

salt 10: Conrad Bakker



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“The idea that art doesn’t take a physical form is ridiculous...Ultimately it’s the material, and that material is language, steel, whatever you want to have it...so it’s a matter of wrestling with those material properties and at the same time with the mental experiences...a matter of setting up correspondences, where you seemingly have something that’s very material but at the same time it somehow is absorbed into abstraction. So that first you see it, then you don’t.”

– Robert Smithson, 1969¹

For his *salt* exhibition, Conrad Bakker debuts *Untitled Project: Robert Smithson’s Library* and *Book Club*, an ongoing artwork currently consisting of over 300 books on tables and shelves at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. The books are culled from the oft-cited catalogue of Robert Smithson’s (American, 1938-1973) personal library and span a range of topics that interested the artist before his untimely death at the age of thirty-five. Though only a portion of Smithson’s library is on view, the information represented is vast, touching on topics such as geology, mythology, capitalism, film, physics, the cosmos, philosophy, science fiction, and avant-garde literature. In presenting these books, Bakker nods to postmodern conceptual exhibition practices while being deeply committed to material relationships that Smithson championed. Bakker’s interest in Smithson’s library emphasizes the power of objects to reflect our assumptions, and his clever use of commercial structures interrogates value and the capitalist system.

¹Robert Smithson in Schmidt, Eva. “Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969-70).” Ed. Jack Flam. *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London, England: University of California Press, 1996. p. 215.

The Dematerialization of Art

Bakker’s presentation of books and reading materials as an exhibition draws on what art critic Lucy Lippard called in 1967 “the dematerialization of the art object.” At the time, Lippard noticed an extreme shift in artists’ materials. Reacting against Abstract Expressionism and the rigid, material-based definition of Modern art, artists began producing work with inexpensive and even ephemeral materials like video, photography, text, and performance. Wanting to prioritize their ideas over aesthetic qualities, they rejected previous expressive and subjective styles, eschewed all traces of the “genius” artist’s hand, and ignored judgments of taste. Artists like Lawrence Weiner and Robert Smithson were quick to point out that language is as much a material as steel, and Lippard agreed that “it isn’t really a matter of how much materiality a work has, but what the artist is doing with it.”² The shift in emphasis from “material” to “idea” was groundbreaking and marked the beginning of a conceptual art practice that continues today.

The 1970 artwork *Information Room (Special Investigation)* by Joseph Kosuth, a pioneer of Conceptual art, is a significant prototype for the kinds of discursive and educational installation formats that have become common. For *Information Room*, Kosuth presented his personal library, together with contemporary philosophy and art theory publications, for viewers to peruse. The radical artwork looked and functioned like a reading room with two long wooden tables piled high with

²Lucy Lippard, in conversation with Ursula Meyer, in Lippard, Lucy R. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...* New York: Praeger, 1973. p. 6.



Left | Joseph Kosuth. *Information Room*, 1970. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery. © 2014 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Below | Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Robert Smithson's Library and Book Club [A Range Guide to Mines and Minerals]*, 2014.

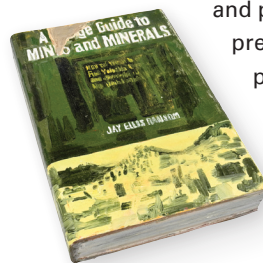
paperbacks and newspapers. His idea, that information be transferred to and synthesized by the readers/viewers beyond the gallery, determined the physical aesthetics of the space. Since Kosuth's *Information Room*, and indicative of the pedagogical and social legacy of the dematerialization of the art object, artists like Michael Clegg and Martin Guttman, Andrea Fraser, *Temporary Services*, and Thomas Hirschhorn have continually enlisted libraries and archives to disseminate information, build knowledge, and create social interactions.

Bakker's installation format is familiar, but his project challenges this trend toward a dematerialized art and information dissemination. In fact, Bakker's books deny us information. They cannot be read. All of his books are made of solid wood, as are the tables on which they rest. Bakker hand carved and painted to-scale copies of Smithson's books, a process the artist

will continue until he reproduces Smithson's entire library of over a thousand volumes.

