

MAXISMS AND VIGNETTES

LESLIE HEWITT
AND DOMENICK AMMIRATI

Leslie Hewitt and Domenick Ammirati met in the fall of 2005 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Core residency program for artists and critics. The following text is composed of excerpts from a conversation that took place in Houston during February 2006.

The first time, tragedy.

LESLIE: Artists are always saying, "I, I, I" or trying to be first—an innovator. An artist has to be the original, which to me is a farce.

Criticism

LESLIE: I do not think that it begins and ends with an artist's interpretation of his or her own practice. But when the responsibility falls on someone other than the artist, I sometimes get frustrated with the potential for artifice and reductiveness for the sake of market value, and the potential that creates for missing the substance of the work.

Competition

DOMENICK: Outside of a certain academic discourse, I often think, why read criticism? Why not just read artists' own writings and look at their work? On the other hand, a tendency for the artist to be more in charge of presenting him or herself puts me out of a job.

The Intellectual

DOMENICK: It's like what I was telling you the other day about one of the people in my show. He's a very good artist, but I'm afraid that in a market-driven context he's not going to get proper intellectual training. Which sounds very superior of me, of course.

Something Extra

LESLIE: It's good for artists to have a second degree, in history or cultural studies for example, or simply substantial life experience. We need something to supplement what we learn in art school, something in juxtaposition to undo conventions.

Basquiat

LESLIE: The market can be really wonderful because it allows the work to exist in major collections, and an artist to obtain stardom or to be on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* in an Armani suit. But at the same time, there was something lost in his art practice; he fell into a vortex of exploitation. I can't help but think he wasn't protected.

Worry

DOMENICK: Every time I sit down to have a conversation about art, it very quickly turns to the art market. It seems a little worrisome to me, or maybe just depressing.

Cynicism

DOMENICK: I thought about applying to the Manifesta art school, but I wasn't sure if they were going to follow through with their praxis-oriented rhetoric or if it would turn out to be bogus, like every other thing.

Scalpel; sponge

LESLIE: Apprenticeship is something that's still very real in the art world, and its importance is probably understated. I've worked as an artist's assistant and have mentors. I got to experience firsthand how other artists define their practice in the world we live in now. That's not really something you learn in any institution, at any level.

I reach for my revolver

DOMENICK: "Pedagogy" is a word I hate. It sounds too hierarchical.

"I wish it were true"

LESLIE: William Cordova and I started the project when we were at Yale. Their film archive lacked quintessential films, especially films that reflected a revolutionary consciousness. In the hallway of the art school, we made a monolith from floor to ceiling of our personal archives, consisting of blank and copied films on VHS, independent films addressing constructions of a Black and Latino revolutionary spirit and films that are essentially erased from the collective consciousness. Later we proposed to expand the project for Project Row Houses in Houston. The project evolved to transform the row house into an art house, a film house, a renegade cinema.

A Tree Falls

LESLIE: In *Third Cinema*, a kind of revolution was present within the structure of the film. But what happens when there's no distribution? What happens when films addressing change can't be seen?

Use what you've got

LESLIE: A word I think is crucial in terms of intervention, in the mass media and otherwise, is "resourcefulness."

Vogue

LESLIE: To me, the '60s and '70s were this weird moment where protest had a one-up on media, using it for strategic advantages. Now, today, we are feeling economic and political frustrations that are similar to the ones present during the late '60s and early '70s. But we are stuck romanticizing protest. Can we envision something new? Are we reenacting because of necessity or limitation, due to the fact that we rely so heavily on media to inform lived culture?

Instrumentalization

DOMENICK: Should art simply be a conveyance for ideas that one supports in a social or political way? As much as I like the idea in some respects, I ultimately disagree with it. I think it's Adorno who suggests a kind of art that can be "negative"—resistant in a way that's different. Maybe that's outdated, but I balk at the idea of art just being something you use.

Hackneyed

DOMENICK: It's amazing how quickly an idea goes from possibly interesting to totally hackneyed. Flags are a good example, they're popular nowadays. Of course by the time this appears in print, they'll be out of fashion.

