LEFT BEHIND

Chris Sollars

Jank Edition

INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS SOLLARS

by Jennifer González

Jennifer González: Let's talk about the multiple historical references in the work to start with. Several of the works, for example, are reminiscent of the condensation or displacement in Surrealist sculptures, like the work of Salvador Dali or Meret Oppenhiem, while others remind us of the assemblage and junk sculpture movement in the sixties. And then there are these soft sculptures that remind us of Claus Oldenburg and Robert Morris. Can you talk about the historical references you're making and what kind of conversation this work is having with sculpture in the past?

Chris Sollars: When I'm considering form and considering sculpture I am thinking across the century and across movements. It's like a running memory of sculptures that I haven't always seen in person. I filed them away in my memory bag so to speak, as forms. I agree the work has a certain level of surrealism, say the Meret Oppenheim, with the collision of two different forms or materials that come together. And I do think about that in terms of what materials or objects or dissimilar things can be integrated together. There is a tradition of the Dadaists, Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, or even what Rauschenberg ends up doing with picking up not just store bought ready-mades, but the junk off the street out of necessity, to then make sculpture with it.

JG: Obviously people like assemblage sculptors from the 1950s, the California movement and Keinholz and other folks who are working with that remainder culture.

CS: Yeah, like Bruce Conner assemblage works too.

JG: Right. Those were some of the other people that came to mind as I was looking at the work. As an art historian I go to my references when I look at things. I tend to wonder: was he thinking about Conner when he was doing that, or was he thinking about Keinholz or Oldenberg? Those were precedents that were resonating for me. In addition to other forms of street art or social practice in the city landscape, the work resonates with a history of sculpture.

If you're knowledgeable about sculpture and the history of modern sculpture then you start to see these playful references. It's not only a question of materials, but you have this one that looks kind of like Joseph Beuys with his little cane sticking out of his blanket, which is also potentially a reference to his idea of social sculpture and performance.

CS: From *I like America, and America Likes Me.*

JG: I don't know if you were thinking of that work from *I Like America and America Likes Me* explicitly?

CS: I couldn't resist. Objects trigger both function and art historical associations for me. "There is no felt blanket but here is a purple futon; the futon needs form I'll prop it up with this 2"x 4" . Wait, that's funny, that looks like hunched over Beuys. As I am walking the street that database of works in my head from over the years is coming out especially as I am making sculptures.

JG: I felt that on the one hand there was a kind of subtle undercurrent of this history of sculpture going on in the work, but on the other hand as I was just saying, an important difference is the work is not designed for an art space, it's not designed only for a gallery audience.

CS: I think that the agenda, if there is one, is to make these sculptures in public space and to have them challenge the notion of what I see contemporary sculpture represented as in contemporary art spaces and in the media.

JG: This is important, the relation to urban space. One of the main differences from the artists I just cited is that they were working for, or making work for, gallery spaces not the street. In fact the anti-gallery look of your current work insists on a sort of urbanity of objects abandoned in a city landscape, bound in a city landscape, photographed in a city landscape, posed in that landscape. And I was thinking that there are some radical differences and departure from that earlier sculpture tradition.

The question that I wanted to follow up with was: What do you consider to be the ecological politics of this work? And by ecological, I am speaking broadly about social systems, political systems, economic systems, as well as natural systems. So on the one hand there's a kind of recycling element to it, it's about materials but then there's this whole other set of concerns that has to do with the eco-politics of the city, so I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

CS: It's funny to have this conversation about Beuys, leading into this idea about ecology. I find that amusing. And from our conversations in the past with say Hans Haacke moving from ecological systems, or, closed systems that are in and of themselves, the piece. I also always think about an agent or person that's needed to start that system.

