

Terry Berlier's Object Ethics

Jennifer Jane Marshall

marsh590@umn.edu

Terry Berlier's sculpture is characterized by both elegant workmanship and incisive social critique. These are beautifully finished objects that are never "finished" when it comes to making meaning. They seem to expand beyond themselves: accumulating more and more pieces, parts, and places, referencing more and more images, sounds, and ideas. The viewer is pushed by this expansion, too, into a world alive on its own and teeming with inter-object relationships.

Witness: thirteen works produced while in residence at Recology, a resource recovery company in San Francisco geared aggressively toward waste reduction. In these pieces, we follow wood spirals up, down, and around. A birdcage and shopping cart are paused between the to and fro. Two phones close together still can't get anything across. (See *Homespun*, *Flight Delayed*, *Smart and Final*, and *Fossil Phone #1* and *# 2*.) With this suite of works, Berlier forces us to reconsider the material world—as for us, but not reducible to us.

There's an implicit ethics here, especially given the context of the work's production: Recology's Public Disposal and Recycling Area south of the city. Here, the trash piles up from deposits made by homeowners and construction workers alike: billiard balls and wine bottles, scrap wood and concrete. Front loaders push the piles around while people pick them over: a guy from St. Vincent de Paul's, looking for salable items; Recology workers, reclaiming materials eligible for recycling; and the artists—scheming creative-types whom Recology has brought in, two at a time, since 1990. Their task? To make art out of trash-heaps, to literalize the recycling movement's cherished chestnut: that one man's trash is another man's treasure.

Berlier's work has confronted environmental politics before. *Self-Leveler (aka: Tipping Point)* of 2009, a wobbling and accelerating pendulum, is outfitted with a portal-like window, offering a view (through video) of tidal waters, rising in time with the swinging axe below it, but seeming not to mind. Another piece, *Timeframe* also of 2009, similarly belittles human industry, down to the size of so many termites. For this series, Berlier burned scale maps of deforestation sites onto tree-ring cross-sections, which now chronicle time's progress by two measures—tree growth/ tree removal—and yet remain impassive either way.

This chilling political deadpan recurs in *Homespun*. It's made from dozens of turned-wood fragments that Berlier reclaimed from Recology's piles. She's joined them together into an unfurling force: a striking representation of just how much of our household makeovers end up in the trash, and a punning illustration of a housing market spun out of control—California real estate descending a staircase. In this piece, as in *Flight Delayed* and *Smart and Final* (a birdcage and a shopping cart filled with cast-off, never-used concrete), Berlier meditates directly on the waste generated by construction. But that last word stings a little. Constructing, after all, is Berlier's artistic stock-in-trade. One wonders, if her sculpture generates its best effects through building, are compromises made here, too? Anything given up in making?

Perfect Lovers (for Ceil and Sally) explores this problem by staging it, surprisingly, as a romance. Two objects share a bifurcated platform and mirror each other almost exactly in shape. The one on the right is an elongated wine bottle that Berlier found while picking through the pile, miraculously intact. She made its mate out of scrap wood she joined together and turned on the lathe. Two unlike materials, glass and wood, thus gradually became more kindred: not just because of what the wood sacrificed in the process (all those curls and splinters), but because of what the bottle took in along the way (the very same: sawdust gathered up and poured in). A

tribute to her great-aunt Ceil, a lifelong woodworker, and the woman with whom she shared a life, the pairing reminds us of all our own domestic ecosystems, how what we shed gets gathered up again, how loss is not quite lost.

Berlier's work points—and it always points—to a world shot through with ethical responsibilities like these. But what those are and who they're for remains an open question. (Or an *Open Secret*, as one of her earlier works, an enigmatic meditation on nuclear energy in the wake of Fukushima, suggests.) Pressures mount, and relax; urgencies build, and retreat; we have obligations—as art viewers, as home-bodies, as world-dwellers—but these are duties we must struggle first to comprehend and finally, clumsily, maybe to fulfill.

