Fluid History

Sculpture by

Bill Albertini

Kent State University

Kent, Ohio

October, 1991
Cover:

Decal #1
(detail)
1990

color laser print
7¼ x 7¾"
Foreword

The School of Art Gallery at Kent State University is committed to documenting and exhibiting the work of contemporary American artists, especially those who have not been exhibited widely in northeastern Ohio. The Gallery is an educational resource for the visual arts, serving both the academic and the general community. Bill Albertini, an innovative sculptor living and working in New York City, participated in the 1988 Summer Blossom/Art program at Kent. Because that contact was so successful, plans for an exhibition and catalogue were set in motion. The works which are on exhibit were executed between 1987 and 1991. They reflect Bill Albertini's intense fascination with a primary investigative theme – a fluid perception of material evidence from the past. His work, in general, represents some of the most engaging and meaningful object-based work being made today.

This exhibition and publication came to fruition through the cooperation and assistance of many people and organizations. First of all, Paul O'Keeffe served as guest curator, and I am deeply indebted to him for his expertise, enthusiasm and perseverance. I would also like to thank Robert Mahoney for a provocative essay; David Cundy for designing the catalogue; the Althea Viafora Gallery, New York and the School of Art for its assistance. A special thanks to Bill Albertini for his generosity and cooperation. It has, in fact, been a great pleasure working with him.

Fred T. Smith
Director, School of Art Galleries
Kent State University
Return Of The Domino Effect! Bogeyman Of Vietnam Makes Comeback

Twice in the past twenty-four months world events have travelled a path from light to shadow in a way that makes one believe again in that old whipping boy of the Vietnam era: the Domino Effect. In Eastern Europe, some East Germans on vacation there heard that Hungary was loosening travel restrictions at its border with Austria. They acted on the impulse of vacation and went on a permanent vacation — to freedom in the West. A pressure of borders built up: within eight weeks the border-crossing came right to the center of their political world: the Berlin wall. Then something curious happened: the domino rolled back down. The euphoria of Berlin was relived in a more poetic and purely idealistic mode in Prague. The names were spelt funnier, the scenes were more eccentric and self-referential. Remoteness lent a beauty and a literary nature to the revolt of Prague. Prague’s overthrow was presented as a romantic fictionalization of Berlin. Then came Romania. The ethnic strife was even less defensible in the context of world politics, suspect of provincialism and unfinished business; the personalities involved, as well as the events — shouting Ceaucescu from the balcony, his execution — something out of the thrillers of another generation. Also, the sheer fact of anything like that going on “out there” made it more brutal: a shadowy country, if it too had an army, then armies must pervade all life. The scene became an elemental and fundamental passion play about the pervasion of faceless militarism in modern life. From the nonpartisan and mainstream thrill of Berlin, came provincialism succumbing to the shadow that haunts all events in history. In the Gulf War too, the roll of the domino carried events through all the political orbits, from center to periphery. When the bombing started, Tel Aviv felt the commencement of another holocaust. World War loomed, for a moment. The ground war involved the largest amassed force of infantry by any earthly army since 1945: again, Now plunged back into historical time. But then, the face of great events, the dreaded confrontation with history involved in the ground war turned out to be a mirage. The US-UN troops rushed up into a phantom world (filled a vacuum), had a turkeyshoot victory, and refugees from every side fled on foot across deserts, reduced once again to a state of destitution which lent itself to antique “Lawrence of Arabia” existentialism. A Kurd-Shiite Revolt also turned out to be a mirage. The Kurds fled to a mountaintop up in the womb of a shadowy land, Kurdistan, which has not existed in the modern era. A “Second Gulf War” commenced, as the US military went north to help out. Readers of the news got an occult geography lesson in the unspellable names of very remote places. Once again, a power politics strategy ended in a murky fight with fundamentals.

“Salon de War” In War-Ravaged Baghdad-On-Hudson

After Eastern Europe, and now, after the War — the events in Ethiopia remind us that Iraqi aggression too was enabled by the collapse of Soviet sponsorship — a new world, expressed as a work of art, an “art world,”
ought to have developed, both in response to recent change and in anticipation of more. None has. In my imagination, two parallel art worlds (parallel universes) have grown up in the imaginary space lying beyond the shadowy and fundamentalist end of the cycle of recent world events. These two parallel art worlds begin to supersede a domestic art world that has failed to respond. If I were to imaginatively curate a “Salon de War,” not so much an antiwar salon, but a salon of art that is awake to the changes that the revolution and the war have brought to the world, one of the first artists that I would include would be Bill Albertini. Albertini's sculptural practice has been keenly awake to the shifting discourse – the birth of parallel art worlds – seeking to redeem art from its worry-warted postmodern cul de sac and return it to an examination of, among other modern issues, the pervasion of military value in our times. First, by resurrecting constructivist motifs and forms in what I called (in a review of his work) a “Zweitemoderne” style, second, rolling the domino as history does, purifying the discourse by pushing it into an imaginary space where the sheer facts of the operation of quasi-militaristic symbolism in art can be interrogated and deconstructed.

**Record Executive's Nazi Past Revealed**

Materially, this passage from light to shadow in history – this rotation of the domino of history in a cycle in time – left abandoned hardware and destroyed infrastructure in its wake. The magnified dust of heels, this debris was the material signifier of the speed of events. We have seen it before. Constructivism derived its forms for art in the wake of a history conceived of in a revolutionary way – with a heavy underpinning of military hardware. The constructivist aesthetic pulled “field-ground” compositional devices out of the beds of complacent art, in effect broke art past ground, so that it could, inspired by the architectural hardware supporting it, confront the groundlessness created by a revolutionary time.

To activate the domino effect under his particular practice, Albertini had to construct a revolutionary history and a physical infrastructure. The agent of the imaginary history – a history of shadows and gaps that ends up questioning history – is a quasi-cruciform symbol that has had everything from religious to fascistic meaning twisted out of it. In its revolutions, semiotic skirmishes break out in any number of worlds. When Albertini was still tied to the constructivist regime, his deformations warped the official agenda of the oblique resource, and subverted history. It also charged ahistorical domesticness with false innocence with regard to its symbolic allegiances. In *Plug* (1989) the color and code of a Malevichan revery is bound up as a “2001”-style secretary, its ornate legs mocked by the ball and chain of still another emblem, fluctuating in reference from a ship's anchor to a show poodle. *Home Entertainment Center* (1989) also compacts all the slings and arrows of life into a stereo-become-black-box (entertainment compressed to critical testimony). The rococo legs sinuously insinuate a dark force into the slippery world of commodities. In *Doppelte Erscheinung* (1989) Albertini offers up a bent, hyperextended cruciform as a mirror-mirror-on-the-wall hot rod of macho pride. The bound up anger and violence of the disgruntled civilian is coded into the context of its encasement in a prisonlike screen. In *Shelved Prop* two black panels with rococo mounts are called in as Simons to carry a lazy cruciform leaning and loitering in the corner.
The passion of a sacrificial death is set like the ashes of a pet, on a too small shelf. *No Escape* (1989) piles up so much of a black monolith in front of a mousy attempt to see through domestic screen to the truth of the regime (represented by cord and rococo legs) that a sense of suffocation develops. In all of this work, constructivist color and form is bounced off an indigenous formula in such a way as to disdain the fall from public awareness to domestic myopia which postmodernism has presumably involved. Albertini’s work at this point was fighting from room to room, through the trenches of the commodity debate, to find good faith.

**Republican Guards Nabbed On Space Coast! Attack on Disneyworld Thwarted!**

Soon after, taking a breather between exhibits, Albertini inhibited the discourse, as he had done before, in drawings, and in photography. In these works he began to feed his signs through imaginary (unconstructable) realms. The photographs were “old photos,” reputedly excavating old bunker sites, decaled with the symbol of some regime and aircraft, also marked with the signs of a mystery service. Albertini retrofit his constructivist derivation into a backwards parallel history. He went back into the aura of the gap space which begins to lower about Newsreel memory of the period of the World Wars, and segued into another force field, finding some strange and unidentified ally that one is surprised one fought with, and cannot name. One looks at these old photos as one utters an oh! of surprise to hear that x was fighting y at z for who knows what reasons, at some point in history. What were they doing there? Why were THEY (presumably now friendly) fighting? Again, the patency of history is purified as the basis for permanent paranoia (if they could fight, anyone could). By pushing his exegesis to the point of paranoia, Albertini greatly expanded the range of his abstraction. The complexity of the pathways led to more convoluted variations of cross and mitre (religious elements pulsed for some months) motifs: in drawings like *Separation #1* the fantasy element of an attached cord suggests that the two wrestle like the negative and positive charges of a battery. Albertini has again energized his form (as in *Home Entertainment Center*) but there is a new lightness: solid state has been replaced by magnified chip. The flexibility of staged paranoia also involved Albertini expanding his practice past photography and drawings, into rubber stamps. Albertini developed the stamps as prototypes for tattoos. The marks on the wings of planes in *Decal 1-4* (1990) thus come down in the world of Albertini’s regime of signs to end up as tattoos; no doubt to be remarked on the arm of a biker at some beach in Florida, with the cross-fingered handshake of a mum comrade in hiding. The tattoo on the arm of an outcast is the last stop in the long life of a social sign: it is the terminus of meaning, the final degradation, proof of its exhaustion due to too many prior reifications. A biker is the literalized dialectical image, a sandwichboardman opposite of the original trooper or pilot, who says: it’s over now, but a once explicit and powerful force has become a secret cancer of persistent underground discontent in society. Civilizations mature, perhaps degenerate, by these absorptions.

