

Slow Dissolve, Michael Ned Hote

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Charles Ray is an anachronism. In 1978 the artist presented a wall-mounted sculpture entitled *Clock Man*, featuring a large generic clock face painted on an oversize wooden box. Ray was situated in the box, and his legs dangled like ridiculous pendulums from holes in the bottom of it. The piece followed from a number of works in which Ray's body was used to activate or complete a sculpture. Several of these were preserved as photographs: *Untitled* (1973) is a black-and-white photograph of Ray tied to a cantilevered tree branch; *Plank Piece I—II* (1973) is a photographic diptych that documents the artist pinned to the wall, in two different ways, by a large wooden plank. *Clock Man* was also photographed for posterity, but unlike these other examples, the piece was intended as a performance; it was impossible to represent the work as a single photographic instant: it happened in time. Over the course of a day, Ray kept time from inside *Clock Man*, manually moving the hands on the clock face according to his unassisted perception of the minutes passing. By the end of the performance, the clock read six o'clock, and Ray was three hours ahead of time.

Over the years since *Clock Man*, Ray has increasingly left the clock behind, so to speak, with projects that consume not hours but years of time and, seemingly, generations of studio assistants. (In one slightly dubious anecdote told by a former assistant, Ray literally removed the batteries from his studio clock, and remarkably nobody stopped working to take lunch.) He is currently trying to finish an enormous work tentatively entitled *Hinoki*, which is the Japanese word for cypress wood. While driving through California's Central Coast, Ray became obsessed with a very old fallen tree near a vineyard. The 30-foot-long tree, seemingly melted into the ground where it fell, had been devoured from the inside by insects; it was a complex index of natural processes and time. Ray considered the sculptural possibilities of the tree for a long time, and at one point even considered producing a pneumatic replica of it - an idea that proved impractical.

With assistance and over a period of days, Ray moved the tree piece by piece to his studio, where he produced a fibreglass cast of each massive section. The cast sections were taken to Japan, where Ray located a team of traditional master carvers, who have since been meticulously replicating the tree, inside and out, from huge laminated cylinders of cypress wood, for several years. The sections will eventually be brought together, and *Hinoki* will remain in Japan as a ghostly trace of the dead California tree. At the time of my writing, the pressing issue Ray faces is deciding exactly when the work - which has been carved toward an idea of 'exactitude' - is finally finished. The idea for the work was never finite and has in fact evolved over time, resulting in part from decisions more pragmatic than conceptual.

While Ray is often discussed in relation to minimalism, or the high modernist sculpture of Anthony Caro - both serve as significant, if paradoxical, influences on his thinking about sculpture - it is also important to remember that the artist's formative years coincided with the rapid proliferation and institutionalisation of conceptual art tendencies. In his influential 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' (Artforum, 1967) Sol LeWitt wrote, 'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.' One can see residual traces of this paradigm in certain works by Ray, in which the work could be effectively described in its title. *All My Clothes* (1973), for example, consists of 16 nearly identical photographs of Ray wearing each item of clothing he owned. But it would become clear in the intervening years that the artist was increasingly interested in something antithetical to LeWitt's suggestion (also in 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art') that 'all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair'. While Ray's work usually begins with an idea, that idea is open-ended: the decision-making process is slow and perpetual, and ultimately determines what the idea of the work is - after rather than before the fact. This is exemplified by *Hinoki*. In interviews with the artist (and even in a few texts written by him), Ray has indicated many of his works have started with an idea about space. While this seems a likely starting point, the gradual transformation of these works throughout the intervening process - and the way the viewer is expected to perceive that process - suggests that Ray's works are ultimately about time.

In many ways *Hinoki* seems to spin out of Ray's 1997 *Unpainted Sculpture*. The initial idea for *Unpainted Sculpture*, which looks like the pale, if opaque, apparition of a wrecked car, emerged when Ray suggested that a former student replace his crumpled fender with a cast fibreglass version of it. Quickly Ray claimed the idea as worthy of sculptural investigation, and decided to take the idea to its logical, if perverse, extreme: 'I spent a couple of months looking for a wrecked car that was really sculptural. I went to all these insurance yards, and I was looking at ones in which fatalities had occurred. I don't believe in ghosts, but I wondered that if there were ghosts, would the ghost inhabit the actual physical molecules of the structure, or would it be more interested in inhabiting the topology or the geometry of the structure? You know, if you were to duplicate the geometry, would the ghost follow?' (Interview with Dennis Cooper, Index, 1998).