Such as plugging in the fan, or adding the water to the cube, and how we enter into this system. I think it goes back to those early pieces I was making in the nineties. I would insert myself into public space. And I would also study a certain system, or become aware of the system after I've become an agent within the system too. So for example, in the city your neighbors put stuff on the street, people abandon stuff on the street. It's like a mini economy where you can go and scrounge and see what's there and pick up stuff and take it home or throw it in your truck, if it's not locked down, depending on the degree of cleanliness. The object is in between being something that's left for somebody, versus just put out as trash. I go from object to object to figure out what should go together. But I'm also thinking about what the visual background is, or where the piece should be situated. Is it in the middle of the sidewalk? Is it on the edge of the street? What makes sense formally? Or as an obstacle in space? I like that physical encounter; maybe you have to move around it, maybe the background or the light at that point of day is a certain way so there is a play between light and shadow over the sculpture too. I'm aware, though, that certain days are not as good for going out because of the street cleaning crews. So I'm becoming aware of the city's street maintenance crews that come pick up junk. It varies from time to time. Maybe I'm just grabbing something a day before something gets picked up, or I've moved it out of the street cleaning stuff so then it's simply delayed in terms of throwing it away again.

JG: That's a great description of some of your process. There's this whole ecology of the street sweepers and these other people that also pick up stuff off the street that you're interfacing with.

CS: And I guess the other thing I was going to say or mention was that there's a tradition of making work with used or found material and then transforming it, as a delay of its final result as waste. But my

gesture again has been one of temporary art versus permanence. It's not like a piece that has been created then, you know, now it's this great form that someone can buy for several thousands of dollars. It doesn't exist in that capacity, it's more a temporary moment for the viewer in public space instead of for another audience.

JG: On the one hand there's the street audience that encounters the work. I want to talk more about that in a minute. But, I also want to talk about the audience that encounters the work via the photographic documentation, in a gallery or print form. On the one hand the photographs have the sort of everyday, almost banal quality to them, and yet on the other hand they are also clearly formally thought out, the angle is very thought out. The composition is very precise. The lighting is carefully considered. So again, along historical lines this evokes the work of sculptors and photographers like Richard Long or Andy Goldsworthy, though they are very different. They transform their environment and then take pictures of the result, and similarly, the work is ephemeral, it's not about creating a permanent sellable object. I wanted to ask you if you could say more about the world of photography, as a medium in the work. Do you consider the photograph to be primarily documentary, recording an ephemeral action, or does it have its own aesthetic role as a conceptual object as well? It seems to me that there's a double moment for the work: the street encounter, then the photograph.

CS: The photographs are both documents of sculpture and making work for the camera. The photograph starts as a way to document my private practice. So, even though the practice is in a public space I view it as something that is very personal or private within that space. I'm allowing myself to be in my own head, to not have conversations with the people that are passing by. It's a way in which I communicate with the physical object within the space itself or the photo.

I said at the beginning that a lot of the historical sculptures you referenced I may or may not have seen in person. There's a dependence of my introduction to a lot of art as slideshow, as photography or photography in books. It's a mediated experience that I have with quite a few works. Even if I have seen it in person, a lot of the works I have seen are in a mediated circumstance where I'm not allowed to touch the sculpture. It's not in the space where it existed with its original architectural environment. A part of the object may now be missing, like the winged Nike figure at the Louvre. As you were talking about those photographers that are sculptors or approaching sculpture from the angle of photography, I immediately thought of the Brancusi portraits of himself and the moving of objects around his studio. Fishcli and Weiss' *Equilibres* balanced sculptures that exist for a brief moment and documented with photographs. I also think about even Man Ray's sculptures with *Object To Be Destroyed*. It did get destroyed, it's documented as a photo but there's an idea of impermanence that surrounds the sculpture too that is also dependent on photography. Even, say, Duchamp's work is more seen as photographs as a way to create more of a media spectacle around it. Does that start to answer the question?

JG: Following along those lines a little bit further. What is your desire for the future of the work as it circulates? In other words, it obviously has its own life as a kind of slide show in a gallery space. I wonder, when you think about the future life of this work, do you see it primarily in either an installation mode where it's presented as a slide show or do you see these as one-off images that someone might want to put up on their wall? Again, I know you're not interested in selling the work per se, but do you feel like these are stand alone images or that they really require each other as a group to make sense?

CS: You know I think they make sense independently but I think

some are not as strong as others. I think about how works can stand up independently of the whole, but also how they're integral to the group. I don't know if that goes back to some other idea of the individual and the social but I think it's just part of my practice. We could view this image on its own, but it can also be a willing, or an integral component of the group itself.

