

First published in *Mapping Histories*, the exhibition catalogue accompanying the Third Newport Biennial, Newport Harbor Art Museum (now Orange County Museum of Art), Newport Beach, California, 1991.

Transfigured Things: the assemblages of Greg Colson

Buzz Spector

We are surrounded by a world of things, whose cycles of production, consumption, and decay provide us the artifacts of allegory and the objective circumstances of order and chaos, memory and bliss. The effects of utilization: dents, dirt, rust, and wear; are evidence from the lives of objects accompanying our own youth, adulthood, and old age. Similarly, the forms of things, shaped in accordance with the necessities of function, evoke aspects of ourselves, both physiognomic and psychological, from which a great body of symbolic fragments is derived.

When objects are discarded, that is, broken, lost, or rendered obsolete, what remains with them is a kind of narrative of use. Sometimes this narrative is attached to the experiences of a specific life, as is the case with souvenirs, but all discarded things, regardless of the circumstances of their inutility, are markers of the distance between themselves and their origins. They are traces of experiences that happened elsewhere in time and space.

Systems of thought can also proceed through a cycle of conception, contestation, acceptance, and obsolescence. So too do their letters and figures, the alphabet through which all thought is fixed in its place, the text. Outmoded beliefs or theories persist as graphic vestiges, equations, diagrams, or textual incantations that attract the same curious regard we address toward old tools or furniture. But the letter is always breaking free from the meaning of the word, and every chain of signifiers is as admirable as a graphic paradigm as it is the demonstration of a power of thought. In this way, letters are a species of objects, capable of being moved from their circumstances, that movement itself serving as a measure of cognitive distance. The art of Greg Colson is a reflection upon such distances, and upon the nature of the systems we use in assaying them.

The materials from which Colson makes his sculptures are mundane in the extreme: automobile inner tubes, stained and dented ironing boards, strips of weathered plywood, even a battered toilet seat, appear in his work. Moreover, the artist's alterations of this unpromising stuff are quite subtle. Such magical reformations as Picasso's *Bull's Head*, 1943, made of a bicycle seat and handlebars, demonstrate a material plasticity outside of Colson's concerns. Instead, his (usually) simple arrangements on gallery walls reveal a sensibility honed by exposure to Minimalist and Conceptual Art.

A work such as *Organization of Knowledge*, 1989, typifies Colson's method: its trio of

wall-mounted metal lunchboxes invokes the formal organization of Donald Judd's sculpture; while the notations in colored pencil (of the Dewey Decimal System) covering the boxes recall the systematic conceptualism of Joseph Kosuth. Such references would seem to suggest a haughty seriousness of purpose in Colson's odd object, but the wordplay instigated by its unlikely juxtaposition is amiably parodic—"food for thought," as it were.

The engaging wit so characteristic of Colson's art first found expression in the drawings and cartoons he made during his undergraduate years at California State College, Bakersfield, in the late 1970s. He became more interested in sculpture while attending the Claremont Graduate School. Colson moved to Los Angeles after receiving his MFA in sculpture in 1980. He was among a group of young artists associated with the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), and had his own cartoon feature, "Colson's Corner," published in LAICA's *Journal* during 1981-83. The spare draftsmanship and laconic humor of Colson's drawings gradually found its way into his sculpture through the maps, diagrams, and equations he began applying to the surfaces of its constituent objects in the mid-1980s.

One of Colson's most successful early works incorporating this type of graphic superimposition is *Cincinnati*, 1987. The stained and chipped white enamel covering an automobile hubcap provides it with a patina of use upon which Colson's carefully rendered street map of the Ohio city gains a certain poignancy. Although the abstract pattern of little thoroughfares in the drawing resembles a maze of cracks on the painted surface of the disk, the viewer's recognition of the conceptual territory shared by hubcap and map—both are connected to transportation—adds a dialectical aspect to their relationship.

In *Cleveland Stadium*, 1988, Colson has inscribed the seating plan of the ballpark upon an old painted wood toilet seat, whose central aperture signifies the absent playing field. The shape of the seat does in fact resemble the general outline of the Stadium, suggesting an initial reading of Colson's diagram as an editorial reflection on the fortunes of the Cleveland baseball team, or perhaps as the objectification of a rather derogatory image of Cleveland (the city) as an industrial junkyard on the banks of the polluted Cuyahoga River. Yet, the seat isn't merely decrepit. Beneath the peeling flakes of paint, it is seen to be well crafted. This craftsmanship locates the seat in a distant past, before the age of plastic bathroom fixtures, and makes of it a kind of artifact. This artifactual status is cleverly reiterated by the historicizing grandiosity of the stadium plan with which it is adorned.

