REPRESENTATIONS AND REAL THINGS

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by

James Anthony Rubino, B.F.A., B.A., M.A., Ph.D.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1987

Master's Examination Committee:  Approved by
E. F. Hebner
Susan Dallas-Swann
Richard L. Roth

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
VITA

November 27, 1951. . . Born - Hackensack, New Jersey

1977 . . . . . . . . B.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1977 . . . . . . . . B.F.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1979 . . . . . . . . M.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1983 . . . . . . . . Ph.D., Philosophy, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1986-1987. . . . . Teaching Associate, Department of Art, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

Major Field: Expanded Arts
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE SOUND-ACTIVATED PIECES</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. PLAYING WITH PICTURES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. REAL THINGS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution. . . . It is difficult to bungle a good idea. 1

The directions that my art has taken are for the most part the result of my questioning the type of object I am making. My decision whether or not to make a piece or how to make it has turned not so much on the experience it might provide or the ideas it might communicate to someone, but on what the completed object will be and what I am doing in making it.

Below I discuss three major types of work I have done. Each in its own way reflects my continuing interest in personal responsibility (as reflected in my relationship to my work) and the nature of illusion, representation, and "real" things.
CHAPTER I

THE SOUND-ACTIVATED PIECES

The works I will speak of here move when there is a sound nearby. Most marginally resemble animals or flowers either in form or movement, and most appear either to retreat or attack in response to sound.

One of the primary sources for my making these pieces was my concern with my relationship to my work, with my work's having some sort of autonomy. In 1971 I was a freshman in art at Memphis State University. I had made a painting with a stencil and spray paint, and I was somewhat surprised at the enthusiastic reception it received from my instructors. What remains in my mind is their comment: "Look at those warm and cool colors bouncing off each other!" Not knowing at the time what warm and cool colors were, my immediate reaction was that this was fraud. I thought that in light of my ignorance I was not, I could not be, responsible for that painting's being good. What made it good, it seemed, was there by accident.

This incident alone does not account for the direction my art took while I was at Memphis State--I have
always had a preoccupation with personal responsibility, with praise and blame, innocence and guilt. My introducing this particular interest into my art was encouraged by the prevalence at that time of process art. The focus of my work became the means I used to produce it. The emphasis was the self-effacement and the elimination of the artist's personality, common to much process/systemic art. My earliest work done in this manner consisted of "pictures" or prints made in such a way that I could not determine beforehand their visual characteristics. In 1973 I moved from manual to computerized methods, producing two-dimensional designs from an input of random numbers. Around 1975 I began to take a similar systemic approach to the creation of word pieces (usually editions of offset prints) using the dictionary and thesaurus as a source. For example, I did several "synonymic transitions," in which I traced out in the thesaurus the branches of meaning from one prechosen word to another (e.g., Past to Present (1977)). A predominant theme of these works is my relationship to the finished product: by introducing chance (e.g. in the computerized work) or by adopting preexistent modes of organization (e.g., in the works derived from the
thesaurus), I diminished my responsibility for the features that the final product possessed.

The outward form of my work took a radical turn a few years later, yet in retrospect I see its connection with the above process-oriented work. The series of kinetic works that I did in the late seventies either had the apparent function of harming people (e.g., Baby Blinder [1979]) or in fact violently attacked the viewer (e.g., Riddle [1981], a small spike strikes the viewer's finger when he/she pushes a button). In the former type of piece I challenge the typical relation between the tool and the toolmaker, the artist and his/her art. It is in part our taking this relationship for granted both in practical matters and in art that results in one's initial shock. These works imply a maker with attitudes different than my own.

The latter type of pieces seemed more than anything else to be like booby-traps, and at times I found myself hesitant to suggest to people that they examine them, adopting instead a look-if-you-wish attitude. Yet with time I began to see these pieces not as booby-traps, but instead as protecting themselves. I found seeing them as such appealing because of the way that it distanced me from their effects: the maker of a booby-trap is
responsible for the trap's effects; yet if something is best seen as protecting itself, this tie with its maker is severed.