**Demon Earth Art – One Person Exhibit – Saddam Hussein/E. Kennedy Gallery – 842 Broadway (555)970-SCUD**

By devising a high and a low for his signs Albertini not only colonizes new imaginary space for his sculpture and he dropped his last exhibit at the Althea Viafara gallery in New York right into that gap
space – but also gives his practice a multimedia circulatory movement that parallels and incorporates a model of the up-down trade of signs from military to civilian life and back again in the real world. Albertini may have his own reasons for making Untitled (1991) in the shape of a bin, holding a stock of terra cotta shards, quasi-religious artifacts, or currency, of a regime. It certainly has its own self-sufficient formal and material basis. I however – in the post-war weeks I saw it – thought less of what it was, and more on how it got there. Its faintly militaristic tone reminded me of photos in the papers during the war, “Hotel patrons in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia fondle the remains of a Patriot missile daubed with patriotic message “We Love You All (!)’’ that has been set up in the lobby”: a vertiginous clash of on and off duty in life. Thinking of larger ramifications, I recalled a description of a patriot missile launcher (by Tom Brokaw I believe) as a “semi-trailer truck tilted up into the sky.” The low-tech canister of this hi-tech missile made me wonder. Visually, it reminded me of the earthwork sculpture Cadillac Ranch, old Cadillacs with fins, all in a row, tilted up into the Texas sky. That work of earth art in turn derived from the Cadillac fin itself, symbol of 50’s prosperity, which was itself first inspired by the Lockheed P-38, a World War II airplane with a twin tail. That is, to follow the circulation, military air craft, ten years later, inspired a fantasy luxury car; its garishness inspired the ranch critique; another twenty years after, ten years more down the path of vehicular evolution, it retrofits to warfare hi-tech in the context of a war that at times looked more like a demonic earth art made into life, than a war. The forms finally fused again in the Welcome Home parade in New York on June 10: the Generals rode in 1940’s cars, to evoke memories of tickertape troop parades past, in front of carted Patriot missiles and their canisters, both, now, mere floats in a parade.

Firestorm in Artist’s Studio: All Sculpture Feared Lost (an interlude)

Speaking of aircraft, which can be said to be the archetypal motherlode of at least the material world and semantic aura of Albertini’s newest sculpture – carrying its cargo of regime art – the Gulf War was very Albertinian. All those spotter pictures of planes, for example. I never got over my dread. When an early skirmish was waged over Khafgi, a ghost town, things got weird. And when I woke up one morning to a headline, “More than 80 Iraqi warplanes have been flown to Iran,” this odd defection from the war made me fear some occult, field-breaking stratagem. As each plane passed over into the airspace of its former enemy, it became phantom – the air space was rendered imaginary. Something would remain “up in the air,” unresolved, for however long after this implicitly conceded war they sat there, in the body of that hardware. This removed energy has a way of turning up again. The mythology of phantom aircraft seems a natural outcome of a failure of the mind to keep up with aeronautic technology. Things drop off a radar, they become phantom and repressed. Was it a surprise then that soon after the War, the tabloids found a redemptive salve? No. In the Bermuda Triangle the famed “Lost Squadron” of World War II is found (“Undersea Probes To Eye Famed ‘Lost Squadron,’” May 18, 1991) – it did not “vanish” into the Triangle, then, but crashed into the ocean. Why was it found now? Because the imagination that cannot grasp air-war unreality (the war did not get real, the press complained, its images not human, not war photos, until the ground war began: this fatuous argument seems to think that the war would only have been
worthwhile if it had been long-term and high-casualty, it was repeated in the Sunday *New York Times*, June 16, 1991) must find a new basis for misunderstanding in a flight from reality, epitomized in the recent War by the moment of confusion when the Iraqi aircraft defection to Iran occurred. Opening this phantom space, allows another one, holding from prior war, to close, to come back into the world of fact. This sort of economy of departure from and reentry into history also models the installational aura of Bill Albertini’s sculpture.

