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The following notes were developed to accompany a gallery talk I did while walking through the 2012 John Chamberlain retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. They are not supposed to be an “essay” per se, just some notes about his work. Thanks to sculptor Taylor Davis for her invaluable insights while walking through the show with me.

SOME THOUGHTS ON JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

I.

THE COUCHES, TASTE, AND BURLESQUE

I didn't think too much about John Chamberlain's work until a visit to Chinati in 2002, when I saw one of his couches. I actually wasn't sure *what* this huge foam thing was, but you could climb on top of it, and it was flanked by two video monitors playing a kind of Jack Smith-esque hippie sex movie (which turned out to be his 1968 film *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*), and on a little shelf nearby there was a printed statement by Chamberlain partly about laziness. “In what I do, constant hard work is not necessary; my drive is based on laziness. I don't mind admitting that I'm lazy because laziness is, for me, an attribute.”

All this was an eye opener, to say the least. I thought Chamberlain was the car crash guy, a relic from the age of expressionist machismo. What was he even *doing* at Marfa, the home of Protestant Judd boxes? And for that matter, why was he at the uber-classy DIA, by the way? All I knew was that he was a denizen of the '50s who came from Beat poetry and welded junk sculpture. Until the scales fell from my eyes in Marfa, I did not know much else about him. I had no idea that his work actually extended from crushed steel to delicately layered paintings, from underground movies to conceptual writing and process photography; I hadn't a clue about his work in foam, plastic, foil, film, video, nor about his many unrealized and funny ideas for installation and other social projects. Only after seriously reading up did I find out that his fans included not only Donald Judd but also Dan Graham and Lawrence Weiner, Donna DeSalvo, Brian O'Dougherty, Klaus Kertess, Christopher Williams, and other smart, non-vulgar people. And it was hard not to notice that some of his egregious chromatic and formal moves practically predict work seen in galleries now. So I started marveling that Chamberlain could have remained hidden in plain sight, that an artist could become a cliché *and* remain simultaneously under-known. Not that Chamberlain's situation hasn't been duly noted; Brian O'Dougherty wrote that Chamberlain suffers from category trouble: “He's always out of joint.” I would say that his production runs restlessly down the middle of various genres, adhering to none as doggedly as it would seem, so his work actually ends up being predictive of later hybrid forms. As Judd said, “the work is simultaneously turbulent, passionate, cool and hard.” Chamberlain is a collagist, jamming shards and pieces together, not only pieces of steel, but ill-fitting pieces of the culture around him, making jokes fit with monuments, making fluff go with glare, forming an oeuvre that is in fact a patchwork of the culture around him.

Chamberlain's 1971 retrospective at the Guggenheim, curated by Diane Waldman, featured a range of many of the materials that Chamberlain had used up to that date, including early welded pieces and foams, paper bags and Plexiglass works. In the lobby of the museum was an enormous installation of one of his couches, which he called barges,

which invited viewers to lounge around on its soft surfaces. That piece was installed with monitors on either side playing some homemade country-western music being performed by Chamberlain's friends in a loft. Chamberlain was totally ahead of his time with his 1967 foam couches: by now they seem like a kind of proto-relational aesthetics. Their scale alone marks them as inherently a form of social art, because there's no way to put them anywhere except in, say, the lobby of a museum or some other institutional space—they are often gargantuan slabs, up to 25 feet long. Then there is the impropriety of their method and use: Chamberlain cut and carved them roughly and crudely by hand and with saws and knives—there's a film of Chamberlain on YouTube making one on these couches, hacking at the foam with giant kitchen knives, wearing suspenders and a t-shirt and a hat, though eventually the t-shirt comes off and he's just in suspenders and a hat, with just his hairy chest and moustache and little pair of khaki shorts, while pretty girls and other guys hang around drinking and smoking on and around the foam slabs. The couches always defy propriety. They are soft and rather ridiculous stations covered with silky fabric that invite people to lie down, to flop on. As the writer Gary Indiana put it: “Consider the eroticism of the massive foam couches: vast, brooding carnal invitations designed for one thing and one thing only.” Or Klaus Kertess: “Furniture as sculpture as instant party.” Chamberlain himself describes the origin of these pieces in a more slapstick way; he says they began while he was trying to figure out how to change a mattress pad with a friend and the mattress pad foam kept getting out of whack. “Shoving the foam rubber into the mattress was funny...” (In typical Chamberlain vernacular-speak, he also noted that the foam work makes people uncomfortable because it is made from urethane foam, which deteriorates at a rate faster than that of human cell tissue.)

