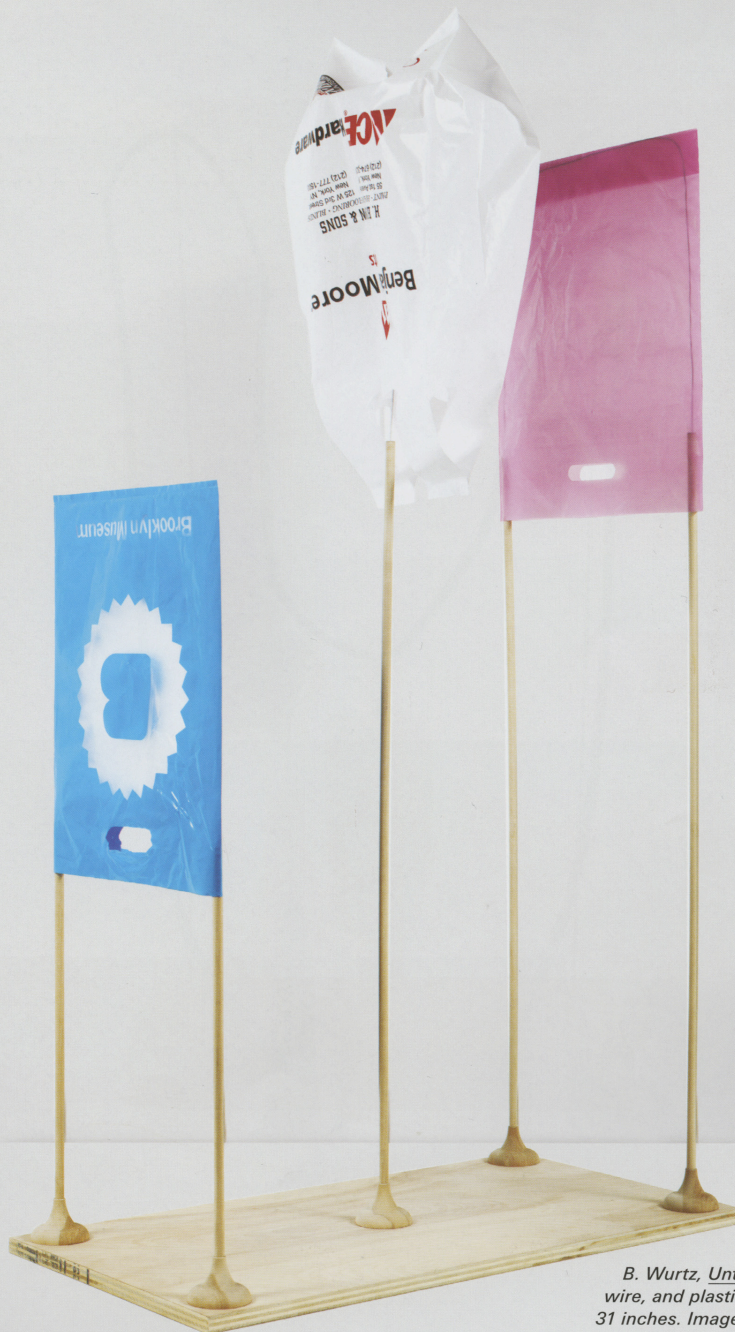


# METRO PICTURES

"John Newman and B. Wurtz," *Bomb* (Summer 2012): 25-32.

## **BOMB**

John Newman and B. Wurtz



*B. Wurtz, Untitled, 2012, wood, wire, and plastic bags, 57 x 16 3/4 x 31 inches. Images of B. Wurtz's works courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York City.*

*B. Wurtz, Shoelace, 1995, wood, metal,  
and shoelace, 12 x 6 1/8 x 5 1/4 inches.*



John Newman first came across my radar in a conversation I had with Richard Tuttle a few years ago. Shortly after, I was invited to curate an exhibition at White Columns, in New York City. John wrote me a letter, care of the gallery, saying that he related a lot to the exhibition—which consisted of a range of sculptures—and wondered if I might be interested in meeting with him. He included a catalogue of his work in the envelope, and, after looking through it, I was intrigued. I emailed him back, we arranged a meeting, and that is how our friendship began. It turned out we are both quite opinionated, and that is something I thoroughly enjoy.

