

JOHANNES VOGT

photograph

Review: Carson Fisk-Vittori, Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago

By Jason Foumberg, 13 December 2013

The gallery smells of the feminine hygiene products—Raspberry Rain shave gel and Japanese Cherry Blossom body spray—that are integral units in Carson Fisk-Vittori's photo-and-sculpture assemblages, on view at Carrie Secrist Gallery through January 4.

The saccharine scents are manufactured to signify cleanliness, and the artist coolly critiques the triumph of ersatz natural experiences. Fisk-Vittori's artworks in *Women Weed & Weather* parody store product-displays and commercial advertising imagery to illustrate the extinction of the nature-culture divide.

The artist emerged several years ago with real-life still-lives (as sculpture) that included houseplants adorned with inappropriate objects, such as thumbtacks. Now, her botanical interventions function as stage design for a new photo-based project. Fisk-Vittori's photographs of urban nature, as spotted around Oakland, are supported (sometimes literally, as in *Windshield Display*) by bottled nature. In a twist on nature photography, the artist focuses her camera on instances where nature is a nuisance, such as weeds, and human attempts to beautify nature, such as gardening.

Fisk-Vittori happily confuses the motives of commercial and art photography. In *Nature Window*, a smart phone seemingly sprouts from a plant. As an instance of product placement, it's unclear which is the more desirable commodity: the phone or the plant. This puzzle is further complicated by *Nature Window's* display upon an emerald green painted wall—the same green of the photo's background and of green-screen technology, which productively substitutes the realistic for the real

The artist's images and objects have a second life beyond the gallery. An intentional consequence of the artist's packaging of her photos—the prints are sandwiched between Plexiglas and aluminum—and integrated with readymade objects, is that the exhibition documentation, when viewed online, convincingly masquerades as a type of stock-photo collage that is now proliferating on Internet visual culture websites like Tumblr, in which the artist readily participates. The "weeds," as referenced in the show, symbolize absurdist viral trends, and viewers are merely shoppers browsing for the truest distortion of aesthetic experience they can find.



JOHANNES VOGT



REVIEW:

**Carson Fisk-Vittori
and the Carrie Secrist Gallery**

By Shreya Sethi

December 17, 2013

RECOMMENDED

The photographs and sculptures of Carson Fisk-Vittori unabashedly employ the design tactics of advertising and commercial art. Artworks that contain shampoo bottles, hair sprays and dishwashing soap almost come across as absurdist product endorsements rather than works of fine art. The products are usually integrated with incongruous objects such as a potted plant, or are found placed on minimalist sculptures that act as shelves. On a wall painted entirely green is a photograph of a cellphone being held up by a plant-shaped stand, giving the impression that the phone is some kind of perverse yet natural outgrowth. In a nearby work, an oyster-shaped soap dish is placed on top of an image of a garden plant, which in turn is resting on women's razor blades. The purpose of these odd combinations is to blur the contrasts between the naturalness of the abundant plants in the show and the artificialness of the consumer products, many of which have artificial fruit and flower scents.



"Altostratus or Nimostratus. The Sun/Moon Can't Be Seen," 2013

The ease of placing one thing next to something else is a major strategy that has emerged with the rise of images in digital culture. There are a number of artists now, including Fisk-Vittori, who are very involved with the world of Internet art and find ways of taking their practice online. Similar to her use of ready-made objects, these artists tend to generate meaning through appropriation. Virtual galleries and magazines act as good platforms for displaying such art. Fisk-Vittori is frequently featured on websites such as Mossless Magazine and The Jogging; however, in a physical gallery space her objects demand more attention and allow for closer inspection.

JOHANNES VOGT



Carson Fisk-Vittori

Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
Recommendation by Robin Dluzen



Carson Fisk-Vittori, "Glacier Mist," 2013, bottled water, fountain, rotating display, ivy, lava rocks, hydrospike and other artifacts, 84 x 80 x 48".

Continuing through January 4, 2014

In Carson Fisk-Vittori's solo show titled "Women Weed and Waether," the femininity suggested by the title is false and impersonal, the flora is artificial and passive, and the meteorological forces of nature are powerless. In her assemblages and installations of shampoo bottles, lady razors, potted plants faux flora, glossy advertisements and digital prints, the Oakland, California-based artist is anything but subtle in driving the point of her content: mankind's preoccupation with suppressing and smoothing the natural.

