroused this curiosity in me, which has turned me into a bit of a researcher, Rachel bas-Cohain for instance. Often, it's just that I find one or two works that are so peculiar that I'll try to find something that fills in the picture a little more and get an understanding of their context. I can't say I'm a particularly indefatigable researcher. I'm a big fan of Richard Stankiewicz, but I still don't know the proper pronunciation of his name.

BH *Was Ree Morton important in terms of allowing in a narrative element to the work? A certain blunt humor? Even more funk?*

EH Ree Morton used her own peculiar interests, such as the book *Wild Flowers Worth Knowing* (1917) by Neltje Blanchan, which she mined for poetic associations, and she seemed to follow her interests in physical materials that she happened upon (found logs, Celastic). While the work was investigating what could be called new forms of its time, it did so in an intensely personal way. It encouraged me to mix in my own interests. I believe works like *A White Hunter Is Nearly Crazy* (2003; p.67) or much of the show *I Don't Exist* came out of this. For instance, using cast faces in my work was low and cheap and suburban, but I liked it. The sculpture *Equity* (2004; p.79) came from my own opinions about hearing the constant discussion of real estate in 2004.

BH *I think of you and many of your peers in the grad program at UCLA in the mid-to-late 1990s as a group who worked with Charley Ray – both as students and as studio assistants – right at the point when he was completing Unpainted Sculpture (1997), a work that, among other things, became one of the last works he created in that manner (say, without digital imaging and various kinds of international fabricators). Could you talk about that scene and tutelage, the things you learned? Or was Chris Burden, or Paul McCarthy or Nancy Rubins, a more apposite and engaging figure for you when it comes to how you came to make the work you made?*

EH It was really a golden time. I was in a peer group of earnest makers and aesthetic seekers. Many of us didn't know how inappropriate and out of intellectual fashion object-making was. Many of us were quite noticeably rough-around-the-edges, and it was a great act of honing by the faculty. Charley, among other things, taught a relationship to the formalist history of



Ree Morton
Fading Flowers
1974
Celastic, painted wood
48 x 48 x 8 in | 121.9 x 121.9 x 20.3 cm



Grabbing Hand
2006
Steel, plaster, paint, paper, wooden shelf
4 x 8 x 8 in | 10.2 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm

sculpture. He showed us that we could be connected to that lineage, that there were things in that work that were of great importance, and that we shouldn't repeat their methods but instead find ways of doing some of the same things with our means and in relationship to our time.

BH *What was the genesis of the "color theory" and "grey scale" works? Why tree branches? How has your thinking about these works changed over time and through different material, wood to bronze? Do you consider these series of works "signature" works?*

EH I'm not sure how color theory stick came into being. I remember finding the odd section of cut-up tree in the street that had the quality of sending one thick trunk into many smaller branches, and I must have thought of this as diagramming something, like a sculptural graphic. I remember that getting the courage to paint it took a long time, because I felt like painting sticks with acrylic was a very bad place to be. But then, the (color) theory justified the object and it all worked out.

Grey Scale (2000; pp.136–37) came from looking at geometric sculptures that had a grid form, and then the flash of inspiration that this could be done with a tree, and that tree could again demonstrate another kind of basic information using paint. My thinking has changed greatly about these works. In 2001, there was a great deal of pressure to make another work like *Grey Scale*. I pretty much refused to do this. I made a couple of works that were more ironic workings of the same idea, such as covering the tree with fake ants, or painting it red, white and blue. I didn't want to become an artist who decided early on to cash in on one idea. I had a lot of other ideas I wanted to investigate.

From the moment it was first shown, it was clear that *Grey Scale* had the potential to be "signature work." However, I come from one of the last generations of the twentieth century, and I carry a great deal of it with me. I have old-fashioned ideas about art and aesthetic investigation being an alternative to the dominant culture and as such I thought it was a bad idea to make the most popular work over and over. At that time, the idea that a young artist would willfully choose to become a small-scale manufacturer of high-end consumer goods was an idea that disgusted me.

Now, I've spent a decade making a lot of other kinds of work and defined a much larger territory for myself to work in by publicly presenting a greater breadth of ideas and forms. I see this as a reservoir I've made for myself in time and I can begin now to revisit some of these ideas. Many of them seem to me to still hold a lot of unexplored potential for aesthetic development and meaning.

