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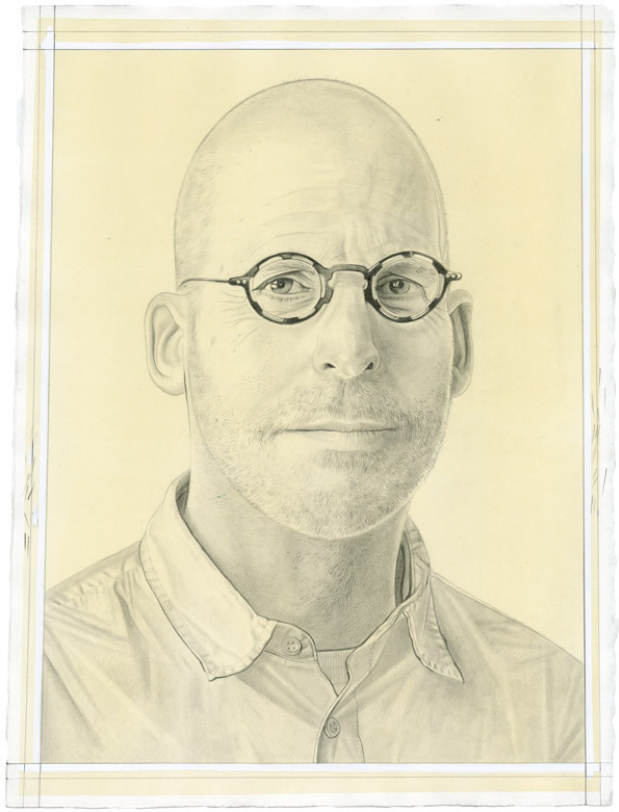


Portrait of B. Wurtz. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.
From a photo by Taylor Dafoe.

"He's like a magician," replied the artist N. Dash, when I mentioned I was interviewing B. Wurtz. Her response was typical of the enthusiasm and joy Wurtz and his work elicit among artists. Having moved from California to New York in the early '80s, the artist has steadfastly pursued his sculptural poetry, integrating entirely unexpected materials into intimate, funny, and endlessly engaging assemblages. Wurtz has a show at Office Baroque in Brussels from June 4 through July 16; a retrospective previously at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, U.K., opening at La Casa Encendida in Madrid in October; work included in *Pure Pulp: Contemporary Artists Working in Paper at Dieu Donné* at the Wellin Museum of Art, Hamilton College and then traveling to the Dedalus Foundation in New York this fall. He has work included in *The Trick in the Smile: Artium Collection*, at the Basque Museum—Center of Contemporary Art in Spain, on view through August 28.

Sara Roffino (Rail): Let's start with the pans. When did you start making them?

B. Wurtz: I started working with them when takeout was delivered to me in one of them in 1990. Now I just go to the Fine Fare down the street and there's a whole bunch of them. I've always intended to continue the series, so I have a fair amount now, but it takes longer than I thought it would to paint them. So I slowly make more and more. My wife, Ann, once asked why I don't get people to help me, and I thought, "nope." I have to do them myself. I have to paint them because what I like about them is that they are mass-produced, the designs are all made by someone anonymous, so it's really important that the painting is done by me. The balance has to be right.

B. Wurtz, *Untitled*, 1997. Wood, wire, metal, plastic bags.
67 × 30 × 21 inches.

Rail: I recently re-read the Calvin Tomkins interviews with Duchamp and one thing that came up a lot and kept bringing me to your work is the importance of decision with the work—your gesture.

Wurtz: Every artist is different. For some people it's not important that they make the work themselves, and maybe it would be different for me if I didn't use so many found objects.

Rail: There's really a breaking down of the ideas of conceptual versus formal. It's not one or the other.

Wurtz: I do a bit of teaching and I always talk with my students about what I see as "the scale:" at one end is pure subject matter, at the other end is pure formalism; for me, something at either end is not going to work. Pure subject matter becomes obvious and didactic, pure formalism is boring. But anywhere in the middle of the scale—it can be right in the middle or it can be right near the end—can work. I probably fall more in the middle because I do feel like I came from a conceptual background and subject matter is important to me, but it's already there in the form of the found objects. So playing with the formal stuff is where I have my fun and how it balances out.

Rail: Can you explain that a little more?

Wurtz: I feel like you look first and then the theoretical stuff happens. When I'm looking at an artist's work, I want to look at it first and *then* I want to hear about it. Art is visual, however conceptual it is or political or however heavy the subject matter, it's still a visual thing, and that's the place to start.

