

PABLO BRONSTEIN

The Poetics of Waste

Keith Miller

The existence of the whole, subjective, embodied, fully human being in the world sounds like an impossibly wide-ranging choice of subject matter for an artist. But it is one of the subjects, in the end. Pablo Bronstein's work thus far has often seemed partial in its engagement with the human: in his witty antiquarian drawings the figures are always dwarfed by architecture; even in his stylised performance pieces they can be a marginal, gesticulating presence. And yet Bronstein's work is clearly 'humane' in a broader sense.

Bronstein's engagement with eighteenth-century architecture, decorative art and print culture is meaty with irony: in the small divergences of touch and technique by which he parts company with his quoted sources (and with more straight-faced attempts to channel and revivify those sources); in his crunching shifts of tone, as in the early drawings, published in book form by Koenig, which depicted the postmodern architecture of London through the prism of the Piranesian, proto-Romantic sublime; and in his insistence on the performative aspect even of works which don't feature 'performance' in any obvious sense.

Bronstein's interest in architecture and decoration, moreover, is never about these things per se, but about how they make us feel (small, clever, weak, rich, judged, tasteful). Different people feel differently about the same architectural space, of course; a visitor to Copenhagen might nod appreciatively at Arne Jacobsen's National Bank, but stride unseeing past Marmorkirken. If Bronstein seems more engaged with the classical tradition, it's perhaps only partly because he enjoys or notices it more; it's also because in the West, baroque, rococo and neoclassical buildings are still immediately recognisable as expressions of power.

The centrepiece of the Charlottenborg show is a huge latrine or public urinal, designed in a hefty, pared-down neoclassical style derived from the work of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736 – 1806), who worked for the French King in the last decades before the Revolution, and whose ideas subsequently found much favour abroad, notably in Northern Europe. The seasoned gallery-goer may immediately think of Marcel Duchamp's Fountain (1917), and there is a whiff of that hugely influential work wafting over the present one, to be sure. But Duchamp himself said that the point about his translocated urinal was precisely its uselessness ("If it's signed and you can't piss in it because it's stuck to a gallery wall, it's got to be art: what else?"). Bronstein's loo, while not exactly high-tech, is certainly functional (and there's nothing 'ready-made' about it, either, though the fetishisation of craftsmanship which you often find in responses to classicism is as absent here as from Bronstein's previous output).

The work invokes, in a typically arch and idiosyncratic way, a radically critical discourse about the Enlightenment, implicit in several works of anthropology in the 1960s, and Michel Foucault's "archaeologies of knowledge" in the 1970s. Ordering and structuring the world through knowledge meant creating new hierarchies and dichotomies: mad and sane, sick and well, dirty and clean. Separating the 'whole' human subject from his bodily waste was just one specific example of this process. Whereas at the court of Louis XIV in the seventeenth century looking after the King's shit was a prestigious office, and people used to relieve themselves cheerfully in the exquisite surroundings of the Galerie des Glaces, the turn of the nineteenth century brought a revolution in hygiene: water closets, sluices, sewers, a whole branch of the

Industrial Revolution dedicated to cloaking the disgraceful fact of our excretions in pious invisibility.

This text is an extract from a longer essay that appears in the publication accompanying Pablo Bronstein's exhibition at Charlottenborg. Keith Miller is a writer based in London.