

IAN JOHNSTON: THE CHAMBER

JUNE 6 — JULY 18, 2015

ONE THING AND THEN ANOTHER

Ian Johnston's sculptural practice is a supple one, having involved numerous shifts in both method and expression over the course of his career. It is a trajectory he has likened to a stream of consciousness.^[1] At its core, however, is a persistent inquiry into the nature and consequences of our relationship with the material world, an exploration, to quote the artist, "of the space that engages our physical selves."^[2]

Johnston arrived at his present place by way of architecture. Desiring to work more closely to the physical realm than that discipline most often allows, he spent the next ten years teaching and exploring a host of other, more malleable forms and materials—found, salvaged and constructed objects—through which to articulate his ideas. Traces of his architectural training remain however, as his projects manifest in complex and visually arresting installations, often taking on aspects of built form. The medium of ceramic has been particularly seductive for the artist, concerned as he is with the matter and metaphor of material culture. Intrinsically pliable, wet clay has the ability perform a unique mimicry. It can assume the guise of an object that it is draped over or molded around, can take the shape of negative space when pressed into a container and, thrown on a wheel or shaped by hand, it can metamorphose from a raw slab into entirely original, sophisticated form.

Johnston's questions about our relationship to material culture or, more specifically, about our current culture's voracious appetite for the consumption of material things, has led to the realization of several multi-part projects developed through a series of international residencies in China, Canada, United States, Denmark and, most recently, the Netherlands. From the outset, Johnston sought to create work that explored the peculiarities of material consumption within each of these cultures, especially as indicated by the detritus left in their wake. "Surely," the artist remarked, "China would present a unique taxonomy of consumption as compared to Canada, the US or Denmark."^[3] What became most compelling to Johnston, however, were not particularities but commonalities—the sheer uniformity of global consumer culture. The astonishment of this realization is the underpinning of *The Chamber*, one element of larger three-part body of work titled *Reinventing Consumption* that, typical to Johnston's process, evolved organically through a complex web of associations and allusions. In this project, alongside his inquiry into the global crisis of consumption that arguably defines our present cultural climate, is a related but seemingly opposite interest: the invention of objects from an earlier moment in western society, one defined by the onset and consequent acceleration of such voracious consumption.

While in residence at the European Ceramic Work Centre in the Netherlands in 2010, Johnston developed a method of molding wet ceramic material using a vacuum forming process. He draped wet clay over an object, placed that object within a plastic bag and then, sealing the nozzle of a vacuum around the bag, drew out the air until the clay clung tight to its object-mold. His discovery of this technique led to an obsessive repetition of some 750 experiments, and the casting of a series of found objects including pots and pans, manual typewriters, and a 1950s rotary dial desk telephone. These "objects of convenience" were simply at hand,⁴ but interestingly, the vintage of each refers, not without some nostalgia, to an era buoyant in its belief in progress and unabated growth.

It was Johnston's observations during the vacuum-forming process that provided a departure point in *Reinventing Consumption*. In his repeated experiments, he noticed that the "respiration" of the plastic bag—which deflated as the air was sucked out—alternatively both concealed and then revealed the object(s) beneath. This discovery led to *The Chamber*, and to bagging a veritable mountain of cast-off things. In this monumental installation, Johnston has conjured a colossal variant of the vacuum-form bag. In the centre of the gallery floor lays an enormous, limp nylon sac. Like an enormous synthetic lung, the sac expands slowly until it becomes taut with air and swollen to proportions that threaten to fill the entire space of the gallery. Fully inflated, its contents are lost to view, but as the sac deflates a pile of miscellaneous objects is gradually revealed. Scavenged from thrift shops, dumpsters and roadside curbs, these things have been retrieved, as the artist has stated, "from the banks of the waste stream."^[5] Accompanied by sounds that alternate from rushing water to the menacing crackle of flames, the experience of this luminous, respiring bag is immersive, unnerving and eerily beautiful.

Of course, the bagging of things—indeed of entire roomfuls of things—has a particular resonance in my place of writing in Vancouver, British Columbia, one that offers a compelling historical precedent and a lens through which to consider Johnston's monumental installation. In 1966, two years before he and then wife Ingrid would incorporate to form N.E. Thing Co., artist Iain Baxter& (then Iain Baxter) bagged the entire contents of an apartment—including furniture, light fixtures, even water in the sink—at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery.^[6] Pos-

sibly the first actual installation in Canada wherein the physical space of the gallery itself became the work of art, *Bagged Place* scrutinized North American consumer society's obsession with plastic packaging: "It had to do with where our culture was going at that time," Baxter& recalls. "This was exactly the moment when groceries were starting to be bagged in plastic instead of paper. It was the beginning of the transition to plastic, which I saw as a huge development at the time."^[7]