Also, some of these things, like the trees, can be lucrative. As you recently said to me, Bruce, the middle class is disappearing in the art world too. I'm choosing to make these "signature" or "branded" works, while they still hold aesthetic

interest for me and can also help me survive in an art world that increasingly demands business savvy. I would hate to be emerging now. All my past time spent in simple studio contemplation is very different from my current world of learning how to engage fabricators and use money to get things made. Though it makes me nervous because it sounds like an attempt to justify a middle-aged man's compromise, I can say that my recent efforts to increase the amount of capital put into production, to make less ephemeral, more durable work, are all toward a larger goal of making good sculpture. I'm seeing too much mediocre work come into the world in a big way now, and I feel it's important to use the means I have to counter this trend in an art world that often seems to not know the difference.

You aren't needling me are you?

BH *Really, my intent wasn't to needle – and I apologize for what was a bone-headed, inelegantly phrased, and indelicate question. So let me pony up. I know you know your Walter Benjamin. I remember seeing you, every once in a while, over the course of two years or so, and you'd have with you yet another of the volumes of selected writings of Benjamin that Harvard University Press had then recently published. I was silently awed by your thoroughness in this endeavor. Whether or not I can pull it off, I am trying to articulate, to address to you – because your work for me compels such a confrontation – some of the social conditions in which the artist must work right now. Benjamin was right about Baudelaire, as the exemplary figure of his time, as much as I might prefer, many days, Mallarmé's turning away from all the muck (not that that sums up Mallarmé's project, which was, in no manner, unengaged). You have always struck me as, well, a Baudelairean artist, and I am trying, at this point in my life, to be more Benjaminian, attentive to what he insisted we attend, however grim – or, perhaps, Jack Smithian (I wish!), his funny, acute ferocity, especially as witnessed in his interview with Sylvère Lotringer in 1986, "Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art" (he vents brilliantly about landlords and real estate). I'm trying to deal with the conundrum of our zeitgeist as a way to want to continue to think about art at all.*

*For quite some time, you have engaged "economics" at its darkest – unless I completely misconstrue the title and force of a work like *Grabbing Hand* (2006; p.28) or why *Second Law* (2006; p.97) had the batteries embedded in its support (both as pointers to waste and to the necessity for self-empowerment and off-the-grid energy) or the comedy and the heaviness of *Despair* (2005; pp.38–39). I'd like to consider even how your use of a vernacular that draws strength from "funk" or "outsider" – lousy terms, but they expedite a lot of concepts – aesthetics relates to just such social conditions. I guess I'm trying to talk about exactly what isn't "supposed" to be talked about in terms of a life in the arts, exactly about what your work, crucially, doesn't verbalize but shows or materializes. It's a question, I guess, of materialism, in every sense.*



Despair
2005
Welded steel, steel ball, wood
92½ × 96½ × 96½ in | 235 × 244 × 244 cm

EH Yeah, materialism and dialectics. The sculpture called *Form vs. Content* (2006; p.108) was made around this time too. It's the one with the baby dolls and barbed wire. This sculpture, which used what I thought was a deliberately unsophisticated trope, was the centerpiece of my first New York solo show. I thought it would use the context of the "sophisticated" environment to call attention to the issue of taste itself. It was an experiment to try to learn something about the role of context in making an object acceptable to a high-end audience. Here's what I learned from that experiment: many of the people who look at contemporary art, in particular those in a position to purchase it, are unfamiliar with this sculptural trope. Their experience of objects in the world is much more limited than that of the average artist. They didn't see my "meta" intention, that this was a sculpture about sculpture. They couldn't arrive at this "secondary" meaning of the materials before them. Many were lost in the "primary" reading of babies being poked with wire. There was a class divide. And in this sense, I was calling attention to something ignored by what are called "Marxists" in the art world. Namely, materials and class.

A work like *Despair* uses one of the lowest forms imaginable: it's a rolling-ball sculpture. It really is a common work, and by "common" I mean that nearly every sentient human alive will stand and watch the ball roll to its obvious and inevitable conclusion.