Rail: So even if the art is not about aesthetics, the decisions ultimately are aesthetic?

Wurtz: Yes.

B. Wurtz, *Untitled (cans with pier)*, 1989. Wood, tin, cans, cloth.
26 1/4 × 25 1/4 × 12 inches.

Rail: Did that feel in conflict with your surroundings when you were studying at CalArts in the late '70s?

Wurtz: I did my undergraduate at UC Berkeley and I really had some good teachers there, but then grad school at CalArts was amazing. I got there with this idea that art shouldn't be talked about because it would ruin it—maybe I was a little naïve, but I wasn't totally naïve. I knew about conceptual art, but I discovered quickly at CalArts that sitting in a room with a bunch of students and a teacher and talking about every detail did not actually ruin art at all. It made it more interesting. It took me a very short time to realize that. I was in Michael Asher's all-day class; we spent a lot of time in that class talking about the details of how the thing looked or how it was made. Why did you choose this color? Why did you choose this material? Why does it look like that? It is kind of funny that that kind of critique took place in a course taught by Michael, a major conceptual artist. CalArts was also great because there was a variety of different people—Jonathan Borofsky, John Baldessari, Michael Asher, Douglas Huebler, visiting faculty Vija Celmins and Barbara Kruger, and so on—but it was all visual, even for the people on the conceptual end. In a way Borofsky was more of a maker of visual things, though he certainly had a conceptual side of his work.

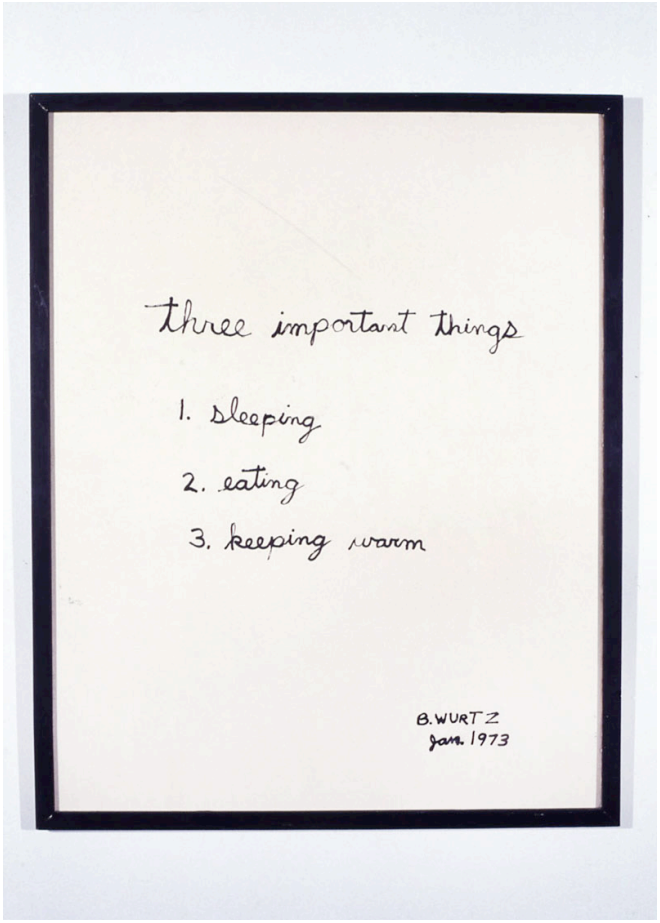
Rail: Did you know about Ferus Gallery and things like that before school, or when you were in school?

Wurtz: During undergrad I knew a little bit about what was going on in Los Angeles. I used to drive with my parents to L.A. because my grandparents lived there. I remember when the L.A. County Art Museum [LACMA] opened and we went and visited. I don't know if I knew specifically about Ferus but I knew there was stuff going on in L.A.

Rail: There were several assemblage artists working there—

Wurtz: I knew about Ed Kienholz for sure.

Rail: You had a few years between UC Berkeley and CalArts; what happened during that time?



B. Wurtz, *Three Important Things*, 1973. Ink on paper. 29 1/2 × 23 3/4 inches.

Wurtz: I moved back to Santa Barbara and I lived there for eight years until I decided to go to graduate school.

Rail: I'm curious about that time in between—

Wurtz: I'll be honest about this: I had a lot of problems, emotional problems, which was one reason there was this gap. I had some serious issues with depression and anxiety, but I never stopped making work. Santa Barbara is an interestingly sophisticated town for its size, but it's still Santa Barbara. I finally realized that it just wasn't going to happen for me there with the kind of work I make. I was always about making the art, but I wasn't completely ignorant about what I had to do if I wanted to have a career—you can't be in the middle of nowhere and expect to be discovered. I reached the point where I realized I either had to move to a big city or go to graduate school. Because I was in California I wasn't thinking about New York then—it would have been either Los Angeles or San Francisco. A friend of mine who was an artist in Santa Barbara gave me really good advice, telling me that if I went to graduate school I should go somewhere that I could really connect with someone's work. He suggested John Baldessari, who I only knew a little about, so I went to the library and looked him up. He taught at CalArts and that's why I decided I was interested in CalArts. I packed a box of art and went with a friend to visit the school. I think Doug Huebler was there. I got a tour of the school and when I came back to the art office my box of art was there. I had this sculpture made with wire and it was bent. I was really upset. The people in the office said, "We took it away and reviewed it and you've been accepted." Isn't that crazy? [*Laughter.*] I didn't even apply to CalArts and I got in, so I went with it. Later I wondered how I was going to pay for it. It was an expensive school—nothing compared to now—but I got a job there and I got some scholarship money and that's how it worked out at CalArts. It's probably the best thing that ever happened to me. And I think it needed to happen at the time it did. It was an interesting time in the art world: the Pictures people were just showing, Julian Schnabel was the beginning of the art stars.

Rail: You graduated in 1980. And from there you stayed—

Wurtz: Well, I met Ann at CalArts. We had gotten together by the time I graduated and we ended up living together in Hollywood for five years and then at some point Ann got into graphic design and I stuck with the art, but I started thinking it wasn't going to happen for me in L.A. I'd had a show at LACE, and there was one young gallery, Richard Kuhlenschmidt, but he wasn't interested in showing me. There were some more established galleries and I talked with Rosamund Felsen, but there just wasn't going to be a gallery for me, so one day I asked Ann if she would move to New York. I remember she just said "okay." I think she realized that as a graphic designer, there would be more opportunities for her as well.

Rail: Was there a shift in the work when you moved to New York?

Wurtz: I don't think the work ever really changed in a significant way, which is curious to me. I've had some big survey-type shows, including this retrospective I just had at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, and the work, throughout this long period, has a strange consistency. I think coming to New York didn't even really change it. I wonder how I stuck with it so long, because I had a lot of frustrations. There's that thing inside all of us that we have to honor—that need to do something. I needed to make art and so it was never really an issue with the art. I felt comfortable moving along the way I was. It was a little difficult not fitting into a lot of what was going on, but I had enough people who supported me—people I really respected kept me going.

Rail: So was there a moment when you trusted it more yourself, or where your relationship to it shifted?

Wurtz: It's never good to be too trusting in what one does. You have to have doubts, but I think I learned to live with those doubts and to accept mistakes. I always managed, I think, to turn mistakes into ways to move ahead. I remember once having a show with Hudson and I'm sure we had no reviews and no sales and Hudson said, "I hope someday people get it." It was such a sad thing to hear. I'm laughing about it now, but it could have been really sad: maybe after I die they'll get it. There's a writer named Dennis Cooper who used to write for *Artforum*, who I knew from L.A., where he ran Beyond Baroque. He said the exact same thing once: "I hope someday people get it."

Rail: What do you think has enabled people to get it?

Wurtz: The times changed. I started noticing that young people were interested in my work and I really liked that. I thought it was a really good sign that young people were interested. Things change slowly with art. In spite of all the weirdness about the art world now, and the market, one of the great things about the present moment is that there are all kinds of things going on at once. In the past it wasn't that way. Back in the '80s when we first got here there was Neo-expressionism, there were the Pictures people, and it was really kind of just those two things. My work was not quite fitting into any of that.

Rail: Your work has been a counter to the glitz with its intimacy and quietness. There's clearly a human behind it. The 1973 text work *Three Important Things* is about happiness or this idea of what we need, needs being met, but I think there are other layers to it as well.

Wurtz: That was a super important work to me. I made it in Santa Barbara. I remember the room I sat in where I made it. It does have to do with happiness—what did I need more than that? Part of making that work was my realization that if I was going to make my art there was not going to be money. I come from an upper-middle-class background, so I did not have any suffering as far as financial stuff, but I was somehow going to have to get by in the world and I didn't quite know how. I think that's what drove me to thinking about those basic necessities: if I could have those I would be okay, and maybe not just be okay, but I could be happy.