Like Johnston, Baxter& also experimented with the vacuum molded process, the results of which he first exhibited in the year before the realization of *Bagged Place*. Taking his cue from the hardened, shiny surfaces of Warhol and Oldenburg, but often incorporating discarded, emptied objects, Baxter& "literalized his belief in plastic as 'the common pottery of today.'"^[8] "I'd always gone to dumps and I noticed all kinds of plastic throwaways," Baxter& stated in a 1967 interview. "It became real to me that we lived in a plastic world, that everything we see, touch, drink from, the artificial ventricle for the heart, is plastic. It was a revelation of the plastic coating that goes on around the electronic generation. And I wanted to make these things."^[9] Johnston's *The Chamber* seems to be sited at the end of the trajectory that Baxter& describes. This work, however, is far less playful; gone are the references to pop art and culture. Like Baudelaire's Parisian rag picker, who horrifies nineteenth-century bourgeois culture by scavenging discarded items from trash bins and making visible that which is hidden in plain view, Johnston reveals the cast-off detritus of modernity, dispensed with for the ever-new in a perpetual cycle of the made-imminently obsolescent.

Karl Marx argues that the commodity's market success depends upon the erasure of its marks of production: the grime of the factory, the imprint of the machine and, most importantly, the exploitation of the worker. Built into the commodity object, then, is a screening device, which enables consumers to disallow knowledge in favour of belief. But oscillating precariously between revelation and revulsion, desire and disavowal, the ugly reality covered over by the commodity always threatens to reveal itself, for that which we repress inevitably returns. Perhaps herein lies the tension with which Johnston's installation holds us rapt: first balloon-like and luminescent, then shrunken and drawn, at once concealing and revealing the wreckage of consumption within, *The Chamber* is both mask and memorial, an uneasy epitaph to our culture's unsustainable ways.

Kimberly Phillips
Director/Curator

NOTES

^[1] Skype interview with the author, June 14, 2013.

^[2] Johnston, in email correspondence with the author, July 1, 2013.

^[3] Johnston, quoted in Deborah Loxam-Kohl, "Context, Materiality and Consumption: Exploring the process and material narratives of Ian Johnston's *Refuse Culture*," *Ian Johnston: Refuse Culture: Archaeology of Consumption* (Castlegar: The Kootenay Gallery of Art, History and Science, 2009), np.

^[4] Johnston, Skype interview with the author, June 14, 2013.

^[5] Ian Johnston, *Reinventing Consumption* Project Description Draft, July 2013.

^[6] In preparing this essay, I learned that while Baxter&'s practice was familiar to Johnston, the artist was unaware of *Bagged Place* when he embarked on *Reinventing Consumption*. It is serendipitous then, that Johnston's initial concept for the work included bagging the entire contents of a one-bedroom apartment on one side of *The Chamber* and those of a more modest, subsistence-type room on the other. Email correspondence with the author, July 4, 2013.

^[7] Iain Baxter&, in Alexander Alberro, "Interview with Iain Baxter&," *IAIN BAXTER& Works 1958-2011* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2011), 15. In the same interview Baxter notes that when he rebuilt *Bagged Place* for an exhibition in Toronto in 1987, the work took on a different meaning. This was in the midst of the AIDS crisis, and the plastic was then related to safe sex.

^[8] Baxter&, quoted in Robert Wainstein, "Narrative Chronology," *IAIN BAXTER& Works 1958-2011*, 154.

^[9] Baxter&, quoted in Joan Lowndes, "The Message Is—VSI: The Plastic World of Iain Baxter," *The Province* (Vancouver, February 3, 1967), 3.

BIOGRAPHY

IAN JOHNSTON is an internationally exhibited architect turned sculptor based in Nelson, BC. He studied architecture at Algonquin College, and Carleton University in Ottawa and with the University of Toronto. Prior to opening his Nelson studio in 1996, he spent five years working at the Bauhaus Academy in Eastern Germany. At the Bauhaus, together with two architects, he developed and facilitated a series of semester-long interdisciplinary workshops around themes of urban renewal and public intervention in a tumultuous time of cultural transformation.

The artist wishes to gratefully acknowledge the support of the Columbia Basin Trust and the Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION AND PUBLICATION LAUNCH
Friday, June 5, 2015, 7:00 PM

IN CONVERSATION:
Saturday, June 6, 2015, 2:00 PM

Access is committed to contributing to critical discourse about and within contemporary art in Vancouver, and in linking artists of different generations to one another and to the wider community. Join Access Gallery Director/Curator Kimberly Phillips as she speaks to exhibiting artist Ian Johnston about his persistent inquiry into the nature and consequences of our relationship to the material world, an exploration, to quote the artist "of the space that engages our physical selves."

Access Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and BC Gaming, the City of Vancouver, the Burrard Arts Foundation, and our committed donors, members and volunteers.



Access Gallery is a platform committed to emergent and experimental art practices. We enable critical conversations and risk taking through new configurations of audience, artists and community.



ACCESSGALLERY.CA