

Becky Brown does not suffer from the anxiety of choice that plagues makers of many stripes. Whether engaging her painting practice, her sculptural objects, or her writing, the answer to everything is an inclusive “yes, please: as much as possible,” and “thank you”-always “and”, never “or”. As I prepared to think about her practice through this essay, Becky sent me texts she had written, floods of language seamlessly congruent with her visual production. They began with lists as a matter of course:

Interdisciplinarity, interconnectedness, interdependence, integration, interface, interference, interfold, interim, interior, interloper, interlude, intermediary, intermission, interpretation...

and:

Inundation, proliferation, saturation, fragmentation, appropriation, information. Multitude of languages, diversity of symbols, history, memory, archeology, time. Neurosis, anxiety, fear, desire, landscape, cityscape, narrative, event, communication, abstraction, geometry, depth, surface, tension.

In his unforgettably charismatic commencement speech to the graduating class of 2008 at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, celebrated critic Jerry Saltz repeated an assertion he’d intimated elsewhere in talks and writings: the notion that artists are cats, and their art is the sofa. To illustrate, Jerry contrasted the summoning of a dog with the summoning of a cat, gesticulating hilariously with his body for added emphasis:

“Come here, Fido”, and ‘Fido’ does; no sooner have you called ‘Fido’ than he is jumping on you and licking your face. Try doing that with a cat. “Come here, Snowball”. ‘Snowball’ walks over to the sofa *opposite* you in the room and rubs his body against *it*. Dogs just want to be loved by *you*. Artists, on the other hand, want to be loved by the *whole world*; so they make this thing called “art”, and they put it between themselves and everyone else. Artists are cats, and the sofa is their art.

It is a lens through which to regard an artists production that I’ve chosen to invoke for Becky Brown because I’m interested in reading her ‘sofa’ as an amorous gesture toward the World- it feels, intuitively, like the right thing to do- and in exploring from that vantage point what sort of singular “Becky-ness” emerges.

## Becky Brown



To begin where Becky Brown does when she's writing, her lists are experientially compelling. Only apparently stream-of-consciousness, they possess a hidden logic. The ones quoted above come from two separate instances in which the artist had set out to articulate something about her visual production, yet not a single word is repeated, and the varied, often surprising juxtapositions of word against word force a slowed reading if I am to fully occupy the space each evokes. Applied to her collage-paintings, spatial interventions, and freestanding sculptures, the experiential quality inherent to Becky's lists suggest that the 'sofa-self' she offers the world cloaks a deliberate, curated vocabulary of forms immediately beneath an appearance of transparent inclusiveness. Brown's colours and shapes recall the innocence of childhood, evincing legos, tonka trucks, stacked plastic rings, and those little cars that race on infinitely reconfigurable tracks to invite viewers into her world. Yet, what a strange play-lot it is. Jumping into these spaces confident of

my footing, I step outside to find myself categorically No Longer in Kansas: everyone's invited to the party, *and* there's mud pie for dessert. You can play, too, *and* you have to balance this stack on your head while playing hop-scotch and reciting the alphabet. Backwards. To reassert Saltz' metaphor (with a nod towards "Chairy" from Pee-wee's playhouse), how do Becky's sofas court the World's affections? They are too self-aware for straight 'play' and too meticulously crafted; even as they invite substantial dialogue, they dissolve into peals of laughter; they're pretending to be available and playing hard-to-get. "If we're going to have a relationship, World," I hear them say, "you're going to have to work for it."

As I write, there are five days left of the residency. Window frames, bamboo ladders, and pieces of what used to be signage are clustered close to the gallery entrance for what will coalesce over the next couple of days into Becky Brown's intervention. These are sprouting collaged growths, and the



growths themselves are becoming structural: a collage/lamination crowding the “real” view out of the window frame it inhabits. Everything is upright and with the exception of the ladders, which lean on the wall, freestanding. Brown’s intervention elements are completely camouflaged in the very much “in-process” studio ambiance the gallery currently evinces; we’re replete with construction tools, the sound of saws, and electricians running up and down ladders. As yet unsure of their positions on the floor, the artist’s grouping is an awkward family photograph, one that gets even funnier and more engaging as I step closer. One of three evenly spaced holes in the self-consciously vertical brick on the floor has sprouted a white starburst made from multiple pieces of paper, and I remember myself as a kid- laughing so hard, the milk I’d been drinking spurted from my nose.