The slide show in the gallery space is more for the presentation of the whole project. I think as a projection, versus a physical object in a frame, the images emphasize the impermanence of the sculptures themselves. I think if they were ever shown as a group again, it would have to be as a slideshow rather than presented individually, as photographs.

JG: Some of the individual pieces have a figural, animal or insect quality. Can you say more about how your work transforms the inanimate to the animate and how this re-populates the city, or it maybe also serves as a portrait of the city? Tell me about the decisions you make to animate objects.

CS: I was always interested in sculpture being active, not passive. So, I think a lot of what you're seeing that references the body, for example, also are the materials that people discard of themselves or from their person, like the broom or jugs, like milk cartons and things like that. There are always handles on things or a shirt that references somebody. Even chairs reference the body specifically. A lot of those objects are of a certain scale that reference the figure or figuration, or abstraction of a figure. I make those in relation to my own body in space.

JG: There are some that look like a reclining figure, where you use a found shoe for the—

CS: —or a comforter then the bucket and the cut out of a face or something?

JG: Exactly. You shoot it at an angle so that the perspective allows us to read it as a figure. If you shot it at a different angle, we might not necessarily read it immediately as a figure. If we came at it from a different direction on the street, it might not read the same way. This is what I meant about the importance of the photographic documentation of the piece as well.

CS: The right angle.

JG: The right angle, the perspective of the artist. The umbrella that looks like it is turned into a spider—objects that we think of as inanimate are thus animated. The figural works become personifications and almost a kind of parallel population. Not all the pieces are figural, of course. There are many pieces that are pure abstractions or some that are color studies like the green carpet that hangs over a chair in front of a similar green paint on the wall. It's almost like a color study rather than anything else. So, I'm not saying all of them are figural. I was just thinking an urban landscape and how do these more animated objects that look like figures or animals and so forth, change our relationship to the city as well as to the objects themselves?

CS: I think if an object is stripped to a skeletal structure it does that. I think if something's always abstract then there's less of an entry for viewers, sometimes. You know if something looks like a color study, or is more formal and beautiful I'm maybe thinking about photography and painting. A lot of early two-dimensional works I was making, prior to making works on the street, were some gradation of background or texture of walls I was seeing in and around the city or

dilapidated buildings. Those are the things that ended up becoming the background of these sculptures or what I look for as backgrounds for certain sculptures.

When it comes back around to Christmas, the trees always come back too, (except for one I found in April). The tree has a certain scale and that starts to become anthropomorphic. I guess this idea of something becoming anthropomorphic from an inanimate object is similar to the trash performances I have directed, where people are hidden or dressed like a pile of garbage that then become animated. In that work there is this idea of something that seems inanimate and passive, but actually is very animate in terms of its destination from home to landfill. There's always something working around it or in terms of the system that it comes from, or where it might be going. That's where the animate comes in, and why I animate form at times.

JG: That's a great answer. You call the series *Left Behind*, can you explain why you chose this title?

CS: I was trying to figure out two words that might describe the action of leaving these sculptures on the street. They are not disassembled, they are not taken with me. It reminds me of a national park with signs that state: "take photos, leave nothing but tracks." There's an idea of being fluid; going in and out of these spaces without too much destruction. And I also think about the "left behind" Christian book series where there's a group of non-Christian people that are left behind on the planet by themselves. I think there's a little jab at that ideology, at the same time. Or a reference to that.

JG: It also seems you are working with objects that are themselves left behind, so there's that layer too, this sort of double step in the process to the work. I was going to ask you more about the process itself. You mention a kind of scrounging around and scoping out different

streets and different neighborhoods. Sometimes you start with a different background and then you try to figure out what might look good in front of it, and sometimes you start with the object and then you try to find the right place to put it. I imagine for example that some sculptures take seven minutes and some of them take hours, potentially. How many times a week do you manage to do one? How does this work take up time in your life?

CS: It started because in 2009 I had been working on another project for four years, the film *C Red Blue J*. I wanted to return to sculpture and I also wanted to return to just a playful process. Not having a physical studio space other than my apartment to work in I'd thought I would start taking these walks to get ideas and also maybe try to make something. Through taking walks I would take several hours walking the neighborhood, meandering and really taking my time and not worrying about trying to be somewhere.

