

Into the bargain —a parable in two parts David Armstrong Six at goodwater

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Into the bargain—a parable in two parts: **David ARMSTRONG SIX** at goodwater

Gordon LEBREDT

MORRIS: *Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?*

SMITH: *I was not making a monument.*

MORRIS: *Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?*

SMITH: *I was not making an object.¹*

In this now-eminent exchange, Robert Morris queries Tony Smith on the prescript for the work called *Die* (1962). Clearly, when it came to scale, Smith preferred something intermediate, something neither too large—a monument—nor too small—an ornament.² According to Morris, sculpture, a category that would encompass all useless three-dimensional things, falls between these two extremes, these two limits. As it turns out, Smith's intermediate thing, his modular (hence, expandable) prescript—*Die* being the empirical representative of such a prescript—measures out at 6 x 6 x 6 feet. With something like *Die*, Smith opts for a constant based more or less on the generic dimensions of the human body. *Free Ride*, a work from the same year, is only slightly larger; based on the open cube schema of *Die*, the length-dimension of each of its three axes is 6'8"; which is to say, about the height of a typical domestic door opening.

Because I was not making a monument. / Because I was not making an object. is a recent work by David Armstrong Six. It's one of a number of works exhibited at goodwater under the title *How are You Feeling Doctor?* Aside from the intensity of this particular work (it's composed, in part, of commercially available fluorescent lighting strips), I'm struck by the "base"—if indeed that's what we should call it. Conceivably, the banks of lighting strips, which have been configured to replicate the coiled or twisted schema of *Free Ride*, could have been placed without any additional support. However, Armstrong Six's imposition, his 216 x 174 x 17-inch prosthesis, reads as a counter-

point, or counterpart, to the illuminated structure it labours to set off. In other words, even though it comes to lift, to place in relief as it were, the lit component of the work—the thing to which, we suppose, the title refers—much like any conventional base, it does so as if it were itself another work. Like its companion, this base, podium, plinth or stage could stand its place as a work. If we take it that such might be the case, then these two things do indeed form an odd or eccentric couple, in spite of the fact that nothing of their situation appears to be out of place. As composite objects, both retain and reflect in a most uncompromising fashion, their vernacular origins. Even the manner in which each of them is put together is straightforward and relatively transparent. And each is, with a nod to Smith's original schema, domestic rather than public in scale.³ Everything, it would appear, fits rather comfortably with respect to the space at hand. Yet the base, which is base in every sense of the word, has little or no work to do, for when its partner above is powered up (sometimes, at the discretion of John Goodwin, it remains off), the load, the "content" that it supports, that it holds aloft, is

at once dematerialized. It would seem that what would normally bank on the proficiency of its support has, at certain times, no need of its services. Levitation—or levity, since all of this is also quite funny—is part of the bargain. But it is precisely light, an irradiation so aggressive in this case that it incapacitates the eye, which cancels the contract or bond between the two components. We could say that this effect of lighting cuts into the entire presentation; overflowing its local or domestic margins, it thus works to belittle or reduce—to the point of annihilation—everything that makes up its scene, to make light of or lay waste to its organization, its *mise en scène*.

So, what of the fate of our two speculators and their less than secure pact? Well, with all this talk of the scene and its fading, of retreat or withdrawal before an omnivorous light, I'm reminded of a fable attributed to Bidpai, the one in which two inseparable travelling companions—a scorpion and a tortoise—come to a river. The tortoise offers to transport the friend across what, for a scorpion, is virtually an impassable hazard. Halfway across, however, the ungrateful insect attempts to deliver a