Indeed, Dan Graham, an advanced thinker, wrote praisingly of Chamberlain's couches, stating in *Rock My Religion* that they were important to him, that they offered a physiologically charged sensate experience not unlike sex or drugs, one that confuses subject and object in social space, and he noted the forms of irony implicit in them: “cultural and aesthetic irony in Chamberlain's questioning of the effect of mass consumption and a social irony concerning the economics of built-in obsolescence.”

Meanwhile, the *New York Times* critic, Hilton Kramer, reviewed the 1971 show dismissively. In a column entitled “Serving a Period Taste,” in which he did credit Chamberlain with adapting the medium of welded steel sculpture to the pictorial syntax of New York School Abstract Expressionist painting, he still chided that Chamberlain had done little or nothing else of interest, that he had “left sculpture as he found it.” He stated that Chamberlain's genre was a thing of the past, that the work



was “of interest now primarily to researchers gathering data on the wayward tastes of another era.” (Ouch.) And the review snarked: “There is something stupid in treating a minor artist as if he were a major figure.”

Actually, the review is interesting because it shows the old, conservative Kramer oddly in alignment with a part of the left/critical art world of the time, both parts of the art world struggling to eschew and distance themselves from the then-totally-commodified format of Ab Ex. Kramer: “... when Abstract Expressionism was enjoying for the first time a widespread influence... (the) ideal artistic statement would have consisted in a pair of paint-spattered blue jeans and an unironed blue work shirt, somehow elevated into a saleable commodity.” Apparently whether from the right or the left, Chamberlain was just too gauchely celebratory of the capitalized gesture of intuition; from either side gesture itself was now at least suspicious, if not completely bankrupt. But what precisely interests me in this bad review is how it fingers, pardon the expression, one of the exact characteristics that we might find great about Chamberlain’s work now: its attunement to a kind of bad taste. One of his work’s formal functions is precisely its superficiality: literally, how things appear, how they are formed by their surfaces, how they deal with surface. With one more historical turn of the screw, this quality is somehow redeemed in a post-Warhol time when surface itself is of supreme importance, and when surface itself self-reflexively reveals not only what lays there but what is suppressed by what lays on top. By fully deploying tactility, in all its expressionistic vulgarity, Chamberlain literally provokes the issue of taste, the limits of taste, the dictates of taste. His delivery system of surfaces and facades, all done up in a fleshily audacious array of color, are all part of what I love about this work now. His work may be a commodity but, it is a meeting of flesh and commodity.

When Chamberlain’s couches were originally shown, they were often flanked by those video monitors broadcasting looped programs of various kinds (organized by Chamberlain), in some cases his own movies, like *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, and in another case (an installation in 1981 in Germany) an ultra-modern looped program of ridiculous American TV commercials, such as fake commercials from *Saturday Night Live*. Chamberlain actually spent much of the year 1968 involved in film. He made three 16 mm films: *Wedding Nights*, *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, and *Wide Point*. All of these feature downtown underground superstars Taylor Mead and Ultra Violet, and they are as much like parodies of underground film as they *are* underground films. Chamberlain himself hung around the set of Warhol’s *Lonesome Cowboys*, and he was even asked to *be* in the film when its star Ondine failed to show up. But he said no. His own films are ambient, distracted, Dionysian visual extravaganzas where the characters exist in various exotic, dreamy, strange places amidst meandering scripts and voluptuous goings-on. *Wide Point* was really a kind of proto-installation project, as it was shot on seven projectors and was supposed to be projected on seven screens simultaneously. Chamberlain had lots of ideas for other film projects that were never completed, including a vehicle for superstar Viva about a Navajo creation myth, and another film that was supposed to be based on the “secret life” of William Shakespeare.

