Art(work) and Critical Play (Leisure):
Keith Benjamin's New Work Discussed in Seven Movements

By Matt Morris

1. Wake up.
Commercials advertising various brands of coffee, televangelists calling for revival in earnest, even sarcastic friends wishing you would take a second, better look at your current love interest's glaring vices. There is more than a good night's sleep to which we average folk are routinely asked to break from, roused into a state of more aware, acute critical observation. And the rewards for this heightened consciousness should have all the fulfillment and comfort that a hearty breakfast provides (but they don't always). Such a call and response has been echoing around Modern art history for, well, practically a century. It was dawning on artists that there was more to art than was previously known or considered. Most of that 'more' lay within the territory of "real life," across an uncanny valley from pictorial oil paintings and statues rescued from the blocks of stone out of which they were carved. In 1911, Pablo Picasso slapped oilcloth (printed with a pattern of chair caning across it) onto *Still Life with Chair-caning*. In 1915, Marcel Duchamp exhibited *In advance of the broken arm*, which was nothing more than a mass-manufactured snow shovel that was unlike anything the French artist had previously seen (some sources say this was the first artwork he referred to as a "readymade"). In 1964, Andy Warhol presented his first *Brillo Box*, and philosopher/writer Arthur C. Danto had a field day. Though Warhol's first *Brillo Box* was screenprinted onto wood to look like a package, Danto noted that his later works with the boxes, as well as with soup cans, presented products and advertising *from real life* and showed them as art.

To say that art should wake up is to argue that the artist has a responsibility to produce work while he is *socially awake*, that is, art that possesses a self-awareness of the world and age in which it is being presented. It needn't instigate superficial debates with dominant cultural paradigms to purport relevance. In fact, I hope we've outgrown such a transparent strategy of conceiving of an enemy within the cultural matter we live through. Instead, the bridge from art to life is simple (though nearly invisible, like the trap in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), when Indy's faith guides him to the Holy Grail across a camouflaged bridge over a deep crevice in the Canyon of the Crescent Moon. Not the last filmic reference in this essay. Another route to fusing art to life is via other, more ubiquitous art). Keeping the world around

him in mind, as well as the stuff of his life in ready use, a number of humble gestures by the artist may not totally erase the taxonomic barriers between the mundane and the transcendent, but it can get blurred enough that your thoughts step back and forth between them with ease.

Hegel's dictum, "The familiar, just because it is familiar, is not well known," comes to mind. Such sentiments were problematic starting points and sparring partners for philosophers in the 20th Century that sought to pin down humanity's relationship to reality, and in so doing, deconstruct invented models for human consciousness / physical reality / conceptual ideas. The Neo-Marxist Henri Lefebvre expounded on Hegel's basic idea by espousing the activity of analyzing one's everyday life in order to better understand what was previously unknown. This "critique of everyday life" was art for Lefebvre, which is good because it went on to inspire some of the most radically thinking artists of the 20th Century (the Situationist International, among others). But it would be better to think of the abovementioned artistic precedents in this way as well, because while the Situationists stopped making objects—practically stopped doing anything—the artist at hand, sculptor Keith Benjamin, and those others mentioned, are in an ongoing game of "capture the flag" in their studio practices. The objects they produce blend art and life together through the use of detritus snatched out of kitchens, recycle bins, dumpsters and garages. Without fully disregarding these materials' previous lives, Benjamin reincarnates them into the semi-abstract structures and meditations that comprise *Unemployed Title*, his solo exhibition at U.turn Art Space.

A century of war, the emergence of abstraction, an age of mechanical reproduction and the deconstructive practices of Post-modern philosophy were some of the wake up calls for art. Keith Benjamin is the breakfast that follows (and not just the many works he has produced in two decades of working that clearly invoke breakfast as a thematic element). As an artist and educator, Benjamin is a quiet instigator of the simple, witty art solutions that he himself employs. He is a role model and reliable point of reference for the state of critical play in which artists presently find themselves, the aftermath of a boundless, totally unresistant post-post-modern world that Arthur C. Danto saw coming. He called it a post-historical place that art had arrived at:

