

MONUMENT⁵³

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

KERRY HILL IN TAIPEI

BATHING BEAUTY

LIPPMANN'S BOY CHARLTON

OUT WITH THE OLD

RENZO IN ROME

COUNTRY LIFE

TONY FRETTON

WHAT'S NEXT

VENICE BIENNALE

DECEMBER/JANUARY 02-03

AUD\$16.45[INC GST]

NZ\$17.50[INC GST]

RM\$29.90

SNG\$15.90[INC GST]

PRINT POST APPROVED


PP 233867 00013

ISSN 1320-1115



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771320 111004



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"Product Lines" (2002), John Vella. cardboard (Dimensions Variable)

PRODUCT LINES

UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, ACADEMY GALLERY

August 19 – September 3, 2002

Reviewed by Gerard Reinmuth

SYDNEY-BORN artist John Vella has been living and working in Hobart since 1996, moving there to study for a *Master of Fine Arts* at the *University of Tasmania*. A short stay became a permanent move as Vella found life in Hobart offered him that rare commodity – the time and space to think. This speculative time is apparent in Vella's art practice – a genuine search for his own voice, unencumbered by pressure to relate to a current "scene" or to even "be seen" at all.

Vella has quietly gone about generating an impressive body of work over the last two or three years, centred around representation of "everyday" objects – he regularly cites Duchamp as a reference point – via the acts of storage, wrapping, unfolding and surface transformation. Hot plates, light switches, cigarettes, cotton buds, even a whole bath have been wrapped (stored) behind stretched canvas before a painted "imprint" of the stored object is made on the new surface.

Recently, Vella's attention has turned to boxes. Initial experiments saw cornflakes packets being unwrapped to examine their two-dimensional profiles, then refined by painting over all but one or two words of the text describing the products within. These "word profiles" were followed by "photoboxes" – the construction

of new boxes from photographs of unwrapped and flattened packaging, exchanging the cardboard for photographic paper in the process and thus the image it supports.

Product Lines concludes a residency proposed by Vella at international box manufacturer *AMCOR's* Launceston factory. Vella teamed up with *AMCOR's* in-house box designer Chris Vocke to design a series of "box-sculptures" derived from the company's standard packaging templates. The conception of the project (and, ultimately, the design process itself) was based on "getting behind enemy lines and subjecting the industry to friendly fire," according to Vella (a clue towards a genuine political agenda that may be elaborated upon in future work).

The result is a fusion of Vella's formal sensibility with the characteristics of box manufacture. The exhibition takes the form of a miniature cityscape – perhaps revealing Vella's architectural background – but in the decayed, incomplete and punctuated quality of the works, a city in ruins. The potential for metaphor was not lost on Kit Wise, who wrote the show's catalogue essay: she refers to coffins, boxes for the homeless, Aboriginal burial poles and shopping.

Vella's installation was best described, however, in an off-the-cuff remark from art critic John McDonald, who saw the work as a representation of "the science-fiction scenario of the deserted city of consumerism". Chris Vocke, box designer and collaborator, has a more prosaic interpretation, cutting across art-speak, the search for greater meaning and Vella's own euphoria at seeing the early prototypes with "settle down mate, it's just a bloody box".

Gerard Reinmuth is the Sydney-based Partner of Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth TERROIR, a contributing editor of *MONUMENT* and tutor in the *UNSW Master of Architecture (Design)*.

DAMIANO BERTOLI: FRIGHTENED OF THIS THING THAT I'VE BECME

1ST FLOOR ARTIST AND WRITERS SPACE, MELBOURNE

July 24 – August 10

Reviewed by Simone LeAmon

THE ART WORKS and installations of Melbourne-based artist Damiano Bertoli typically examine structure and narratives from the history of western art and design. Bertoli's recent exhibition at *1st Floor Artists and Writers Space* in Fitzroy brought together motif and icon in a changing perceptual field. The result was a strange, "plastic" historicism of aesthetic and philosophical idioms from minimalism and the baroque.

Bertoli's installation adopted the intoxicating and sensual dimensions of a nightclub. Inside a black-painted space, blood red and ultraviolet light shone onto a large sculptural composition at the centre of the gallery. The theatricality of composition and environs encouraged a dramatic reading of the work.

Composed of a baroque chandelier made from PVC, a remake of an incomplete open cube from Sol LeWitt's *Variations Of Incomplete Cubes* (1974) and a red and black plinth referencing the Russian constructivist Malevich, the sculptural moment assembled a curious intellectual dialogue. Is the chandelier lowering itself to LeWitt, one wondered, or is Malevich holding up/pushing up LeWitt to the (baroque) chandelier?

A recurring motif in Bertoli installations, the chandelier references

classical and crystalline growth patterns, emerging as a conceptual link between the primary structures of minimalism and the generative sprawl of the baroque interior. After all, prolific tendencies and a sense of expanded geometry are inherent to both the baroque and minimalism. Sol LeWitt's incomplete open cube, meanwhile, speaks of permutation, procedure and the rational in art making.

Considering LeWitt's work and explorations, it is plausible to suggest that his "procedures for realising art" charted a style guide for the design and manufacture of the current "commercial cool" that decorates the interiors of the salaried. So, is minimalism performing tasks relative to those of the chandelier in the 17th and 18th centuries? Has minimalism morphed with the classical?

Frightened of this thing that I've become, along with Bertoli's past works *The diamond age* (2002) and *Continuous moment* (2002), collapses and compresses the space/time relation between artistic endeavours and achievements. All three works resonate beyond the space of the gallery, encouraging viewers to look more closely at the built environment and conditions that manifest according to order. Indeed, they bring into relief the elaborate and experimental mock-ups that exist in the world around us.



"Frightened of this thing that I've become" D. Bertoli (2002) PVC, cardboard, mdi, acrylic and UV light.

Simone LeAmon and Charles Anderson run the Melbourne-based interdisciplinary practice *n+1 equals*