

# YOU'VE BEEN SERVED

## **No denouement**

We can think of an exhibition space as an inescapable theatre where the artist forces the beholder both to look and to determine what they look at. It's understandable, then, that it's tempting to deliver a clear and convincing message, a coherent expression that helps establish the artist as autonomous. This might explain contemporary art that can be described as striking, well composed, eloquent and whole. Let's call them excellent artistic practices. While sharing traits with corporate architecture, excellent art is made for a life in a professionalized public sphere: Ideal for circulating among information and money, but perhaps not so ideal for human beings. As a human I'm part corporate architecture and part garbage.

For that reason, I'm inclined to favor art that can juggle the complexity of both conviction and deception, a simultaneous suggestion and retraction of content. This composite appearance reflects the more intimate aspects of my own life, such as the everlasting conflict between the need for predictable and responsible behaviour versus erratic and nonsensical thoughts and feelings that lead nowhere.

In recent years, Linda Lerseth has developed a collage-like sculptural practice characterized by a fine balance between elements of careful, planned procedures and decisions that appear to actively sabotage order. These counterproductive decisions consist of interrupting established methods of manufacturing, and forcing together representational elements which seem to repulse one another. Through her relentless commitment to communicate a spontaneous presence, Lerseth has become an artist who can be relied on for a consistent delivery of collapsed messages and fresh deception.

Lerseth does this through a layered set of procedures, where one step provides the groundwork for another. Even though it's a construct to talk about a beginning and an end in an ongoing process where the motion of influence and motivation is more circular than linear, it's helpful in order to single out her course of action.

Let's start off by introducing the reader to the library from hell: items intentionally stored in an unsystematic manner. I would say all artists work with found material in one way or another, but the way we organize it divides us. The excellent artist, on their quest for coherence, has an inclination to order their material chronologically, by motif, subject or style. A more ambiguous approach is to actively refrain from systematization altogether and trust in the fact that it's all connected through what motivated the collecting in the first place. The manner of how it was found will determine how it will be kept. In Lerseth's case, her collecting is defined by an interaction with the objects, the moment of first encounter where the thing claims her attention.

Lerseth's archiving consists of transforming the found object into a slip-cast mould that can be used over and over again. This method comprises first of the creation of a negative silicone mould, then a positive cast in wax, then yet another negative cast in plaster, which will serve as the slip-cast mould. This is then labeled and kept in the aforementioned librarian nightmare. The methodical sequence of the library facilitates another essential ingredient in Lerseth's work: How to achieve the appearance of non-representation in figurative sculpture.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg became famous for his *combines*. The *combine* can be described as a sculptural tableau made out of trash and found objects collaged together by juxtaposition, overlapping and overpainting. While leaning on Rauschenberg's approach, Lerseth has taken the methodology to a new level of abstraction by taking an interest in the representation of the found object, and not only using the found object itself. Where Rauschenberg was limited to the physical material he collected, Lerseth has given herself new artistic opportunities by adding a layer through the process of casting the found material. Repurposed trash in art can often transmit a certain nostalgia for lost objects and often reeks of moralizing sentiments, pointing fingers at insufficient waste management. But the act of casting disposed objects, on the other hand, sits eerily between a death mask and a reversal to its industrial mode of production.

For me, the beholder, the laborious element of craft represents a safe haven in the course of interpreting Lerseth's work. Ceramic surfaces, stained with gray and turquoise glazes, along with intricate details from the casting process, turn into lifebuoys for my brain when the exposure to nonsensical combinations of objects and symbols threatens to pull it under. The craft also facilitates the deception that is at work in Lerseth's practice. The skillful use of

materials and colours brings me in, turns on my curiosity and sense of wonder. But it leaves me with nothing, apart from the exhilaration of having a go at the humanly unsolvable sudoku. It doesn't take me anywhere but on a journey in my own head, perhaps forming some new connections and thinking some new thoughts.

### **Diet nonsense**

When looking, and in order to get an overview of a situation, my eyes jump and move constantly and involuntarily in order to create 3-dimensional maps of the surroundings. This automatic visual mapping is called *saccade*, and my eyes do this partly because the fovea, the central part of the retina that provides me with high resolution images, is limited to 1-2 degrees of vision.

Involuntary eye movement is famously taken advantage of in advertising. It's known for making itself visible wherever there are people, whether it's on the highway or in my digital feed. It uses a well known strategy of appeal with a twist, for example a persuading image that—once it has me pulled in—reveals an unexpected turn. This twist is intended to be just shocking enough to turn on my curiosity, so that I will process what the ad is actually about. This achieves two things: first, pleasure is released when I'm in the process of solving a riddle. And second, the message, once resolved, is stored in my long term memory. What started out as an involuntary exposure, ends up with associating the message, product and brand with a positive experience.