Paralleling consumer culture's reduction of womanliness to shiny hair and smooth legs, and nature to the vase of arranged flowers and the feeble houseplant, Fisk-Vittori's pervasive formalism simplifies the various meanings of her objects into cold, commercial-like displays. In "Plan for a Pond: Organic," travel sized shampoos and nail clip-pers mingle with feathers and tiny flowers arranged end to end in an oblong circle on the wall, emphasizing the absurdity of attempting to fabricate such a feature of the natural landscape.

JOHANNES VOGT

BASTARDS

contemporary art talk

A Plant as Familiar: The Use of Plants in Contemporary Art

By Faye Kahn

7 May 2013

Contemporary society occurs within a system of objects: toasters, cars, latch hooks, extension cords, hair pins, keys, cards, bunk beds, and so on. It is this very system (see also: pile, archive, collection, etc.) that contemporary artists have assimilated & reappropriated as a catalogue of their raw material. In a statement from Cincinnati's U-turn Art Space's 2010 "Stuff Art" group show of contemporary assemblage artists, an uncredited author defines the tactic as follows:

"These artists use spatial relationships and juxtaposition to increase our awareness of the common by approaching a free-for-all of range of materials as freed form ... The evolution of these art practices is also in dialogue with "truth to materials" philosophies that began in the International Style of Modernist architecture..."²

Not only through Modernist Architecture but more popularly recognized at the advent of the readymade by Duchamp in 1917 & carrying through such evolutionary checkpoints as Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, Mike Kelly's stuffed animal agglomerations, the Etsy object sculptures of Brad Troemel, & the composited image collages of dump.fm users. The assemblage artist today is in an active & influential position, albeit one that pushes objects across the gallery floor, cutouts across the photocopier bed, & gifs around the checkerboard transparency field rather than paint across a canvas.

If this is the language in which we are speaking now, a lexicon containing stuffed animals, sign-my-guestbook gifs, Vitamin water, urinals, emoticons, taxidermy, etc. etc. & onward into infinity, it is worth noting the popularity of the term "plant" or "houseplant" & occasionally "office plant" which can be found repeatedly throughout digital & physical gallery dialogue.

The houseplant's original intention was for the interior decorator, whose profession hinges on the art of arrangement. Houseplants usually function as decoration in the home to soften our transition from nature to domestic space. It freshens the air, appeals to our aesthetic senses, & reminds us of idealized places we aren't (outside). This relationship to interior decorating is recognized by many plant-wielding artists, including & exemplified by Claire Fontaine in her Interior Design for Bastards show (2009) whose statement immediately admits its awareness of "[t]he close and ambiguous relationship between art and decoration."³

In a matryoshka-like way, the art of arrangement is repeated on a smaller scale within the houseplant's own container, & even institutionalized by the practice in Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. According to the Ikebana International website, "In principle, ikebana aims not at bringing a finite piece of nature into the house, but rather at suggesting the whole of nature, by creating a link between the indoors and the outdoors."⁴ Assemblage artist Carson Fisk-Vittori discusses her Ikebana-like exploration of this link in a 2011 interview with Claudine Ise of contemporary art blog Bad at Sports:

JOHANNES VOGT



“...a soda can thrown in a flower pot is a gesture, because it is intentionally placed whether or not the person was aware of it... It’s really a natural gesture, like eating a cherry and spitting out the core, but in our world we are dealing with these man-made objects that are specially designed and branded. The contrast of man-made object and plant life really shows how far away we are from living with nature. I basically started looking closer at these casual arrangements and creating my own with elements of plants and man-made objects...I view these arrangements as microcosms for our relationship with nature.”⁵

*LFT: Carson Fisk-Vittori , Untitled (Gerber) (2011), Little Paper Planes Gallery
RT: Ikebana Arrangement, Yasuhiro Sasaki (2010), Ikenobo Society of Floral Art, Kyoto*

This approach also addresses the current heightened cultural awareness of environmental issues, which has pushed plants into the socio-political spotlight that provides the creative fodder of cultural critics & artists. There is also an undeniable escapist aspect of the houseplant, as it is kept inside as a reminder of the outside, natural world. This adds to the plant’s ability to represent tropical & indigenous cultures that have more intimate relationships with nature.

However prescient these decorative & potentially escapist implications of plants, they cannot completely explain their rise in popularity in contemporary art. Though these qualities may influence the artist’s decisions on a conscious level, the houseplant has taken on more complex implications than a simple symbol of nature. Through its living presence & familiarity, it has transitioned into a subject that can go as far as acting as a stand in for a human being.

The movement of the plant from the exterior natural space to the interior gallery necessarily devolves the specimen into the tamed version of itself: a house plant. Consequently, this conversion is also the first step in transforming the creature into an entity better capable of relating to humans. Unlike other found props from the system of objects catalogue, a plant is living & needs to be maintained—a quality uniquely expeditious in its importance to living things (in fact the lifespan of the plant determines the duration of visual moments in the work in which it resides). Furthermore, in many cases the plants in use occupy space in an analogous way to how a person would, with similar height & life presence. In an article discussing the sculptural work of Claes Oldenburg, Julian Rose describes the effective use of scale in relation to the minimalist work of Tony Smith:

“The primary objective in scaling the work roughly to the human body was to establish a connection between viewer & object. Objects that are too small or too large...tend to isolate themselves from the observer. A small object is perceived all at once, in a glance; it demands no participation. A similar problem arises with much larger objects, which are unintelligible at a short distance and fully legible only from distances so great that the viewer no longer feels that he or she is sharing space with it. A human-sized sculpture, neither too small nor too large, invites the viewer to move around it, gaining a full understanding through exploration of a shared space.”⁶

JOHANNES VOGT

Coming upon a plant in a gallery space has a similar effect, if not more pronounced with the added dimension of life. In fact, this dimension & our a priori participatory relationship with plants lessens the problem of the small object Rose describes; we are accustomed to getting close to small plants to take care of them which extends our personal, shared space relationship with them.

Plants serve as a unique stand-in for a person because they have no emotive face. The exploitation of emotion & drama through pop culture, capitalism, & consumer arts has caused passion to become a subject that borders on guaranteed cliché & is territory that must be broached with extreme caution & tact. Plants therefore have a heightened utility to the artist as a subject more ambiguous than a portrait, mannequin, or cartoon character. Domesticated houseplants appear innocent, attractive, & defenseless, making them sympathetic individuals, while not fostering any theatrics or relying on sonic communication as an animal does. As a result of this, installations including plants do not always necessarily feel softened by the presence of plant life but can in fact occasionally alienate the viewer as though she were walking into a room of emotionless people. Still, they are more responsive & decisive than a mineral & their anthropomorphic qualities are obscure enough to free us from any social judgment of character from either subject or object.

This anthropomorphic phenomenon in the fine art world can be exemplified by a blog post found on the Walker Art Center website written by gallery photographer Gene Pittman. In the post, Pittman discusses archival photos from the center pre-1971, a time when plants were commonplace in the museum & gallery setting performing a decorative role:

”In these images [plants] seem to act as the stand-ins for the patrons, sometimes aloof and in the background or congregating around the radiator as if in discussion. And then there are those that are really into the work, standing in front of a sculpture’s light, their shadows enveloping the work.”⁷

Following the text there is an extensive image collection featuring examples of the gallery patron plant in its natural habitat. Looking at these photos today out of context, one might easily confuse them for photos of a contemporary exhibition incorporating plants in an installation. Compare, for example, the following two images:



Untitled archival photo from the Walker Art Center taken by in house photographer Gene Pittman



Parrots (installation view), Jacopo Miliani (2008), Frutta Gallery

The top image, from 1959 at the Walker Art Center & the bottom from Jacopo Miliani’s 2008 installation Parrots at the Frutta gallery in Rome Both situations involve tall, frond bearing plants observing framed 2D artwork hung on nearby walls with no obvious distinguishing feature illuminating the arranger’s identity as artist, as in Miliani’s installation, or as interior decorator, as in Pittman’s archival photo.

A similar effect is achieved by the Tumblr hosted image collection *Mise en Green* assembled by Brooklyn based curator, exhibition producer, and writer Arden Sherman (www.miseengreen.com) that intuitively documents the plant’s evolution from decorative gallery constituent to chosen member of the art piece. Amongst archival museum & gallery photos like those described above appear photos from contemporary

JOHANNES VOGT

gallery shows without any obvious distinguishing feature. For example, a long cluster of potted greens from the Dormitorio Publico 2012 show at the Campoli Presti Gallery can be found between archival photos from the Guggenheim & the MoMA in the 1950s. A selection of hanging & floor-dwelling plants in ceramic containers at Paul Wacker's Wait & Watch a While Go By show at the Alice Gallery in Brussels (also from 2012) is displayed unobtrusively between documentation of the MoMA & Manchester Art Galleries from the 70s & 80s.