Sold

LESLIE: "Riffs on Real Time" is about pushing the mode of the camera. We rely on it to do what? Document? Archive? To speak to some truth that we are now aware is always subjective somehow? To trigger memory? I'm not completely sold on the idea that it does any of those things.

Rephotography

DOMENICK: I feel like whenever a photograph is a rephotograph, it has a strange temporality that I can never quite put my finger on. There's a pinned-butterfly kind of stillness.

LESLIE: There's also the question not of time but of space. I'm interested in turning the illusion of the picture

as a frame or a window in on itself. In the distance between the second camera lens and the original, a space opens up. Who's in that space? Am I? Is the viewer?

In relation

LESLIE: I enjoy the vernacular and the everyday, and to me, part of implicating the everyday is implicating the photograph as an object in space, in time, as something that moves and shifts contexts. As it moves, its meaning shifts with it.

Riding the line

DOMENICK: I like the way you deal with contradictions. Like with the idea of the document, for example. The photographs in "Riffs on Real Time" are totally documents, but I know that on the other hand you doubt the idea of the document. Or there's the way you deal with the image. We think of images as being immaterial, but your photos insist on the materiality of images as things that travel physically through the world. Even the use of monochrome palettes works two ways. They make the "Real Time" photos seem more tablet-like, more object-like. But at the same time, monochrome refers to transcendence and dematerialization.

The ethics of viewing

LESLIE: I want to push for a critical viewership. I think we're trained to be lazy viewers.

Juxtaposition

LESLIE: I'm reading three books simultaneously right now: *Inside the White Cube*, *One Place After Another*, and *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*. The space in between them is what I find most engaging.

To take no stance is a stance

LESLIE: As artists we are not extracted from society; we do live in a system. I am aware of how this informs all aspects of our production at this point in history: even if one takes a position of dematerialization, that's also consumable. We could begin to see appropriation as a direct act to counter direct consumption, or to ask what it means to be radical at our stage in an all-encompassing capitalist model.

Roots

DOMENICK: Knowing the focus on history and memory in your work, it makes sense to me that you would be interested in the word "diaspora." It seems to me that having to piece together a culture after being uprooted might result in a greater focus on the forces of history in general and one's own personal history, as compared to an experience that was less traumatized.

Abstraction

LESLIE: Capitalism is built off of slave labor: you need a huge underclass that supports the larger infrastructure. We are all implicated, but in America we're moving further away from recognizing it. It's becoming abstract because it's not within our geographic eye.

Simple

LESLIE: This is much more complex than the way I'm going to put it, but: in the early half of the twentieth century an average Black person did not have basic human rights. Because of this, the average Black person had to develop a particular view of society—a double consciousness, if you will. When one is affirmed by the power structure, there is less of a need to look at things in a different way, because *the system* is working for the one affirmed. For those who are deprived of opportunity because of history, it becomes implicit to tell history in new ways, to see it through new eyes, to expose certain truths. It implicates why things are the way they are for both the enfranchised and the disenfranchised.

Choice

DOMENICK: I was reading this thing by Adrian Piper about systemic art, where she said for her the best work was work that involved the least choice. The less conscious the choice made by the artist, the more likely it is to reflect underlying social or other structures. Your work isn't about systematization exactly, but with your iconic drawings, or your photos, there are systematic or serial motifs, and it allows you to get to something like that—something transpersonal, maybe.

One Thing After Another

DOMENICK: I can't seem to stick to a coherent philosophy of anything, or a uniform approach, so whenever I have conversations about art I fall back on an impulse to tell a story.

Niches

DOMENICK: I grew up in South Carolina, went to a public high school. There was a racial divide, of course, but among white kids different kinds of subcultures had to stick together—like hippies and punks would go to the same parties, because they weren't normal, essentially. So it seems to me that the smaller the context, the more that anything that's different or oppositional has to stick together. That's closer to the way the art scene in Houston seems to work. I kind of think that's healthy when compared to the thinly sliced art world of New York.

Bayou City

LESLIE: *Project Row Houses* is a really interesting model of how art, architecture, and society come together in a shared space, in practice rather than purely in theory.

