

Practicing Attention

Elijah Burgher, "Practicing Attention", *comfort shoes, welcome mats, and other heavenly gifts*, brochure essay, Gallery 400 University of Illinois, Chicago, 2004

It is difficult to generalize about Carl Suddath's practice. His work evinces an attitude to the prospect of getting transformed into language that can't be characterized as prickly so much as affably ambivalent. To probe his artworks with words is much the same as experiencing them in person: when we think we've "got it," they point to another part, another object, or simply the gallery space itself, as if to say, "well, have you looked at *this* yet?" I think the best place to start is to list the many differences amongst the objects in the exhibition in order to acknowledge the teeming variance of his practice. Some works hang on the wall like paintings – but at differing heights, at eye, navel, and out-of-reach levels. Other works sit on the floor, some in the middle of the floor, others in corners, while others still are planted on the floor but lean on the wall. Some works are architectural interventions, while others are clearly autonomous objects. Some works plainly exhibit the materials with which they were made and the means by which they were constructed, whereas others deliberately conceal those materials and means. Some works are no bigger than your pinky while others stretch from the floor to the ceiling. Walking into "comfort shoes, welcome mats, and other heavenly gifts" is like entering a Bizarro World group show of contemporary art. There are painting-like things, sculpture-like things and installation-like things occupying the space, each bearing a differently colored, monochromatic surface – ranging from matte blacks to glossy teals to creamy tans – as if to signal their status as a thing at which to look. In this way, his work sticks out like a sore thumb in the standard gallery space of the white cube. It is definitely not the case that his work doesn't belong there, because it is *of* that space and readily borne by it. But like a bad haircut or a large birthmark, it is a conspicuously abnormal part of an otherwise normal whole.

Suddath's work does not lecture with declarative statements or pose polemically troubling questions, nor does it ingratiate with preciously hushed tones. As suggested above, if his work were to speak, it would probably excitedly solicit our attention with a concise, "look at this!" Beyond the diversity of his practice, the unifying thread in Suddath's art is a desire to concentrate the viewer's attention in anomalous objects and the relationships they engender. There is an implicit hope in this that our attention will be woken up and whetted for the planet-full of other visual experiences that await us outside Gallery 400. For instance, Suddath has installed a strip of molding in the largest gallery room, along the bottom edge of a length of wall that partitions off part of the space, and painted it a rancid shade of pink, a sunburned Barbie doll pink. The molding not only draws attention to itself – courtesy of its anomalous color and the fact that it is the lone trim in the room – but also has the secondary effect of conferring attention to the wall to which it has been added. We notice that the dimensions of the upper ledge of molding thin and thicken in accordance with the wall's irregularities. In this respect, the molding behaves like a pedestal on which the wall is displayed, grasping and holding it up to view. It is for the sake of this economical and forthright address to the viewer that the artist seems to have chosen a strip of wall, to which to add the trim, that projects into the viewer's space.

The molding is further complicated if we learn that the pink has biographical significance, that it is the color of the trim in the new house into which the artist recently

moved in Houston. Granted, this bit of information does not drastically alter our interpretation of the work. It does, however, corroborate this viewer's hunch that the artist brought that grotesque, dead pink into the gallery in order to see it better, to see it apart from the contingencies of everyday life and to focus a special attention on it. Suddath's work often recontextualizes objects, information, and attributes from non-art contexts. Sometimes it is merely the utilitarian, everyday, non-art *look* of a thing he's made that makes it seem to deserve the name "readymade." Rather than laying open to view the discursive and institutional frameworks that make possible the designation as Art of this segment of dumb matter, Suddath does something weird with the readymade: he marshals it toward formal, perceptual ends. Duchamp did not exhibit a bottle rack or bicycle wheel to incite a more close inspection of the visual and physical character of those objects; but that seems to be why Suddath covered one of Gallery 400's windows with drywall tape – to better perceive its pattern of small holes – or why he installed a palm-size, circular mirror high on a gallery wall – to see its appearance change from a hole in the wall to reflecting the texture of the ceiling tiles, depending on where one stands in relation to it. What Suddath's work solicits us to do is to look closely, to perceive resemblances and differences, rhymes, rhythms, dissonances, concavities and convexities, surface qualities, spaces behind, between, and in front.