Part of what makes the ethics of Berlier's Recology suite so tough to puzzle out is that her objects don't seem to need us in the same way most other artworks do. That's not to say they don't reward us. Walking around, crouching down, craning up, bending to: these are all good exercises to perform in Berlier's playgrounds. But, make no mistake, these things relate and respond at least as richly to each other as to us. A gallery full of Berlier's things is alive and well... even without us being there, happening whether we notice or not. This could summon end-of-days environmentalism: Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, or the protagonist of Charles Bowden's *Mezcal*, who concludes: "In the long run ... nothing counts but the desert because it waits and it always, always wins."¹ But if the natural world waits for its chance to get on without us, Berlier manages to entertain this notion without submitting to its fatalism. Instead, she offers us the chance to live in the world without us, to be enlivened by its mysteries.

¹ Charles Bowden, *Mezcal* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 66.

Digital designer and critic Ian Bogost has observed, “When we theorize ethical codes, they are always ethics *for us*.”² Instead, he tasks us with a different exercise: what kind of responsibility and care inheres between non-human things? What universes exist in those billiard balls? Those bird cages? The felt beneath them? The wires bent over the concrete space within? (*Odd One Out* and *Flight Delayed*.) Bogost is like other contemporary theorists who view ordinary materiality to be vibrant, alive with significance not assigned by us. But he’s unlike thinkers such as Bruno Latour or Jane Bennett, who pursue this vibrancy to the point of totalizing animism: a network of shimmering relations that supersedes the nubbiness of its working parts. Bogost wants nubbiness. He wants edges on his things: horizons of demarcation that allow for relationships in the first place; borders that indicate that things, too, have interior lives and worlds unto themselves—each object, he imagines, a black hole.

One of Berlier’s Recology works makes Bogost’s metaphor better, if only because she’s made it—by-hand and for-real. For *Event Horizon*, Berlier took reclaimed Ikea furniture slats (real wood, not laminate), fashioned them into octagons, and fit them together in a graduated series, each spaced about a half inch from the other in the stack. Hung on the wall perpendicularly, the stack becomes a hive. Then, just as soon, the hole in the center invites a perilous peep show. What we get is a vision of our own peeping: our own eye reflected back at the receding end of a kaleidoscope. As in quantum mechanics, the observed is transformed by observation. The gravitational pull of this object beckons us. We fold ourselves toward that single point of contact, the eyepiece. We witness an expansion of vision in the mirrored recession into nonspace. We watch the octagonal rings pulse back and forth (thanks to a swinging light overhead). And we try to resist the tug of attention exerted by that dilated pupil,

² Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 73.

that blinking dot, that black hole in the distance—that is, that “us.” Bogost compares all beings to black holes. In doing so, he hopes we’ll be prepared to encounter radical alterity in all things—every object an alien other. Berlier installs a watchful, human eye over this metaphorical contraption. What’s radical is that we hardly recognize it as our own.

A last note: *Acoustic Locator*. Berlier made it out of two oversized metal wheels, a fluted wooden column, and discarded wooden shelves, which she joined together into amplifying horns, one big, one small. The result looks like a cannon’s been crossbred with a phonograph. Indeed, it sort of has. Acoustic locators were experimental military devices used before radar for detecting distant threats. Putting an ear to Berlier’s version at Recology, what comes close is not a manmade menace but an avian elsewhere: real birds singing, but who knows from where? They’re instantly brought closer than the chaos at hand—the rumbling front-loaders, the screech of Caltrain, the tinkling waterfall of glass when the recycling conveyor’s running. *Acoustic Locator* locates birds and we can hardly believe it. Berlier herself was surprised. “Little treats,” she calls them, and they are. A world without us, a network of nonhuman actors, a trilling universe. But the happy fact, thanks to Berlier, is that we hear it. We hear the song, we goosebump at its survival, and we respect it for the many “more-thans” that it heralds: more than here, more than now, more than us.

Jennifer Jane Marshall, Assistant Professor of North American Art
Art History Department, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities