

## WoodTurning in North America Since 1930, Symposium I Minnesota Institute of Art October, 2001

### The Art of Choosing

#### One: Preface

Of all the characters of Greek mythology, none exemplifies the editor's craft better than the thief, Procrustes. Legend tells that his victims would be subjected to his 'Procrustean bed.' If they were too short for the bed, he would stretch them. If they were too long, he would trim them to fit. Eventually, Procrustes was killed by his own gruesome method, yet he lives on in our language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'Procrustean' as "seeking or tending to produce uniformity by forceful or arbitrary methods."

The Procrustean impulse of the editor is ruthless but inevitable: given the constraints of time or space, something has always 'got to go.' I acknowledge our desire to make artful choices--not only as writers, but as makers, collectors, dealers and curators. Rather than focus on what we choose to keep, however, this essay looks at the mess on the cutting room floor--through the eyes of Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), a painter, sculptor and poet who strove to make something "out of what everyone else dismisses." His materials were candy wrappers, train tickets, and other refuse gathered from city streets and carried home in the large pockets of his overcoat. He would carefully sort and clean his materials. He "spoke of taking each element he used and drawing off its *Eigengift* --literally, 'self-poison' or characteristic tang...." This word was coined or 'collaged' by Schwitters in order to describe an essential aspect of his creative process.

In his essay in, *The Cultures of Collecting*, Roger Cardinal surmises that Schwitters cleaned his material "so that it would serve as a docile ingredient..." but adds that upon closer inspection, most of the collages "tend to fall short of the minimum standard of aesthetic hygiene, as if still registering too much *Eigengift* "...."they blurt out tales of dirtiness and contamination..." (p. 83). Working amidst the turbulence of inter-war Europe, Schwitters assessed his materials--scattered along the continuum from 'dirty' to 'docile' -- and obviously judged that 'dirty' often held more expressive potential.

Like Schwitters, we all subject our materials to some test of fitness or purity; the 'art of choosing' entails the 'art of cleaning.' Each tree, or object, or maker carries its unique burden of *Eigengift*, or 'self-poison.' But just as the deadliest venom yields life-saving anti-venin, we must judge how much 'poison' is acceptable and how much must be neutralized in order to suit our creative ends. This is an essentially Procrustean dilemma: we can't keep everything. But rather than sweep our rejects under the rug,

we may pause and examine them and, in Schwitters' words, make something out of '...what everyone else dismisses.'

The form may be a vessel or a collection, a group show or an essay. Whatever its impetus, the moment the will to form is sparked--no matter how dimly--the will to discard also ignites. Consider the object, playing Eliza Dolittle to our Henry Higgins: how much 'cleaning up' can it endure in order to earn acceptance? When does 'aesthetic hygiene' cross the line to sterility? I'll briefly consider these questions by offering for example my experiences as an object-maker.

## **Two: The Maker and The Object**

Begin with the tree, and its own *Eigengift* born of chemistry and genetics, disease and climate. Like good vintners, we hope to capture its *terroir*: a unique and complex alchemy of soil and weather. We trust our taste to distinguish what is tanginess and what is taint. Removing roots, soil and leaves, we assess the tree's body, and make a butcher's studied cut. In concert with our material, we simultaneously address the possibilities of form; winnowing from the storehouse of memories, sketches and unconsciously 'borrowed' themes. Some ideas will be shelved, many will be discarded.

We do not exhibit or sell our scraps and shavings as finished works... at least not yet. They may become kindling or garden mulch; sanding dust may be used as filler. But for the most part, whatever is removed is gone for good. The voice of the wood is silenced by a hundred small choices: should we remove the 'sting' of rough fibers; soften the 'bite' of tool marks? The wood's original *Eigengift* of growth rings and water stains--once interrupted by cutting--may re-surface with polishing, or disappear forever beneath burning or paint. Whether the idiosyncratic gestures of hand carving, or the clean precision of mass production, each process leaves evidence of its passage.

Makers also disclose their particular *Eigengift* through choices of work patterns and environments: country or city, in sickness or in health. We may risk the hybridization of collaboration, or cultivate the vulnerable elegance of classicism. We may choose to track the wilder charms of vernacular forms. As we ply these choices--some made freely, some thrust upon us--we generate rhythms as we choose and enhance, discard and cleanse. The finished form is the envelope of this pulsation--a collage of invisible actions and controls. Or, to quote Schwitters, "Every form is the frozen instantaneous picture of a process." (Grove, p. 197) The object might also be seen as a negative: the complementary form to all that was discarded, unused, and unwanted.