Since then, we have traded many studio visits and our work has recently been shown together at KANSAS Gallery. This past spring, we sat down in John's studio in Tribeca and continued our ongoing conversation about art and life.

— B. WURTZ

B. Wurtz is a mystery. When I first saw the name, I didn't know if it belonged to a man or a woman. When I first saw the work, I assumed it was by a *much* younger artist. When I saw an exhibition he curated at White Columns, it was clear that he was collapsing the conventional demarcations between outsider and insider, sincerity and irony, conceptual and formal. When I asked around about him, he was thought to be an esteemed village elder of the burgeoning Lower East Side scene. When I first got to know him, I was disarmed by his sweetness and generosity, his charisma and his humility—and his tough-mindedness.

B.'s work has an upbeat, oxygenated, effervescent effortlessness, which I greatly admire. It can be quite funny—and he is completely serious about it. It is rare that an artist who has been working quietly for a good long time gets to be simultaneously discovered and rediscovered.

— JOHN NEWMAN

**B. WURTZ** I just saw your show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. One of the things that interests me about your work is that it looks like nothing else around.

**JOHN NEWMAN** It's my goal to make something I've never seen before. I realize that there is a certain level of grandiosity in this statement, because there's nothing new under the sun. But as a goal, as a method for working, it is something I like thinking about. When I started working on this smaller scale in the early '90s, I felt that a lot of what was going on in the art world was what I call "journalism"—research-driven artwork and art reporting on the art world. That was when I began to travel a lot: India, Africa, Japan... I was really impressed to see that people had very special and meaningful relationships with objects small in size, but by no means small in significance.

The way I saw the art world back then was that everyone was like a farmer, planting their crops on one side of the hill so that eventually all the minerals would become depleted! And I thought—like a good farmer—I had to find another hill to plant on, one on which I could grow something very different.

**BW** That was well put. Everything's been done before; it's the personal focus that makes it seem new or as if it were never done before. There is a big difference between being derivative or using history as a starting point and, from there, being truly creative. When you began making these new pieces, you reinvented yourself, which I find fascinating. These new works, for me, come from an unexpected place. There's a nonmodernist aspect to them and there's a certain "craft" aspect.

Craft is something I usually want to avoid. It makes me think of objects with no real subject matter or, conversely, maybe too obvious a subject matter, a kind of show-off conventionalism. But, at the same time, I like to be confronted with something that I might ordinarily resist. Jeff Koons, for instance—I really have no interest in kitsch—but in the '80s, when Koons made those polychrome-wood sculptures using one of the finest traditional techniques—well, some of the late-medieval religious figures at the Cloisters museum were made exactly the same way. Looking at both examples close up in a kind of abstracted way, disregarding their subject matter, they became the same. I thought, There's a way to make me look at kitsch in a different light. There's really nothing in art that someone can't make work, if done well. Your work makes me think of the 17th or 18th century, when things would be expertly crafted, often using precious materials, the stuff that was lost with modernism. Your work is also very hand-made looking. It intrigues me because I don't quite know what's happening.

**JN** I want to expand the spectrum of sculpture's vocabulary, whether it's engaging objects from other cultures—artifacts or instruments—along with forms in nature. I was particularly fascinated with medieval armor and Japanese samurai helmets. Yet the idea of craft is very complicated for me—it makes me cringe a bit to have it brought up.

**BW** But you don't need to defend it!

**JN** The crafts reside in a different, maybe parallel, art world than the one I'm talking

about. I learned about art backward. Initially, I wanted to be a poet. In 1969, a fellow student showed me pictures of Conceptual art and early Minimalism, and I thought it was the most radical thing I'd ever seen. I got bitten by the bug and have been an artist ever since.