> *I am suggesting that in that sense there are to be no next things. The time for next things is past. The end of art coincides with the end of a history of art that has that kind of structure. After that there is nothing to do but live happily ever after. It was like coming to the end of the world with no more continents to discover. One must now begin to make habitable the only continents that there are. One must learn to live within the limits of the world.* [Danto, Arthur C., "Approaching the End of Art," 1984]

2. Backdrop / scenery.
Keith Benjamin was born in 1967 in Onadaga, New York. He studied sculpture at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, graduating with a BFA in 1989. A few years later, he earned an MFA from the University of Illinois, Chicago, in 1993. In that same year, he returned to the Art Academy as a professor, where he has been teaching young artists ever since. But the conventional role as teacher has been but one of his social outlets within the Midwest's art world. From 1998 to 2005, Benjamin operated the Warsaw Project Space in Price Hill, an old neighborhood on the West Side of Cincinnati. His career has been filled with numerous solo exhibitions at such venues as Chicago's MWMWM Gallery and Cincinnati's Linda Schwartz Gallery, Publico, the Weston Art Gallery and the Warsaw Project Space. He has also participated in exhibitions at Chicago's Arena Gallery and White Walls, as well as Cincinnati's Country Club, semantics gallery, SS Nova, Artworks Gallery, and University of Cincinnati's Reed Gallery, to name just a few. In 2001, Benjamin was one of five Ohio artists to participate in the exhibition Working Space at Rathaus Gallerie in Munich, Germany. Just two months into 2010, he has already participated in the group exhibition *Urban Interventions* at University of Cincinnati, a faculty exhibition at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, a large food-and-art experimental exhibition at the Carnegie Center for Visual + Performing Arts in Covington, KY and the group exhibition *Shapeshifters* at Country Club's Cincinnati space. Later this year, Benjamin's work will also be included in *The House in My Head*, a group exhibition at the Weston Art Gallery in downtown.

From that dense block of accomplishments, I hope to tease out a few as formative and important moments in the artist's career thus far.

Chicago in the early 1990s must have been amazing. When Benjamin arrived at the University of Illinois, current students were still referencing

Martin Puryear (who had just left the school) and his carved wooden sculptures that oscillated between illusory representations and odd abstractions. Benjamin recalls that leftover works from another internationally established sculptor, Tom Friedman, could be found around the school, as he had just finished his MFA before Benjamin arrived. Perhaps most notable as it pertains to Keith Benjamin's own aesthetics, another highly accomplished contemporary artist that he rubbed shoulders with in this vortex of talent and ambition was the Venezuelan artist Arturo Herrera. As classmates, the two dealt with salvaging readily available refuse for their art in divergent, but complimentary ways. Herrera's collage-style work that combines fragments of Disney cartoons, children's book illustrations and other highly colorful (and slightly kitsch) snippets approximate some of the same values that Benjamin's art from this time forward deals in. Both artists were attempting to define their own cultural identity in these years—however abstractly—and looked to source material and substances that already carried a life and stories of their own. The same could be said for Friedman, whose sculptures document an obsessive and intricate process wherein one material is exacerbated or reimagined into another sequence or form (take for example Friedman's *Untitled (Total)* from 2000, in which nine **Total®** Cereal boxes are interspliced to make a larger, pixilated, nearly vibratory final object). These artists continue to provide a helpful context for Keith Benjamin's work, as all have cultivated banks of imagery or themes, along with a consistent vocabulary of materials that they stretch and challenge to perform in new configurations. It was in one of his lecture classes during graduate school that Benjamin was first challenged by Lefebvre's vision of a fully integrated life—no distinctions between the activities of work and leisure, no distinctions between the experience of life and the experience of art.