BH *The clarity with which you tell the tale of those works' reception compels me to ask if you could talk about your interest in the diagrammatic – a diagram or schema that does what it's supposed to do but then also skids or boomerangs to do something else that has a mysteriously emotive effect, confounding the directives of what the diagram looks as if it's for. In Left-Handed Guitarist (1998; p.64), say, the figure stands at the edge of a diagram of an infinite pit – a declivity drawn in a manner that resonates with many related works about perspective that you were making at the time. Anyone can see that the pit is just a representation, and yet the precariousness of the rocker standing on the brink of it all triggers something like vertigo or a Cobain-like fall into an abyss. With Sunflower (2004; p.132), the dried plant is actually supported by the welded-steel scaffolding, but it's also held up by prismatic color theory – referring both to the flower's and to color's relation to light and vision, which is to say, perhaps, that it's in some "meta" manner supported as much by the concerns of history (Van Gogh), dialectics (nature versus art), and/or empathy (our relation to the visionary).*

EH Using diagrams was another way to expand the working territory of the sculpture, to engage another kind of space. Ray was a big influence on this. I could use forms in space, even the "exhausted" twentieth-century conceptions of "modern" sculpture, as an armature that would be reflexive with the viewer. What you call the "mysteriously emotive

effect" came about as the result of a very long and ambiguous studio process. I'd spend a lot of time with these things and try putting different meanings on them, either by physically altering them or just doing thought-experiments with them (while staring at them) – until I found something that resonated with me in a way that was unexpected. It was the kind of work that could almost never be done tidily or efficiently, that's to say: I couldn't just think of the idea, then make it. There'd be a lot of experimenting – and failure – and a great deal of uncertainty about what made a success. Much of the work was presented with the hopeful premise that things that I found resonant would also be resonant with at least some portion of my audience. Diagrams are universal. I was often tempted to use text on works, but text has many problems associated with it. First, it would restrict my audience to people who could read English, and, secondly, it always forms a strong dialectic with the object or a didactic relationship to the object. It would shut down the body-read.

BH *You once handed me a photocopy of an article from and magazine by Gareth Jones on St Martins School of Art's infamous "A" Course, which in its original form operated from 1969–73. Among its controversial features were: 1) the "elimination of talking in the seminar;" 2) the avoidance of "the endless distraction of explanation," both by students and faculty, including the "deliberate absence of staff evaluation;" and 3) the "decision to lock the door of the project area" during class time "to foster an atmosphere of study and concentration and rule out interruptions." How do you think about your own teaching – both in terms of what you attempt to give the students (or withhold from them) and how it relates to your own work?*

EH My best recent teaching experiences have been with undergraduates at universities. Most of them are unlikely to follow art-making as a life pursuit. I'm reticent to teach them the standard recent canon. My training was to question hierarchies and histories and ask how they came to be, and to see them as only part of the larger multifaceted reality. Art history is a history of successful products. These products may or may not be the best of their time. Sometimes, it's because they're packaged well; sometimes they're the most palatable; sometimes they most easily summarize a set of ideas. Works considered "important" are often determined by a very small consensus (I should say here, not a nefarious consensus), and they only reflect the limited knowledge available to that small group of insiders. Works from this lineage then become elevated to the status of religious icons and the artists revered as saints. This is more cult-like than scholarly, and I have a hard time using classroom time for this kind of indoctrination. One of my teaching assistants once pointed out to me that at the end of the semester I still hadn't mentioned the existence of Minimalism. And why should I? If these students continue with

any other class, or visit any museum, they're certain to get this adequately burned into their minds. I'm not going to promote the brand.

The undergraduates I meet (and this may not be true everywhere) are particularly skilled with language and with concepts – and particularly lost in the physical world as something they can have any agency in creating. Everything is built for them, usually overseas, and they relate to all of the physical world as consumers. Teaching them to use tools, to dumpster-dive and recycle materials, to build things and touch them and accidentally create textures and feelings with objects that are outside of the things they see for sale, to think with objects – this is the stuff I try to do. I do teach a history, but it usually follows my interests. I teach with an emphasis on tactility and building, on comparisons with other objects given to us, on the ways our bodies relate to things and read them in contexts. Saying this, I realize that I'm only giving them what I'm interested in and what I know from my own work, and little else. In some contexts, this would make me a lousy teacher. Here in SoCal, this is our method.

BH *Given the mores of the current art system, which certainly include MFA programs, what's the place of the ethical in relation to the aesthetic, if it has any place, today?*

EH I'm in favor of artists pursuing work that presents something new, or different. As exhausted as that concept is supposed to be, I've found myself surprised and delighted and my outlook has been re-formed by things I've seen. I'm disappointed by things within the contemporary art world that strike me as completely redundant with the world-at-large. So, I guess this means I want art to be a subculture, an outside culture (I know, romantic, modernist...). Or at least we should realize that assuming the dominant value system, with its common language of money, status-signifiers and mass-markets, is completely optional.

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