



Place Versions

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Sterling makes evidence and we call it sculpture. He texted me the other day at 9:30 am:

Got up to something this morning. North Lamar just south of justin. I'll send u the address in a min. Prolly finish the install within the hour and start shouting right after

Shooting not shouting

I drove up to an abandoned-looking building — an ex-tire repair shop or something like it. Pulling into the parking lot with the window cracked, I couldn't see if the slow crunch below my tires was the sound of twigs snapping or a sculpture.

By the time I got there, Sterling was documenting the installation that he had set up that morning. He does this sometimes — installing sculptures in places that could be reasonably thought of as the total antithesis of the white cube. But thinking about these abandoned businesses and parking lots as merely the opposites of traditional gallery space is dangerously reductive, because it still reinforces white cube's status as the fulcrum around which artistic practice revolves. His work doesn't easily antagonize

like that. It also doesn't really hope to elevate trash scraps to the status of fine art. That value system is the very thing his work ends up loosening altogether.

Most pieces in these installations are regulars: two decorative balls with chipped pearl facades, one on the floor and one up on a shelf, a line connecting the two articulated by a thick yellow strap; four label-less jugs of water erected on the corners of some preexisting rectangle, a kind of gas station gargoyle; a formerly tufted dirty turquoise pleather seat cushion perforated by hunks of dried bamboo where the buttons used to be; et cetera.

But certain questions come up when you install a dirty seat cushion on the ground. Which dirt is the cushion's and which dirt is the floor's? Where is the thing to be looked at, and where is the space around it? I look at these and wonder what a materials list might say.

Sometimes found-object-type sculpture is intentionally haphazard about its preciousness. It's installed in ways that both embody and confuse boundaries between art and non-art, which has political potency. Something both sweet and troublesome about Sterling's sculptures is that they admit that their preciousness is born out of relationality. What better way to query modernism's belief in purely formal relationships than to pluck the good shapes from the trash, where all forms have been ontologically equalized? The dirty turquoise seat cushion I mentioned earlier—he found that in a field. He recounted that its holes (the perfectly circular remnants of where its buttons used to be) looked to be just the circumference of some bamboo nearby, which he confirmed by tearing off stalks of it, slicing them with a too-dull pocket knife, eventually making his fingers bleed a little (he tells me this in the least heroic way one could, but still leaves me room to speculate). He said he stuck the bamboo in the cushion, he took a photo of it, and then he took it back to his studio. He shows me the underside of the cushion as we squat on the fractured concrete carport. "I took it back to the studio and cleaned up the foam." He tells me about this measured grid of bamboo stalks protruding up from the surface of a piece of plywood that lines up with the holes in the cushion, "in case it needs to be installed somewhere else."

While he may be setting up a fleeting display of oftentimes old, dirty, or seemingly simple things, Sterling's also simultaneously referencing a set of detailed instructions he's articulated for himself over the years. A small, color printed picture cutout accompanies each piece like a type of trading card, collected in the pocket of a three-ring binder. Graphite arrows inscribed over the pictures note things like *24" left of corner on each side, taller than 6', or 16" apart*. So for each sculpture, there's a set of instructions—rules just barely broad enough to allow each piece to be

installed in a small variety of places. A baby blanket covered in little cartoon spiders is always installed high up, always in a corner, always x number of inches from the corner, no matter if it's in a museum or on the side of a warehouse garage.

These notes help keep a sort of uncanny consistency, a type of consistency that can only be measured across many iterations of the same pieces. It's a slow-burning reward that begins to re-calibrate late-capitalistic tendencies. If you were to see one piece installed in two totally different places, you would begin to see it not as a unique object, but as an entity who behaves a certain way. It's a rare relationship between the viewer and the viewed. It makes you zoom out of the single exhibit and glimpse the scope of Sterling's personal project. We could probably zoom in or out infinitely, renaming his unique "pieces" and "installations" to fit the scale. He spends time on futile things like consistency, and it's an act of generosity. An accidentally meticulous calculation of value spent and value disregarded; a mental exercise in sharing.

At his studio now. I ask Sterling a lot of questions, really specific ones. Do you feel bad about covering things? Like covering things in plaster or epoxy or paint? What's your storage situation? How do you feel about pedestals? He explains that he's really, really picky about which objects he skims off the city's garbage; they don't have to be pretty but they do have to be special, and he doesn't usually paint over them or alter them much. If he does paint (cover) a piece, it's usually wood. (We both look around his garage studio and take note of the fact that all of the built-in additions he's made to the space are constructed out of wood.) "Wood's familiar, and I end up thinking about it as a raw material. It's also always almost the same temperature as the body." He flips over a white circular pedestal made out of cardboard and wood, revealing its tectonic pine armature inside. "I kinda like the inside more than the outside."

Answers to these different questions of mine all sort of did the same thing. In fact, I don't think that it would have had much consequence if I had not asked those questions, because I think that his answers would have come up anyway. It's not so much that he answers each question I have, but that each question establishes a set of terms which he uses to say the same type of thing. It's the type of thing that language can only circumnavigate, but that his art can articulate in sensory terms over time (and that his practice actively embodies). You know when you see his work's polyphonic composition of bits all strung together, its vibrant commercial color pallet sun-bleached in sections, the way it all keeps you moving as you're looking—you know that it's getting at something a little uncomfortable, something that would be robbed of its slow potency if I tried to name it here.

The work insists on a certain type of trashiness that lives right alongside a supremely detailed, almost futile level of care and attention. Sterling activates the synesthetic sensitivity of looking — something between paranoia and curiosity — that requires the acknowledgement of vulnerabilities (both in the viewing body and in the works).

Sterling's sculptures are the residue (evidence) of his particular method of being *with*: being with shapes and colors in the world, being with his collection of images cut out from years of books he didn't read, being with Austin's commercial real estate problem, being with the realities of professionalism. His practice digests the conditions of the environment around it, alchemically making raw material out of circumstance.

It turns out I had run over a sculpture when I pulled up to the tire shop. It was a decisively shaped bundle of wire hangers that looked like they were all spooning each other. He said it was totally not a big deal and, despite a lot of ingrained lessons, I genuinely believed him. I still don't know if that installation had a title, but if it didn't then he would probably just refer to it by its street address.

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