Colson is very sensitive to the connection between the physical condition of the found objects he uses and the social, political, and historical circumstances that have shaped them. For this reason he often chooses broken, cast-off or otherwise discarded objects for his work. Even when the constituents are new, or rather, unused in appearance, as in some of Colson's arrangements of mailboxes, the style of the objects is traditional, thus resisting any attempt to clearly locate the work in the present.

This is not to say that Colson's art displays any antiquarian tendencies. There is nothing precious about any of the artist's material choices, because that preciousness would encourage a reading of the work in terms of nostalgic desire. The nostalgic tendency to implicate his work in

an idealized narrative of the past is further rebuked by the kinds of graphic inscriptions that the artist applies to its surfaces. In place of sentimental narratives, Colson uses a variety of impersonal classification systems, implying that the objects and notations are equally removed from the realm of personal experience. But like his choice of objects, Colson's symbol systems tend toward the slightly out-of-date, and his decision to laboriously hand copy his graphic materials subtly translates them into artists' marks. The compelling emotional resonance of Colson's art is conveyed in large part through an evidence of hand that inflects both its objects and inscriptions with an equivalent discretion and tact.

The circular arrangement of enamelled sheet metal in *Home on the Range (Harmonica)*, 1989, is emblazoned with the musical notations of that old traditional song, adapted for performance on the mouth harp. Colson has rendered this graphic information in pencil and ink, matching the curvature of the metal. The form itself is a composite of six sections, evidently cut from the side panels of a discarded appliance, such as a stove. These sections are rather casually bolted together, the irregularity of the joining serving as a structural equivalent to the casual hand in which the lyrics and notes of the song have been applied.

Colson is fascinated with the relationship between maps and territories, between words and the epistemological spaces of their definitions, and between the schematics of systems and the actual exchanges that they delineate. In *Greater Los Angeles*, 1989, the freeways connecting Los Angeles and Orange Counties appear as an assemblage of wood and metal strips, each labeled with the name and number of the corresponding route. At the same time, the communities through which these freeways pass have been transformed into so many empty spaces between the work's array of connections. The circumstantial graphic resemblance guiding the arrangement of the work reverberates against the materials Colson has chosen for his construction. The tarnished aluminum strips and bits of stained wood are the kind of detritus often encountered along a roadway after a traffic accident. The effect of the work is that of a subtly sad emptiness, tinged with a residue of danger, appropriate to the cognitive territory the artist is really mapping.

Garment patterns schematize human physiognomy, making visible all at once the multitudinous aspects of the body in an array of fragments that, given substance as pieces of cloth, can be sewn together to reproduce its contours. In this way such patterns comfort their readers in a manner similar to maps, suggesting that the proportions of the territory they assay are indeed manageable. Colson has included a variety of miniature clothing patterns in his work, attaching them to mailboxes, ironing boards, and in the case of *Simple Domestic Costume*, 1990, to a scratched and stained child's blue chalkboard. Two irregular pieces of painted sheet metal have been bolted to the back of the chalkboard and at several places the screws holding the three pieces together pierce the front of the slate. The titular garment is a rather old-fashioned skirt and bodice with an accompanying wide-brimmed hat. The pattern pieces overlap the top edge of the slate, running onto the black metal sheet immediately behind it, creating the vague impression of a figure, seen from the rear, peering over a fence. This odd conjoining of domestic references comes closer to the topography of nostalgia than is usual in Colson's *oeuvre*, in part because its overlapping planes suggest a scenic distance that implicates the pattern parts in a

posture of longing.

If nostalgia, *per se*, is not Colson's subject, there is a turn in his work toward the melancholic, which is the characteristic emotion infusing nostalgic desire. This is especially the case with a number of Colson's works using old automobile inner tubes. The 1987 *Krebs Cycle* is an inflated innertube covered with the notations for this diagram describing the biochemical effects of respiration at the cellular level in most plants and animals. But this version of the Cycle, in white chalk on the black rubber, is hardly meant to serve the ends of science. The use value of the diagram is rendered irrelevant by its siting, just as the use value of the tube is irrelevant to its situation within the art object.

The same thing happens with the auditorium seating plan in *University Hall*, 1990. Though correct in its enumerations, the plan could hardly be used to reserve a seat for any event. Only the office manager of that particular public space might be expected to recognize its contours as rendered on the bulging rubber of the tube. This graphic information is indeed far from home, just as the tube is far—both in place and time—from its road. Colson's little pieces of paper and crayon lines circumscribe the object's empty middle aperture, even as the tube itself is simply a casing of empty air. Inevitably, that air will escape its confines in a final reiteration of the transformation of significations that already marks the elements of the work.

The care with which Colson matches his material and graphic residues confirms his awareness of their melancholic situation, but his work is rescued from bathos by the play of language that emerges from its structural incongruities. Neither the nonsensical nor the senseless find a place in Colson's practice. The distinction of this art is its ability to forge new sense from the intersections of thoughts and things.