The form of my pieces thus changed in order that their action would be most easily interpreted as self-defensive behavior: a resemblance to natural protective behavior, e.g., quick, sudden movement; protective coloration; and, most importantly, replacing push buttons with sound-activated switches. Since the movement of these pieces suggest retreat or attack, they appear to be autonomous, to have a life of their own. This mirrors the distance that I strived for in my early work while allowing for a complexity that chance or systemic methods did not permit. The answer to the question as to why one of these pieces moved is not necessarily that I intended it to move; rather, the answer that seems to come to mind—in view of the pieces' appearance and the way they move—is that the piece is defending itself: it appears to move out of its own desire, not mine.

Another recurring theme that appears in the sound-activated piece is a play on an ambiguity of the real and the represented. The artist that spawned this interest was Jasper Johns, especially his flags, targets, maps, and the like. Even our experience of the paintings of the
Abstract Expressionist, Leo Steinburg says, requires perceptual illusion. Johns's images, on the other hand, do not seek this immunity of the unreal. You can't smoke Magritte's painted pipe, but you could throw a dart at a Johns target, or use his painted alphabets for testing myopia.

... The subject in Johns's art has regained real presence. ... Paint is paint, and numbers are numbers, and you can have a painted number in which each term is only itself.²

Since flags, targets, maps, and numbers are flat things, Johns's paintings of them can be seen both as representations and as the actual thing itself.

I see a similar ambiguity in my sound-activated, organism-like pieces. Just as Johns's flag can be seen either as a flag or a representation of a flag, the threats of these pieces can be seen either as representing a threatening organism or as an actual threat—after all, in some the spikes are sharp, the movement quick. Scorpion (1984)—whose spiked tail springs quickly forward when there is a noise nearby—does not represent a
scorpion because it is a kind of scorpion (a bizarre, wooden, mechanical scorpion). E. H. Gombrich fostered this idea:

Take any object from a museum, say Riccio's Box in the Shape of a Crab. . . . If I had it in my hand or, better still, on my desk, I might well be tempted to play with it, to poke it with my pen, or to warn a child . . . not to touch any paper on my desk or the crab would bite it. . . . On the desk, in short, this object would belong to the species crab, subspecies bronze crab. 3

The talk here of "subspecies" is simply a way of expressing how we react to the bronze crab. The threat of Scorpion transforms our way of seeing it: since its threat is real, one cannot maintain the distance that representations normally allow.

Note that Gombrich is describing our behavior toward Riccio's box outside the museum context. Within a gallery or museum, our response would probably be different.

As I contemplate [the crab] in its glass case, my reaction is different. I think of certain trends in Renaissance realism which lead to Palissy and his style rustique. The
object belongs to the species
Renaissance bronzes, subspecies
bronzes representing crabs.4

I have found that the gallery context distorts to some
degree how my sound-activated pieces are seen (though in a
different way than Gombrich here points out).

One common criticism of my sound-activated pieces is
that they are "one liners"--the experiences these works
offer, that is, are not rich enough: after clapping one's
hands, the piece goes through its (usually very short,
perhaps funny) routine and then returns to normal. This
complaint arises, I think, because of our expectations
about how art is appreciated: what there is to be
appreciated in a work is there for the viewing; though we
might not be able to fully appreciate a work on one
viewing, we can return again to it to have a similar,
perhaps even richer, experience of it.

To see any of these individual pieces move once or
twice, however, is not to see the work. They over a much
richer experience with constant exposure over an extended
period of time. They were made to be lived with, and one
cannot experience what they are about until one has done
so for a considerable length of time. In fact, part of my
reason for making their movements short and quick was so
that they work within the living environment. When going about one's day-to-day business, one has neither the time nor patience to watch an extended mechanical "performance." Over time, one becomes attached to them: I've had two or three owners of my work mention, when I had the work for repair, that they had missed the work. Over time these pieces become an integral part of one's home life.