Rail: That's part of it, but something that came up in your interview with John Newman in *Bomb* is this idea of, *épater la bourgeoisie*. Is that part of the work as well?

Wurtz: Are you talking about shocking the bourgeoisie?

Rail: Not shocking so much as provoking—

Wurtz: I hope so. I'm trying to do that. There is a lot of this work that is a bit rebellious regarding the subject of what is art and what is valuable as art. I had a lot of fun making the work and playing with it formally and all that, but I'm also playing around with what art is. What is a sculpture? What is a painting? What's worth being taken seriously as art? I am clearly indebted to Duchamp, but Calder was also a big influence on me—and what could be more joyous than Calder?—but I do try to provoke in a way. That's why I like my work shown in a very serious setting: the classic white walls, the classic white pedestal. You mentioned earlier that I sort of contradict myself—to me that's okay, contradiction is an interesting part of life. I do take my work super seriously and I love what I'm doing, but it's also hopefully a bit humorous and a bit provocative.

Rail: When did you first learn about Duchamp?

Wurtz: Probably when I was in high school. I used to go to the Santa Barbara library to do my homework and I would read *Studio International* and of course there would have been stuff about Duchamp. I remember being at the Santa Barbara Art Museum looking through an auction catalogue, and I noticed that the Duchamp works were so much less expensive than anything else. I thought it was crazy, so I clearly valued him hugely. I was shocked that there wasn't the monetary value, now though of course there is—

Rail: Though not relative to a lot of other, less important artists.

Wurtz: The market is sort of arbitrary, which is the unfortunate part of what's going on now. It doesn't reward critical or theoretical excellence. It rewards what someone wants to put in their house and show other people. There are a lot of great collectors, but there are clearly a lot of other collectors in it for investment or glamour or whatever—not what I would consider real collectors.

Rail: I'm always shocked when I think about how much art is in storage and how much work changes hands without ever even changing where it is stored.

Wurtz: There used be way fewer collectors so the serious collectors had a larger presence in the past, especially for contemporary art.

Rail: Do you feel like you come out of a specific California moment?

Wurtz: Yes and no. Yes because I'm a native Californian and I know it had an effect on me, but I also know that the art I was interested in learning about was not really what was going on in California. It was Picasso and Warhol and Duchamp and Calder.

Rail: But California accepted Duchamp before New York did.

Wurtz: I didn't realize that before, but it's true. He had that show at the Pasadena Art Museum. There was so much going on in California—Helene Winer was at Pomona, and there was Walter Hopps, and Ferus was the first place the Warhol soup cans were shown. It's making me realize that California is more important to me than I thought it was.

Rail: In your recent show at Metro Pictures the paired paintings and sculptures from the mid '80s incorporate paintings of the sculptures in a way that intentionally distorts or challenges the perspective of the found objects. The show also included the piece with the blue plastic bags, which is the largest work of yours I've ever seen. You generally work on a small scale. Has this always been the case?

Wurtz: There are some pieces that are definitely taller than humans, but they still are normal-room sized, and they are usually very light and they come apart and can be stored. The classic mistake many artists make when they have the chance to do a show in a much bigger space, is that they pump up the scale and it fails. For me, scale is in the mind and I like the miniature becoming big in the mind. I think about bonsai, a little tree in a pot that is styled to look like a big tree. It does this funny scale thing. It's the same thing with blocks: a child's mind pictures them like a big building or a town. One of the things that interests me about making my sculptures is that they have a monumental attitude but are not actually big. There's also a practical aspect to the scale of my work in that I've always had to think about what I do with it and where I put it and where I store it. Also, I want to make the work myself, without having someone help me, which is another reason I like this scale.

Rail: How do you decide what objects have the qualities that merit inclusion in your work?

Wurtz: I've discovered that the ones that work for me are the ones that are very ordinary and probably overlooked. It fits right in with the food, clothing, and shelter thing. I realized that objects that had too many interesting things going on already didn't leave any room for me. They were already amazing things in themselves and it was going to be no fun for me to make them become something else. With overlooked objects it's sort of like my little challenge to see if I can get somebody to look at them more carefully. But they're also neutral enough that they can start to function as just a formal element—a shape, a line, a color—and I want to expand upon that to build something that becomes a little more complex formally. I'm not interested in obscuring what the objects are and what their actual use is and I'm not interested in piling thousands of them together so that you don't see them anymore and it becomes something else. In a way it's like respecting them. I'm paraphrasing Richard Tuttle, who made a great comment talking about the sort of lowly, junky thing. He said that if you give it respect it will give it back to you.