In his film projects you find the same basic entanglement of sex and a sense of humor that are present in his giant couches. Chamberlain said many times: “I deal with material as I see fit... which has to do primarily with sexual and intuitive thinking.” His films mock or imitate underground films and yet they *are* those kinds of films, and similarly I think the couches both *are* sculptures and a brazen parody of these sculptures at the same time. They contain the dual consciousness of making something and being something. They’re neither purely a parody nor a cynical gesture, and are perhaps similar to the early work of Claes Oldenburg, another Pop expressionist. Barbara Rose, writing about Oldenburg’s *Store* in 1969, could be writing about Chamberlain when she says, “*The Store* was a place of quick love, as well as a museum... With its brilliant color, sensuous surfaces, and abundance of goods, *the Store* hinted at the joys and pleasures that industrial civilization *might* bring. It was also both a satire on the American obsession to consume, and a celebration of the vitality of American culture.” Chamberlain’s work is not only brazenly carnal, but brazenly comical in its base enjoyment of its own low-ness. His work both makes and makes a mockery of a formal language that it

speaks anyway. The couches are an example of this duality, and so are his many famously punning and lewd titles which read like a parade of burlesque acts or characters: *Pardon my Breeze*, *One Stop Smut Shop*, *Toasted Hitlers*, *Mrs Swayed Schwooz*, *Lord Suckfist*, *Infected Eucharist*, *Wandering Bliss Meets Fruit of the Loom*.

2.

PROCESS, COLOR, AND SURFACE

Though Chamberlain’s work is usually described simply as a kind of Pop expressionism, the adjectives you might assign to it are broad. You might use the words *baroque*, *hybrid*, *anthropomorphic*, *performative*, *relational*, *wrecked*, *collapsed*, and *camp*. This sculptural vocabulary makes clear the connection between his work and a whole generation of newer artists, artists who themselves make a broad spectrum of work with both a formal sense of color and materials and a sense of humor and corporeality. Chamberlain’s excessive shininess, delighted fakeness, and assertive exteriority are almost jokey forms of desire. His work also shares with more contemporary artists a defiant rejection of the clean-cut categories of painting vs. sculpture. His sculptures really function like paintings, and essentially I think they *are* arguably paintings, or collages. One of the formal ways that Chamberlain sculptures blur the line between painting and sculpture is that the work often seems to have no structure inside. Rather than revealing its structural armature, like a good modernist thing, Chamberlains are centrifugal; their underlying structures are suppressed or not there at all. They are forms like cabbages or roses, sheaths of concentric surfaces that are bent around mysterious cores which we cannot know because we never see them. Sometimes we can peek in between the ply of the work and see that there is nothing in there but more of the same. In fact, Chamberlain proposes different options for volumes of space inside the work, in some cases to have *no* space inside, as I’ve been describing, and in others to *start* with a strongly declared inner space and then to crumple or crush it away in a single gesture. The oil cans and the galvanized steel works from ’67, ’68, and ’69 are examples of this latter way of dealing with interior space, and the work almost contains the loud pop as the air inside it is crushed like a cigarette pack or a balloon. He based the proportions of these boxes on the proportions of cigarette packages—at that time, he was going to nightclubs like Max’s Kansas City every night, and was famous for sitting around drinking and crushing cigarette packs. No one could crush a pack of Gauloises like Chamberlain could. The galvanized steel works were begun by working on some discarded Judd boxes that had been rejected for having slight irregularities. Other galvanized steel boxes were fabricated especially for him to crush. His “Penthouse” pieces, made of paper bags with paint and resin thrown on them, were expressly made to capture the energy of blowing up and popping a paper bag. Chamberlains are more compositional than constructional. These forms are arrived at through a series of gestural decisions made with swatches of metal. The question of *how* they were made, fitted together, or attached, or *where* the materials were torn from to begin with, are oblique. There are little hints, of course, that they were once cars or appliances, found or chosen from scrap metal yards, but mostly in the end the metal they are made of is rendered as strokes or patches of color, just like in a painting, strokes that register time and change and motion and flux as a painterly painting does. In this way, they’re performative sculptures, overtly performing their own process, materiality, and trajectories. The raw torn edges are held together with a little tack bolt here or there, but these forms are seemingly always on the verge of falling apart. Clearly if there is such a thing as minimalism, this is its opposite. Judd called it “immoderate,” “snazzy,” and “elegant in the wrong way.”