The Materiality of a Thing

Bakker's *Robert Smithson's Library* does not attempt to share textual information or create a shared social experience, but the idea of the project is still paramount. Bakker's project gives a weight and presence to a library that has been presented only in abstract list form for the past forty years. His emphasis on materials and skilled craftsmanship gives the exhibition a physicality that confronts the viewer and inspires questions about the usefulness of his copies and their absent originals.



Bakker explained in a 2014 lecture that throughout history, artists have made representational sculptures and images of things to generate an understanding of the real world, yet "we don't get closer to the real if we make the artifice more believable; though perhaps we can get closer to

the real when we become acutely aware of the distance between the artifice and us and the real.”³ Indeed, the roughness of Bakker’s copies and their inability to function illuminates the complexities of the human-subject/inanimate-object relationship. In cultural theorist Bill Brown’s 2001 essay *Thing Theory*, he states that “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested.”⁴ When Bakker’s simulated books fail to perform as expected, the viewer instantly becomes aware of their qualities: what makes them appear like books, why they cannot be books, how the books were made, how the books are used, who can own the books, etc. Unlike passive objects that simply work for us, Bakker’s book sculptures act on us, forcing us to acknowledge the essential traits and trajectories of the originals and the rough copies.

The same concept appears throughout Bakker’s ongoing *Untitled Projects* series. Bakker inserts roughly-hewn and hand-painted wooden replicas of mass-produced objects into common commercial channels, where they stutter and provoke. By their very nature as imperfect, non-functioning stand-ins for the real, Bakker’s sculptures highlight their referent’s relationship with humans as well as their own physicality. Whether in gallery installations or specific consumer contexts, his sculptures make visible and critique the relationships between people, places, and things. In 1997, he sculpted everyday home objects that he offered for sale in his front yard after advertising a garage sale with fliers

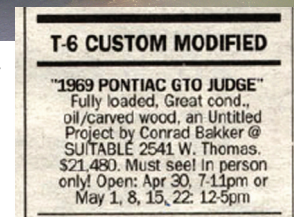
³ Conrad Bakker Artist Lecture, March 13, 2014. Art + Design Department Lecture Series. Columbia College, Chicago, IL. <http://vimeo.com/89908955>



Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Garage Sale*, 1997. Installation view from artist’s front yard, Grand Rapids, MI.



Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Muscle Car [1969 Pontiac GTI Judge]*, 2004. ¾-scale, oil paint on carved wood. Installation view Suitable Gallery, Chicago and classified ad.



⁴ Since the end of the twentieth century, the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies has questioned the traditional, human-centric study of how people make things by considering instead how things influence people, how they mediate social relationships, and how they can be read as having their own subjectivity. “The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.” Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001), pp. 1-22.



Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Market [Geneva]*, 2006. Installation view from the Plaine de Plainpalais open-air flea market in Geneva, Switzerland.

posted throughout his neighborhood. In 2000, Bakker displayed and sold painted wooden replicas of gadgets like binoculars and nose hair trimmers through his own mail-order catalogue. In 2004, he listed his 3/4-scale model of the 1969 Pontiac GTO Judge muscle car in newspaper classified ads and displayed the sculpture in a garage gallery before it ultimately ended up in the collection of the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas. In 2006, he hawked his “knockoff” Rolex watches in a vendor booth at an open-air flea market in Geneva. In 2012, Bakker offered his sculptures of vintage bottles of maple syrup in exchange for real bottles of maple syrup brought by visitors to a gallery in Burlington, VT. Bakker extends the imitation beyond object mimicry into display modes and transaction formats, but the inability of his sculptures to smoothly navigate the time, space, habits, and economic cycles of their original referents leads to a more complete understanding of the differences between the real and the copy and us.

For *Untitled Project: Robert Smithson’s Library and Book Club*, Bakker will distribute a second replica of the library to individual Book Club members around the world. One set of the simulated books



Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Seasonal Economies [Maple Syrup/Barter][1 Quart]*, 2012. Oil paint on carved wood + bartered real maple syrup.

will live together, eventually representing the complete library. Images of each of these books will be uploaded and catalogued on the artist’s website.⁵ Visitors to the website can join the *Robert Smithson Book Club* by purchasing one book sculpture for just \$100. Bakker will then remake the selected book and ship the second copy to the new member. In return, the member must upload a photograph of the book in their hands to Bakker’s website.

