



LEGI BILITY OF EFFE ORT BY



DIY

JOURNAL
THE FUNKY
DINKY

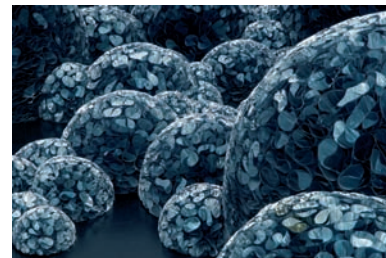
Anyone familiar with the landscape of the American educational system over the past 25 years will surely be familiar with what we might as well call 'the great levelling'. It goes by other names too: 'grade inflation'; 'institutional mediocrity'; 'special culture' ('special' as in 'everyone is...'). What these variants of the great levelling hold in common, of course, is the enshrinement of 'effort' (as in 'A for...') within the ranks of self-evidently positive values. As such, effort has become the stuff of semi-mindless platitudes: 'Put in the effort and you will be rewarded' or 'Better that you made the effort'. And soon enough, the reason any kind of effort is made in the first place is beside the point.

It should come as no surprise, then, that effort as an indication of value has taken up residence within the precincts of contemporary art. Faced with the loss of one or another ideological commitment – be it modernism, anti-aestheticism, institutional criticism, avant-gardism, naive politicism, rear-garde academicism, etc – artists must find a reason to keep working, a reason to keep making art. But when those reasons are not forthcoming, the least one can do is simply keep working, keep making and hope that somehow one's artistic means will become ends in and of themselves. How else to explain the recent tendency towards compulsive repetitions and accumulations? – think Ingrid Calame's tracings from the LA River or the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Carlos Amoraes's swarm of paper moths, *Black Cloud* (2007) or Tara Donovan's profusion of tape rings, *Untitled (Mylar)* (2007), which stand as exemplary indexical, iconic and symbolic modes of this kind of 'effortful' aesthetic signification.

But effort for effort's sake need not appear as the compulsion to repeat; it also manifests as a mimetic impulse, which replays the traditional artistic strategy of material translation in order to gain aesthetic traction. On this side of things we find Chris Gilmour's *Aston Martin DB5* (2006), a full recreation in cardboard of James Bond's truly tricked-out roadster from the movie *Goldfinger* (1964). In the same vein, but more self-reflexively, David Ersser's show at Roebing Hall this past September, *Nothing But Heavy Duty*, recreated the artist's studio-cum-woodshop – replete with power tools, table saw, extension cords, folding ladder and other assorted items, detritus and materials stock – entirely out of balsa wood. These are genuine feats of material mastery, but they quickly appear formulaic, in the most literal sense: take the form of some complex object, select an unsuspected and somewhat resistant material, add labour, add time, add a little more time (for time is of the utmost importance: if 'time' is not legible, neither is 'effort'), and there you have it: some 'thing' made out of something else.

(To set these comments in sharper relief, it's worth noting that figures such as Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg could easily fall in with this company if it weren't for their favoured blue and green polystyrene, which one can assume was selected at least in part for the effortless with which it may be manipulated. Which is to say that Hanson and Sonnenberg are less interested in the viewer's apprehension of the magnitude of their endeavour – ie, in the legibility of their efforts – than in the signifying potential of their constructs.)