All the work is somewhat anthropomorphic, though it’s notable for omitting a sense of head or face, and concentrating instead on suggestive bodies. The bodies are absorbed into the materiality of the sculpture itself, and it’s hard to separate precisely a figure from a cluster... but a sense of a figure always seems to be fundamentally present. Chamberlain once said: “The definition of sculpture to me is stance and attitude.” The earlier work seems more like single figures, like *Miss Lucy Pink* from 1963, about which Chamberlain said: “[It] has a sort of front and a back. I look at the piece every now and then and sometimes it reminds

me of somebody who's putting on a good front, but you take a look around the back and her ass is hanging out." As his work progresses chronologically, the figures multiply, swell, accumulate into masses or assemblies of figure. Perhaps this formally connects to Chamberlain's interest, as an art student in Chicago in the 1950s, in Hindu temple architecture—think of the temple of Khujaraho, for example, which has a roof which features sculptures of thousands of copulating gods and goddesses. I think that this kind of orgiastic crowd scene is expressed in the later works.

3.

PAINTING AND COLOR

By the '60s Chamberlain had moved away from the language of the scrap metal yard, and started to engage specifically with painterly color, combinations of color, saturated color—color used not just as a surface treatment, but as the palpable material that you mold and crush to make a form. This assertion of color as a primary force rather than a secondary one is what makes Chamberlain a painter as much as a sculptor. Chamberlain's color is second to none: neither second to volume, nor form, nor drawing, nor structure, nor part of a semiotic system in which the color merely signifies. Judd wrote that Chamberlain was the first and really the only sculptor to really use color. George Sugarman is about the only other sculptor I can think of working at the time in a definitively polychromatic mode, but even in Sugarman's sculptures each various piece or shape is painted a different color, bounded by the limit of the part itself. In a Chamberlain, by contrast, there are a thousand more colors present than there are recognizable objects, even if there is sometimes a fan blade or a car fender. The colors are greater than the parts, and the colors in Chamberlains ooze and spread across the surfaces and the parts, and do all the things that color does in painting, like smear, tint, stain, scumble, feather, layer, veil, glaze, harmonize, contradict. The color in Chamberlain is extravagant and promiscuous; listen to these sexy-sounding color functions described by Klaus Kertess, writing in Chamberlain's catalogue raisonné: "The inhaling swell is anchored by a diagonal of off-whites that occasionally secretes a pale shiny blue and drips with a cascade of yellow-orange. Broad irregular blades of red push out from underneath." Or: "[A] pale silver lilac boxlike container capped with a peaked golden umbrel shape... until it bursts open to reveal a flatulent gable sheltering a wrinkled blue cone with an orifice enveloping red folds."

Chamberlain's use of color therefore follows the logic of his production of surfaces: colors as well as surfaces are literally ripped from somewhere else, picked from piles, torn from parts, and then pressed, smashed, crushed, bent and collaged into fractured accumulative masses in which color relations change as you move around them. Chamberlain's "Kiss" pieces from 1979, which Judd called his "hard sweet pastel enamels," were exceptions to his usual process. These were crushed-up oil cans that were painted both before *and* after being crushed; paint was applied to the various facets of the cans first, *then* they were crushed; afterwards various surfaces were painted on top.

