frances whitehead

æsthetic
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anisette
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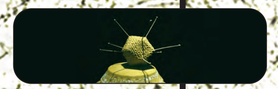
antechamber
annex (extant)
arguably
alive
archive

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
GALLERY IN CHICAGO



frances whitehead

Arguably Alive *(the virus taxonomy)*
Northern Illinois University Art Museum
Gallery in Chicago
April 28 - June 3, 2000
(Front Left)

Antechamber
TOUGH Gallery
Chicago, Illinois
April 24 - May 30, 1998
(Front Right)

Tomb of Tutankhamun, antechamber

F.WHITEHEAD: NOTES

Can sculptural things still aspire to move us by dealing intelligently and with acuity with what threatens and terrifies?

Can the tradition of funerary sculpture, which encompasses so much of what sculptural expression has traditionally achieved, be re-invented and re-ignited such that it can speak to us again without condescension? And can it do this without relapsing into statuary, by continuing to push the boundaries of what the specific "thingness" of sculpture might consist?

One of the few answers available to us today can be found in the work of Chicago-based sculptor Frances Whitehead. Whitehead is now entering into a period of artistic maturity in which two themes, the allegorical exploration of content and the examination of the theatricality of sculptural "thingness" are beginning to come together in works which promise an art of great complexity and resonance. Two recent projects, *Antechamber,* 1998 and *Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy),* a work in progress, epitomize this development.

I

Antechamber can be described most simply through its most memorable image. A small arched cast-iron doorway set into a brick wall leads to a vaulted chamber. Within the chamber are stacked remnants of works created by the artist over the last decade and a half. These include metal fabrications, blown-glass vessels, plant material, mirrored tubes, enormous ceramic modules, a large sugar cube. Both the ordered/disordered arrangement of these objects, and the associations set in train by the image, are a deliberate echo of the famous photograph of Tutankhamun's tomb at the moment of its opening. Why this photograph is so poignant — why it contains what Susan Sontag recently described in another context as a "mysterious surplus of pathos" — is that while the tomb exists and the artefacts exist, what no longer exists is *that* scene. It is not the things themselves but the peculiar and idiosyncratic piling of things within the vault (this evident mix of preparation and, one suspects, last minute confusion) that marks what is distinctively human, even tremulous, about Tutankhamun. This, we suspect, is how things meet death.

Antechamber, installation view, TOUGH Gallery, 1998

Antechamber, with its heaped objects and sense of the apparently forbidden, re-enacts — but without simply depicting — something of this sense. The Egyptian references and the stacking of the remains of the artist's work seem to allude to a funerary embalming of the past and its equivalent, though ambiguous, archaeological recovery. The vaults and doorway suggest enclosure and threshold, evoke a desire to enter and to retrieve. But they also suggest that what is placed there is beyond reach, so that even if we can enter and retrieve, and then later display what is within, we will do so at the price of destroying the peculiar conjunction of objects that in this setting "represents" Whitehead.

The result is an impasse. As we look into the space of the vault, we remain unsure whether the value of the work lies in what is inside, (that which we can scarcely access) or in the total experience we have as we gradually come across these objects in the process of moving into and through the installation. The fact that one proceeded into the underground space in which the work was exhibited, first by negotiating a flight of stairs and then by moving along a corridor, only then coming across the tiny vault hidden within the gallery space, would suggest the latter. But one is not sure, and even the presence, opposite the real vault, of a hydrocal copy of the doorway built into the false wall of the corridor (and which gives onto an otherwise empty but partially illuminated space, a space much larger than the vault but whose illuminated portion is identical in size to the filled vault opposite) does not determine the issue. The site of the work remains ambiguous, poised between an architectonic installation (the entirety of the work) and a disparate collection of things — whose meaning, as that of the objects in Tutankhamun's tomb, lies neither quite in the things themselves nor quite in their arrangement. *Antechamber* then, comes very close to evoking, not Tutankhamun's tomb itself, but the sense of what we feel when we consider the tomb images, and through them, how we stand to things and to our mortality. In Whitehead's translation of this experience, what is effectively an autobiographical content (the remnants of past work) is here made to transcend its otherwise subjective limits.