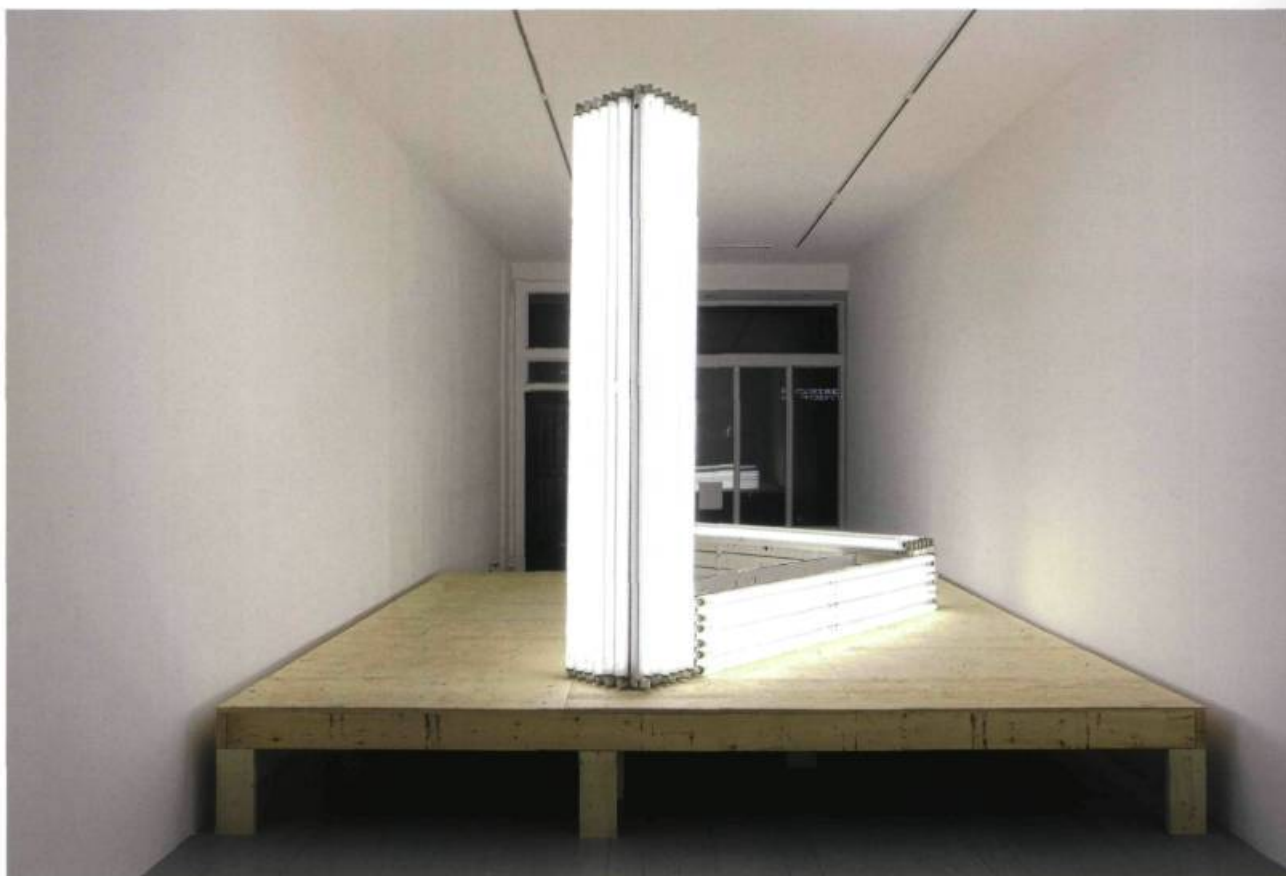
lethal blow to its all too accommodating ride. At which point the tortoise submerges, shaking loose and dooming her compulsive and somewhat diabolical freeloader.

A parable then of the para-site: a support, as Serres would say, has gone missing, cast aside, and everything, even the so-called thing itself, falls.⁴ Essentially, it's a story of excess, of all that exceeds a certain calculation or logic. The thing's hubris—being in excess of what was agreed—sends it to the bottom: an "irreparable tragedy" into the bargain.

Speaking of odd additions, I mustn't forget the box.

On the floor, just off to one side of the platform of *Because I was not making a monument. / Because I was not making an object.*, sits a modestly sized cardboard box. At first glance it's difficult to determine if the box is to be viewed as part of the adjacent work or not. Open, it appears to be empty. A closer inspection of the interior, however, reveals a grotesque and slightly oversized index finger, carved from wood, protruding from one of the four sides. As well, the object bears a title—*Your Sadness Equals My Sadness And So On...*—that clearly establishes its singularity while at the

David ARMSTRONG SIX.
Because I was not making a monument. / Because I was not making an object, 2008. Fluorescent lights, plywood, steel.
156 x 144 x 110 inches.
Photo: Nestor Kruger.



Vera JACYK *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*

Margaret RODGERS



David ARMSTRONG SIX, *Your Sadness Equals My Sadness And So On*, 2008. Carved wood, cardboard box. 11 x 22 16 inches. Photo: Nestor Kruger.

same time announcing, perhaps, some other terrible or sorrowful calamity. A comedic accent to offset the overbearing excesses of its neighbour? It could be, since the thing wouldn't seem out of place amongst the macabre gags and other necrophilia one might expect to find in something like the Addams family's attic. One could imagine that the thing, the finger that is, as being more or less alive, and that, being constrained to the insides of the box, gets transported from venue to venue—under the arm of the artist, its master, no doubt. A mobile quasi-object, a joker of sorts, its only function is to point. But to what does it gesture? To the centre of the interior of its prison of course, the set piece of which we now have the privilege to view from the outside. But this stage, this theatrical opening, has no outside. That's the joke, and it isn't particularly amusing. Why? Because it doesn't really exist. There are no walls, for in this labyrinth it is terror that holds court. And what is the nature of this terror? Let's just say that it comes

with the territory, that it arises from the opening itself. Here, as Lyotard once wrote, there are only encounters, "each tracing at full speed around itself a multitude of transparent walls, secret thresholds, open grounds, empty skies in which each encounter flees itself, overflows itself, is forgotten,—or is repeated, ceasing then to be an encounter."⁵

The labyrinth, then, issues forth from the encounter, around which turn two very different stories of a support: a staging of the stage (the *templum* already a labyrinth *en abyme*) whose fate is itself mediated by a story of light. A devastating cannibalistic light, one that comes to voraciously consume the eye as well as the scene. ←

Gordon LEBREDT is an artist and writer living in Toronto. Recently, he exhibited in *Art in the Halls* at 401 Richmond Street (September 11–October 9, 2008) and at Convenience Gallery (October 28–November 25, 2008). Recent publications include *Afterthoughts: a monologue [to R.S.]*, YYZBooks, Toronto (2007), "Notes from the Parergon: A few off-centre remarks concerning the artist-run facility as medium," *Decentre: concerning artist-run culture/à propos de centres d'artistes*, also from YYZBooks (2008), and "Some Bad Timing: stance, stasis, and movement in the work of Tom Dean and Murray Favro," *Espace Sculpture*, no. 85, Montréal (2008).

NOTES

1. Morris, Robert, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), 11.
2. The choice of the word "ornament" is Morris' given that, when speaking of scale with respect to the medium of sculpture, he reserves the term "object" to mean any three-dimensional thing falling between the monument and the ornament. See *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 11.
3. Using commercially available fixtures (the fluorescent tubes are eight feet in length), Armstrong Six comes close to duplicating the overall dimensions of Smith's *Free Ride* which were based on the height of a standard domestic (interior) door opening. Here, I have taken the liberty of substituting Morris's use of the word "intimate" with "domestic."
4. Serres, Michel, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 32–33.
5. Lyotard, Jean-François, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 36.

Richly coloured eggs, red and black embroidery, gravity defying Cossack dancers, wooden parquetry and distinctive ceramics project comfortable ideas about Ukrainian heritage within our multicultural mosaic. Sometimes artists use this iconography to celebrate or to criticize old country ways.

In *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*, Vera Jacyk uses these cultural references to focus upon the modern historical trauma that Ukraine has undergone as it endured both Nazi and Soviet rule and as subsequent generations sensed the unspoken histories of resistance and subjugation.

Devoid of the characteristic colours and patterns of Ukrainian arts and crafts, Jacyk's pristine installation is a severe and nightmarish environment. Small-scale and disembodied fragments of a home are depicted in matte white—a closet, a pantry, and stairs that go nowhere communicate bleak sorrow and loss. One small suit hangs in a closet, the kind of dark clothing seen in old pass-

port and wedding photographs. A cupboard, its door ajar, reveals a bust of Stalin composed of wax and wheat seeds, recalling the famine and forced starvation the tyrant wreaked upon Ukrainian people. On the stairs are scattered small disembodied arms, implying a life fragmented, and people displaced.

A blackboard drawing of a healthy child goose-stepping obediently suggests another grim aspect of the country's history. In the drawer lies a partially embroidered swastika. A child's lower torso and a woman stretched into agonized elongation are created from barbed wire. Two pysanky are positioned at a child-sized table where the artist, as a little girl, might have played quietly while hearing the silence and tension endured by adults around her, those who brought these histories and terrible memories to Canada. But these eggs are not coloured in the symbols representative of their culture, they are black with white

Vera JACYK, *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*, 2009. Detail. Courtesy: McLaren Art Centre. Photo: Holly McClellan.