By the way, in the '60s all of Chamberlain's paintings were named after popular singing groups: The Righteous Brothers, DeeDee Sharp (whose song "The Mashed Potato" ushered in the popular dance of that same name), Ray Charles, The Supremes (a painting that he actually sold to Diana Ross. There is a wonderful picture of the two of them together; I guess they really were hanging out.)

4.

1969-1970 AND THE ODD TEXT PIECES

Although 1969 and 1970 were years when Chamberlain was in the middle of a seven-year-long hiatus from most of his painted steel work, still these were productive years for him sculpturally, a time during which he produced some interesting sculptures made from scrap appliances, as well as his Plexiglass works and the paper-bag Penthouse pieces. In 1969 he made one of his two sets of elegant white scrap-appliance material, pieces in which he did not disguise the sources and left many of the drawer handles and bits of the fixtures themselves showing. In 1970, back in East LA again, Chamberlain made a body of very West-Coast-

looking work made of melted sheets of Plexiglass, then a new material. These works were made by heating the Plexiglass in a giant walk-in oven, forming it into folded or collapsed shapes, and then annealing it with lustrous translucent glazes made of quartz and aluminum in his friend Larry Bell's vacuum-coating machine. Chamberlain himself has said that he never quite got the bugs out of this process and that he moved on (to the paper-and-resin Penthouse pieces) before he really perfected the use of these new and exotic materials.

Also in 1969-70, he worked on several somewhat vexed language and text projects, first through the Art and Technology program at LACMA, run by Maurice Tuchman, which paired artists and corporations to work together collaboratively. Chamberlain was paired first with Dart Industries, and then rather inexplicably with the RAND Corporation. At Dart, he tried to realize a video project that had been suggested to him by Douglas Huebler, a mapping project to be simultaneously screened on fourteen screens. That didn't pan out. Then he came up with a smell environment project called SNIFFTER, a presentation of more than a hundred odors indexed into a kind of parodical poetics: some of the odor categories included mother's milk, German Shepherd, wrestling arena, moonshot at Cape Kennedy, Hostess cupcakes, Larry Bell's studio, and Charlie McCarthy. The SNIFFTER project didn't pan out either, and Chamberlain moved on from Dart to try working at the RAND Corporation, a conservative think tank functioning like the brain of the military industrial complex. RAND specialized in the development and study of gaming structures, including war games, and was partially responsible for the development of the Internet, and for war policymaking. (It was where Daniel Ellsberg worked, and it was from RAND that Ellsberg stole the Pentagon Papers.) However, in this political environment, and at this highly politicized time, Chamberlain did NO political activist work at all. Instead, at the height of the Vietnam War, he worked at RAND for six rather disastrous weeks on absurd poetic texts. The RAND people mostly didn't like him and he didn't like them back. He complained to a friend at the time about how uptight the people there were, saying, "I can't get into any of their circuits... like the girls wear too much underwear." He tried arranging screenings of his Hernando Cortez film, which most of the RAND people hated, and the film was shut down. He ended up sending the other RAND workers questionnaires in which the respondents were to make up their own answers, rather than to answer questions, and asked that these answers be sent to his office in room 1138. The workers mostly refused and sent him antagonistic notes like "the answer is to terminate Chamberlain," or merely "fuck you." He ended up writing his own answers, and publishing a 34-page-long poetry-text formulation, which is divided into two parts: "What are the circumstances to these responses?" and "What is the response to these circumstances?"

Later in the '70s Chamberlain also worked on other never-realized text pieces, including a project to collect hundreds of clichés that could operate in a cliché world of experience, setting them into grids and trying to "wash" them with different "informational fields." (Whatever that means.) Chamberlain had studied with the poet Robert Creeley in 1955 at Black Mountain College, and had sustained a lasting friendship with Creeley. By the '70s he was also friendly with Lawrence Weiner, who interviewed him for his DIA catalogue in 1991. These associations and projects underline his interest and use of language as a structure and a material, not unlike his use of tactile materials. Yet his language projects, which are in line with the work of contemporary artists of his time, remain the most obscure part of his work.

5.