Certain objects don't make a good sculpture in public space because of their scale. I had to start looking for objects that had a certain scale. They can be dirty objects but they have to have a certain large-scale size. If it's fabric it can be draped or it can be rolled. Futons can be rolled or laid. Cardboard is difficult because cardboard comes in sheets and becomes easily flattened unless its structure changes; it doesn't hold form well.

I bring a pocket knife if something needs to get stuffed or ripped or cut into. I just use what I have with me to insert something into something else or poke a chair through an already ripped or destroyed box spring. To attach or adhere things I might tie stuff with a shirt that's lying on top of something else; things are attached in different ways. But the objects that end up in the sculpture are mainly the ones that are necessary to hold the form. I like to view the objects or materials with everything in play, without a hidden structure. Even

though something might be propping it up everything is a part of the structure and the form. I think the backgrounds come from thinking about the materials: what are the materials? what are the colors? formally where does this want to be? where is the light (because the afternoon light is disappearing)? where can I put this in the light instead of the shadow? It's not like I see a wall and ask "What can go there?" It's more that the form is created or is being thought about and I need a space for that form to exist.

JG: So, I want to comment on two things. One is, I think many people are curious when they see something like this and they see you working on the street, You mentioned yourself you don't really talk to people that are passing by; it's really sort of meditative, a personal project for you and it's not about interacting with other people. Inevitably people must come up to you and talk to you about the project or ask questions. Or, maybe they want the stuff or…

CS: Or they want me to move it.

JG: I just wondered if you can give any anecdotes about what it is like to do this kind of work. What are the working conditions of this kind of work?

CS: I think in previous works I have done on the street I am usually in a performance role. I might be less likely to talk, and if I do talk I describe the action that I am doing. I'm washing trash, or in this case I'm making sculpture. This project is more direct: I make it clear that I am actually making something, versus merely performing an activity in the space. I have had people want me to remove things or move things, or think that I should not be touching the objects because they put them there, although they are objects that exist in public space. Even if it's on the edge of their sidewalk it is still something that they maybe don't want to have to rearrange later, or maybe they

called a truck to pick it up in the afternoon, or something like that.
JG: No one has tried to get involved with or ruin what you're working on while you're working on it?

CS: No, no one has come over and kicked it as I made it. I have seen people sit on things I've made afterwards. After I made the Joseph Beuys piece you mentioned earlier a group, possibly of young Christians, came out of a house and circled that futon and prayed around it, holding hands.

JG: (laughs) Oh yes, I saw the picture, I remember that picture.

CS: So there are strange interactions. Sometimes there is a smile, sometimes there's a laugh but if I'm digging in the trash and I'm not a grubby person…I don't think people want to talk to me. (laughs) They keep a distance because I'm handling things they don't want to be handling.

JG: Right. It's like a practice of the untouchables to work in the dirt, right? There is real work in trash and trash heaps that takes place among the poorest classes globally. There's a critical relationship you have with that class status by temporarily taking it on. In the US all of that salvaging labor is supposed to happen without us noticing it or seeing it. There is something mildly disturbing for the passerby when they have to witness someone touching trash, you know? This was Meirle Laderman Ukeles point back in the 1980s with her *Touch Sanitation* performance piece, when she shook the hand of all the New York City sanitation workers. In our culture, the people who touch trash aren't supposed to be touching people too.

I have another question which is less about practice and more about form again. When I first saw the series of images I laughed because I found so many of them whimsical and funny. There is a streak of hu-

mor running through the work which is really light and pleasurable. Tell me about that decision. These pieces are not dark, you know, or emotionally heavy; which they could be.

CS: I was just thinking as you were saying that: what is a dark and scary sculpture? I don't know if a sculpture can be fully dark and scary (laughs). It's a sculpture. It could evoke things or try to mimic something or it can give a sense of dread in terms of its place or what it's made out of. Maybe the objects that people are putting in the street aren't very scary (laughs).

JG: There could be very scary objects left in the street, in my opinion. I was just thinking one could make figures that look more forlorn or distressed than yours. There is this certain humor to the work that's quite enjoyable.