> *The critique of everyday life has a contribution to make to the art of living. It is a domain in which everything remains to be said. In the future the art of living will become a genuine art, based like all art upon the vital need to expand, and also on a certain number of techniques and areas of knowledge, but which will go beyond its own conditions in an attempt to see itself not just as a means but as an end. The art of living presupposes that the human being sees his own life—the development and intensification of his life—not as a means towards 'another' end, but as an end in*

> *itself. It presupposes that life as a whole—everyday life—should become a work of art and 'the joy that man gives to himself'. As with every genuine art, this will not be reducible to a few cheap formulas, a few gadgets to help us organize our time, our comfort, or our pleasure more efficiently. Recipes and techniques for increasing happiness and pleasure are part of the baggage of bourgeois wisdom—a shallow wisdom which will never bring satisfaction. The genuine art of living implies a human reality, both individual and social, incomparably broader than this. The art of living implies the end of alienation—and will contribute towards it.* [Lefebvre, Henri. *The Critique of Everday Life*, (translated by John Moore)]

Cast in several lights, an artwork today may feel new or old-fashioned (remember, context is everything. Lynda Benglis said it. Robert Smithson said it. Lots of people have pointed to this reality of the aesthetic experience). Where our avant garde borderlines lie is difficult to determine, and I propose that it is a fruitless search. At a certain point in the middle of the 20th Century, an area of artists stepped away from producing objects—some, like James Turrell and Robert Irwin into the realm of perception and light, while others like Dan Graham or much of On Kawara's work looked at ideas (often embodied in simple text documents) as the final artistic medium. There are days as an artist, critic or curator where I am reluctant to affirm the impulse to make more stuff. Benjamin's sculptures are welcome proof that there is still much to understand about the presence of an object and the radical potential of material aesthetics. But had some practitioners not stepped out of the studio practice altogether, perhaps there would not have been the space to cultivate recycling and reuse as tropes used in art movements like Arte Povera or Nouveau Realisme, any of which could be discussed as precedents for the art movements Keith Benjamin came of age under.

3. Eternal youth.

Throughout his time living and exhibiting art in Cincinnati, Benjamin has maintained relationships with commercial galleries (such as the now defunct Linda Schwartz Gallery and the reputable Country Club), while always enriching the subcultures around alternative art spaces in the area. His pioneering efforts at Warsaw Project Space in a decidedly un-artful stretch of Price Hill is a model that a number of other projects

(including the U·turn Art Space) has emulated. Before there was U·turn, there was Publico. Both galleries represent small-scale youth movements, operated by students from the nearby Art Academy or else recent graduates. Publico was a five-year venture in Over-the-Rhine, one of Cincinnati's oldest areas. Publico—a gallery that also maintained a regular print publication, a poetry reading series, and functioned as a popular stop on the tour circuit for bands such as The Dirty Projectors—met the tenor of the surrounding urban streets with hipster savoir-faire. Keith Benjamin exhibited there several times, with a large solo exhibition in the gallery's final year. When Publico closed its door at the beginning of 2008, curator (at the Contemporary Arts Center and now at Country Club) Matt Distel wrote an "exit interview" with the collective of young artists who maintained the gallery:

> *The Publico collective cites several Art Academy faculty as a guiding force in its methodology, particularly sculpture professor Keith Benjamin. The group makes reference to the humble nature of both his art and his approach to teaching. Benjamin also founded an exceptional and underrated exhibition gallery, Warsaw Project Space, which clearly had a profound impact on Publico's management. In the course of the discussion, I believe they coin a new phrase: "passionate humility." At first blush that phrase appears to be an oxymoron, though I start to take it as an antidote to the prevailing wisdom that Cincinnati (as a microcosm of the Midwest) has some type of inferiority complex, particularly when it comes to art and culture. It's a subtle yet significant difference.* [Matt Distel, "Remember the Publico," City Beat, January 9, 2008]

The influence of Keith Benjamin's aesthetics was evident in most of Publico's exhibitions. No doubt Benjamin's association with these youthful alternative gallery projects, that run more on humble passion than any significant funding, has not only imbued we upstarts with the wisdom of his experience, but also kept him and his practice young in spirit.

4. The nexus of meaning.
But first, a clip from The Simpsons. ["Homer's Enemy," Episode 4F19, Season 8, first aired May 4, 1997, written by John Swartzwelder, directed by Jim Reardon]

Beth Graves, *i hope keith's happy*. (Keith Benjamin pictured, unwrapping a set of gifts given to him by Graves as one of her school assignments. During her time as a student at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, Graves (a member of the gallery Publico) produced several projects that reacted to the example Benjamin sets in his aesthetics, personality and teaching style.