Rail: There's a shared vocabulary.

Wurtz: I like him a lot and I've been compared to him a lot. But I think we're actually more different than we are similar. I think we have a similar way of working with materials, but my work came more from conceptual and pop work and his came more from Ab-Ex and Minimalism, if you want to be general.

Rail: Yeah, he's included in *ABC Art*.

Wurtz: I love his work. It's just a different approach, but it's curious that we do have some overlap also.

Rail: You've talked about the beauty in the everyday objects. In the interviews with Tomkins, Duchamp says there is no taste. He rejects the idea of taste.

Wurtz: That is a hugely important issue to me. Seeing the beauty in the objects I choose is directly related to Duchamp. I'm aware that he claimed to use no taste and that is a lot of what his work was about. But I seriously doubt that it's true. I think he did think there was beauty, but it didn't fit in with what he was doing. He had to do it the way he did because it was more radical and it's more interesting in a way, and it makes you work harder. I love that he took that attitude, but that was a long time ago. I do choose objects for aesthetic reasons, even if that aesthetic reason is it being plain.

Rail: Then does choosing it because it's plain also relate to how you see it as being beautiful?

Wurtz: It does, because I'm very particular about how things look. I would not have a chair in this room that I didn't like. I'm very particular and I do have a sort of Minimalist aesthetic, but I also sort of rebel against it. I started to get tired of everybody's apartment looking the same, with the same mid-century design and every piece of architecture just being a rehash of modernism; it made me want some of the Victorian aesthetic just for some relief.

Rail: So it *is* about taste?

Wurtz: Yeah, it *is* a taste thing. What I love about making the decision to be up front about using my personal preferences in the selection of the found objects is that it is very much a response to Duchamp. In a way, I owe everything to him as the inventor of the readymade. But I take a different direction and do something else.

Rail: The contradictions with Duchamp are really striking and also sort of aggressive. You are confronting him.

Wurtz: There are contradictions within Duchamp, and that's part of why I think he's so interesting. Duchamp said he wasn't making art anymore and then we find out he had been working on that elaborate piece in secret. That's certainly—what is a better word than contradiction? A dichotomy? Or—

Rail: He's a trickster.

Wurtz: Yeah, a trickster. But not just for the sake of being a trickster. He's also serious, for all his being fed up with art, what he saw as sort of—he had that term "bête comme un peintre," it means "as stupid as a painter," that you're this low-level person not really using your brain, but you know he loved art also. He just wanted to poke at it.

Rail: And later on he editioned the pieces that were sold—

Wurtz: Contradictions, but that's what life is. When you mentioned me having contradictions there was an immediate reaction, like, "Oh I really fucked up, what am I doing." And then it's like, "No, that's okay."

Rail: Do you think of the material as metaphor, or metaphoric within your work?

Wurtz: I could see someone else making an argument for that in my work, but it doesn't enter my conversation, or my conversation with myself. I feel like things are what they are—

Rail: That's a very Minimalist—

Wurtz: It *is* very Minimalist, but the work is already loaded so I don't think it has to refer to anything else, or be a metaphor for anything else. They're good enough already. I guess I am sort of a funny minimalist in that sense. But I absolutely love hearing what people see in my work, which runs a range of reactions. I never have an idea that this work is this and it must be seen that way. I accept however anyone sees it and I often learn things from other people I didn't really see—and to me, that's part of it. A lot of people see figurative things. It's never literally figurative, but it is body-related, certainly in scale and with the objects, so I think that kind of makes sense. I don't know if that's a metaphor—non-organic things referencing a body. Maybe it's something I did unconsciously. My reasons for making the work aren't often verbalized in my head, so what happens to me is that a reviewer or a critic will say something and I'll think, *Oh they said what I was thinking but I could have never said*. I'm not making messages, but maybe there is a little message in my work about money and material things not being important. My favorite word in relation to art is "serendipity." To me that word is more and more important. In life too, but particularly in art.

Rail: I think that's a word that could be used to *describe* your works, but it isn't at all serendipitous that they look the way they do, it's the result of deep thinking and detail—it's a very constructed serendipity.

Wurtz: You're right, but it's because I had to react to the serendipity, like someone gives me something that I wouldn't have used or something goes wrong and I have to correct it. I get very determined to figure it out. I think of John Cage a lot, and chance. I'm always ready for something to disrupt me.

Rail: Almost every review of your work refers to it as poetic, which I think maybe is connected to this sense of serendipity in it.

Wurtz: It's very nice that people say that.