

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

February 9, 2013

Waste Not: One Artist's Rules of the Game by Thomas Micchelli

You could look at Environmental Service's exhibition, *What is Yours is Mine*, as a maximalist spin on Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning Drawing" (1953). But you'd be wrong.

In that landmark exercise in art-from-art, the brash young Neo-Dadaist dropped in on the Abstract Expressionist master and politely requested a drawing. When de Kooning asked him why, Rauschenberg replied that he was going to erase it. And so de Kooning, taking care to select one in ink and crayon that would be really hard to erase, gave him a drawing and Rauschenberg erased it, and the result — framed, matted and labeled with the help of Jasper Johns — is now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

What Environmental Services is up to, however, is a very different kettle of fish, one that has more to do with Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* than Rauschenberg's invisible drawing. While the art on display in *What is Yours is Mine* shares the notion of using the work of others as its raw material, it is not a conceptual transgression that calls into question the nature of art, nor does it undermine the idea of authorship. Rather, it extends it.

Contrary to expectations, Environmental Services is not a collective effort along the lines of Group Material or the Bruce High Quality Foundation (an impression reinforced by the formal variety of the works in the show), but an all-purpose artists' services company founded, owned and operated by the artist Doug Weathersby. Environmental Services (ES) is Weathersby's answer to the perennial problem of making a living while pursuing one's art. The press release from Dodge Gallery on the Lower East Side, which is presenting *What is Yours is Mine*, explains it this way:

For \$40/hour (three hour minimum) ES will do anything from installing your art to forming a compost pile in your back yard to painting your house, all the while creating art through photographs, temporary installations, and the reconfiguration of accumulated materials.

Through ES, Weathersby has fully immersed every detail of his life into the making of art, from the enigmatic photographs and to-do lists he posts on Facebook every day (seven of which — actually eight, but more on that later — are on view here as framed 31 x 24-inch archival inkjet prints) to the reused, recycled and repurposed materials that make up the current exhibition. By crediting the exhibition to ES, rather than using his own name, Weathersby closes the loop between making art and making ends meet. All of this sounds swell on paper, but it can also hold the seeds of a precious art-about-art mindset that rarely ventures beyond the studio door — a trap Weathersby sidesteps by dint of his chops and smarts, both of which he possesses in spades.

A project-oriented artist, Weathersby makes work for a specific reason (such as the current show) with a specific set of rules. For *What is Yours is Mine*, aside from the photographs and to-do lists, he restricts his materials to those salvaged from the studios of artists who have also exhibited at Dodge (Dave Cole, Taylor Davis, Darren Blackstone Foote, Sheila Gallagher, Eddie Martinez, Jason Middlebrook and Cordy Ryman).

He allowed no new material other than glue (screws and nails were also used to hold the pieces together, but they were recycled from the artist's previous exhibitions), and he had to use everything he collected, which included failed and unsold artworks by the other artists. Nothing could be thrown away. By adhering strictly to his own precepts, along with several requested by a few of the artists, Weathersby submits to a form of discipline that can either stifle the imagination or help to liberate it.

In this way his methods fall in line with the writers of the Oulipo group, a loose affiliation of mostly European authors founded in 1960 (the name is a contraction of *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or "Workshop of Potential Literature"), whose members included Calvino, Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec and Harry Mathews.



Environmental Services, "Taylor's Sheet Goods/My Sconce Shelf" (2013). Plywood, mdf, particle board, pine tar pot, 75 x 12 x 12 inches. Photo: Carly Gaebe.

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In his essay, "Cybernetics and Ghosts" (1967), Calvino writes:

Literature is a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material, independent of the personality of the poet, but it is a game that at a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning, a meaning that is not patent on the linguistic plane [...]

A book like *Invisible Cities* exhibits the kind of self-reflexive strategies discernible in almost every Oulipo work. It is composed of nine chapters, and within those nine chapters are numbered sections (1 through 5) and repeating categories ("Cities and memory," "Cities and desire," "Cities and the dead," etc.). The book can be read linearly, numerically or categorically, but "at a certain point" the textual convolutions cease to be a game and take on a complexity of consonances that mirrors the maze-like patterns of reality itself.

Weathersby, in the guise of Environmental Services, is playing such a game, rigorously following a method that continually turns in on itself but ultimately expands into a metaphysical investigation of influence and originality, the individual and the community.

The show has an odd cohesiveness despite the one-off quality of the individual pieces; Weathersby's sensitivity to the formal interactions of his multifarious elements goes a long way to settle down the conflicting forms and surfaces, allowing him to make the most out of the cards he's dealt himself. Foremost among the material pleasures of the exhibition is the artist's extraordinary way with wood, which can be kinky or sensual, off-putting or painterly, conjuring a vibrant, even elegant series of works that frequently belie the rude state and heterogeneous origins of the salvaged components. Like the city of Zaira, described in the first chapter of *Invisible Cities*, Weathersby's art "does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand."

A floor piece called "Darren's Wood/My Chain" (2013) — comprised of dozens of interlocking, boxlike frames of simple, unfinished wood — almost escaped my attention when I walked into the gallery. But after a few moments of looking at it, the variously-sized elements resolved into a palpable sense of movement. What had been just a pile of scrap suddenly seemed to heave up and lurch across the floor.

Another work, inconspicuously leaning in the corner adjacent to the street window, is "Darren's Wood's" polar opposite: a single, serpentine and softly polished length of pine carved from the trunk of Cordy Ryman's Christmas tree.

And so it goes from one piece to another—an impossibly tapered pedestal made out of increasingly larger plywood and particle board squares, topped by a can of pine tar lying on its side; an exquisitely molded, cloudlike form sitting behind a back corner of the gallery, its surface mottled with apertures and striations (again from wood supplied by Darren Blackstone Foote); a lushly finished hunk of cherry wood, as variegated in shape and color as an abstract painting, standing alone on a maple shelf.

There are also four works made from leftover fragments, which Weathersby dropped into a garbage can and covered with glue, as well as a full-scale plywood dumpster in the middle of the gallery filled with pieces that didn't fit elsewhere, including one of the artist's framed photographs (the eighth, mentioned above) that turned out to be one too many for the width of the wall. The concentration of materials — possessed, manipulated and/or discarded by one of seven artists, rounded up and reimagined by an eighth — become "invested with an unexpected meaning" in the works' implicit narrative of cultural exchange, literally incorporating artistic precedents in the form of objects relinquished by the artist's immediate predecessors.

This comes through most evocatively in the four pieces that were made in a garbage can. In a visual and metaphorical coup, the glue that holds these objects together, the only independent element in the conceptual schema — erupting into spurts and streams of eye-peeling orange — feels freely, wildly cathartic. Check off whatever analogies you'd like.

What is Yours is Mine: Environmental Services continues at Dodge Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 17.



Environmental Services, "Darren's Wood/My Chain" (2013). Hardwood, plywood, mdf, glue, dimensions variable. Photo: Carly Gaebe.