I am very conscious of when and how my work comes on: some of my work is activated by a push button, some when it is picked up, some by a timer, some are sound-activated. Within the gallery context, the sound-activated switch appears to be simply a convenient way of getting the work to move; if it were the movement itself that was important, an accessible push-button switch would suffice. In the home, however, the pieces respond, not at the wishes of the owner, but to accidental or stray noises. One piece, Mock Echo (1983), will help me make my point. This piece simply makes a noise (a sharp knock) when there is a noise nearby it. Were one to experience this piece in the context of a gallery it would be, to say the least, uninteresting. Within the home, however, it takes on a different significance: most of the time the noise that makes Mock Echo respond is accidental, for
example, dropping one's keys. In this light, the simple knock becomes associated with one's doing something by accident. Thus it becomes a mocking, a reminder of one's faults.
CHAPTER II
PLAYING WITH PICTURES

While in graduate school in philosophy, I did quite a bit of thinking about the nature of pictorial representation (in fact, it was my first dissertation topic). One of the things that interested me was how we use pictures, in particular, how we sometimes use them as a surrogate for the real thing. I once saw a wonderful example: a cheap chess set the board of which was an actual size photograph of a marble chess board. I have from time to time incorporated this idea into my work.

I have done a series of pieces which contain a picture of internal organs—a medical illustration or my own drawing—that is in some way acted upon within the piece. The first piece in this series, Delusion (Digest) (1979), is a small (6" X 3" X 1") box with a hinged door on its front. Inside the door is a small cavity on the back of which is an illustration of the human digestive system (taken from a dictionary); the top and bottom of this box each contains a hole extending into the cavity. Thus air can naturally trickle through the upper hole,
over the picture, and out the bottom hole. Several things motivated this piece. Most importantly, I think, was the myth of Pygmalion: Ovid tells the story of a lonely sculptor, Pygmalion, who falls in love with the statue of a woman he has created and prays to Venus for a woman in the likeness of that statue. Venus answers Pygmalion's prayers, and the marble statue itself comes to life. As far as making a real person is possible, using the picture is nearly as close as carving a statue: the picture is not used as an illusion—its use in effect depends instead on delusion.

A moment of complete happiness never occurs in the creation of a work of art. The promise of it is felt in the act of creation, but disappears towards the completion of the work. For it is then that the painter realises that it is only a picture he is painting. Until then he had almost dared to hope the the picture might spring to life.5

This first piece was also motivated by a pun (as was most of my work at that time): 'digest' not only refers to the process of digestion: a digest is an abbreviated substitute for the real thing. It was a year or two later that I noticed in the dictionary the idiom 'to eat the air,' meaning "to have vain hopes." The coincidence was
enough to motivate me to make another piece in the same
vein, Air Eater (1981). It, too, is cabinet like; it has
an open mouth on the front top which opens into a cavity
(accessible by hinged doors) containing a color medical
illustration of the internal organs. The hole through the
bottom contains a fan which comes on three times a day
(breakfast, lunch, and dinner), sucking the air through
the mouth, over the picture, and out through the bottom
hole. I made another "air eater" in 1984; it differs in
that it is tubular, its teeth open and close as the fan
pulls the air through, and the drawing of internal organs--
rubbed by a feather when it comes on--is not at all
accessible.

Recently I have again taken up the picture-as-
surrogate theme. Case Worm (1986), for example, contains
a drawing of worm guts within a welded steel cagelike
casing. Rubber artificial worms turn slowly on an
armature, and their tips massage the picture. Playing
Possum (1986), like Air Eater, comes on three times a day,
blowing air over and brushing down a picture from a poster
of the internal organs of an earthworm. Digest (1986)
consists of several mechanisms placed directly on top of
an open biology textbook: after a lamp comes on, a
portion of the text (on "incomplete digestive systems") is
scanned; then different mechanisms rub, brush, and blow upon pictures and diagrams of human and animal digestive tracks. This last piece is in one way more successful than the first two: since the book remains intact, the pictures are easily seen as pictures rather than as one representational part of a represented organism. (Compare how we see a drawn-on mouth of a hand puppet with how we see a drawing of a mouth in a dentistry magazine—we don't see the magazine as having a mouth!) One might see Playing Possum, for example, as representing an animal with exposed organs; yet the pictures in Digest retain their integrity as pictures.