The structure of the *Library and Book Club* exchange mirrors Smithson’s dialectic model of site/non-site. In the late 1960s, Smithson explored industrial sites collecting materials like rocks, earth, maps, and photographs. He later contained and displayed these materials in sculptural installations that he referred to as non-sites. Though abstract and discrete, the materials of the non-site signify the original site, making the qualities of the site apparent to the viewer. In this case, Bakker’s complete set of books could be considered the site and the individual books and their photographic records the non-sites, each signifying the larger collection. The library on display, in turn, represents the expanding network of Book Club

⁵ www.untitledprojects.com/robertsmithsonlibraryandbookclub

members just as Smithson's industrial sites reflect his non-site sculptures as well.

Robert Smithson and Personal Libraries

Robert Smithson was a pioneer of earthworks and a strong, critical voice in the New York art world of the late sixties and early seventies. His short but prolific career marked contemporary art's shift from modernism to postmodernism, from medium-centric to idea-based art, from the passive to active spectator, and from the institutional white cube to a radically expanded concept of venue. As Cornelia Butler notes in her essay *A Lurid Presence: Smithson's Legacy and Post-Studio Art*, it is widely recognized that "no other postwar American artist can be said to be as influential as Robert Smithson...

Smithson's name, face, and the images of his iconic earthworks are seemingly everywhere, and his mythic persona looms large in graduate art seminars across the globe."⁶ Considering Smithson's heavy impression on contemporary art, it would be hard to find an artist today who is not responding, consciously or unconsciously, to Smithson's legacy. Bakker shares Smithson's commitment to materiality. Even though Smithson was an early champion of language's inextricable ties with art, and he enlisted the use of new ephemeral materials like video and photographic documentation, he was adamant about art's physicality:

"I think that Conceptual art which depends completely on written data is only half the story; it only deals with the mind and it has to deal with the material too...I'm for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is

there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter."⁷

Smithson's personal library is a bit of a legend. Hidden away in the offsite storage of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art,

the content is not very accessible, but a catalogue compiled shortly after Smithson's death in 1973 gives the collection conceptual form. The cataloguer's section headings are still used today: Anthropology and Archaeology; Art and Aesthetics; Criticism; Fiction; History, Biography, Politics, and Economics; Linguistics; Philosophy; Psychology; Religion; Science; Travel Books and Geography;

Magazines; and Records.⁸ As a high school student, Smithson studied in the evenings at the Art Students League of New York and took classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Shortly thereafter, he worked at the Eighth Street Bookshop in Greenwich Village. Outside of those experiences, he was a self-educated artist, but as his writings, artworks,



⁶ Butler, Cornelia. "A Lurid Presence: Smithson's Legacy and Post-Studio Art." *Robert Smithson*, exhibition catalogue. Eds. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles / University of California Press, 2004. p. 225.

⁷ Robert Smithson, in "Fragments of an interview with P.A. Norvell, April 1969" in Lippard, Lucy R. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...* New York: Praeger, 1973. p. 89.

⁸ For the full catalogue of Smithson's library, see Tatransky, Valentin. "Catalogue of Robert Smithson's Library: Books, Magazines, and Records." *Robert Smithson*, exhibition catalogue. Eds. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles / University of California Press, 2004. pp. 249-263.

Above | Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Robert Smithson's Library and Book Club* [The Gods of Mexico], 2014. Oil paint on carved wood.

and library attest, he was truly intellectual and extremely well informed.