Viewing the plant as a human stand in allows us to obtain a more insightful reading of contemporary artworks that utilize them. Wait & Watch a While Go By now appears to reference what the group of hanging & potted plants in the exhibit are doing. The gallery is hung with paintings by Wacker & Maya Hayuk done in an unpretentious graphic style, many of which include images of wild plants & houseplants alike. The resulting situation is one of a kind of plant hangout- a place for them to relax & enjoy each others company with pictures of family members decking the halls.

Although this anthropomorphization goes largely unrecognized (at least publicly) by the artists that implement it, at the beginning of his 2008 performance piece *Este Cuerpo Que Me Ocupa*, João Fiadero directly confronts us with an unadorned plant as subject:

"...Fiadero walks into the stage coming from the audience, crosses it, opens a door on the back wall, and brings in a tall plant in a vase. With care, he lays the vase down on the stage floor and returns to his place among the audience. At the center of the stage, the plant executes a beautiful solo with living creature, inert matter, and imperceptible motions."⁸

In this example, a potted plant takes on the role of the choreographed dancer. The rest of the performance introduces a cast of other domestic objects (mostly furniture) and a few people, but the first physically present subject is a plant. In internal activity it is between a human and a non-living object. It is transitional, a pathway between identification from a person to a thing.

Buffalo based artist Ethan Breckenridge places his plant subjects in undersized transparent prisms & cubes that emphasize the plant as a sympathetic creature. In his *Too Soon* installations in Bolivia (2009) & New York (2010), potted plants are crammed into carpeted cubes. The viewer empathizes with the plants, leaves pressed uncomfortably against the walls of the cube, & we may reflect upon our own domesticated & carpeted glass cubes. Breckenridge more specifically articulates the relationship between human & plant in *Plants Have No Backs* (2008)- another plant (or two in some iterations) in carpeted windowed structure- but this time furnished with a folding chair. The title & the presence of the chair immediately allow the viewer to compare herself to a plant, in particularly those in front of her, humanoid in height. Without any need to sit down or rest its non-existent back, the chair remains empty. If a person were to sit in the chair, she would be in intimate conversation with the plant. One wall of the box is constructed out of a mirrored surface depicting infinite clones of plants with unoccupied chairs. The plant stands tall & unaffected, neither suffering nor lavishing its solitary existence.

In tandem with the plant in the gallery space, the proliferation of the houseplant in artistic practice continues in the internet medium- work that is without 3D physical manifestation. In particularly in the work of younger artists on social communities like *dump.fm* & the *TightArtistNetGang*, found plant imagery is common in the composited moments that function as their incessantly morphing artistic economy. The plant's ubiquity here probably has more to do with the large quantity of plant based gifs & clipart used in early web design (much 4.

JOHANNES VOGT

of contemporary net art aesthetics is based in early web/PC nostalgia) than with an anthropomorphic presence. Because web design began by imitating tactile textures, objects & actions in order to make itself more user friendly, it is for the same aesthetic reasons that appears in interior decoration that it finds its way onto the web as design elements. Furthermore, net art of this kind, which seems to seek to create a surreal version of the physical world, would be incomplete without common objects & textures, making plants an obvious & indispensable tool. Like in physical presence, plants here too remind us of an exotic outside world, or, in the case of a potted plant, the physical world immediately outside of the computer. There are examples of plants in net art at every turn, but 24 year old net artist Douglas Schatz (dump.fm username guccisoflosy), who repeatedly incorporates plant imagery in his work, summarized the trend in posting an animated gif of a potted plant against a grey checkerboard transparency background above the text "Digital Office Plants Are the New Aesthetic."⁹

Unfortunately there is not enough room here to document a full up-to-date survey of contemporary artwork utilizing houseplants, but perhaps acknowledging this mania will allow us to look at this work with added dimension & intellect, rather than relegating it to simple appropriation. Surely plants will continue to aesthetically enchant all kinds of humans until further notice. Worldwide ethnic traditions document the symbolic meanings of various species, but the houseplant as readymade has mobilized the plant image into the 21st century. It has matured out of trite decorative & expired folkloric identities into advanced contemporary symbolic territory. Although the houseplant's current definition is unstable (as anything contemporaneous), its qualities as an emotionally ambiguous living subject that is aesthetically pleasing make it a versatile object that will continue to take on meaning as its use continues.

