

FROM A TALK GIVEN BY DAN ABRAMSON, JULY 10, 1993 AT
SHERRY FRUMKIN GALLERY, SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA:

. . . What Dan Abramson does as an artist is a fairly well kept secret. And I take most of the responsibility for that. Between 1970 and 1986 I made no attempt to show my work.

My first solo exhibition (1962) and the better group shows I had a part in--those being in New York City or thereabouts--those involved abstract expressionist things, action painting which, in keeping up with the times, segued into a pop-representational-sort of genre. We're talking 20 years ago here, the point where my level of SINCERITY and COMMITMENT underwent catharsis.

To support my family back then, I worked as an advertising writer. Early on, just a couple of years out of college, in fact, I'd been a contributing writer and associate editor of ART:USA:TODAY which was published by Viking. That's when I learned that art writing per se pays peanuts.

Oddly enough, as a writer, I cannot always find or explain in words exactly what it is I'm feeling. Or what it is I believe. It is often the writing of others that provides articulation and illumination.

I want to read a short poem by Charles Simic that beautifully verbalizes feelings I've nursed along for probably my entire life. This poem is from a rather new volume called Dime Store Alchemy. It's a collection of poems that celebrates

the work of Joseph Cornell. Simic, you should know, is a Pulitzer winner, and this is his 16th published collection:

We Comprehend by Awe

WHITMAN, TOO, saw poetry everywhere. In 1912 Apollinaire spoke of a new source of inspiration: "Prospectuses, catalogues, posters, advertisements of all sorts" which contain the poetry of our age.

The history of that idea is familiar and so are its heroes, Picasso, Arp, Duchamp, Schwitters, Ernst—to name only a few. You don't make art, you find it. You accept everything as its material. Schwitters collected scraps of conversation, newspaper cuttings for his poems. Eliot's *Waste Land* is collage and so are Pound's *Cantos*.

The collage technique, that art of reassembling fragments of preexisting images in such a way as to form a new image, is the most important innovation in the art of this century. Found objects, chance creations, ready-mades (mass-produced items promoted into art objects) abolish the separation between art and life. The commonplace is miraculous if rightly seen, if recognized.

"The question is not what you look at, but what you see," Thoreau writes in his journal. Cornell speaks of "being plunged into [a] world of complete happiness in which every triviality becomes imbued with a significance . . ."

Georgio de Chirico, whom Cornell admired immensely, writes: "The huge glove is painted zinc, with its terrible golden fingernails, swinging over the shop door in the sad wind blowing on a city afternoon, revealed to me, with its index finger pointing down at the flag stones of the pavement, the hidden signs of the new melancholy."

This exhibition presents certain pieces that I've made over the last two years. I had been getting more deeply involved with the relationship between the outside of the box and the interior. Concept began to take precedence over content--that is, the various and curious objects and fragments that get arranged within a confinement. I do not see, not anymore, the box and glass as a container or confiner but as dimensions of a total--in the same sense that the borders of a canvas do not need to confine content. Matisse, for example, when he drew, he would never draw in holding lines in advance of the drawing. The better artists, I suppose, are of a sort who do not observe lines...

I came to "The Gallery" itself as a subject or concept after one of my collectors--an architect, albeit a frustrated one--saw more clearly than I myself did where it was I was headed. And once again, it was through another person's writing, through a book that the architect passed along to me, that my own thinking gained articulation: Inside the White Cube by Brian O'Doherty. This seminal volume, which began as essays in Art Forum in the seventies, examines the ideology of the gallery space as we see it in our time. It portrays the interinvolvement of the white cube that is the basic configuration of the modern gallery and the art-like objects that get displayed therein. Or herein, as you can see. As some of you might know--and certainly all of you can imagine--one cannot get anywhere as an artist without a gallery. And a gallery cannot continue without artists. But

the artist does not dominate the gallery. The other way around is more likely the case. What I'm saying is this: It is the artist's work that must serve the white cube. The gallery space is the dominant that must be addressed. Marshall McLuhan gave us to realize that "The medium is the message." O'Doherty's essays lead to a realization that the gallery and what gets contained within add up to a single experience. And it is that total experience--something that can provoke a galaxy of emotions, everything from euphoria to revulsion--that is on my mind when I make these boxes. And so, in looking at them, please feel free to fill them with your own imaginations. I give them form. Form is the shape of content. What remains is is that enigmatic haze known as ambiguity, the ambiguity between the certain and the uncertain.

In an afterword to recent re-publication of . . . White Cube, O'Doherty wrote: "We now know that the maker has limited control over the content of his or her art. It is its reception that ultimately determines its content."

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