But I am also very interested in 17th-century sculpture. I find Bernini's glorious virtuosity overwhelming, but I have always associated crafts with a hippie sensibility mixed with something of the practical, like, "Does it hold water?" I understand that working on a more intimate scale and mixing materials could bring up an association with craft. But it is a connection that causes me a lot of ambivalence.

**BW** I'm talking about art from past centuries. What I think happened in more modern times is that "craft" and "fine art" got separated. Whereas I don't think, in the past, it was seen that way. To me, it's refreshing to have that wrench thrown into your work.

**JN** The wrench sounds good.

**BW** I find it makes me really think. I like being thrown by things. There are Eastern or Asian aspects to your art, which also has a huge connection to Western modernism. Modernism is so related to Japanese architecture, certainly design is.

**JN** You're right—in recent times we have made a stark distinction between art and craft. In the 16th and 17th century, sculptors like Cellini or Giambologna also made decorative objects in porcelain or silver. And sculpture then was very connected to architecture.

As far as expanding this idea about sculpture's vocabulary, I think there is a lot of misunderstanding in regard to artists like David Smith or John Chamberlain because they basically used one material, which *seemingly* limits the possibilities. Or Anthony Caro, who would spray-paint a piece one color to prioritize the composition over the material, or the opposite with Carl Andre, who wants you to look first at the matter-of-factness of the materials themselves. I began to think about materials as metaphor. All materials have intrinsic properties that can resonate in a number of ways. They each have a different weight, color, and texture, but also they have the potential for associations. Straw might make you think about farms and horses as much as being yellow, crackly, or lightweight. Glass evokes windows or lenses as well as fragility. So I started thinking that by putting disparate materials together these elements could function metaphorically and that their juxtaposition could generate a kind of "third" meaning. Some of this came from looking at non-Western art . . . and crafts!

**BW** Yeah, you mentioned Japan.

**JN** What's fairly new for me, in regard to expanding the vocabulary, but is not new for you, is the use of found objects. When I started thinking about materials as metaphor, I also began to think about processes as metaphor—glassblowing, knitting, working with clay, and welding—to suggest different meanings, especially if several methods are deployed in the same piece. I then began to fold in found objects as well, again, to expand the vocabulary. But the objects I chose—stones or gourds, for example—were somewhat anonymous. It's a tricky business because we usually associate found objects with their obviousness—let's say in Pop art or, to a different degree, in early modernism.

**BW** Dada too.

**JN** To find something or to have something made to my specifications offered me a lot of possibilities. But your work is so much about found objects and you go in so many different directions at once with them—the found object that can be named and recognized within popular culture and then the found object as an anonymous element that you use in a very formal way.

**BW** Yeah. That's pretty much to the point. I have that dual way of looking at

it. First, the found object, the real use value of which remains obvious or isn't obscured by the ultimate form or gestalt of the sculpture. Second, a found object with more generic qualities—like pieces of wood from construction site dumpsters, or wire found on the street—becomes an element in a composition where all parts talk to each other. That happens in your work too.

**JN** True.

**BW** What I hope for in my pieces is a balance of seeing what the things really are and all that that implies—their use value, their history, their birth into the world—and, at the same time, recognizing the works' very formal qualities in terms of color, composition, and line, which is where my part as an artist comes in.

**JN** The smaller pieces you've been doing lately have some marble bottoms—I don't know what you'd call them exactly, because they're not pedestals. This formality of arranging the parts very specifically and putting them on something like a marble stand seems almost classical—not *antimodern*, but *not* modern. And yet what also intrigues me in your work is that—aside from the recognition of how the elements are part of our contemporary consumer culture—the compositions have a connection to what we might think of as statues!

**BW** I really love art. I am ready to mess with it but not reject it. It's true that some of the pieces are very traditional statues, so to speak. I make my work with lowly materials but challenge that by throwing in a bit of marble. Perhaps it creates a paradox to consider: Rooms of Greek or Roman marble statues in a museum are the setting where I often picture my pieces. I also prefer to see my work displayed in pristine and elegant settings, like a traditional white gallery space with museum pedestals. It contrasts the ordinary, throwaway nature of many of my objects and materials and creates an atmosphere of seriousness while playing up the humorous elements.