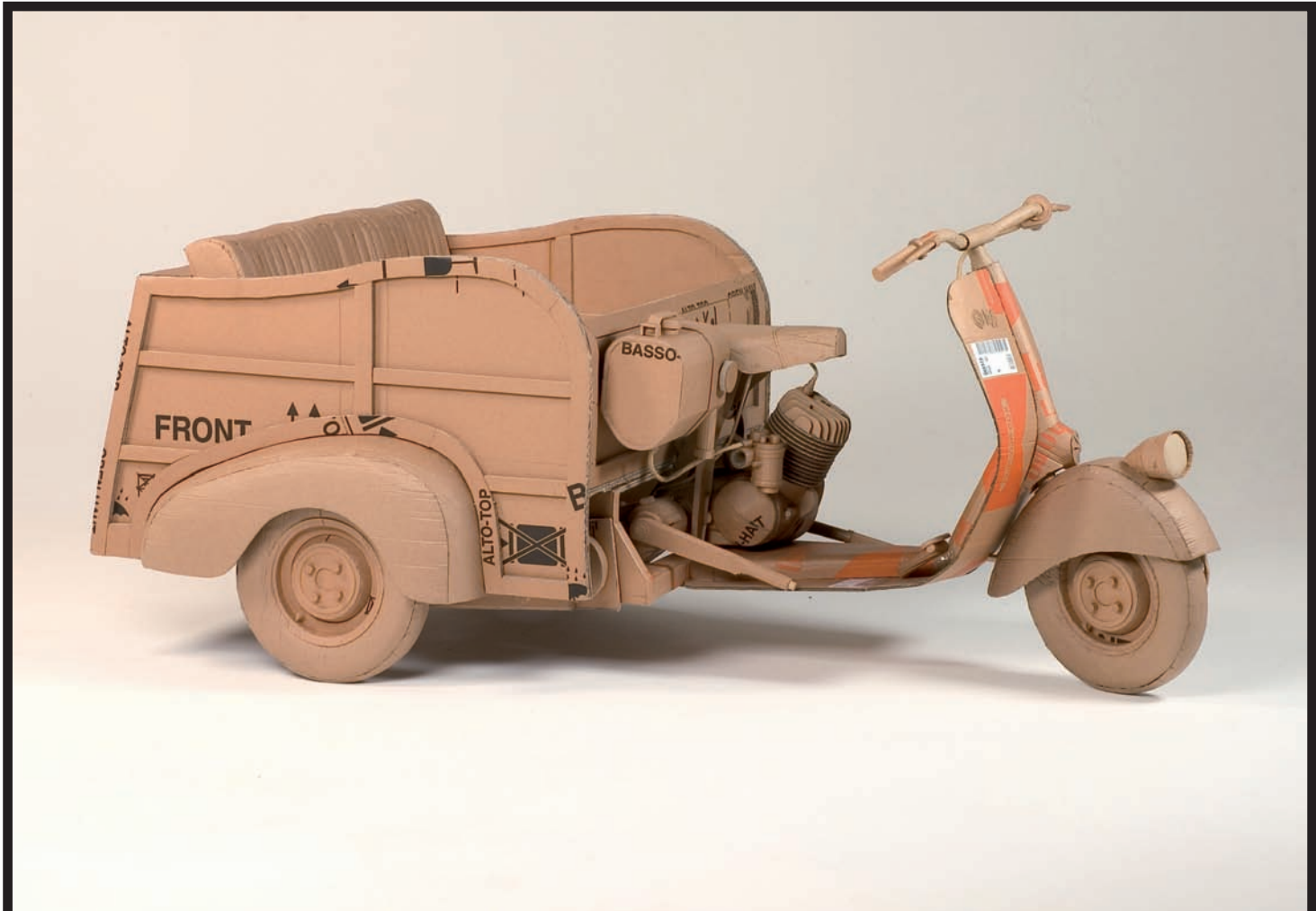
Of course the legibility of effort is nothing if not dialectical – indeed, this is what moves it from a mere theme into a particular problem for contemporary art. For in what other way are we to understand the offerings of artists such as Gedi Sibony or Ian Pedigo? – works that ask how few moves one can make and still render a 'work' of art legible as such. Here materials are equally important, though not for their pliability or for their significance, but for their utter evacuation of content – an evacuation which does not quite result in, does not quite purify or reduce to, any kind of form. One hesitates to think of Pedigo's or Sibony's art as some kind of physical manifestation of Robert Morris's *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* (1963), though that is certainly its effect: a gesture that simultaneously negates and produces value; it's the laudable failure, a



Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Mylar)*, 2007, dimensions variable. Photo: Stephen White. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, and PaceWildenstein, New York

Gedi Sibony *Chatterer*, 2007, wood, Plexiglas, plastic sheet, dimensions variable. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York





Chris Gilmour, *Auto Taxi*, 2006,
cardboard, glue, lifesize. Courtesy Perugi
Artecontemporanea, Padova

good-enough effort. This hint at Morris reminds us that any new reliance upon the legibility of effort – or the lack thereof – to secure aesthetic value traces its precedents to the so-called process art of the late 1960s. But for those artists, the privileging of process was simply a strategy by which to overcome the tyranny of ends over means and the temporality that that kind of object production (aka Minimalism) entailed. So for Yvonne Rainer, performance could become a *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* (1970); and for Richard Serra sculpture could be defined as *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47* (1968).

The problem with ‘process’, however, was that it simply flipped the means/ends dichotomy on its head and so left exposed the delicate underbelly of artistic ‘means’ itself, which was now understood according to its component parts: labour, time and materials. And too singular a focus upon any one of these aspects of artistic means would render nearly unrecognisable – or rather, ‘illegible’ – results. The most extreme case here being John Cage’s *4’33”*, first ‘composed’ in 1952, which means it stands as a kind of process piece *avant la lettre*, just as it initiates the issue of effort *in extremis*.

Of course, within our contemporary moment, it is Martin Creed who can most lay claim to that Cagean sensibility by making effort, and its relative legibility, a medium of artistic practice. Creed’s work does not fall at one or the other end of the high- (eg Gilmour) or low- (eg Sibony) effort spectrum, but rather occupies the entirety of its continuum. Think of the now-iconic *Work No. 227 (The Lights Going On and Off)* (2000), or *Work No. 557* (2006), composed of a series of standard A4 sheets methodically filled in by strokes of black marker, or *Work No. 503* (2006) and *Work No. 600* (2006), two pieces which reconceive shitting and vomiting as essential forms of – effortful? effortless? – ‘production’. As these examples should make plain, Creed has even self-consciously reconceived the artistic ‘oeuvre’ itself as the accumulation of so much ‘work’: the ultimate gesture of accumulation, a lifetime’s worth of efforts, which, of course, Creed has now taken to ‘replaying’ in his *Variety Show* performances, those entertaining reminders of much of what he has ‘done’, lest it all become a little too illegible. ⚡

Carlos Amorales, *Black Cloud*, 2007,
25,000 paper moths, dimensions variable.
© the artist. Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert,
New York and Paris