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Shard Experience

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1.

It's perhaps 12 years ago, and I am pouring wine, our good Cambria Chardonnay, for guests, also from California, at our new house in Champaign, Illinois. We have only recently moved there from the West Coast, so the unfamiliar height of the counter and the angle of the bottle I hold results in my knocking a glass to the floor. As everyone rushes to help with the spill, I realize that this is a "shard" experience.

2.

Franz Schönbeck throws stones at a window. The act is documented in a slide image of a multi-pane, factory-type window set in a brick wall. Sixteen of its 20 panes are broken. The title is *Two Birds/Zwei Vögel*, the technique is "stone-throw (performance)," and the date is 2007. A broken window as glass art is something new. Not the broken glass part, of course, for we have a substantial history of broken glass in art. The piled shards in Robert Smithson's 1969 *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)* and the glass rubble of Anselm Kiefer's 1990 *The Breaking of the Vessels* come to mind here, or the neater arrangements of shards in various of Donald Lipski's untitled works in glass. Not even the window *in situ* is new when we recall the photographs of broken windows in Gordon Matta-Clark's *Window Blow-Out* installation of 1976. What's new is Schönbeck's attention to stone throwing as technique, which adds "unmaking," so to speak, to making in the service of an art idea specific to glass.

3.

My introduction to glassmaking came from three weeks in the summer of 1991 as an artist in residence at the Pilchuck Glass School. Pilchuck often invites artists of a certain art-world standing, who have not previously worked in glass, to experiment with the medium and its properties, to see what can be done with brilliance, luster, transparency (or not), brittleness, and technique in the service of artistic ideas other than those of primary practitioners. I tried making (or at least asking the glassblowers in residence to make) vases and roundels on the pipe, and also produced a suite of sand-cast glass books. These were molded in the open position and with a light bulb in profile emerging from each page. You could say they were illuminated.

4.

Marcel Duchamp spent eight years (1915–1923) in the making of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* before pausing with the explanation that no more could be done. The work was lent to the Brooklyn Museum's 1926 "International Exhibit of Modern Art," and during the return trip to Duchamp's studio, its two sheets of glass were fractured while in the crate. This was not discovered until years later, but Duchamp accepted the changed condition of his work and simply sandwiched the reassembled fragments between sheets of plate glass to give the work the form it has today.

In Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine's encyclopedic catalog accompanying Duchamp's 1969 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *The Large Glass* is reproduced in two full-page color plates, showing both sides of the work. The opacity of the paper on which the image is printed is then an inadvertent reiteration of the contradiction of photographing panes of glass against a white backdrop so as to eliminate anything that would otherwise be seen through them. The glass of *The Large Glass*, as glass, can be seen in several smaller documentary images, of which my favorite is the 1936 photograph of Duchamp with Katherine S. Drier, owner of the work, in the library of Drier's home in West Redding, Connecticut. Here *The Large Glass* can be seen in accordance with its pre-eminent material properties. The bookshelves and furniture behind it and the polished metal poles that support it (Duchamp leans against one) confirm its transparency and brittleness.

5.

Hannah Wilke had herself filmed in 1976 while stripping off her clothes behind *The Large Glass*. A few years later, I had lunch with Wilke in Chicago and praised her performance for the way it confirmed the erotic longing at the heart of Duchamp's work. She told me that she had received some criticism for the "exhibitionism" of that project. I offered that she was certainly a visually appealing physical presence, and in response she lifted her sweater for a moment, giving me a glimpse of bare breasts, while remarking that her bust was no longer comely enough to work as a sex symbol. *Au contraire*.

6.

Back to the Kiefer. *The Breaking of the Vessels* includes a bookshelf-shaped armature, made of iron plates, which stands some 15 feet high, with an inscribed glass transom mounted to the wall above. The armature holds three shelves of lead books, to several of which the artist has attached strands of copper wire. The floor in front of this structure is covered with broken glass. The artist invites a mystical reading of his work by means of a title that explicitly refers to a Kabbalistic tale of God's attempt to contain the world's

evils in glass vessels. The vessels broke, and the evils re-entered the world. Perhaps divine glass vessels differ from those in this world by being polygonal, for the glass on the floor in front of the bookshelf consists mainly of flat shards. Windows, broken or not, represent viewing more than containing, so despite the fact that the glass transom above the shelf bears the translation, in German script, of the Hebrew words for “the Infinite,” the particulars of those shards on the floor are more a reference to *Kristallnacht* than *Kabbalah*.

The Saint Louis Art Museum’s sense of responsibility for the safety of its visitors has resulted in the unfortunate decision to place a rope and stanchions at the margins of the strewn-glass floor. Within that border of nylon rope, the glass is prettified—an “arrangement” rather than a scattering—and the violence that made it is restated as artistic technique.

7.

No border around the edges of the piled broken glass of the Dia’s Smithson; none needed. The cartographic resonance of the form invites us to imagine flying over it rather than being its “sweepers up.”

8.

Naomi Shioya’s *Drops* consists of nine cold, cast translucent blue glass chair forms, each about one foot tall. On the seat of each form, the artist has placed a clear glass ovoid. Droplets would be one way of characterizing these forms; eggs would be another. If you look carefully at the photograph of the work, you can see the tiny, upside-down, reflected figure of the artist with camera in hand. In documenting her work, she has inserted her image into its glass eggs, which becomes another meaning that the work is ready to hatch.

9.

How much glass was broken in Germany during the night of November 9–10, 1938? On page 101 of Lucy S. Dawidowicz’s *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945*, the following parenthetical insertion appears: “(It was later estimated that the amount of plate glass destroyed equaled half the annual production of the plate-glass industry of Belgium, from which it had been imported).”

10.

Gina Zetts made a bracelet from bits of broken glass, then wore it in/as a performance. The work is photographed as if the camera was her boyfriend at some party (the artist is wearing a black dress and high heeled shoes). The lens points down at Zetts’s right arm,

sporting the bracelet, which is held out slightly from her side. The line of shards gleams in the light of the image like a toothy Hollywood smile. The blood running down Zetts's wrist goes well with that dress.

In Ingmar Bergman's 1972 film *Cries and Whispers* the action revolves around the painful death of Agnes, a young woman afflicted with a cancer of the womb. She is attended, among others, by her two sisters, Maria and Karin, whose lives unfold within the film as shared evidence of the pain of living. Karin once inserted pieces of broken glass into her vagina in order to repulse and torment her abusive older husband. The flashback in which this occurs is utterly harrowing. The camera tracks the hand reaching toward the broken glass; clenching the shards tightly, then opening to show us the blood in the palm; then the hand moves downward, toward the unseen lap while the camera glides up to capture the face contorted in a grimace of not-exactly-pain.

Zetts was one of 8 artists wearing objects of glass. Each wore their object while moving around the gallery space. Every simple movement of her arm caused Zetts's bracelet to dig into her flesh a little more, but nobody intervened against her self-inflicted wounding because it was a performance.

11.

Liz Larner's 2002 installation *Between Love Me and Love Me Not* is a two-by-two-meter "flower" on the floor. The radiating petals of this bloom are formed by the placement of 21 pieces of a broken mirror. It reflects us as we peer at it, all the while remembering a childhood ritual of asking an actual flower to reveal someone else's feelings about us by pulling out its petals one by one.

12.

Try this at a party to amuse or appall your friends: place a red rose in your freezer until it is completely frozen. Then, at the proper moment, reach into the freezer, grab the flower by its stem, and immediately smash it against a counter or tabletop. The frozen bloom will shatter, like glass.