

# KARL BURKHEIMER AND THE LANGUAGE OF UTILITY

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From Karl Marx to Clement Greenberg and beyond (and probably echoing as a refrain in this collection of essays), both craft and art are portrayed as heroic but losing enterprises within an increasingly pervasive dehumanization of life brought about by the growth of capitalist society.<sup>1</sup> A tool-making species, in this apocalypse of our own creation, we are losing touch with basic hand-eye skills required to fashion, manipulate, and interpret objects; in effect losing the ability to re-imagine and re-make the world, and are instead becoming mere passive consumers of machine-fabricated commodities. More insidiously, commercialism actively appropriates what remains of the spheres of craft and art. The contemporary museum typically juxtaposes exhibits and labels with a museum shop and its price tags, recalling Robert Smithson's assessment that

A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object...Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise.<sup>2</sup>

Following this reading, my essay could conceivably participate in the commodification and consequent dehumanization of the craft works installed in *Call + Response*.

But I do not want to kill the objects about which I am writing, namely the wood pieces of Karl Burkheimer, even if their initial appearance is in fact suggestive of industry and commercial culture, rather than some kind of traditional folk-like object bearing the marks of handcraft like a laboriously hand-whittled rocking chair.<sup>3</sup> Here, a carved wooden cube brings to mind the form of a plastic or metal machine component, some kind of "whatsit" whose application we would never know unless we were engineers.<sup>4</sup> There, an intricately-assembled, furniture-like structure composed of flat panels recalls what one might find in an IKEA catalog.<sup>5</sup> It might be more accurate to say that his pieces resemble craftlike versions of industrial components and commercial goods. And after all, craft and art survive and remain relevant within industry and commercial culture; products continue to be designed with a regard for materials and their aesthetic impact.

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1. See especially Marx's description of alienation in his 1844 "Comments on James Mill" in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1975), and Greenberg's discussion of kitsch in his 1939 "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1986). For Greenberg, craft would be "authentic" "folk culture."

2. Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," *Artforum* (Oct. 1972). Smithson is referring to a gallery; although ideally non-commercial, I think the contemporary museum can be equally complicit in commodifying craft or art. While viewers cannot purchase objects on view in the museum's exhibition space, they can still purchase souvenir versions in the museum gift shop (posters, coffee mugs, and so on), a translation of the exhibit's "value" into monetary value.

3. Speaking of the small, cube-like pieces in the *Call + Response* exhibit, Burkheimer says they typically require about one hundred hours to create (author's interview, March 2009). This seems both a testimony to their handcraftedness as well as a perverse enlistment of that rationalized and quantified dimension of commercial production.

4. *A & B* (2009), on view.

5. *Five Fourths* (2009), on view.

There may be other priorities, but the absence of a craft or art dimension in our engagement with objects in the world is both a function of the enervation of these dimensions in them, and also frankly our willingness (or rather a lack of will, a kind of laziness or stupefaction), to look for these values to begin with. The same is true in terms of Smithson's notion of the museum's "visual fodder;" whatever propensity toward commodification the museum may condition, we viewers remain the agents responsible for the final stage of that trajectory. Commodities are offered to us, but we also want commodities to willingly (or lazily) accept this commodity relation.

Ultimately, Burkheimer's work seems very much invested in denying this acceptance on the part of the viewer, encouraging instead a more sustained and craft-oriented engagement, and it does so by appealing to that tool-making dimension of our human nature, through what Burkheimer describes as the "language of utility."<sup>6</sup> In other words, his pieces have an *apparent* utility: they contain multiple aspects and elements that point us toward a recognition of function. In reaching toward that recognition, we viewers have to activate and employ different skill sets relevant to a more craft-oriented relation to materials and processes in our engagement with the work, even as the pieces themselves initially suggest an industrial or commercial product. For me, the experience of examining Burkheimer's work is somewhat analogous to putting together a toy for my son at Christmastime, only a toy of Borgesian complexity – such as a LEGO® Bionicle. These are educational toys, intended to encourage spatial thinking, how parts fit together, the durability of components, and so on; my frustration as I try to put the toy together is a function of the absence of these skills in my customary engagement with objects in the world.