CS: I did one sculpture at night. It was a black shirt/dress over a hat rack with a basket as a head. I put it around the corner from a liquor store and people would exit around the corner quickly and be confronted with the back of this tall figure. I noticed that a few people were surprised; some people were just like: "whatever." That is the most menacing thing I can think of that I have made. The effect it had also had to do with the time of day. The practice is playful to begin with. I was just looking at one sculpture which has a gasoline can with a potpourri ball on top. I can imagine how that could light up too; I almost see it as a Molotov cocktail, which could be menacing. But instead, it's funny that it's a potpourri ball on top: potpourri flaming cocktail. I think it goes back to a satisfaction with what goes together and how and it's usually pretty ridiculous. It could be a silly form, it could be a quite beautiful form, but I do like that juxtaposition. That is what comedy is. It's a combination of things that don't go together that then completes a sentence. You know, like Buster Keaton. He'll set up an obstacle, he'll solve a problem with another

problem. Or he'll nail his shirt to the wall or he'll leave his shirt underneath the rug and then instead of rolling up the rug he will cut it out. There's this idea of dilemmas or problems that I like trying to solve: how something can go together with something that it doesn't belong with.

JG: You know what I think made me think of the Meret Oppenheim was the two legs with the shoes on them. They were almost like disembodied arches with two shoes. And there was something also kind of Hans Belmer-ish about that. It is the way there is this sort of uncanny presence of a person in the object and yet the object had been transformed into some other thing. You know it isn't actually a human figure, you know it is just a leg or whatever. So, that's what made me think of the Surrealists. The rational for them was slightly different than yours, in the sense that for the Surrealists the common object was powerful because it might be something that figured powerfully in the unconscious or in a psychological state because in our everyday lives we encounter these common objects.

In your case, you create a dreamlike space or uncanny space that reminds us of a dream, but it's like you've rescued these objects from a state of non-meaning. That's the part I find really poignant. There is the humorous side and there's also a touching or poignant side to it. It's almost like the objects had no meaning and now they have been given a second chance. They register in this conceptual way that they didn't before, almost like a resuscitation. Then we move on because it's over. We get two or five seconds with the image in a slide presentation, but we know the sculpture doesn't exist on the street anymore. So the poignant aspect still remains, I think, in the sense that the objects have been rescued but only momentarily, only to then return to nothing again. I liked that element of the project a lot.

One of the things I like about this project is the way it is trying to


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allow the objects to be as decayed as they are, you're not reworking them.

CS: It exists how it is and this is how it wants to be.

JG: Or it's how you want it to be.

CS: Yeah, that is true.

JG: It is a temporary moment of meaning that didn't happen before and won't happen after and it's that ephemeral quality that ties the work to a conceptual tradition almost more than the formal traditions I've been referencing.

CS: And this idea of a conceptual thread in sculpture: Is the conceptual thread the context in which it is being made? The process by which it is being made? The choice of medium of representation?

JG: For me the link to the history of conceptual art has more to do with the idea that the sculpture is ephemeral, the emphasis is on its ephemerality. Here "dematerialization" is however linked not to the rejection of form altogether, in favor of linguistic representations for example, but rather "dematerialization" is tied to the process of consumption and rejection, the becoming-nothing of consumer goods. The emphasis is on the fact that it is not going to be an object for sale and it's not going to be a permanent object. And so the idea of it, and the process of making it, is its critical aspect.

The fact that you photograph it is something else. The photograph of it then can become part of a different tradition, this is why I suggested that it is more in line with Richard Long, who is a conceptual artist who does those walks and moves rocks and so forth. Then he photographs the result of his actions. But the whole purpose of it is

more of a conceptual set of gestures or conceptual practice. And so for me in some ways the work speaks strongly to that tradition, that conceptual tradition. And also to other kinds of conceptual practices that have happened out on the street. Think of Fluxus and other kinds of practices that are street-based from the conceptual perspective.

CS: It's the photographs of 1960s and 1970s conceptual based performances that inspired me to develop strategies to work in the street. Left Behind is rooted in this process of action and documentation, as the street is the site where I find freedom for my ideas.

Chris Sollars' work revolves around the reclamation and subversion of public space through interventions and performance. Sollars has exhibited and performed in numerous venues nationally and internationally and in 2013 received a Guggenheim Fellowship. *Left Behind* is an ongoing series of public sculptures started in 2009 in San Francisco.

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Left Behind

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