SURFACE AND WORDS

Black Mountain was arguably one of the most radical and generative art schools in the history of America. The original head of the school was Josef Albers, straight from the Bauhaus; when Chamberlain was a student there, the head was the poet Charles Olson. With Creeley as a teacher, Chamberlain played word games, made word combinations, made lists, played with language as a material. In the interview published in his DIA catalogue, Chamberlain told Lawrence Weiner that "my teachers were Kline, de Kooning, Charles Olson. Kline gave me the structure. De Kooning gave me the color. De Kooning knew

about the color of America—the color of America is reflected in their automobiles.” Chamberlain did not elaborate on what he got from Olson in this quote, but I think you can see what he got by looking at Olson’s 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse,” which is, in part, about the kinetics of American-type poetry. I think that Olson gave Chamberlain his method and his speed. “Projective Verse” describes poetry as a physical form that rides out of the poet’s body on the breath, moving into the world on the rhythm and the projection of the syllable. The poem discharges energy as it moves from the poet to the reader, via the poet’s speaking voice, his or her own breathy embodiment. Then the poem exists in the open field of the page, where the empty spaces are as important as the words printed upon it, and it exists in the open air of the world itself, where the poem is like a polyhedron that connects the speaker, the hearer, and the world itself at various points. “Projective Verse” is also about SPEED. Olson says, “...if you set up as a poet, use use use the process at all points, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!” One perception must be followed immediately by another, he says, as the poem rides along the line of breath that carries the energy as it moves between the body and mind of the poet to the outside world. Olson says, “keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen”—and the word “citizen” is important here, because this is a social engagement, a social concept of expression, a form of expression that is conceived as having to do with the world. Language borne on the breath is the surface of words, the surface of its materiality; within the logic of Black Mountain’s cross-pollination of Europeans, Americans, poets and artists, the idea of expression is not a one-way street in which an artist merely expresses their private inescapes outward, but an intersubjective dynamic between an artist and the world. The materiality of language is a moment of activity, an instant when something is seen, perceived and understood, the “instanter” intersubjective moment of getting a handle on things. As Robert Creeley has written in a poem about Chamberlain: “There is a handle to the world that is looked for, a way of taking it in hand.”

In a literal sense this connects with a change in Chamberlain’s process at Black Mountain: working there with collage, under the tutelage of Olson and the influence of his artist-peer Alfred Leslie, Chamberlain stopped using glue to make his collages in the old slow way, and started to use a stapler, an immediate and faster way to attach things, a way to move “instanter,” as Olson says. Stapling allowed for the immediate action that aligns with the faster speech-action. “You just throw on the materials and staple them down.” In fact, a more precise way to describe it is you grab the materials, you assemble the materials, you cut the materials up, you throw the materials down, you scramble the materials, you rearrange the materials, you staple them down, in a swift, kinetic dialectical chain of actions moving from construction to destruction to reconstruction.

6.

HAIRDRESSING, HISTORY, RESTLESSNESS, FOAM

By 1962 Chamberlain was a respected and established artist; he had been included in a group show at MOMA and had had a solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery. Yet, as Kertess writes, “his acceptance was primarily among fellow artists and the immediate inner circle of the art world. Deserved critical and commercial success still eluded him.” By the middle of the ‘60s he had already begun branching out of the crushed cars he was famous for, and was working with the diverse materials I’ve been describing. He moved back and forth between LA and New York at least eleven times, if not more. He made at least three bodies of paintings and who knows how many prints, drawings, and collages. And he began to show his work in Europe. During this restive time, he removed himself from his own cliché of production by largely quitting the painted scrap steel for seven years in 1967, not to return to it (with only a few exceptions) until 1974. Chamberlain’s practice was actually more restless and irregular than he is usually given credit for. He often stopped doing what he was expected to do and changed to something else, though his staunchest support came from the stalwart art world figures of Donald Judd and Barbara Rose. But as Kertess puts it, “Chamberlain remained a pagan friend of the monastic order.”