II

Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy), appears at first sight as a quite different work. Within the darkened space of a gallery, we confront fifty (it feels like more) slightly luminescent, chartreuse-colored, press-molded, Egyptian paste (faience) canopic jars, each about 22" high and about 10" or 12" across at the shoulder. Vertical lighting lends a theatricality and gives a kind of muted yellow-green glow to the space as a whole. On the walls of the gallery, but barely perceptible in the low light, is displayed the numerical classification of the various families and genera of viruses. Arrayed in geometric order across the gallery floor, the jars recall the famous images of the ceramic soldiers in the tombs in Xian, as well as nineteenth-century galleries of archaeological remains and scientific specimens. This sense of specimen is emphasized by the display of the jars on individual stainless steel tables that have something of the feel of medical equipment. The tables elevate the jars, likening the assembly to a figure and more significantly perhaps, bringing the lids to eye level. Here we confront the ostensible subject matter of the work — perfectly-scaled, grossly-magnified but nonetheless morphologically-accurate modeled representations of 50 of the 80 families of virus, the smallest, a half-inch in diameter, the largest a psychologically uncomfortable three-feet.

Enlarged to a point where they take on substantive form and begin to have a putative existence in the world, these are unsurprisingly compelling, even uncanny, representations. In this sense the choice of viral taxonomy as the subject matter of the work is an inspired one. This is not only because our fear of viral infection (the fear of the invisible "enemy within") already has theatrical, even melodramatic, overtones, but also because of the equal psychological investment in the belief that the taxonomic revelation of the underlying order of the virus can in some way be brought to bear on the circumvention of their effects. The combination of the fearful and the melodramatic on the one side, and the belief in the saving power of taxonomy and analysis on the other allows Whitehead to play-off the evidential with the theatrical. Indeed, this relation — with its correlate relations of the objective and the subjective, defines the work of the piece as a whole.

On the evidential side, for example, however cartoon-like some of the virus representations may seem — the product in part of the difficulties of working with faience which is brittle and lacks plasticity — and however much the experience of encountering them is strangely closer to the experience of portraiture than to gazing on scientific models — their *objective* as well as iconic power ultimately resides in our inability to dismiss them as purely the products of the artist's imagination. Scientific veracity here enhances psychological confrontation.

On the theatrical side, the dramatic force of bringing the viruses from invisibility to visibility is intensified by placing the virus models on the lids of the canopic jars. Used in Egyptian burial rites to contain the most significant of the internal organs, canopic jars born on their lids representations of the gods associated with particular organs. The jars stand therefore, both for the attempt to ensure the afterlife through the correct means of preserving the substantive body and its crucial organs and as vehicles for the god who may ensure the after-life. In *Arguably Alive* Whitehead both uses and *inverts* these associations. The jars continue the funerary association — albeit now as carriers rather than containers — but what is offered on their lids is now not the representation of the god but the microscopic condition of the viral, whose power paradoxically enables life or death.

But it is significant also that the viral models are carried on the body of the canopic jar, (in analogous manner to how our bodies "carry" viral infection?) for although the jars appear at first sight to be simply "base" for the viral models, the longer one perceives the work it is the ambiguous status and quality of the jars themselves that forces its way into mind. Initially a seemingly too familiar Egyptological and funerary icon to possess enigmatic force, it is their *materiality* which changes their sense from icons to entities. What in photographs can seem like a field of mass-produced objects, turns out on fuller inspection to be very much a field of made and material objects. It is not simply that the jars are "hand-made", rather that the quality of the faience results in jars that feel remarkably fragile, even tenuous. It is this fragility that belies the image of immortality, and stands in stark contrast to the perceived indestructibility of the viruses themselves.

III

That it is the jars and not the virus models which eventually dominate our experience of the work is not surprising. As Keats most famously knew, the implication of the funerary is in the end more evocative than the direct presentation of death. But what exactly is involved in working with the funerary today? And what is it that Whitehead is able to achieve by working so directly with it?