H. FAYE KAHN is a freelance animator in NYC & a free-format radio DJ at listenersponsored WFMU in Jersey City, NJ. She resides in Brooklyn, NY & holds a BFA in Film/Animation/Video from Rhode Island School of Design.

Sources

1. I would like to thank all of the are.na users that helped me compile examples used in & as reference for this essay, in particularly Karly Wildenhaus, Dena Yago, Laurel Schwulst, Carson Salter, Greg Fong, Damon Zucconi, Charles Broskoski, & Bryce Wilner. Since the completion of this article the channel has remained active & can be seen here after logging in: <http://are.na/house-plants-in-contemporary-art>
2. <http://www.michael-hunter.net/index.php?/exhibitions/stuff-art/> Accessed 12/26/2012
3. <http://www.t293.it/exhibitions/claire-fontaine-interior-design-for-bastards/> Accessed 02/03/2013 <http://www.ikebanahq.org/whatis.php> Accessed 01/03/2013
5. <http://badatsports.com/2011/mantras-for-plants-carson-fisk-vittoris-casual-objectgardens/> Accessed 01/02/2013
6. Julian Rose, "Objects in the Cluttered Field: Claes Oldenburg's Proposed Monuments," October 140 (Spring 2012), p 126
7. <http://blogs.walkerart.org/centerpoints/2010/05/05/plant-as-decorative-element-in-agallery/> Accessed 12/10/2012
8. André Lepecki "Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Object," October 140 (Spring 2012) p. 84
9. <http://whenthennow.tumblr.com/post/33167039389/digital-office-plants-are-newaesthet> Accessed 01/04/2013

JOHANNES VOGT

RAI A SPIRIS contemporary art talk

Mantras for Plants: Carson Fisk-Vittori's Casual Object Gardens

By Claudine Ise

5 July 2011

I've always been fascinated by accidental gardens. Some of the most beautiful gardens in Chicago can be found in the abandoned lots in-between buildings, or in the alleys behind people's homes and apartments next to the cars and trashcans. In Oak Park, where I live, you can find all sorts of lovely micro-gardens in the strips of dirt between property lines. Sometimes it seems like the best gardens arise in the spaces that people pay the least attention to. Carson Fisk-Vittori's use of plants, and particularly her manner of arranging plants and other objects in two and three-dimensional space brings these types of gardens to mind, although nothing about Fisk-Vittori's approach is accidental. I first encountered Carson's work at Chicago's MDW Fair a few months ago –her vacuum-packed plant sculpture was set against a wall with a purple, stipple-paint background at Roots & Culture's booth. I've been curious to learn more about it ever since, and am very grateful to her for taking the time to answer my questions.

Claudine Ise: There seems to be a connection between plant life and movie making in your work. The photograph titled "Movies," for example, shows a bunch of dandelions wrapped up in newspaper printed with movie ads, including one for *The Prince of Persia*; the photograph titled *Deleted Scenes* shows a casual arrangement of rocks (some sort of rock garden?) placed on a white sheet. And in *Sunset, 2008*, a photographic print of a sunset is sort of stuck casually behind a cactus, like a painted backdrop in a movie, but it's obviously not an illusion that's comprehensive enough for anyone to believe. Looking at all of your other images it seems to me like plants function like actors playing roles in a scene. (As in the "advertisements" in your earlier bodies of work). Which is a pretty funny idea, in that in humans, being compared to a plant/vegetable is a way of saying someone is brain dead. Can you talk about the works I mention above a bit – what's behind your references to filmmaking or advertising production?

Carson Fisk-Vittori: My photographs are more connected to advertising and mass media than movies specifically. Though I guess movies are often times elaborate commercials anyway. Advertising companies are experts at feeding images and messages straight into our brains. So using that format in my work allows me to incorporate the techniques that may have taken them years to develop to act against or in opposition to our consumer-based economy through the celebration of the everyday.



Carson Fisk-Vittori. *Movies*, 2011. Archival Inkjet Print.