As if affected by the entropic forces that intrigued Smithson, the various books, journals, and records contained in his library mix and form a homogenous mass: the private collection. Unlike public libraries that represent a democracy of knowledge, private libraries have long stood for the intellectual and social status of their owners. Outside the library, each book has its own meaning, yet together, and in relation to their owner, a new significance is born. After studying Smithson's library catalogue, art historian Alexander Alberro wrote that "the personal library at once erases and constructs meaning through a process of decontextualization and reconfiguration."⁹ According to the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who was himself a voracious collector of books, a collector's relationship to his books does not emphasize their functional value but instead values "them as the scene, the stage, of [his] fate."¹⁰ Philosopher Jean Baudrillard went as far as to say that collected objects are abstracted from their function and cannot reject the collector's narcissistic projection, "for what you really collect is always yourself."¹¹

This loss of functionality that Benjamin and Baurillard mention mirrors Bakker's interest in "things" as objects that resist their duties. If individual objects lose their meaning within a personal collection, Bakker's wooden version of Smithson's library actually functions similarly to the original. His physical yet unreadable library portrays Smithson more vividly than a catalogue listing, which cannot present the volume of the books or their cover images. The materiality of the library gives it symbolic power. If the book, with its pages bound together by a cover and spine, is an archetypal symbol of knowledge, then owned and displayed books project the wisdom,

knowledge, and power of their owner. Imagine the quintessential, imposing image of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves behind a large desk with a leather chair. The content of the individual books need never enter the equation.

The inference that Smithson read all of the books in his collection creates an impressive image of the artist. But, as Benjamin points out, it is "the oldest thing in the world" to have unread books in a personal library.¹² Speaking about his own books that he has not yet read, Conrad Bakker admits, "There is some guilt about not reading them, but the books still talk about my desire to be affiliated with them."¹³ It is likely that some of the books in the Smithson archive contain quantifiable evidence that Smithson read them. We also have statements from the artist and his close friends regarding influential books. But, for the majority of the collection, there is no way to identify how deeply he read—or even if he read—each of the books. Instead, we can assume that he read some, wanted to read others, and perhaps received a few as gifts that were less interesting to the artist, each representing a memory of acquisition or a personal story that added significance to the collector regardless of their content. To the outsider, these unknowable possibilities lend equal weight to the individual books, with their unifying and most significant quality being that they were owned by Smithson.

⁹ Alberro, Alexander. "The Catalogue of Robert Smithson's Library." *Robert Smithson*, exhibition catalogue. Eds. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles / University of California Press, 2004. pp. 245-248.

¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1978. p. 68.

¹¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*, first published as *Le système des objets*, 1968. Translated by James Benedict. Verso: London, 1996.

¹² Benjamin, 62.

¹³ *Art World Magazine*. Issue 8, Dec 2008 / Jan 2009. p. 116.



Conrad Bakker. *Untitled Project: Librairie* [Geneva], 2010. Oil paint on carved wood. Installation view Galerie Analix Forever, Geneva, Switzerland.

Libraries and books function as symbols, regardless of their textual content. Just a title or an author can generate significant meaning. For this reason, Bakker continues to revisit the book as form.

“Books have always been one of the things that I’ve made because they function as natural containers of content,” he says. “A book has this ideology or set of ideas inside, but it’s still an object. I was interested in how a book could represent a set of ideas even when you couldn’t open it. Coffee table books signal something more than their content. They say something about the owner, they say something about the room.”¹⁴ Bakker’s sculptures signify the books they represent in a limited way, signifying only what each viewer knows about the owner and the book’s subject matter or what the viewer can interpret from the book’s painted cover. In turn, these generalizations add to the viewer’s picture of the library’s owner.

Thus, we do not see the “thingness” of such objects, but instead, we interpret objects passively according to how they work for us or what they symbolically tell us about culture. But, even though humans encode objects with significance, it is an



Robert McElroy. Photo of Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store*, 1961. Photo © Estate of Robert R. McElroy/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

object’s evolving circulation within networks of production, distribution, consumption, and exhibition that illuminates its social relationship with humans.¹⁵ Bakker attempts to bring these systems and relationships to the foreground with his objects. In this respect, Bakker continues the legacy of Pop art more so than that of the dematerialized conceptual art object.

Pop art, Capitalism, and Resistance

In part, Conceptual art formed out of a reaction against the commodification of art. Artists attempted to distance themselves from the capitalist system by subverting the museum and the art market. Pop art, which emerged slightly before but overlapped with the origins of Conceptual art, embraced the capitalist system, working within it to call attention to its commercial strategies and to question perceived value differences between high and low culture.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Appadurai, Arjun. “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value.” *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*. Ed. Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 5.