Keith Benjamin, *most high*, ottoman and cardboard, 2007, exhibited at his solo exhibition, *this time*, at Publico.

The set up: Homer Simpson enters a nuclear power plant design contest intended for children and will be judged by C. Montgomery Burns, the power plant's owner:

Homer brings his model on stage.
Burns: Could you explain your model, young man?
Homer: Well, basically, I just copied the plant we have now.
Burns: Mm-hmm.
Homer: Then, I added some fins to lower wind resistance. *(pointing)*
And this racing stripe here I feel is pretty sharp.
Burns: Agreed. First prize!
Burns gives Homer a blue ribbon and some money.

Keith Benjamin's sculptures are a nexus between the formal elements he has cut out of salvaged cardboard (colors, textures, patterns, shapes) and decontextualized details taken from his life as is. The work radically implies that there is no Eden, but instead, beauty and cause for optimism can be cobbled out of the leftovers from life experiences and consumption, as it plays its part in family life. Benjamin's work says that transcendence is a manmade invention, a product of hard work and blithe meditation, but not wholly impossible. It doesn't aspire to create a world beyond this one that has been branded, expanded through cartoon sitcoms and the adventures of breakfast cereal characters, and enriched with layered meanings, ironic situations and an interplay between desire, disappointment and achievement. Benjamin's work sets upon the cyclical movement of motifs and images through our lives, so that they accumulate meaning, a personal, internalized symbolism with which to underpin daily duties. He has culled a library of images and forms from his own biography: pickup trucks, numerous approaches to breakfast as a

Keith Benjamin, #2 #8 *(Tower)*, cardboard and wood, 2010

pastime, and housework such as chopping wood and taking out the trash, alongside meditations on leisure and desire, presented in the form of lawn chairs, headboards, and other metaphors for rest.

5. Beer in lieu of breakfast.
One morning, I was having coffee with the artist when he talked his way through his 2007 exhibition, *this time*, at Publico. He summarized his goals for that exhibition as a loose sequence that confronts aging, with simple, brightly-hued little works near the front of the exhibition, and tired furniture, hairy looking forms and reclining works on the floor towards the back of the raw space. I remember thinking about Apollo's chariot and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* simultaneously: a full journey, the passage of a life embodied in a single day. Looking closely at the details of Benjamin's work, the arch of a day and the arch of a lifetime are easily fused, and thus, usually are.

Keith Benjamin, *Spiral Jetty Breakfast Nook*, 2001

As I've mentioned, it is not uncommon for breakfast to come up as a point of reference, if not exactly a subject matter. His use of cereal cartons punctuates years of work with morning mealtime. Take for example the 2001 work *Spiral Jetty Breakfast Nook*, a labyrinthine model in paper pulp that overtly referenced Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and is built onto the base of a kitchen table. In his recent appearance at Country Club, breakfast and mazes come together again in the 2009 collage *Maze*, in which Benjamin strung the maze games from the back of a series

of cereal boxes together into a winding plume of paperboard collage up the center of a large piece of paper. Breakfast, for Benjamin, holds mysterious importance and acts as one of the high points of the day.

Breakfast is a cue (and a clue) noticeably absent in *Unemployed Title*; rather, the salvaged paperboard in the exhibition has been deconstructed from a bevy of beverage cartons, most often beer. Bud, Miller, Heineken: there is really something that could be said about these kinds of beer and their relationship to social class, national identity and more. Recall AMC's period drama Mad Men, Season 2, Episode 8, "A Night to Remember" in which Betty Draper discovers that her decision to serve the European Heineken beer for a dinner party was the result of her adman husband's persuasive selling strategies. Because Keith Benjamin rarely uses materials that haven't first come into the house and studio via his home life, a fussy viewer could try to reverse engineer *the kinds of people* that the Benjamins are. Their taste in beer seems to straddle a number of categories.

In one older work, *Workaholic* from 2001, the type of beer featured linked the little structure to some tough childhood memories. Benjamin recounted as we looked through slides: "Here's a very personal piece for me; it's about my dad and the fact that we only saw my dad one week a year growing up. We'd go to his summer home, but during that week he always had some project he was working on. He would have his wife take us to do fun things, boating or hiking or whatever. We'd only spend a few minutes a day with him. But he always drank Molson, because it was near the Canadian border in upstate New York." The little red maple leaves that function as Molson beer's logo accumulate in a little pile, like raked leaves.