I don't mean to go too far down that road, but art is part of life and, to me, that means that art is available for subject matter. If one goes to the extreme with only formalism, the content gets obliterated. It becomes boring. When one goes for only subject matter, it becomes didactic, which is also boring.

**JN** And literary.

**BW** Right. Leave that to writing.

**JN** When I first learned about contemporary art, what I found interesting was that it wasn't a literary, narrative experience. It was something else. So much of this had to do with the so-called modernist project. The reduction of form from, let's say, Cézanne to Ad Reinhardt. Of course, there was much of this going on in literature, theater, and music: Philip Glass, Yvonne Rainer, or Roland Barthes famously talking about the zero degree of writing. As a young artist engaged in these polemics in the early '70s, I took it as a challenge to extend these arguments and to think about what was on the other side of zero. What would you call it: the irrational, the unusual, the hard to name? When you said to me, "It doesn't look like anything else," that's my interest now because it's not only about the inevitability of art constantly redefining itself as art or what could be predicted as some idea of progress in art. I understand how a lot of art worked that way, and I admired it. But at a certain point it hit the wall. For a lot of artists, not just you and me, things shattered and fell into a much more complicated place. And that's where we are now.

**BW** And that's a good place. What you said about art being something else—

**JN** —I said that the experience of looking at art, or making it, for that matter, wasn't necessarily literary, narrative, or journalistic.

**BW** It was something else. I have often wondered about the necessity of art, and maybe it's a game to speculate on this—but do we really need art? Isn't it kind of a silly endeavor?

But think about *not* having art. We would miss some incredible part of life. Once, when I was griping about the difficulty of having an art career, a friend told me it was my *duty* to make art. It's not my place to dismiss an activity that has been going on for centuries, even if I want to label it as strange. Look how many super intelligent and fascinating people are involved with making, presenting, and discussing art. So while it's not the most rational or scientific thing in the world, that's okay. The weirdness factor, that's really important. To be thrown a little.

**JN** The monkey wrench you were talking about before.

**BW** But also not to deny that there's



*John Newman, Primaries' Retort, 2012, blown glass, tulle, mutex, cast acrylic, and enamel paint, 10 1/2 x 10 x 8 1/2 inches.*



*John Newman, Stump, brass and counting, 2010, wood, brass wire, museum board, and acrylic paint, 21 x 16 x 8 1/2 inches.*

something very fulfilling about looking. It's kind of simplistic, but—

JN Well, it may be romantic, but not simplistic.

BW It's this curious mixture. Okay, your art doesn't look like my art and vice versa, but there is an interesting connection. We're both sort of classicists. You have a bit of baroque in there. But classical and baroque can coexist. My pieces are maybe a little more like Federal classical . . . and maybe a bit of baroque is in there once in a while.

JN When the wire twists.