The twist in advertisement, which in the context of this text I would like to call diet nonsense, is instrumental to selling the product. It's diet because it can not be unacceptable to the target group, and can only be a tiny bit silly. Many creatives will recognize that they allow the inclusion of nonsense in the initial stages of developing a new project. It's used instrumentally to facilitate the shaping of new ideas, popularly known as holding a brainstorming during product development. Anyone who has been part of a brainstorming knows that it's fun. It's good for team building and creating a trustful environment, where no suggestions or questions are too stupid. But the window of free association is open for a short time before the next stages of progression follows. Persistent reintroduction of new ideas in the later stages of production will probably cost you your job.

Where nonsense catches altitude and becomes radical is therefore when it remains as a residue to a large degree in an end result, in the finished product. In order to achieve that,

one has to remain in that unresolved state by not pursuing a conclusion through chiseling off the incompatible pieces. As an artist, whether or not one is able to endure unresolved expressions depends on the ability to remain vulnerable when the work goes public. Not everyone can deal with being associated with idle messages and the representation of conflict through contradicting elements.

As an artist then, what is the meaning of working with this surplus of incongruity? It reflects what is in all of us, all the time. We patch and mend and mediate so that we come across as individuals with constant and coherent interests, well knowing that we are anything but.

### **Protest and celebration**

Here's a free pass to a run far down the rabbit hole: Go online and search for "hobby horse". Hobby horse first and foremost refers to a child's toy, a wooden stick with the model of a horse head attached to one end. This archaic toy goes back centuries—probably millennia even—as long as humans have domesticated horses. Hobby horse's second meaning *preoccupation or favourite topic*—the adult's toy horse to play with, so to speak—has given origin to the word *hobby*. The double entendre of *hobby horse* was adopted in many languages across Europe in the 18th century as a direct result of the translation and distribution of the novel *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. The concept of a hobby, which there is no point to apart from the fun of it, is firmly separated from work ethics. A hobby then, has the capacity to interrupt productivity, and intentionally breaking the division of pastime and work hours can quickly turn into a protest. As it happens, the French word for hobby horse, *dada*, is said to be the origin of the name for the artistic movement that surfaced in Zurich around 1916.

The backdrop for Dadaism was the collective devastation of World War I. The Dada movement became a clear expression of disbelief in the Western community, spearheaded by politicians who were blindsided by their firm belief in technology, progress and human agency. Dadaism's scornful artistic approach, which was set in motion by scepticism in the wake of disappointment, created a sharp contrast to established strategies of art-making.

For the Dadaists, art was not to be limited by certain expectations set by political rhetoric at the time, which was mostly concerned with keeping up appearances and declaring the war as a noble cause. The flow of deceptive and disempowering propaganda drove the only sensible artistic response: gestures mocking the common ideas and concepts which were

justifying the ever growing disaster that was unfolding. The contemptuous methods of the dadaists included using chance as a compositional strategy, a radical way of disengaging subjective decisions. Dada became a protest movement in the sense that it disrupted expectations of beauty, logic and linear narratives. But it could simultaneously be described as a celebration in the way that it offered a platform for humans to be relaxed and amused.

Clinging to a polarized understanding of art as either rational or irrational denies a nuanced look at the complexity and importance of playful expressions that take incoherence as a starting point. Ridding art of its logic also means stripping it of its instrumentality. This is more an action of setting it free, of releasing energy, and reflecting a wider spectrum of what it's like to be human in a state of crisis. Logic does not serve me well when I struggle.

Linda Lerseth has developed an art practice that carefully prepares the willing crowd for the joy of processing. But in order to access the thrill of everlasting interpretation she offers, there are a few preconditions that need to be in place. First out, a capacity to take pleasure in a collapse in communication will come in handy. In other words, a high tolerance for inefficiency and the tendency to dwell in it. Actually, a slight masochistic delight in being interrupted will take you a long way. If you, on top of that, consider yourself as both pessimistic and optimistic, while being sympathetic to rash decisions, you're all set.

*This text was originally intended for Linda Lerseth's show at Heerz Tooya in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, but due to Covid-19 travel restrictions her show was postponed and rescheduled for Podium, another artist-run space located in Oslo, Norway. During the spring of 2020, I was granted full access to her process through a series of conversations and studio visits.*