Keith Benjamin, *Workaholic*, 2001

But really, more than just personal associations, the cardboard from beer crates (and the faux wood grain that Benjamin salvages off of A&W Root Beer packaging) is really an expression of time, of the later hours. If Benjamin's materials are legible as some testament to his lifestyle, it is that he very consciously observes the habits of work and leisure. He says, "A lot of the pieces are about sleeping, laying down or sitting down. It's like a goal for me: getting back to bed at the end of a day. It's definitely a destination. The idea of working and resting is something I've always looked at."

Beer is (usually) for the off hours. And to read the red, blue and green strips of packaging employed in this body of sculptures as (having at one time been) beer containers is to set the gallery into a state of twilight, albeit a potentially melodramatic streak of midlife crisis. The artist suggested in this gallery presentation subsists solely on soda and beer, the after-work rewards for a builder of things.

Beer in art immediately invokes another Art Academy of Cincinnati graduate, the conceptual artist Tom Marioni. In his casual and brilliant memoir *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, Marioni recounted some of his early performance based projects, such as the 1970 piece *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*: "Everybody showed up, and we drank and had a good time. The debris was left on exhibit as a record of the event. Basically, the show consisted of the evidence of the act. It was an important work for me, because it defined Action rather than Object as art. And drinking beer was one of the things I learned in art school." [p. 93] Then in 1973, Marioni permuted the idea in his work *From China to Czechoslavakia*, in which he saved emptied beer bottles from a year's worth of weekly gatherings when attendees drank and viewed a line up of video art. He did lots of other beer projects, like hand painting artist passes so that working artists could be rewarded with free beer at a local favorite watering hole. To this day, in a more unofficial capacity, Marioni still maintains a fridge of beer in his studio and regularly invites friends and colleagues over as a conceptual artwork.

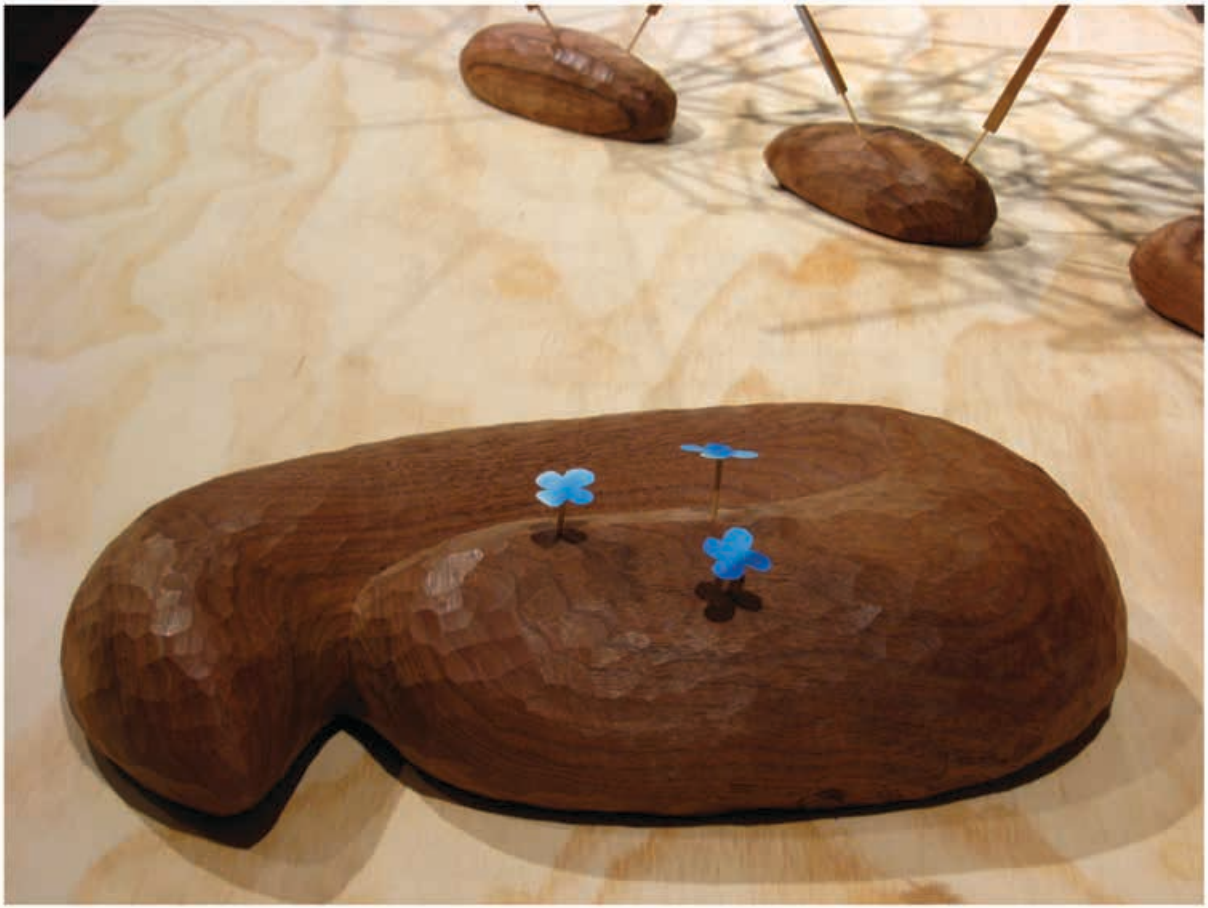
While Benjamin's exhibition is clearly concerned with object-ness in art, it nonetheless bears some resemblance to Marioni's social procedures. The materials of his sculptures are by-products of consumption, in this case, of an impressive amount of beer. The objects emanate an original action that becomes abstracted and spliced into a different, loosely arranged narrative.

