

Bertrand Lavier
MATRIX/BERKELEY 117

University Art Museum
early April - mid June 1988

Harvey
Montgomery Ward, 1988



Many first generation Conceptual artists working in the late sixties and early seventies deemphasized the art object, in part as a gesture against what they perceived as the increasing commercialization of the artwork (one thinks of Sol LeWitt's ephemeral wall drawings, painted over at the end of their exhibition, or the linguistic investigations of Lawrence Weiner who in 1972 wrote, "I do not mind objects, but I do not care to make them").

French artist Bertrand Lavier believes instead that a work of art must be a balance between a powerful visual image and an idea. Like other young artists of a conceptual bent, such as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, Lavier has a decidedly Postmodern approach to the issue of art and consumerism. These artists appropriate mass-produced products, virtually unmodified, as the stuff of their art, both exposing and exploiting the idea of commercialism. Their ambivalence toward the consumer culture owes as much to Andy Warhol as to hardcore Conceptualism.

Lavier is perhaps best known for sculptures created by covering readymade objects (refrigerators, tables, pianos) with an impasto layer of paint. Lavier personalizes and softens these industrial objects by painting them (Claes Oldenburg's cloth toilets and telephones have a similar although more comic effect), and thus also calls into question the accepted distinction between sculpture and painting.

In other sculptures, such as Ikea/Zanussi (1986), Lavier

stacks common objects, in this case an armoire on top of a freezer; another, Knapp-Monarch/Solid Industries (1986), consists of an electric heater atop a file cabinet. In such pieces Lavier, like Duchamp before him, walks the tightrope between art and nonart. But whereas Duchamp's readymades, such as his famous urinal, questioned the artwork's privileged status as a handmade object, the new generation places art within the context of capitalist economy.

Lavier's sculptural superimpositions (each titled for the products that comprise them) are often witty significatfons of modern architecture. Like Richard Artschwager's mock furniture, Lavier's commodities, though unchanged in form, take on a new identity and relationship to reality.

A similar question of identity occurs in a Lavier work entitled Paragon (1986) in which a ping pong table, mounted on the wall, is thickly repainted in its original green and white, looking not unlike radical abstract painting. Lavier refers to the history of painting again in three recently published etchings. Lavier appropriated the designs for his etchings from a comic book describing Mickey Mouse's adventures in The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Lavier also deals with the issue of fine art versus its representation, as in Accrochage No. 2 (1986). In this film installation, images of well-known paintings are projected, actual size, onto the gallery walls. Lavier suggests that,

as theorized by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, we live in a world of appearances, a world in which simulation has replaced the real.

In all these visually varied works--paintings, sculptures, film installation--Lavier's attitude is consistent in presenting issues on the forefront of contemporary art: the paradoxical relationships between painting and sculpture; art and nonart; high art and popular culture; and reality and simulation.

Lavier came to international attention with his participation in the 1976 Venice Biennale and has recently become known to the American art audience with his inclusion in The Museum of Modern Art, New York's "An International Survey of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture" (1984) and two recent exhibitions at the John Gibson Gallery in New York. In 1986, three institutions in Dijon, France cooperated to present a major exhibition of Lavier's work. The exhibition traveled to the Musée de Peinture et de Sculpture in Grenoble and was accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Germano Celant. Lavier was born in the province of Bourgogne, where he has returned to work after living and working in Paris.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

1. Westinghouse Fichet, 1984-88, mixed media (refrigerator and safe), 111 x 29 x 31".
2. Sun Yellow by Benjamin Moore and Modern Lux, 1988, commercial oil paint on plywood, 20 x 82".
3. Harvey Montgomery Ward, 1988, mixed media (foot stool and refrigerator), 51 x 27 x 28".

Selected group exhibitions:

Paris, France, Biennale de Paris '71 (catalogue); Stuttgart, W. Germany, Europa 79 '79 (catalogue); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium, JP3 '81 (catalogue); Kassel, W. Germany, Documenta 7 '82, Documenta 8 '87 (catalogues); Sydney, Australia, Biennale '82, '86 (catalogues); Tate Gallery, London, New Art 83, '83 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, International Survey of Painting and Sculpture, '84 (catalogue); Frederick S. Wight Galleries, Univ. of Calif., Los Angeles, Manipulated Reality '85 (catalogue); São Paulo, Brazil, Biennale, '85 (catalogue); Ghent, Belgium, Chambres d'amis '86 (catalogue); John Gibson Gallery, NY, Reconstruct '87; Charles Cartwright Gallery, Paris, Multiples and Prints

'88; Galerie de Paris, Paris, 1, 2, 2.5, 3. Partez '88; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, Accrochage No. 1 '88; De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam, Netherlands '88; Barbara Farber Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands, New Sculptures '88; John Gibson Gallery, NY, European Sculpture Made in USA '88; Crown Point Gallery, San Francisco, Idea/Image '88.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Galerie Lara Vinci, Paris, '73; Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris '75 (catalogue); Venice Biennale, Italy '76; Fine Arts Building, NY '77; Galerie Eric Fabre, Paris '76, '77, '79, '81; Galerie Média, Neufchâtel, France '82; Lisson Gallery, London '83; Galleria Massimo Minini, Milan '83; Galerie Pietro Sparta, Chagny, France '83; Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland '84 (catalogue); Locus Solus, Gênes, France '84-87; Galerie Durand-Dessert, Paris '84, '86; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris '85 (catalogue); Galerie Buchmann, Basel, Switzerland '86; Atheneum, Dijon, France '86; Le Consortium, Dijon, France '86, '88; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France '86; Musée de Peinture et de Sculpture, Grenoble, France '87 (catalogue); John Gibson Gallery, New York '86, '87; Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin, Italy '87; Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands '88.

Bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Indoden, Gudrun. Kunstforum, Dec. '79.
Vaisey, Marina. The London Sunday Times, May 22, '83.
Groots, Paul. Artforum, Sept. '83.
Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn. Review in Flash Art no. 113, Summer '85.
Celant, Germano. "A Brush with the Real," Artforum, Oct. '85.
Grout, Catherine. Flash Art no. 124, March-April '86.
Biard, Ida. Flash Art no. 131, Dec. '86-Jan. '87.
Smith, Roberta. New York Times, Nov. 28, '86.
Soutif, Daniel. "Bertrand Lavier," Artforum, Summer '87.

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