Here is how Chamberlain describes the period of 1967: “I was tired of using automobile material because the only response I ever got was that I was making automobile crashes and that I used the automobile as some symbolic bullshit about our society. All of a sudden sculpture was the only thing that was supposed NOT to have color in our society. The fact that all this material had color had made it very interesting to me. But the more interested I got, the more everyone kept insisting it was car crashes. Since nobody got it, I grew bored with the whole idea and thought I would do something with no color in it.” So in the mid-‘60s he explored the possibilities of using the tool and shape of the French curve, a drafting tool. These sculptures didn’t really work, but led to the subsequent large body of his foam work beginning in 1966 and continuing for the next six years, until 1972. These amazing, very raw and swift foam sculptures and couches began with a set of thirty or so sculptures made quickly from kitchen sponges, which became the basis for numerous works with urethane foam, all cinched and tied with lassos and ropes, some bare and some with paint dripped on them. They are remarkable, vigorous works that would seem to speak a common language with Process art, and yet at the time they were largely overlooked and not at all commercially successful. Chamberlain showed this body of foam works almost immediately after an explosion of making them, at Virginia Dwan Gallery in LA in 1966 and then in Cologne and Munich in ‘67, but none were sold. All were returned to Chamberlain and he sold a few for pocket money to anyone who asked, including Walter Hopps, who came knocking on his studio door and walked away with one for twenty bucks. Chamberlain gave the rest away.

Michael Kimmelman wrote in the *New York Times* in 2003: “The connection between his sculptures and bouffant hairdos is an unexplored avenue of art historical inquiry.” In the 1950s, Chamberlain had been a hairdresser and makeup man, even teaching at a hairdressing and makeup school at one point. He said, “I could do the job easily. I was sort of ahead of my time. Like, if we had a *Vogue* magazine lying around and somebody saw a hairdo in it, I was the one who could figure out how to do it. When I took my state board, I passed my marcelling test with a cold iron.”

A collector recalled Chamberlain this way: “I think he was somewhat embarrassed by his salon days and presented himself as a very gruff and hairy character, looking more like a north woodsman than a sculptor. He would come to the very sedate law firm where I was working and bring new work to show me. The receptionist would call me saying, ‘A person is here to see you.’ They wouldn’t let him sit in the client’s waiting room, but rather they would put him in the messenger’s delivery room. When I asked why they would treat my client this way, they said that he didn’t go with the Currier and Ives décor.”

Though his foam work asserts some of the specific goals and attitudes of Process art of the early ‘70s, and though this work began before Robert Morris made his felt pieces, still the Chamberlains were never valued at anything nearly what the Morris pieces were valued at. In 1969, Chamberlain was included in the exhibition *New Media/New Methods* at MOMA, curated by Kynaston McShine, along with Warhol, Serra, Hesse, and others, an important show though there was no catalogue. One of his 1967 foam pieces was in the show, listed in the museum’s records as being worth \$900. The 1968 Morris felt piece that was included is recorded at a value of \$5000. Subsequently, Chamberlain was left out of several big surveys of the new art, from 1969 on, at the Whitney Museum in New York and in Europe. Robert Morris, who virtually wrote the textbook work on the art of the 1970s, never wrote a word on Chamberlain, though clearly he knew his work as they both showed at Castelli and had been in the MOMA show together.

7.

VULGARITY

At the time I was first thinking about Chamberlain, a few years ago, the persona of the dandy was in vogue in the art world. In the face of the dandy’s disdainful refusal to get his or her hands dirty, I wondered what you could call the artistic persona that Chamberlain seemed to embody. There was that statement about laziness, and he certainly seemed like a *refined* flâneur or bricoleur, but he still seemed to throw himself into the