6. Talking shit, having wood.
In 1953, Maurice Denis noted an exchange between Paul Cezanne and Edouard Manet. When Manet asked Cezanne what he would submit to the Salon of 1870, Cezanne replied "a pot of shit." As part of the U · turn exhibition, a foosball table has been co-opted into a piece of gallery furniture. Two pristine sheets of ¾ inch plywood are stacked into a vast tabletop upon which a series of smaller works are arranged. These works, as most of Benjamin's sculptures do, take their prompts from home life. Collectively titled #2, they are comprised of cardboard and toothpick forms constructed onto bases of walnut carved into little mounds that resemble droppings and excrement. It's the artist's craftsmanship and obvious sense of humor that restrains these pieces from descending totally into the rich (like manure) history of scatology in art. But, I want to sort through those themes a little bit.

> *Do you know why I get a hotel room? To poop in peace! No kids banging on the door, no phones ringing. It's my time! Every Tuesday and Thursday at three PM. I don't know why I only go twice a week. That's what Angie should be worried about.* [Tracy Jordan as portrayed by the actor Tracy Morgan on the NBC television sitcom 30 Rock, in the episode "Kidney Now!" (Season 3, Episode 22, orignal air date May 14, 2009)]

More domestic than primal, these *sh*ts* (as several other wall-mounted pieces in the exhibition are titled) deal with the choreography, variety and nuance of the different ways excrement lower familial and social barriers. As polite as they are confrontational, these little still lifes are terminal forms, that is they clearly relate to the recycled and salvaged materials from which they are built.

Scatological themes and subtexts had long been repressed within cultural expression, but in the 19th Century, first authors and then artists joined in on a discourse that has now stretched forward for nearly 150 years. Benjamin's #2 series recall some of the descriptive passages from one of the first of these shitty (in theme only) novels, Émile Zola's *La Terre*. Written in 1870, this novel is mostly concerned with the complicated laws concerning property in Second Empire France, but throughout, the primal (and universal) need to relieve oneself is referred to in order to level social classes. Both in the novel and in *Unemployed Title*, it is almost laughingly accessible: shit can be discussed by anyone, as long as they are willing to discuss it. Much could be said of Zola's violent, charged novel in relationship to Benjamin's newest work, such as the hero Jean