Some of my work directly references advertising by title: *Toothpaste Ad*, *Venus Ad*, and *Perfume Ad*, all from 2009, and many of the other photographs use techniques such as gradient backdrops, color, and arrangement to reference advertising culture. One of my intentions is for viewers to realize that you can make everything around you look intriguing with the right lighting and composition, and hopefully realizing that you already have everything you need.

JOHANNES VOGT

An earlier work, *Sunset*, 2008, evolved from an experiment involving the use of gradient back-drops added to different domestic or ordinary scenes to examine if the technique would make an image more interesting to the eye. By revealing some of the “tricks” that are used in advertising, viewers will begin to question how images are manipulative. *Deleted Scenes* 2010 is an image of a found arrangement of rocks by a creek bed that were re-placed onto a paper backdrop in the same found arrangement. The act of removing them from their natural context allows the viewer to examine the natural arrangement more closely. The graphic element of the backdrop removes the natural background element, making the image similar to a diagram, which is easier for us to understand.

CI: Tell me about the shrink-wrapping of plants in some of your recent sculptures and photographs (like the photos I saw at Roots & Culture’s booth at Midway Fair). Shrinkwrapping is a preservative technique, but of course plants need air, sunlight and water to survive, like we do. Do you unwrap the plants after you’ve photographed them? *Lamp Design #2* is 3-D sculptural object, correct? It looks like you’ve inserted plastic balls within the fronds of two fern plants, and shrink-wrapped them to create and freeze their forms. How quickly do the plants decay once shrink-wrapped? Is decay part of the piece? (I’ve never seen one of the 3-d pieces in an exhibition, so I don’t know if we are meant to observe the object over a period of time). Tell me how the lamp design part fits in.

CFV: *Lamp Design #2* is a vacuum packed floral arrangement (as opposed to shrinkwrapped). It was part of the installation at Roots & Culture’s booth at MDW, as well as New Capital’s exhibition “Life Style Appropriate.” It is three-dimensional in nature, but exists in the photographic form as well. This piece recalls the floral arrangements I have previously shown which are ephemeral in nature but exist as photographs for the purposes of documentation. My first iteration of a “lamp design”, *Lamp Design*, 2010 was part of “Casual Object Garden and Other Material Matters,” a collaborative exhibition with Michael Hunter at Roots and Culture in 2010. It consisted of a large light box with a plant resting on top of it. *Lamp Design #2*, 2011, which you described as two fern plants with plastic balls, also has a light component: the marbled ball lights up with led lights. Titling them “lamp design” is in one way blurring the boundaries between art and design, and also playing with the idea of producing absurd furniture designs. My first experimental floral arrangements appeared in the *Real Normal Spring Collection* (2009), at the now-defunct Scott Projects in Chicago, IL. I installed floral arrangements that were scattered around the space, some of which were very minimal, with crude or simple constructions using basic household supplies and containers in the arrangement. At the time I was becoming interested in Ikebana, the art of Japanese floral arrangement, and wabi-sabi, a Japanese philosophy on the beauty of all things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. The floral arrangements I create have a life span ranging from days to weeks, and often times change multiple times during an exhibition. I am interested in the gesture that impermanence implies. In the art world objects are generally made to be archival and last forever, however this is a false permanence since everything is evolving from and going towards nothingness. The floral arrangements are a moment in time and an appreciation for the ephemeral and unmonumental.

CI: Works like your installation *Casual Object Garden*, 2010, and photographic images like *And Also More*, *Weekend Shapes* and *New Forest Table* from 2010 lead me to ask if you see a relationship between the making of a pictorial composition and the act of gardening? Both in terms of artistic intent and the impact of chance occurrences on the results?

CFV: I’m interested in playing with casual placement and intended placement. There is something interesting about examining a presentation of objects that have no intended organization. When I was installing *Casual Object Garden* with Michael Hunter, we would be unconsciously unpacking our work, and later come back to it and find something interesting in the way it was, in a way, automatically arranged. By accepting such cosmic arrangement you are sometimes left with more interesting possibilities than you might find by organizing in the grid-like way that our minds think. I like going back and forth between those two extremes.

CI: I liked the collaborative group show you participated in with Derek Frech, Justin Kemp, Joe Lacina, Joshua Pavlacky, and Daniel Wallace at LVL3, which was titled “A Rod Stewart Little Prince Charles Manson Family” and, like the title of the show, looked like it was produced according to the principles of exquisite corpse. The individual works on view did not have an artist’s name attached to it; rather each appeared to be the product of the entire group.