One of the trickiest aspects of re-locating her practice to New Delhi is the artist’s use of found objects. “Where can I go to find trash?” she asked us. “You know, old furniture or whatever, that people are getting rid of?...” Enter Becky Brown’s education- the collective education, really, of all of those of us who’d come in from elsewhere- on the life of waste in the city. Former car-parts, garments worn thin from use, wooden forms bending in space that used to be chairs, all have their price at the Kabari market in Delhi’s walled city. Critical to the cycle of waste disposal, Kabari-wallas visit homes across the city on bicycles to negotiate the purchase of a family’s recyclable, re-sellable, or re-useable discards- highly subjective categories- which are then re-sold at the market. Colourful discards competing for value in a bazaar of multiple





40

*Cripple Creek*  
 acrylic paint and  
 paper collage on paper  
 19" x 23"  
 2009

subjectivities recall the experience of Becky Brown's work, an acquisitive viewing experience, if also a curious one: What to buy? What stands out? What remains anonymous and indistinct?

The artist had unwittingly entered very sensitive terrain. In one of the more contentious, short-sighted transformations of Delhi state, we learned, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi had decided to contract solid waste disposal to a consortium of private companies- a decision with overwhelmingly negative consequences both for the waste-pickers and the volume of trash ending up in landfills. Reflecting on the transformation of her process in the city, Becky writes:

...much of my practice comes out of the materials that I collect in my path, and my path [in Delhi] is less defined, less independent, less familiar. Much of this is good because it is forcing me to think more critically about some of my practices—for example, if I can't get a magazine for free (if it doesn't find me itself), is it still worth getting? Why do I need to accumulate so much paper? Why am I unable to work unless I have a surplus or excess of material? And why is it important that I am not (or barely) paying money for this material?

Brown experienced a deep ambivalence about purchasing for her work what she was accustomed to finding on her own, for free, in her native Manhattan; paying for her 'found objects' created an imperative for these to be used- not always the case when she found them herself. Whereas in New York, Becky thought about the inclusion of a discarded object as an "extension of [its] life", here she was "redirecting its' course"—a potentially disruptive (as opposed to productive) intervention. Though elements obtained through the artist's roadside collection strategy did ultimately make their way into her work, Becky wasn't the one to acquire them. She could never be certain whether something was trash or not, and on the two separate occasions she tried, workers on the roadside made it clear to her she could not have what she sought. Her bricks and the small, irregularly shaped pieces of cement and slate onto which she's built layered collage sculptures were surreptitiously collected for her by employees of the gallery at night, and as she told me this, Becky protested: "I [didn't] want to take something people [were] going to use!"

If, as artists, we do not insist on something Grand, Far-Reaching, or Noble for our practice; if, rather than formulating pretensions toward something

Universal, we confess to ourselves that it is a deeply personal, highly subjective activity; if we own that, embedded in the process and the choices we make are elements that have meaning only to ourselves, then: there is a kind of compromise we have to reach- perhaps a smaller something, but nonetheless something of value- that we think about ourselves as contributing to the World, to draw a line for ourselves, to be able to say it is not simply self-indulgence. Maybe there are several small somethings along the lines of whose ethics we walk a sort of personal tightrope act, but I propose there is mostly a central something, even if it's small- a main story that makes it okay to make things, though in fact we couldn't help ourselves if we wanted to, though in fact we would make things, regardless.

In not wanting to take something people were going to use, I intuit the contours of the story Becky tells herself. It has to do with scavenging and selection, and the privileging of an object destined for the trash. Becky's assignment of value to that object has everything to do with the fact that no-one else wanted it: I propose that hers is an ethos of ecology, as well as an aesthetic impulse. Perhaps the most profound gift and the biggest puzzle Delhi bequeaths to Becky is the re-writing of her story- at least for now, and maybe from now on. Here, someone wanted all of the artist's various materials, and the act of extracting them from this environment, whether through purchase or subterfuge, posits a re-prioritization that cannot feel comfortable to her, moving as it does her visual production from it's alternately gracious and clunky, funny and sly periphery to Center Stage. Even, perhaps, positing the art-making activity itself as The Point, rather than the by-product of her lived experience.

What will Becky make with this new stack? In my mind's eye, she's already eyeing elements from the pile; she's choosing one and using it to cover others, she's taking all of the green ones out, and putting all of the yellow ones on top. She's changing her mind, and the ideological shape is responding in turn; if it is a new story, if it weaves together various stories, it remains, categorically and inimitably, Becky Brown's.

"And when all the celebrations are over it remains only to pick up all the ornaments—all the accessories of the celebration—and by burning them, make a celebration."

Chris Marker, in *Sans Soleil*