Keith Benjamin, #2 #1 *(Lucky Charms)*, cardboard and wood, 2009

Macquart's final scene, passing graves and harvests, with the novel closing with the line, "Death, seed and the bread grew out of the earth." But most interesting is Zola's emphasis on the fields as a site for both sleeping and relieving themselves in the daily life of the peasants. This outdoor living quarter for the all-but-homeless may as well be borrowed from Jean-Francois Millet's famous *Angelus* oil painting from 1857, more than a decade earlier than Zola's provocative *La Terre*. This work has been emblematic of the humility and struggles of the lower classes, especially after the Great Depression, and was an easy point of reference for Arte Povera artists, such as Jannis Kounellis. I say all of this to further expand a context around Keith Benjamin's work.

Since the liberation of the scatological in the 19th century, the number of artists who have seen to bringing it up in an ongoing conversation about our own humanness is immense. Off the top of my head, I can remember Chris Ofili's infamously controversial and ornately appealing "dung Mary" paintings or Kiki Smith's 1992 sculpture *Tale* featuring a beeswax, life size woman on her hands and knees with a long brown appendage trailing from her buttocks, which are smeared with a similar brown. Maybe closer to the home base for further reflecting on Benjamin's #2s and *Sh*ts*, one can consider Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* from 1961. There were ninety of these pieces, each one a small cylindrical can containing thirty grams of the artists own excrement. The outside of the tin was labeled to say ""Artist's Shit, Contents 30 Grams Net Freshly Preserved Produced and Tinned in May 1961." The pieces were to be sold by weight based on the current price of gold. Along with his aims to shock and to remark on the art market, one could look at these Manzoni works through a Freudian lens that associated scatology with anal eroticism, and feces with wealth and power. How would such a paradigm be adapted to works that represent excrement through carefully carved blocks of walnut? The scale and manufacture of Benjamin's works are not obvious representations of shit; they are more like prank dog droppings, plastic toys used to poke fun.

After Manzoni, in 1992, Tom Friedman presented an *Untitled* sculpture which consisted of a miniscule rolled ball of the artist's own feces. In Friedman's 2001 Phaidon monograph, he discussed the piece this way, "I was thinking about scale and fragility, which led to thinking about the smallest amount of material to present that would have the most significance. So I thought that I would use my feces, and rolled some of it into a ball. I wanted it to be spherical, I wanted it to have a shape, not just be the material. It was tiny, about half a millimeter in diameter. It

was like thinking about shitness through an intense meditative focus." Each of Benjamin's #2 works utilize the beautiful carved mounds of walnut as a miniature landscape for intricate elements made from paperboard and toothpicks that hearken back to the bodies of work that immediately precede this one. Each isolate textures and shapes from packages, such as #2 *#1 (lucky charms)*, which features small blue florets springing up from a spiraling turd like those that neighbors neglect to pick up after their dogs. With breakfast, garbage day, auto maintenance and slumber making up his repertoire already, to open up the typically private experience of self relief may be Keith Benjamin's most honest and revealing work to date.

Keith Benjamin; *lil sh*t #1, #2, #3*; all cardboard and wood, 2010

Is that a small wood and paperboard sculpture in your pocket or are you just happy to see me? When I first saw these new woodcarvings in Keith Benjamin's studio, I could think of few instances where a subtractive sculptural technique found its way into contemporary methods (Martin Puryear, who had so recently vacated University of Illinois before Benjamin's arrival would be one example). Assemblage is the mode of the day, and even these works end up as such. But in the beginning, there is a man with a chisel. "Carving is a sculptor's fetal position," Benjamin announces drolly in one of our conversations. Certainly, for this artist, it is a kind of homecoming. The walnut that Benjamin is shaping has been shaped before; lest one assume he is abandoning his salvaging instincts, he is currently in the process of cannibalizing earlier works he deemed less successful, or at least not successful enough to take up studio space.

7. Leftovers.
I wouldn't exactly call the work Keith Benjamin produces "site specific." But I *would* say that he is very conscious of the context surrounding his artworks and makes decisions about what to present and how to present it that often relate to the exhibition or gallery in which he will be exhibiting the works. The *sh*ts* are very similar in technique and execution to a set of works that Benjamin exhibited in Country Club's expansively post-minimal *Shapeshifter* exhibition, but in that case, the objects dealt with shelter, structure, and in the case of the work *Huck*, loosely escapist themes (seemingly borrowed from Mark Twain) as a raft of paperboard crests across the top of a wooden knoll. It's not that Keith Benjamin wouldn't present the fecal subject matter of the #2 series in a glamorous, highly visible venue, but they are certainly welcome (and at home) in a gallery like U · turn, where subversive content and complex inquiries are appreciated as some of the higher callings of the contemporary visual art experience.

But there is a set of works in this exhibition that are new and strange (or at least part of a longer cycle in his oeuvre, so that we haven't seen these solutions to a sculpture from him for a while). Collectively titled *Leftovers (The Gleaners)*—Millet, again—these bundles of churning cardboard strips evoke Baroque grandiosity and deep pathos simultaneously. Like the wood in this exhibition, these pieces are made from elements that were other artworks before now. But where once they were rigid, the cardboard strips have bowed and curled into tangled bundles and wreaths. They are distinctly elegiac, but not so much that they don't also celebrate the moment: the moment when the piñata explodes, when paper curls with moisture, when someone or something demised is remembered fondly.

Their power stems from their other-ness. Within a show that pairs carved solid wood and heavy furniture with rigid, straight lines of paperboard intersecting, the *Leftovers* works stand out in rebellion against simple geometry. The righteous counterpart is the single largest presence in the exhibition, the weight bench and red beer carton structure called *Monster*. A hulking, spidery tower rises off of the partially deconstructed furniture and expands in flying buttresses and cantilevered cardboard beams. Not that the artist planned this, or that it relates intentionally, but while he was conceiving this work, the art pop changeling Lady Gaga titled a new song Monster at the same time. I listened to it while looking at this looming piece: *That boy is a monster / He ate my heart / (I love that girl) / He ate my heart / (Wanna talk to her, she's hot as hell)*.

Keith Benjamin, Monster, cardboard and weight bench, 2010

Benjamin's Monster is a blast of red phantom ascending from pumped iron. He's a monster. And Lady Gaga (now part of my mythology around the piece) is hot as hell, I might underscore in the lyrics.

The *Leftovers'* masses are made of clusters of sinuous lines, giant three-dimensional scribbles and doodles that are playful and frustrated. While some are suspended as wall-based attractions, a couple can't even seem to summon the strength to hang up there; instead they lie wistfully on the floor. They are *Persephonic*, if you catch my meaning. Springtime, the underworld (hell), all that. Although fallen and crumpled, the bright hues that freckle the pieces save them from what would otherwise be glum, brown-gray storm clouds. As they are, they possess bright spirit even in their afterlife state.

If you didn't recognize it before, you know it after spending some time with *Unemployed Title*: Keith Benjamin's gift is to imbue seemingly undeserving objects and materials with eternal (or at least perpetuated) life (or half-life). Something mundane that was the product of even earlier industrial recycling is recast into a different role. But as an ironic twist, these things rarely return from the grave (or recycling bin) as durable and solid as before. New life is pricey in this process, so that wood is whittled ever smaller to become a new object, and cardboard is cut and spliced into webby towers and vines, far more fragile and vulnerable then the sturdy, boxy cartons from whence it came. Each work carries marks of previous use (like the weight lifting bench that acts as a base for *Monster*) and the evidence of transformation (like the chisel's faceted texture across the wood). These small forms are containers of time—days of breakfast, work, beer and leisure—and of the history of a studio practice twenty some odd years in the making, and really poised for so much more to come. In brainstorming for the exhibition, Benjamin had considered *Last Time* as a possible title for the exhibition, probably for the double entendre it intonates. The nostalgia in such a name is very real in the exhibition. The finality it suggests is really only an affectation, one in which the artist can consider an ending, perhaps an endpoint for the stuff everything is made from. Still, it feels as if Keith Benjamin is getting some payoff for working studiously for several years since his last solo show. I wonder if the beers he will drink will taste differently on the other side of so impressive a victory as this body of work.

> *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.* Genesis 2:2