JOHANNES VOGT

Can you tell me about how that show came about, and how you as individual artists worked together to create the objects in the exhibition – you communicated remotely, right? Via Internet, etc.? Was having to communicate in spite of your geographic remoteness from one another part of the idea?

CFV: The show originated from three Philadelphia artists, Derek Frech, Joe Lacina, and Daniel Wallace, at their space Extra Extra. They previously collaborated on a similar exhibition, “Soft Focus,” 2010. The new iteration of the project, “A Rod Stewart Little Richard Prince Charles Manson Family,” 2011, added three additional artists: Massachusetts-based artist Justin Kemp, Philadelphia artist Joshua Pavlacky, and myself. No work in the exhibition had a single artist attached to it; rather the entire project was a collaborative endeavor. This in part removed the artists’ ego from the work and allowed for a free flow of ideas. Communicating remotely between 6 artists in 3 different locations became a large component of the process. To begin, we created Twitter and Tumblr accounts. Our collaborative Twitter was also anonymous, which further enabled a free flow of uncensored ideas. Our Tumblr acted as a work-shopping tool; everyone uploaded mockups of ideas that would then be commented on and further discussed in video chat meetings. This collaboration began about six months prior to the exhibition. Once the inperson installation began at the gallery, all of the artists were together in a real space, except for Justin Kemp who was Skyped in daily and acted as a consultant for the duration of the installation. During the installation, materials and objects were arranged and re-arranged until the group made a consensus.

CI: What do plants mean to you? When did you start using them in your own work, and why?

CFV: My work with plants started as a reaction from moving from a rural setting in Austin, TX to the urban Midwest city of Chicago six years ago. In the city the wilderness is very contained. Everything is either manicured or intentionally abandoned, to a point where the flowerbeds on Michigan avenue contrast with the abandoned empty lots, and both, in their differences, become these kinds of arrangements. They at once show our love of natural beauty, our need to control it, our ignorance and arrogance. I began to look at it in this way where a soda can thrown in a flower pot is a gesture, because it is intentionally placed whether or not the person was aware of it or not. It’s really a natural gesture, like eating a cherry and spitting out the core, but in our world we are dealing with these man-made objects that are specially designed and branded. The contrast of man-made object and plant life really shows how far away we are from living with nature. I basically started looking closer at these casual arrangements and creating my own with elements of plants and man-made objects. My first gesture was in my backyard, Portal, 2007, which is an image of a mirror leaning against a bush. In the image it looks as if the grass is climbing up the bush in the form of a prism, and almost looks like a digitally constructed image. From there I really started to get interested in exploring my own arrangements of natural and man-made rather than found situations. I view these arrangements as microcosms for our relationship with nature.

CI: What type of houseplants do you have in your own home/apartment? Do you have a garden, and if so, what’s in it?

CFV: In my apartment I have a lot of succulents and aroid plants, I am also growing some herbs and vegetables outside. I also have another garden: <http://flowershop.tumblr.com>.

CI: What you are working on right now?

CFV: I’m currently in the midst of a few different projects. I am working with Seattle-based artist Sol Hashemi, on a landscape design proposal, that we hope to begin materializing in the next year or two. Philadelphia artist Derek Frech, and I are collaborating on an installation relating to man-made displays of natural bounty. And the latest iteration of my ongoing collaborative practice with Chicago-based Michael Hunter, NewHands, it is a mainly text based practice. I will be included in a group exhibition at the Philadelphia ICA this fall entitled “Blowing on a Hairy Shoulder / Grief Hunters,” curated by Israeli artist Doron Rabina, and I will be having my first solo exhibition this August at Important Projects in Oakland, California.

Claudine Isé has worked in the field of contemporary art as a writer and curator for the past decade, and currently serves as the Editor of the Art21 Blog. Claudine regularly writes for Artforum.com and Chicago magazine, and has also worked as an art critic for the Los Angeles Times. Before moving to Chicago in 2008, she worked at the Wexner Center in Columbus, OH as associate curator of exhibitions, and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles as assistant curator of contemporary art, where she curated a number of Hammer Projects. She has Ph.D. in Film, Literature and Culture from the University of Southern California.