The artist mentioned two things that I find heuristic in relation to his work's connection to the readymade. He remarked that he'd been looking at and reading about Ellsworth Kelly recently, and enjoyed learning that Kelly's professed breakthrough in his art came when he realized that he could draw forms "already made" from the world around him – the pattern of shadows cast on stairs, for instance. (Interestingly, in this regard, Suddath based a triptych of drawings included in the exhibition on photographs Kelly took source material, thus qualifying those drawings as "already made" twice over.) Suddath also explained the "heavenly gifts" in the exhibition title were in reference to Shaker drawings, which are not subject to the Shaker ban on iconic imagery because they are authored not by the person whose hand materialized them, but by a higher power that speaks through the person in ecstatic worship. What these two references have in common is that the artwork comes from outside of oneself, a gift given by the world, in one case, and a power transcending the world, in the other. Putting that gift into the form of an artwork or the space of a gallery confers upon that thing the special, contemplative attention that is largely the province of art. One work in the exhibition appears to be an arm-thick column or a pole, but on closer inspection consists of a series of pieces of wood of differing lengths that have been spun on a lathe, stained a creamy yellow, assembled end to end, and suspended from the ceiling. We don't admire the craft of the object so much as simply look at the rounded form, familiar to us from chair legs, baseball bats, and other easily overlooked objects. The yellow stain also allows the grain and knots of the wood to remain visible and behave like figures on the ground of the object's surface. Thought not technically a readymade, the work's pedestrian materials and manufacture permit an examination of its form unencumbered by an aura of craftsmanship or mystique of artistic personality.

The work is not simply a sculpture, however, because its form and effect is relative to the space of the exhibition. In the room in which it stands, it enacts, to some extent, a Barnett Newman zip in real space, providing a sense of scale, proximity, and place for the viewer. It can also be said to draw attention to the particulars of Gallery 400, drawing a line from its gray, concrete floor to the ceiling, the tiles of which are gnarled and discolored in some areas. This indicates an important tension, a contradiction even, in Suddath's work, between the concentration of the viewer's attention in the object itself and the diversion of attention to the space in which it is exhibited. Moreover, this friction potentially impacts the formal _expression of the work, by slitting attention between relating the parts of the individual

object and relating that object as a part to the exhibition as a whole. How does the artist resolve this tension, if at all? Suddath's individual works, as mentioned earlier, are usually quite conspicuous. They don't blend into their surroundings. They couldn't be mistaken for fixtures or furniture. Through glossy paintjobs, incongruous installation, formal irregularities, and other defamiliarizing devices, the artist economically separates out the art from the non-art. His artworks are concretions of attention, around which the space of display and adjacent artworks go into soft focus. One could also describe his artworks as gathering into elaborate knots several threads from the loose, chaotic tangle of our quotidian experience of objects, architecture, and space. The viewer always has the option of picking up and following one of those threads back into the real world, the world of non-art things.

To demonstrate this last point, I'd like to address one last artwork, an object that resembles a six-foot strip of thigh-high bright green fence. It is halved, the two ends installed on either side of the walls of a corridor that extend several feet into the gallery space, so that it frames the short length of hall leading into an adjacent gallery, and fences off a small area to either side of the doorway. The two parts solicit further attention, because they are not identical, their relationship not symmetrical, nor are the parts within either regular. The artwork was initially based on a picket fence near the artist's former Chicago apartment, the pickets of which were irregularly spaced, composing a peculiar, visual rhythm. Our attention is focused as we reckon these differences and irregularities, absorbing ourselves in assessing this odd, two-part object that both faces us frontally, and thus makes of itself a gift to our attention, and, equally importantly, frames a route through and away from it, as if to acknowledge that we shall soon bring our concentrated attention to bear on something else when we turn and walk away.

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