

Objects of devotion, even
(unpublished statement)



Economy (detail) 2001

Talking with Ben today about a pair of wood staircases I am including in an upcoming exhibition.

One of the staircases is already built and I am painting it white.

The other staircase is 1/2 built and will be painted tan or beige or brown. They are small, about 1/2 scale.

We are now re-building the second staircase entirely.

Our conversation arose out of a short talk yesterday in which I mentioned that the inside of the staircase was sculpture too, just like the outside. So, it needs to be attended to with the same care. What I want is not fancy craft, but careful craft. The staircase has to be built as (not like) a “real” staircase. Though only 1/2 scale, it is not a model or mock-up for something else, but is a thing itself. So it needs to be built, as we say, “for real”.

What do I mean by a real thing?

Today I showed Ben some pictures of sculpture: the Medici tombs by Michelangelo, Rodin’s Burghers at Calais, a guitar relief by Picasso, Duchamp’s bottle-rack, some Judd boxes. It was an arbitrary (or not at all arbitrary) assortment of objects. “Each of these is or may be sculpture,” I said. “I think these staircases may be sculpture too, or perhaps they may become sculpture.” It is a question I do not know the answer to, but I ask it seriously even if the answer is not mine to give.

A digression: I pointed to an old shovel in my studio. Its handle and shaft are made from a single piece of wood. I also had a picture of a beautiful Shaker grain shovel, with handle and shaft, likewise, carved from a single piece. “The Shaker shovel, because it is so clearly an object of devotion,” I said, “may also, I think, be sculpture.” It has been not just made, but made “real”. My old shovel, though interesting, is only, however, a made thing. For it to be made “real” (as sculpture or art) would require a conceptual act (as with the “readymades” of Marcel Duchamp). As it is, my old shovel, though well-made, was made without care.

Care? Devotion? I am talking now as an artist not a philosopher.

All artists are devoted to their work. We never know what we are doing, but still we do it because we care about it. A work does not arrive as a real thing, but needs to be made real. This requires devotion to one’s art. (Though Duchamp claimed to have devoted his life to doing as little as possible, it was, nonetheless, a life devoted to). This devotion I am speaking of is no different than, yet not the same as, being devoted to one’s lover or family or faith or nation or baseball team.

To be devoted is to care about/ to care for/ to take care.

The staircase needs to be carefully made. For within this caring lies its reality as a thing. A carelessly made thing has not been cared about and cannot be cared for. I am not talking craft here. I am suggesting the event of making embodies an act of devotion. What is sometimes called “visionary” or “outsider” art, for example, is often poorly crafted, yet made with fierce devotion. As an artist I must care enough not only to make things, but to make them real—at least real to me. And because this act of caring for, or caring about, is always an extension from within oneself to outside oneself, it is fundamentally a social act. The *cared for* object as a form of social extension holds forth the promise of becoming recognized and *cared about* by others. Whether it becomes recognized as sculpture or art is another question. An artist cannot will art into being. And art, likewise, is never an event in nature, but is only and always an event or thing within culture. Art is a social event—dependent not simply upon its context, but upon the relations it engenders. The work of art becomes recognized when it stands there not as a thing for itself, but as a social thing (or thing for us), as when it becomes, in the best sense, a “conversation piece” or a piece for conversation.

If the thing of my making holds no reality for me, it will hold none for anyone else. If I am not devoted to it or fail to attend to it, it is unlikely to receive someone else’s attention or caring or devotion. A thing not cared for cannot become a thing cared about.

But do I seriously intend to place two small, painted wood staircases alongside the Medici tomb and make the claim, “these may be sculpture?” What is real to me may not ever become real to someone else. It may seem merely ridiculous. The risk is inseparable from its reward.

addendum: Presentness *may* be grace, but objects of devotion are not idols. They stand there, but they are not stand-ins (that is another story). Still, the religious metaphor, as illogical as anything else I have just proposed, is apt—*pace*, Michael Fried.

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August 2001