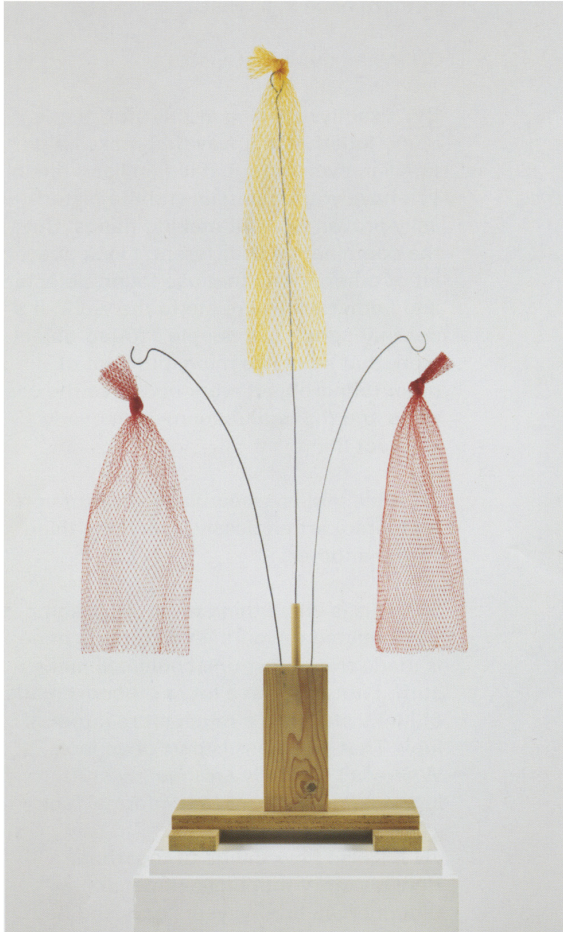
BW Exactly. Looking at this stuff that's come together in a way that makes it unfamiliar, even though it is familiar. I mean, you have your materials and the historically proven ways of making things. But the combination is different. I look at a lot of other artists that use found objects and I don't usually relate to the work. It's not that I don't like people's found-object work that's not like mine, but a lot of other found-object work obscures the use value and the work becomes an overly abstract thing.

JN Well, that is assemblage. A lot of contemporary art endlessly layers one thing on top another.

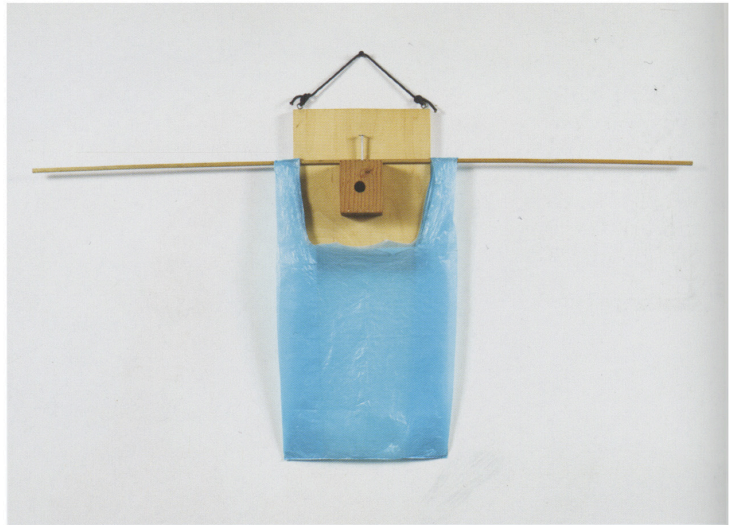
BW This is why I think my work is somewhat related to yours. Even though mine is made from what one could call junky stuff, I noticed that a lot of other art made of junky stuff has a much more informal look. That junkiness is part of its look. Whereas I carefully arrange my stuff, trying to get away from that informal look.

JN It's also how things fit together. Here's a story that I love. I met John Chamberlain briefly, years ago, and he said to me, "You know what the definition of sculpture is, kid?" He stuck out his hand for me to shake and I did. He said, "Fit." I just thought, Fantastic! It was one of those eureka moments. In your case and mine, the materials are very specific—and need to be—but it's about how they work together.