world with a big fat expressionistic embrace. I started to wonder if on the flip side of the dandy there was a counter-dandy, someone I would call a vulgarian. As I understand it, a dandy is a figure that arose partly in relation to the class distinctions of late nineteenth/early twentieth century French society—a sort of ironic self-assignment of class, an imitation aristocrat who is actually from the middle class. It seems that that persona can only arise when the classes aren't exactly fixed, when there are upper-middle classes and lower-middle classes and the possibility of class movement. The dandy classically expresses a posture of disdain for work as a form of critique of the bourgeoisie—the lower or middle bourgeoisie striking a farcical pose of the upper bourgeoisie. I was thinking that a vulgarian is just the reverse: a person whose work revels in doing things. Vulgarians do things rather than keeping themselves at a critical ironic remove from doing things; they exalt in the corporeal goings-on of the body. Vulgarians care, while dandies don't care. The vulgarian transgresses refinement by going downward into carnality instead of upward into aesthetics. After all, class self-re-assignment was achieved by downwardly mobile bohemians in the 1950s and later in the 1970s by seeming like all they were doing was working. Work, and the worker, became a position, became sexy. Workers were another romantic figure, the highest form of low. So Chamberlain, as a kind of Baudelairean *poète maudit*, a poet/rag-picker, a gleaner, faces the baseness of the city and its refuse, archives its scrap and garbage, sorts things judiciously, finds the treasures of the city's junk. This character has more to do with clownishness or embarrassment than wit and hauteur.

Of course both of these positions are constructs. But in thinking about this idea of the willful embrace of the vulgar, TJ Clark's famous 1994 article on Abstract Expressionism, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," was an inescapable framework, just for linking the handmade, the expressionist, the vulgar, and the vulgarly middle-class. In the text, Clark says, "I think we might come to describe Abstract Expressionist paintings better if we took them above all to be vulgar." To call an art work vulgar is to do something more transgressive than to call it low or *informe*. The term vulgar points two ways—to the object itself, some atrociously visual quality that the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries, and to the object's existence in a particular social world. Clark's text has this interesting ending where he ties Abstract Expressionism with lyricism, and says: "...the lyric in our time is deeply ludicrous. The deep ludicrousness of lyric is Abstract Expressionism's subject, to which it returns like a tongue to a loosening tooth."

Clark's equation of Ab Ex with the *ludicrous* is familiar in the general critique of expressionism, in which all expression is lumped together under the heading *expressionism*. In the text, Clark embarrassedly grapples with his own squeamish feelings about expressions at all. What, after all, are they really expressing? Nevertheless, by pointing out the connection between class and taste in relation to modern art in general, Clark gets at something that is usually suppressed in the literature of the art of the time, and which remains unclassifiable in Chamberlain's work itself, which is its own paradoxes of taste. Chamberlain's work contains both bad taste and ironic detachment from bad taste, and it therefore points two ways—both to excess and a satire of excess. As Hilton Kramer said, the work contains its own desire for wayward tastes. I thought about the writer and painter Sidney Tillim, who said in 1989: "Much of modernism's taste is rooted in a form of 'bad' taste. A too-generalized taste has debilitated most of modern art. Taste as I define it is not just about itself but an index of contact with feeling."

So I am interested in thinking about Chamberlain in terms that I call vulgar, in part because of the specific drive in his work toward the sexual and brazen and showy, and in part because Chamberlain makes a kind of slapstick of the idea of progress. He consciously repeats himself when it seems that things should be ended: his jokey titles, his crushed forms, the whole idiom of Ab Ex. At the same time, he insists on the lyrical, almost sentimental, meaning of care, touch, attachment. He repeats the verbs of his process consistently: wadding, squeezing, hugging, bunching, and scrunching. For Chamberlain, everything is making and feeling and doing by hand. In his mundane way of putting things, he likened his process to the way people throw towels on the towel rack in the bathroom or how they bunch toilet paper up: "... the wadding—the only time

[people] can do it is instinctive, with toilet paper. They get this long line of material and they do something with it, very personal." Chamberlain's method is a totally tactile, sexualized, instinctual form of making, and the hands are the tools for knowing and for producing objects that are as much sentient bodies as corporeal objects. I think for Chamberlain the hand is analogous to what the breath is in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," i.e., the way the thought rides out of the body and into the world. When Chamberlain says "sex," it is actually a shorthand for a phenomenological, experiential way of knowing the world.

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May 2012