The aspects and elements of Burkheimer's work that re-orient the viewer in this direction (anti-commodity, but also anti-art commodity or rather anti-artlike commodification of craft) are manifold and interrelated. One device is to encourage the viewer to come closer to the piece, to become more aware then of the physical properties of materials and how they have been worked. An early example is *Errant* (2008), a plank resting on rollers with convex shapes on top. The work's forms evoke a Japanese tea service; this suggestion as to use, as well as the piece's close proximity to the floor, tempts one to sit down, so that one becomes conscious of "getting closer" within a network of functional and sensory contexts.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the closer view obtained by sitting down reveals differences in texture between the flat surface of the plank and the convex shapes projecting upward from it, providing another set of clues and incentives to continue looking.<sup>8</sup> A related device is the deployment of digital cues or prompts, invitations to use the hands through the inclusion of latches, knobs, doors, and drawers. Within the museum context, a viewer may be unsure as to the propriety of handling a particular piece, but the appeal to the hands encourages speculation as to the tactile qualities of components, how they might shift and slide against each other as they are moved, and how their shapes are precisely determined by the possibility of this movement. Burkheimer also encourages viewers to consider how the components of a piece fit together: there is an evident seam bisecting the small cube entitled *A & B* (2009, on view), so apparently it can be handled, rotated, and pulled apart; the IKEA-like initial impression of *Five Fourths* (2009, on view) prompts speculation as to how the flat panels interlock into each other and the order in which they are attached (one thinks of the injunction "some assembly required").

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6. Author's interview, March 2009.

7. I think the Japanese markers in Burkheimer's work are less overt references to craft traditions within these countries and the cultural values they possess, than a kind of prompt within the viewer's search for recognizable function. That being said, one could certainly adopt a more ceremonial or "meditative" attitude toward the piece.

8. Closer to the piece, what had been a tea service also becomes more like a miniature meditative stone garden (so a different set of functional associations is aroused), a reading more obvious in a piece like *A Place for Tea* (2008), where the texture of the plank more evidently suggests the appearance of raked stones.

A particularly recurrent (and I think particularly significant) aspect of Burkheimer's work that forestalls any rapid, unthinking consumption by the viewer is the way it engages interrelated notions of mold and model. On the one hand, Burkheimer is fascinated by the highly-crafted character of wooden forms known as foundry patterns, used to create the sand molds for metal casting and amongst the highest paid kind of carpentry work. In other words, antecedent to industrial production is a still important and remunerative craft practice. Behind the precision we associate with industry is an even more precise (because it is antecedent) "traditional" craft activity, even if it becomes hidden from view in the finished product. While these technical skills may not be readily perceivable by a viewer, the kinds of carpentry used in pieces like *A & B* come from this practice – the wooden material and evidently part – or component-like appearance can still put that viewer in mind of a mold. On the other hand, Burkheimer's work might make a viewer think of a model, and the idea of a model is also often suggested by the way many of his larger pieces like *Five Fourths* seem to be too small, to be a kind of miniaturized structure or something halfway between furniture and architecture. As with the devices Burkheimer employs to encourage proximity, hand manipulation, and thinking about how parts fit together, he here reminds us that the mold and the model are also important elements of our tool-making human heritage.

More than this, though, I think the mold and the model counteract the potential aesthetic packaging of the craft object within the museum by pointing to something else not seen in the space of the museum (and this resistance to spatial context is especially apparent in a piece like *Five Fourths*, which seems to carve out its own space, a space moreover too small for us as museum viewers to occupy). Within the sphere of modern art, a related notion might be found, again, in the writings of Smithson: what he called the non-site. The non-site was a kind of three-dimensional model (a "three dimensional logical picture"), viewable within a gallery space of an earthwork like his well-known *Spiral Jetty* (1970), which itself was located on the shores of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, far from the gallery context.<sup>9</sup> It thus provided some kind of substitute experience of an otherwise distant artwork, even as it underscored that this experience was incomplete, that the portable, purchase-able gallery object was manifestly not the "real thing" itself. More than this, though, the three-dimensional model did point to the working out of ideas through the construction of objects; in other words, while incomplete in itself, it still indicates a process of thinking through making, that a model is not a mere "picture" of an idea. I do not want to impose this sense of the non-site on Burkheimer's work, but I do think some of its aspects resonate with the significance of mold and model in his pieces. As "three-dimensional logical picture[s]," they reinforce a sense of thinking through making; if not presented with finished products themselves, we are then made attentive to that unfolding of process which is perhaps the saving grace of craft.

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9. Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites," in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (University of California Press : Berkeley, CA, 1996). As a modernist art historian, I have found it useful to compare elements of Burkheimer's work with the practice of artists with whom I am more familiar. Smithson's concerns with foregrounding process and his engagement with modern-day industry seem also points of connection. However, I am not aware of nor am I ascribing any overt relationship between the work of Smithson and Burkheimer.