From an aesthetic point of view, both the difficulty — but also in the end the virtue — of death as a subject matter is that, once removed from direct implication in a represented body, it becomes essentially unrepresentable. Death can therefore be presented in a work only indirectly. But that death "is" — that it cannot be denied by any act of rational subjective will — also allows, even compels, that it be presented with the force of fact. Thus what death offers to the artist is that its "impossible" presentation must be conducted, at least in part, outside of the realm of the subjective.

This is significant in that it provides artists with a useful correction to those aspects of modern romanticism in which the value of a work has often appeared to reside largely in the way in which it seemed to fulfill the promise of a purely subjective creativity enacted through the development of a particular style or manner. The problem with this position has always been that the attempt to realize it in its exclusive potentiality must inevitably erode the basis of all content that lies outside of subjectivity.

Whitehead contests this delimitation. The agent of this contestation is the incorporation of the evidential moment into the work. In *Arguably Alive,* she uses the apparatus of scientific representation not only as an allegorical means of presenting the *fact* of death (or at least our fear of it) but also as a means of placing an objective dimension — a dimension of fact — into the work.

That the objective is brought into the work does not, of course, mean the complete erasure of subjectivity. Instead, Whitehead is proposing that the work of the work-of-art, is to re-establish a dialogical relationship between the subjective and the objective moments. It is worth considering what this might mean. That in a work the subjective is broken of its absolute domination does not mean that subjective taste (and the decorative as a whole) can be sloughed off. They remain as inevitable moments of the work. In *Arguably Alive* for example, there is a sense in which the canopic jars function much as interior decorating objects function anywhere. Their slightly shimmering, salt-encrusted surfaces, half illuminated, half cast into shadow, provide precisely the kind of mild aesthetic charge that one associates with interior decor, one that is just sufficient for an aesthetic attention that takes them in (initially) almost inattentively, and one that is entirely consonant with the (apparent) role of the jars as essentially base to the (lethal) ornaments that crown the lids.

But the latter provide the clue that the play on taste employed here is a knowing one. Just as the models that adorn the lids of the jars are a play, if a somewhat macabre one, on ornament, so the jars and the mode of their arrangement and lighting are knowingly tasteful. This doubled play is part of what the work offers, part of its realm of reference. The late nineteenth century was full of injunctions to artists and designers to "penetrate" nature to discover the microcosmic source of the truth of ornament. Whitehead's penetration to the ornamental core of virology — death as the truth of the ornamental core of existence — comes as a neat inversion of the conventional view of the decorative and the ornamental as superficial.

IV

That the ornamental, the decorative and the discovery and revelation of truth can be shown to coincide is not an insignificant achievement. The questions with which we began are questions about the manner in which subjectivity negotiates psychologically the greatest incommensurable that it faces, its own potential and actual extinction, and then finds a way of working this negotiation in terms of the work and materials of sculpture.

Zola spoke about sculpture as the book of stone onto which was written the deepest concerns of history. Whitehead has re-interpreted that original function, not by direct enactment of the sculptural per se but by the indirect creation of ensembles of things in which the dialectical relationship between subjective conditions and objective fact is once again made available to art. Whitehead has come back to this fundamental truth by re-discovering the force of the funerary as a means to bring us back to these considerations — in the process bringing art back to the condition where it can comment intelligently and with affective force upon them.

What her work achieves is the setting up of a space and a set of encounters in which this doubled negotiation of subjectivity with the objective facts of the situation, first with the subject of attention and second with the material qualities of the work itself, can be re-experienced by the spectator. Since the objective moment is denied to art as an internal aspect of its operation, work that has aspired to re-establish a dialogue between these moments has required a more conscious setting-up of a moment "beyond" the work.

In twentieth-century art, this setting-up of a moment "beyond" has taken a number of forms, one of which, especially in the last thirty or forty years, has been an interest in the theatrical. Empowered by the interest in the creation of spaces, temporal if not temporary in nature (hence the interest in installation), which are capable of acting as the experimental sites in which the relation to content might be re-fashioned, the theatrical has appeared to provide a means of re-working the conditions of artistic production and reception.

The function of the work of art, in Whitehead's terms, is to create things, spaces and encounters though which we can (re-)experience the conditions of our being-in-the-world; that is the conditions of how we are produced as beings and, secondly, and at the widest, how we stand to Being as a whole. Why art is important here is that in the poetic act we re-create both the impulse towards the production of the world as our world, an originary world, *and* Giorgio Agamben's "impetus towards shadow and ruin" (disappearance, death). It is in sensing these double moments that we are brought most sharply to self-consciousness. *Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy)* and *Antechamber* can be said to do precisely this, both in their ostensible subject matter and through the manner of how we experience the work.

What Whitehead has seen is that it is only through the re-creation of spaces in which both presence and its annihilation can again be re-experienced that we can bring ourselves to fully address, experientially as well as intellectually, the way we stand to the fact of our own mortality. Needless to say, such a bringing to presence of this experience is also a re-assertion of the potential of art to comment with acuity on the conditions of our being and to move us by so doing.

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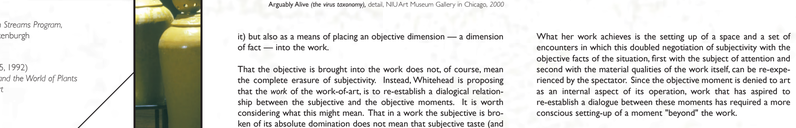

Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy), detail, NIU Art Museum Gallery in Chicago, 2000

FRANCES WHITEHEAD

Born 1953, Richmond, Virginia; resides, Chicago, Illinois

EDUCATION

1975 MFA, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois.
1978 BFA, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, *with honors.*

GRANTS/ AWARDS

1999, 87, 85 Illinois Arts Council, Visual Artist Grant
1998 Acuff Distinguished Chair of Excellence in the Creative Arts, State of Tennessee
1991 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award
1986 National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artist Fellowship Grant

EXHIBITIONS /PUBLIC ART PROJECTS

2000-01 National Endowment for the Arts and U.S. Office of Surface Mining, *Arts and Appalachian Clean Streams Program,*
Acid Mine Drainage Remediation site, Murray City, Ohio, Collaboration with Michael Van Valkenburgh
Wave Hill Gardens, Glyndor Gallery, Bronx, New York, *Abundant Invention*
Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, *Gardens of Pleasure*
1999 Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona, *Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy),* (Solo Exhibitions 1995, 1992)
Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, Duluth, (traveling), *Botanica Contemporary Art and the World of Plants*
1998 Inter-Kontakt Grafik Foundation, Prague, Czech Republic, *2nd International Triennial of Graphic Art*
TOUGH Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, *Antechamber,* (Solo Exhibition also 1996)
1996 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, *Art in Chicago 1945-1995*
Herron School of Art, IUPUI, Indianapolis, Indiana, *Trope*
National Gallery of American Art, Washington, D.C., *History of the Monoprint:1880 to the present*
Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri, *Hortus Obscurus (the dark garden),* permanent sitework
American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, New York, *Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture*
1993 Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio, *About Nature*
Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, Illinois, The Nature of the Machine
The Drawing Center, New York, New York, *The Return of the Exquisite Corpse*
1992 DART Gallery, Chicago Illinois, Solo Exhibition, (also 1989)
Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York, *Sette & Segura: One Decade*
Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri, *Natural Forces: Human Observations*
1991 LedisFlam Gallery, New York, New York, Solo Exhibition
1989 Atlanta Arts Festival, Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia, *National Site Works Program,ÔTerminusÕ*
1987 The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, *Standing Ground: Sculpture by American Women*
FEATURE Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, The Non-Spiritual in Art
1985 Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, Solo Exhibition

COLLECTIONS

Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
Bank America, San Francisco, California
Hallmark Art Collection, Kansas City, Missouri
Merck Pharmaceutical Company
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois
Peat Marwick Executive Education Center, NEA Collection, Chicago, Illinois
Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, Arizona
Sidley and Austin, New York, New York
The State of Illinois
U.S. Equities, Chicago, Illinois

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CURRENT POSITION

Professor of Sculpture, School of the Art Institute of Chicago