**Activist Group Adopts “Friendly Fire” Symbol**

The retired serenity of the apparently “used” (but for what?) terra cotta shards in Albertini’s *Untitled* (1991) also answers a constructivist explanation by inscribing a model of military signage as well. Again, in the war, I think I will not be accused of semiotic miraging if I say that the fear of and occurrence of incidents of “friendly fire” early on was evidence of a subconscious dread of a long war, and of a repressed critique, full of doubt, of the long-term plan. Support for the war was always provisional of a surgical short-term conclusion (we forget this now). In order to safeguard our armored divisions from friendly fire an inverted V was painted on all our vehicles. From the sky, it was a V for victory, but now and then the V was reproduced upside-down to ground level in the news, and then it acted graphically to turn victory upside down. In the subconscious of the pictures the inverted V (for inverted Victory) could be said to have made a policy right into a second wrong. Doubt of mission, the provisionalness of the war, was institutionalized, marked on ALL vehicles, as they swept up through a non-enemy to a quickly cease-fired nonvictory. In the same way, it ought to be apparent, Albertini’s twists and turns of cruciform or swastikalike icons represent, as in a language where fraktur factors in on meaning, reassessments, insinuations, and distortions of mind and time. One looks back on this inverted V, with its internecine symbol ism, as one looks on Albertini’s signs: what army is it? is it an army? what are they doing? why, as in the case of every sign that drifts out past unambiguous instrumentation, does it so quickly break up into a variation of a keyboard tantrum of $@*#(@*, as used to express cursing and frustration in the comics? And on past that, toward a condition of proofreader’s marks, and a critique? As in history, so in Albertini’s mock-veteran art: the domino effect is touched off until it rolls on and on, and, like a revolutionary chasing his shadow, finally passes over into a condition of philosophical quandary epitomized by the question (to paraphrase philosophic forestry): if a government falls in the “forest of signs” and no one hears about it, does it really make a sound?

— Robert Mahoney, June 1991
Untitled

1988

mixed media and light

87 x 78 x 43"
Shelved Prop

1988

steel, wood, paint

85 x 70 x 46 ¼"
Snakes and Ladders

1988
mixed media
72 x 48 x 36"
Toaster

1989

wood, hardware, paint

50 x 93 x 22"
Plug

1989

wood, paint, hardware

51 x 54 x 29 1/2"
Cut
1989
mixed media
138 1/4 x 62 x 52 1/4"
Installation View

Althea Viafora Gallery

1990

(from left)

Out of Order, 1989

Pump, 1989

Untitled, 1989
Doppelte Erscheinung (Double Vision)

1989

wood, steel, paint, hardware, mirror

48 x 32 x 8"
Home Entertainment Center

1989
mixed media
72 x 68 x 26"
Target Blockhouse

1989
mixed media

51½ x 40 x 29"
Separation #1

1990
ENAMEL PAINT, EPoxy

48 x 78"
Untitled

1991

site-specific installation

Althea Viafora Gallery

architectural column, plaster paint

228 x 24 x 24"
Display

1991

aluminum, plaster, lights

192 ½ x 36 ¼ x 44"
Untitled

1991

aluminum, plaster

51\frac{3}{4} \times 51\frac{3}{4} \times 32\frac{1}{4}"
Bill Albertini

Born in Dublin, Ireland, 1955.

Education:

Yale School of Art, M.F.A. 1980-1982
Crawford School of Art, Cork, Ireland 1975-1978
Ravensbourne College of Art and Design, Bromley, Kent, England 1974-1975

One Person Exhibitions:

1990 ........................................... Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, New York
1991 ........................................... Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, New York
1991 ........................................... Jacob Karpio Gallery, San Jose, Costa Rica

Group Exhibitions:

1979 ........................................... “Malou ’79,” Brussels, Belgium (representing Ireland)
1979 ........................................... “Group Exhibition,” Oliver Dowling Gallery, Dublin
1979 ........................................... “Student/Staff,” National College of Art and Design, Dublin
1983 ........................................... “Four Sculptors, Four Architects, 4+4 The Norfolk Projects,” Norfolk, Connecticut
1984 ........................................... “Staff Exhibition,” Art and Architecture Gallery Yale School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut
1988 ........................................... “Group Exhibition,” John Davis Gallery, New York, New York
1988 ........................................... “Visiting Faculty Show,” Kent State Blossom Program, Kent, Ohio
1990 ........................................... Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, New York
1990 ........................................... Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, New York
1991 ........................................... “Inherent Vice,” The Centre for Photography, Woodstock, New York