Pop art inspired an analysis of the power of mass media images within the modern consumer society. Like Bakker's sculptural copies, Andy Warhol's reproductions of brand name products asserted that images of things are just as powerful—perhaps even more potent—than the things themselves.

Pop artist Claes Oldenburg's project *The Store* could be considered an early precursor to Bakker's *Untitled Projects*. In a rented space at 107 East 2nd Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Oldenburg opened a store for two months in 1961. In the back half, he wrapped plaster-soaked canvas over chicken wire and painted it brightly to mimic commonplace objects. The objects, inspired by the merchandise sold in nearby stores, ranged from oranges to cigarettes to hats to hamburgers. In the front of the space, he positioned the objects to emulate a low-end market and sold his sculptures starting at \$21.79 and up to \$899.95.¹⁶ Oldenburg's objects barely resembled their mass-produced counterparts, and, at the time, they did not appear as fine art. Oldenburg said, "I want the object to have its own existence."¹⁷

With Oldenburg's *The Store*, as with Bakker's *Untitled Projects*, the sale of mass-produced consumer products is conflated with the sale of handmade art objects. Both projects beg the question: how does cultural and social context play a role in the creation of value? The exchange value of Bakker's objects vacillates from the commercial value of their original referent to barter to art market prices to free to somewhere in between. As Bakker says, his "sculptures lack the full functionality of their prototypes but are introduced into the marketplace via methods that essentially defeat their status as high art commodities."¹⁸ He assigns prices so specifically, according to the structures and limitations of each project and exhibition format, that viewers can hardly avoid

questioning their own preconceived notions about value. In our society, what determines the value of mass-produced and fine art objects? Is it intended function? Perceived consumer needs? Personal symbolic projections?

In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher uses the term "capitalist realism" to describe the globally accepted concept that capitalism is now perceived as the only possible political economic system. He questions whether there is even room to envision alternative models since this totalitarian system permeates all aspects of culture and every individual, limiting our imagination and structuring our very understanding of the possible. Capitalist realism yields disillusionment and inaction which, according to Fisher, should be challenged by identifying and teasing out its tensions and contradictions. Fisher specifically calls on artists and media professionals to take risks and produce intellectually demanding work to critique the system and educate the public.¹⁹

Conrad Bakker is doing just that. He situates his art to question how personal affections drive consumption and how artistic practice is valued and functions within our capitalist society. He makes things that resist, things that bump and push their way through the system, setting off alarms and pointing out inconsistencies along the way.

Whitney Tassie **Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**

¹⁶ Buskirk, Martha. *Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art between Museum and Marketplace*. New York: Continuum Press, 2012. p. 210.

¹⁷ Claes Oldenburg statement in McDevitt, Jan. "The Object: Still Life," *Craft Horizons*. September 25, 1965. p. 31.

¹⁸ Clutter, Tyrus. "Material Presence: The Sacramental in Art," *SEEN Journal*. Volume IX, 2009. pp. 2-5.

¹⁹ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books: Ropley, Hampshire, 2009.

Conrad Bakker (Canadian, born 1970, lives Urbana, IL) received his BFA from Calvin College and his MFA from Washington University in St. Louis. He has exhibited his work nationally and internationally at Tate Modern in London, Galerie Analix Forever in Geneva, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Renaissance Society in Chicago, Fargfabriken Center for Contemporary Art and Architecture in Stockholm, The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, NY, The Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, The Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Des Moines Art Center, among other venues. His work has been reviewed in *Art World Magazine*, *ArtUS*, *Art Papers*, *UOVO*, *The New York Times*, *Contemporary*, *Flash Art*, *Art Forum*, *Sculpture*, *Dwell*, and *ReadyMade* magazines. Bakker is a recipient of a Creative Capital Foundation project grant and an Illinois Arts Council Grant. He is currently an Associate Professor of Studio Art and the Assistant Director of Graduate Studies for the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign.

salt 10: Conrad Bakker is the tenth installment of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' ongoing series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

The *salt* exhibition series is sponsored in part by the UMFA Friends of Contemporary Art (FoCA).

Find more information on the *salt* series online here: umfa.utah.edu/salt



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