The object's first layer of historical *Eigengift*, or *provenance* may now be applied: a signature, date, and title. This final act of authorship removes the traces of the logger and lumber mill, the chemist who formulated the finish, and the person who cooked

dinner for the maker. If the object must leave the private realm of the studio in order to enter public life, we will dust it off, find a box, pack it up, ship it.

### **Three: The Object in the World**

The hands that touch our object--directly or indirectly--also add to its *Eigengift*: the UPS driver, the gallery assistant. Perhaps the collector cleans off the smudges of commerce before its proper placement in her home. It may become shopworn, rain-spattered, faded. Where and how this object is touched and seen and held becomes part of its unrecorded *provenance*. Over decades, smudges gain meaning. As we know from "Antiques Road Show," grime adds value. At some point cleaning an object becomes the work of a conservator.

The object may also weather the rigors of a dynamic aesthetic climate. The unofficial ballots of the marketplace stirred by the fickle winds of judgement will clothe the object--either with the laurels of success or the bubble-pack of boredom.

The object may be seen as raw material by a collector; selected as one brief statement in the longer personal narrative that is embodied and embedded in every collection. A fortunate few of these objects will run the gauntlet of 'aesthetic hygiene' and be accepted into our temples of culture; in time perhaps orphaned into storage; then decades later be declared a long-lost, freshly discovered darling--like Bach or Bouguereau. This is why museums must be large. Today's useless baggage may be tomorrow's priceless treasure.

The object may be used by scholars or students. Perhaps the polish of historical significance will be lovingly restored and the object allowed to play its part in a well-crafted historical narrative. Perhaps the object will be subjected to the judgement of the aesthetic purist: zealously dry-cleaned, with ideological fumes still clinging to it; all wildness tamed into quaintness. The purist demands a thorough cleansing of historical *Eigengift*. As described by George Kubler in his all-embracing work, *The Shape of Time* :

Purists exist by rejecting history and returning to the imagined primary forms of matter, feeling, and thought. ... the pioneers of functionalism in our century... sought to invent everything they touched all over again in austere forms which seem to owe nothing to past traditions. This task is always an insurmountable one...By rejecting history, the purist denies the fullness of things. (Kubler, p.124)

The forces of 'aesthetic hygiene' may inevitably exert the 'elbow-grease' necessary to scour away the tarnish of commerce, or clarify the myopic vision of the maker. But can we briefly restrain our Procrustean appetite for order, and discern the difference between academic rigor and *rigor mortis* ? Poison can be deadly but--in small doses--it can also be an intoxicant, stimulant, therapy. As makers, we must temper the full

potency of the *Eigengift* of our objects, exhibits, and histories. But how 'docile' must our ingredients be? As fair compensation for this loss of wholeness, we can ask some thoughtful questions: On what grounds do I discard an idea, or object or maker? What should I make of all the stuff that I cannot impale on my point of view? Because we create our vessels/collections/essays in order to help us think/feel/understand, Schwitters' gutters and dustbins can still yield gems for the creative observer.

#### **Four: Dimensions**

Finally, an object can't escape the worst threat to its *Eigengift*: the editing of its third dimension. Slides, photos and websites are necessary yet disembodied facsimiles. Two-dimensional images replace the object's ripeness with the vacant glamour of a 'pin-up.' The 2-D image cannot tell the object's full story any more than the word 'stone' can break a window. Mysteriously, when we finally see the 'genuine article,' it is often simultaneously more and less than we imagined. It may seem smaller-than-life, shockingly human. Yet we also feel privileged to witness the evidence of a careful hand at work. This is where the full meaning of *Eigengift*, 'self poison,' finally comes home: it is the whiff of the mortal, the once-in-a-lifetime.

Fortunately, our field has had a wealth of opportunities to show real work to an ever-growing circle of admirers. This survey of the wood-turning field offers a complex portrait of our collective efforts. As we contribute to this portrait we choose from the palette of our personal *Eigengift*. What part of the spectrum suits us: The anemic pastels of cool objectivity or Procrustes' sanguine palette knife? I choose my colors closer to the center in the deep blush of excitement when I'm caught red-handed, 'dumpster diving' with Schwitters.

#### **Bibliography**

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