I again used a complete book in Pygmalion (1987). Like Digest, the book is opened to a page containing text and a picture of human organs; and after the text is scanned, the picture is worked upon by various mechanical devices. Yet unlike Digest, to even further preserve the integrity of the pictures as pictures, I isolated the mechanisms by positioning them under the book; they rise up over the edge to do their work.
CHAPTER III
REAL THINGS

I see another type of work I do as being motivated by my interest in the distinction between the real and the illusory. As does most of my work, these pieces share with the conceptual art of the sixties and seventies a reaction to the idea that the significance of art lies primarily in the visual aesthetic experience it provides. The focus in that art was not the visual features of the work itself but the idea that it embodied, the process by which it came into being, or the gesture its artist made in presenting it as art.

One aspect of this kind of art that I find appealing is that the significance of a work can turn on what it is as opposed to its sensory qualities. An example is Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing (Rauschenberg, with de Kooning's permission, erased one of his drawings). In this work it does matter that it is what the title says it is—if it were not actually an erased de Kooning drawing, it would, at the very least, be a different piece. Likewise, the significance of Robert
Morris's Box with the Sound of Its Own Making (1961) (a box inside of which is a tape recording of the box being made) depends not on what it appears to be, but on what it actually is. In this piece it does matter how the sound heard was actually made, that it actually be the sound of the box's construction. Perceptually the piece would be the same if, say, a recording of another box being made was used. Even if one made a tape aurally indistinguishable from the original recording of the box's construction, the piece would not be the same piece were the "fake" tape substituted.

Some of my work is similar to these pieces in that I hope to achieve symbolic overtones simply in virtue of what the piece is. Some are simply functional objects. Like ordinary, everyday objects--tables, toasters, doors--what is central to Baby Blinder is its function. And its symbolic content comes from that function: our actually using it is unthinkable; our repulsion reflects our own blinding of a sort. Life Clock--a clock that keeps time in years (my age)--is another such piece.

The Self-Duster also does what its title suggests, it dusts itself off every hour. Web Tangler hangs in the corner at ceiling level; it has two separated rods which are positioned in a way to invite spiders to build their
webs between them. Every two or three days, however, the rods come together, tangling any web that may have been built. I do not think of these pieces as functional objects; it is not that I do not like dust or cobwebs. Rather, I think of them as repeatedly making a gesture or performing a ritual (whether anyone is watching them or not). Both say something about decay and value.

Finally, in two recent pieces I have tried to give common symbols a more concrete form. Bomb (1986) is a kinetic piece that hangs from the ceiling. It consists of a bomb-like object (with a sharpened brass tip) which falls to the ground every two to three days. Although it creates a real danger, that danger is so dwarfed by the threat it represents that the danger nearly becomes symbolic (as a pin prick in a ritual might symbolize future pain). This piece hung for some time over my studio door. I have since taken it down; yet still after about six weeks the space over which it hung seems somehow charged. My Nimbus (1987) is a lifesize re-creation in bronze of the symbolic halo used in early religious paintings (with the additional humorous touch of a skullcap with straps, as if it could be worn). This piece is my first bronze casting, and I enjoyed the fact that the nature of the piece almost disallowed --barring
complete disaster--my failing. The nimbus is a symbol of perfection, and if, say, only two-thirds of it had cast correctly, it would have carried my failure in its content.
CONCLUSION

I have at least for the time being given up my work with the organism-like sound-activated pieces--I have pushed that direction as far as I could go. I see a great potential, however, in pieces involving the mechanization of books. I hope to explore this in a way to exploit the way that information is conveyed both by words and pictures. I also intend to continue my work with "real" things--there seems to be potential in the way Bomb and My Nimbus exploit common symbols.
NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY