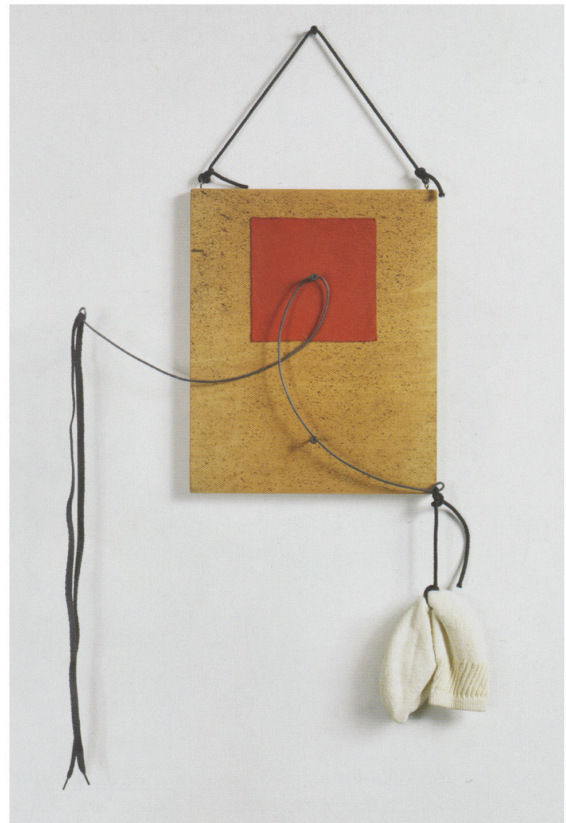
I have a funny idea, and I bet you've thought something similar, as it seems to me that the part-to-part relationships in your work tell this story. I kid around with what I call my Kidney Transplant Theory. My girlfriend's daughter used to tease me when she first got to know my sculptures. Sometimes she would have



*B. Wurtz, Untitled, 2001, wood, wire, and mesh netting, 43 x 20 x 10 inches.*



*B. Wurtz, Untitled, 1997, plywood, plastic bag, wooden doll, and rope, 24 x 38 1/2 inches.*



*B. Wurtz, Untitled, 1997, acrylic on canvas, wood, metal wire, sock, and shoelace, 33 x 19 x 1 1/2 inches.*

some funny thing that she would buy or find, and she'd say to me, "Here, see if you can put that in a sculpture." At first, I was really bothered by it; I thought she was making fun of me. But in fact, it really helped me to think about this: Can a foreign body that exists on its own plug into the system of the larger work and give it life? Or will it kill it?

**BW** Or be rejected by the immune system.

**JN** A lot of things we have been talking about connect to what I call the "nothing." This probably resonates more clearly in your work than in mine. Let's say that when you first saw a work by Barnett Newman or Robert Ryman or even a Giacometti sculpture, didn't you have a sense that it was made out of nothing? Prompting you to say, "What the hell is that?"

**BW** (*laughter*)

**JN** I think what's really interesting is to squeeze out something from nothing. Do you know what I mean?

**BW** I do. For me, it brings up the question of materials again. Religious art was made with materials that were considered precious—the opposite of "nothing." And it brings up again the difference between East and West. If you think of Japanese tea-ceremony cups, they're made out of mud. That's super sophisticated. We were alluding to this before—the purpose; these mud cups have a "philosophical value." I read an interview with Duchamp where he was asked why he didn't want to make retinal art. And he said that it could have a philosophical value. If you think of the tea ceremony, it's very much like Conceptual art, making something seemingly crude but at the same time hugely refined. And so, when you're making something out of nothing—what happened with modernism is that simpler materials, which could be called nothing (depending on how you want to look at it), could have huge value aesthetically and philosophically, or whatever. And you and I are sort of in the middle of all this.

**JN** I think that's right. Actually, the middle is something I'm trying to put my finger on here. It isn't so much the "nothing" of materials; it's more the idea of nothing. I think of it as a tuning fork. On one side, there's the possible notion that what is being presented is almost a joke—I mean, come on, are you going

to tell me that *that's* something serious? And on the other hand, it is a ponderous, philosophical pretention. Richard Tuttle's wire drawings come to mind—work that skates on that razor's edge, sort of humming and hovering in between those two poles. That, to me, is thrilling.

When I first looked at *your* work I was really excited by detecting the same thing—this curiously slight yet Dadaist way that makes you think, Come on, give me a break. And that's what I mean by *nothing*.

**BW** That's very well put. It's not so much the material being nothing but a more focused idea that could appear to be almost nothing, that is, as you said, the razor's edge.

Another connection between the two of us is that we have a penchant for comparing things. I've made sculptures in which many things were literally paired, for example, an element with its representation. I did some pieces where I attached an object to a board and did diagrammatic drawings of different views of it next to the actual object. My works that I call the photo-object series pair an object on a low base that sits on the floor with a large-scale photograph of that object above it on the wall. The photo makes the object look huge and monumental. Or one sculpture was made with a bowling ball and a rock. They sit together on either end of a bench-like base and invite comparison. I'm looking in your new exhibition catalogue, and there's this image with the red and the yellow, comparing the two colors, or this one with the three oval-shaped things. You take a form and you recreate it in different materials; the form is altered by the materials and changes each time but is still in relation to the others. It's curious, it's as if there's something in our minds that drives us to do that.

I'm interested in objects and in the world, obviously, since I use found objects. I'm also interested in myself. What makes me wanna be an artist? How does my mind work? I don't know if I have an answer.

**JN** It's not so much that I have *the* answer. But I have thought about this as well.

**BW** Let's hear it.

**JN** As I said earlier, I first got interested in Conceptual art. I'd never made anything as a child; I didn't know how to make things. My father was a linguistics

professor and he would call an electrician if he had to change a light bulb. During the beginnings of Conceptual art, a lot of artists were engaged with linguistics as a model to determine ideas about the structure of meaning. Meaning in art seemed so personal and subjective that it was difficult to talk about it rigorously. After I left graduate school, I was making two-sided reliefs that hung perpendicular to the wall. It interested me that if you looked from one side to the other and back again, by comparing and contrasting, you extended the visual experience via memory—it was like reading or even encryption. I didn't want the experience to be merely optical or retinal, as you referred to before with Duchamp—and especially not decorative. At the time, I was interested in being in between categories—not painting, not sculpture—as well as in reading, comparing, and contrasting through memory, which came from thinking about visual art's relationship to language. And yet I now feel those binary relationships of oppositions seem a bit simplistic.

**BW** A way to look at it is to consider the difference between one word and a sentence. A sentence is made up of many words, and, in a way, that's what we're doing. I came at it from a different background than you because I was always making things.

**JN** When you were a kid?

**BW** Yes, as a very small child I was making little things out of wood blocks, and I did a lot of drawing. You probably drew as a kid.

**JN** I really didn't. I suppose you could say that I came at it more from a cerebral side. Now the irony is that making objects seems like a fantastically radical thing to do because I never did it! (*laughter*) It's one reason, perhaps, why the problem of craft comes up in a confusing way. I tend to set up challenges for myself: How can I possibly make that? Can I even figure out *how* to make it, and what is it going to take to get it done?

But I would like to know more about your earlier days. You went to school in California, where there was a whole other sensibility going on compared to the East Coast. I wonder if that had any connection to the use of text in your early work?

**BW** As I said, I made things. But I also, as with you, got very interested in Conceptual art when it began. I was

super into Duchamp. I'm assuming you were as well. So I had this drive to make things, I loved doing it, and I loved how they looked; but I needed some kind of subject in there to make it more philosophical. Maybe this is what you were referring to with linguistics. You didn't just want to have the philosophical; it needed some visual—or what Duchamp would call retinal—in there, too, to make the mixture engaging.

JN There's one thing about Duchamp that I was *not* engaging with in my work and that was what the Dadaists called *épa-ter le bourgeois*, a slap in the face to the public. You have a bit of that Dadaist slap going on in your work—the “let's see if you can take this” kind of slap.

I still find that private, intimate experience of looking—just me and the object—to be very satisfying. I can recall, though, when I was teaching around 1992, everyone seemed to be obsessed with “commodity fetishism.” My students thought it was bad that art objects could be bought and sold—sculptures, especially, were subject to this criticism. If it was an installation, or an earthwork, or a video, it somehow challenged the corporate system. In fact, what's been happening is that installations, earthworks, and videos can be bought. So we really are in a different place now.

BW That's kind of refreshing that we could get beyond that. It's ironic that museums now want those big installations. They bring in the crowds. People like to interact with things.

JN This is especially curious with regard to sculpture now. In the '70s, everybody seemed to know what a painting was; it didn't matter what you painted, painting had a clearly defined territory. As a sculptor, I've always envied this. Sculpture back then had become a big umbrella that sheltered video, performance, installation, text, sound, and objects too. What has happened, oddly enough, is that “sculpture as the object” seems to have lost its credibility. Now installation is the big umbrella, and what has come to be referred to—I think ironically and disparagingly—as “object sculpture” is now thought of as a subset of installation. That's a big change, and it has to do with the art world's larger audience having expectations of what they want to see—usually some sort of spectacle. Something you can walk into and be enveloped by as opposed to a more esoteric or specialized experience with a singular

and peculiar object. That's one reason why I'm interested in Chinese scholar's rocks, for example. They are instruments of reverie to enliven meditation and to engage the imagination. That kind of quietude does not seem to be as valued in the same way as the participatory, interactive spectacle.

BW It depends on where you're coming from though. Museums have got to survive. And a lot of them started thinking about how to bring in viewers. Carsten Höller's *Experience* last year was the most attended show ever for the New Museum and that was extremely participatory. I think other parts of the art world will take up the smaller object, one with philosophical meaning. It depends on how you want to look at things, negatively or positively, and on whether you even need to choose. What's great about the art world now is that *all* this stuff is going on at once.

JN I didn't mean to say that one thing supplanted the other. The point is that sculpture—which used to be the welcoming field—is now being less understood than installation. Installation seems more accessible as a mode of looking at art, whereas sculpture is more difficult to grasp. I've had several people say to me, “I don't know how to look at your work,” which I have decided to take as a compliment—although I don't know if it is meant to be one. Has anyone ever said that to you?

BW Let me think . . .

JN Of course you know how to look at it; it's right there! That was always the beautiful thing about Minimalism. Donald Judd said, “The great thing about sculpture is that it's *here*.” It's with us.

BW (*laughter*)

JN We are here together in the same space. And that *being here* is so compelling. The argument about getting rid of the pedestal had to do with its tendency to distance, to separate shared space. And yet an object is not *here* in the same way because it's in a kind of specialized space. I'm interested in the pedestal again because it creates a specialized, particular space. Again, Chinese scholar's rocks—it is just you and it. And your imagination—now that is large scale! But changing your mind is something I want to talk with you about. When I saw your show at Metro Pictures, some

of the works had writing on them. And there was also a lot of wood. I thought—which I never expected to think in regard to your work—of H.C. Westermann. I'm interested in what you think of him. And I am interested in the idea of changing your mind about artists and then discovering other artists for yourself as fuel for your work. I wonder if you do that kind of thing?

BW Well, the H.C. Westermann connection is very interesting because I loved him as a young person. He was a big influence on me, as was Alexander Calder.

JN As a young artist, I was not thinking about Calder at all, but about 15 years ago, I began to see that his work was connected to certain aspects I was interested in—for example, the idea that a sculpture could float. Because of the mobile on every baby's crib, his work became so absorbed in the culture that you couldn't really see it anymore. As with farming, you have to turn over the topsoil to allow for new growth.

BW This is another example of how we came at it from opposite ways. I connected to these artists when I was young, and I basically stuck with them my whole life. You, on the other hand, had this interesting reinvention of yourself.

Calder is a good example, because during my very first art classes at UC Berkeley, I made this little mobile thing out of wire and cutout pieces of colored plastic. The teacher said, “This looks like a Calder mobile.” It suddenly dawned on me that Calder invented the mobile. It did not exist before that. I went back into the studio and made this other hanging thing, but it did not look anything like a Calder mobile. I brought it back to class and the teacher said, “This is great, I don't even know what this thing is.”

JN Sculpture was always about gravity, but a sculpture that floats is a complete paradigm shift. Calder's work was very sophisticated in terms of his art-historical precedents—hybridizing Mondrian with Miró—without ever being didactic, and, at the same time, it contained a brilliant and wholly original idea about engineering and construction. He also had another extraordinary ingredient—joy!

BW Joy is a huge part, almost the most serious part, of art. Think of life without joy—what's the point?