Ray eventually settled upon a wrecked 1991 Pontiac Grand Am, and with a group of assistants began methodically to disassemble the vehicle into its constituent parts, making a mould of each in order to cast each part in fibreglass, finally assembling the various replicas to create *Unpainted Sculpture*. The title Ray chose for the piece is actually a lie: the sculpture is painted with a uniform coat of matt primer grey, which unifies the sculpture not unlike the way yellow paint unifies the parts of Caro's *Prairie* (1967).

It had been some eight years since I had seen *Unpainted Sculpture*, when the work served as the stunning climax of Ray's travelling retrospective. It now resides at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and, when I recently saw it again in person, had lost none of its initial, even hallucinatory impact - pun intended - as a disturbing emblem of the acceleration, recklessness and disposability of late capitalist culture at the end of the twentieth century. In this sense it responds, however ambiguously, to Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' series of paintings (1962-3) and J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. (David Cronenberg's filming of Ballard's 1973 novel coincided with the production of Ray's car.) In fact, one can practically imagine it holding a potent charge a hundred - if not a thousand - years from now, even if one can't possibly envision the society around it.

Despite such cultural cachet, the real gravitational pull of *Unpainted Sculpture* is due to its form, which is at once elegant and fucked up. Like an accident, it stops time. The sculpture unifies - one might say collides - a number of ongoing concerns for the artist, bringing together the complex, folding forms of Baroque sculpture, the perceptual elasticity of Caro (as one circles the work) and the inside/outside spatial dynamic of Donald Judd's monochromatic boxes. Along the way, the work also plays out Ray's interest in the generic versus the specific, and the hallucinatory versus the imagistic. Seen in person, what seems solid can quickly evaporate as one

moves around the car or directs one's attention from the inside to the outside of the vehicle. Or as Ray has suggested, 'I think the piece has my very best and my very worst in it. It has a bit of my showoffiness, and my sensationalism and grandstanding... but it also has my best, I think, in its uncanny-ness. I hope it draws people in' (Index, 1998). In part, Unpainted Sculpture is uncanny because the material is unified and continuous. The work is actually heavier than the car it was cast from, because the fibreglass is, on average, heavier than the material that comprises a 1991 Grand Am, an effect that seems to follow from Ray's deceptively heavy 7½ Ton Cube (1990), a solid steel three-foot cube painted with white automobile paint.

Adding to the perceptual conundrum is the actual act of translation of a variety of materials into fibreglass, which led Ray to a number of unexpected judgement calls. For example, the broken taillight on the Grand Am looked wrong to Ray once it was cast in fibreglass, though technically speaking the part was perfectly well made. Using clay, he adjusted the mould to create an easier perceptual transition from the inside to the outside of the taillight, which Ray compares to a cinematic dissolve artificially moving the viewer from one space to another. Like the title Unpainted Sculpture, the taillight is a fiction.

How important is it for the viewer to see the labor in a work of art? Does the fact that each individual sculpture consumes years of time and thousands upon thousands of man-hours become part of the perceptual experience? Untitled (Tractor) (2003-5) follows closely from Unpainted Sculpture - one might even say it follows from the broken taillight of the Grand Am - yet the construction of the piece was far more elaborate than was its predecessor. The tractor immediately signifies labour - and, allegorically, the ghost of a long-departed American economy - but one might not immediately comprehend the amount or kind of work that went into its making. For Untitled (Tractor) Ray decided to replicate a broken-down 1938 Cletrac tractor in cast aluminium, but rather than making a direct mould of each piece he directed his assistants to carve a replica of each individual piece of the tractor. Like an early industrial capitalist, Ray carefully divided his labour, assigning different parts based on the individual carving skills of his assistants, resulting in a wide variety of exactitude and degrees of 'finish'. Under scrutiny, the whole slowly gives way to a mind-boggling assemblage of individuated parts. Many of the parts are actually hidden from view within the tractor's body, and one could interpret this as evidence of Ray's madness, or merely his faith in the process. Both are probably true. Ask him, and he will say a person viewing the tractor can actually sense the existence of the unseen parts.

But Ray's faith in the viewer is always seemingly at risk. The further he takes a work down the slippery slope towards 'completion', the more he relies on the viewer to find the glitch, the fuck-up, the seam between reality and hallucination that serves as a point of entry into the work. As contemporary culture (and the art market) accelerates to a mind-numbing blur, Ray feathers the breaks, almost imperceptibly, towards a standstill, and invites the viewer along for the ride.