DOMENICK: It's important as an emblem of Houston art. I don't want to overhype it, but it's rare that a project is so well realized; it operates as a nexus for most of the good art that comes through the city. If Houston art has an identity, its relationship to the ideas behind *Project Row* should be number one.

Jones

LESLIE: In Houston's "Third Ward," I am drawn to this art collective Otabenga Jones & Associates, who are counterpoints to what goes on in the museum district of Houston; they're voices critical of the old guard here. Collectives in general are offering new positions of autonomy. I think this is important, considering the times we are living in.

Ease

DOMENICK: I think I chose this idea for "Take One" because it seemed easy, honestly. I've never dealt with physical art objects before and I was kind of afraid to do it. So that's a stupid but genuine reason why the show is what it is.

Delay and Repetition

LESLIE: Distribution plays a weird role in "Take One," in that you can't immediately absorb a lot of what you're taking. If it's a CD, I need to take home the CD and listen to it. Will I take everything and still come back and look again, or will I take nothing and just look at the show?

Texas

DOMENICK: I was impressed by the way people in the show responded directly to its location. Nate Lowman gave me this piece about trafficking immigrants. The piece by Agnieszka Breżńska is about importing back into what she sees as the heart of the US a symbol of Eastern bloc, Soviet-era resistance. The Iraq book excerpt is about riding around with drivers for Halliburton, which of course is based in Houston. And overall the political edges of the show probably seem sharper than they might have seemed somewhere on the coasts.

Showroom

DOMENICK: I'm not saying display is bad per se, but I didn't want this show to be display-oriented. Pretty much I'm just going to put everything in stacks on the floor.

Europeans

LESLIE: Your show made me think of Thomas Hirschhorn.

DOMENICK: I think Hirschhorn is great. He seems like an intellectual but with a gamesmanship or joking to it that I find to be very European.

LESLIE: To not be serious?

DOMENICK: To be both serious and not serious in a way that American artists usually aren't. It's hard to explain, and I've never wrapped my head around it exactly, but I think of Kippenberger. There's this gigantic posture, and that doubles the readings of the work and problematizes its understanding.

Deeds Not Words

DOMENICK: I feel like, if I bother to put these ideas into a nonverbal form, a curated show, why would I bother to write about it? It relates to this fantasy I have: I always thought it'd be great to be a visual artist because you just make stuff and don't have to talk about it. I know it's not true. [*Right now Leslie's laughing at my total naïveté, or just total stupidity.*] But that's my vestigial understanding of what it is to be an artist. I think about it sometimes when I see artists do talks. Especially if their work is especially resistant to that kind of stuff, I think, God, they're being tortured up there, please just leave them alone.

Responsibility

DOMENICK: [Core advisor] Mary Leclère was asking me some hard questions, ones I didn't want to answer really. She was interested in what "Take One" said about the idea of the discrete art object, or how it questions the boundaries of art. These are concerns I haven't thought about at all because they haven't been in my immediate context, and in some way they don't interest me very much. But she's an art historian, and these are questions that run throughout the entire twentieth century's arc. I realized that now, as a curator, I'd have to produce a position on questions like these.

Curator

DOMENICK: I probably shouldn't say this on the record, but the whole idea of being a curator seems like a terrible thing to me. It goes with my adolescent attitude towards bureaucracies, in part. I just don't like the title: "curator."

Smithson

DOMENICK: I've been thinking a little bit about Houston as a non-site; in fact I would argue that New York is the

only art site in the US, with the rest of the country as a non-site. Since two-thirds of the artists are from New York, and the ideas in the show are pretty current there, "Take One" is kind of like a site/non-site project, except in reverse. One thing it's about is the life of this kind of work—this kind of thought—when you take it to a different context, and a somewhat unusual one at that.

Freedom

LESLIE: In my mind, project spaces lend themselves to freedom and experimentation. I think your show is an extension of that. While we're here as artists and critics in residence, we're obliged to define what we understand our vision of a practice to be, not have it defined by an art institution. ■■