

Public Parking

A journal for storytelling, arguments, and discovery through tangential conversations.

One use, over and over: in conversation with Bat-Ami Rivlin

Monday, March 7, 2022 | Daniel Sharp



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled (tub, tub, tub, tub, tub, aluminum, bubble wrap, bolts, duct tape)*, 2019. Found and surplus metal bathtubs, aluminum, foam, bubble wrap, duct tape, nuts, bolts, rubber bands, 70 x 70 x 60 inches (178 x 178 x 152 cm).

A society that prioritizes a one-way, single-use system of consumption will, at some point, have to deal with its unsustainable methods of disposal. Instead of redefining waste or prioritizing cyclical systems of reuse, we might just come up with new names for the same systems. Some people call this green colonialism—the idea that infrastructure for renewable resources will continue to exploit and displace rural, Indigenous, and/or under-resourced communities, both at

home and abroad. This translates to mercury in Indigenous waterways, hazardous waste behind Black elementary schools, and 1.07 million metric tonnes of plastic waste exported to nearly every continent on the planet. Oil companies can rebrand into wind power companies. Flattening buffalo ranges makes way for American and Canadian corporations to frack the land for energy; they keep grids, companies, and corporations up and running, which in turn keeps the TV on, tuned to stations like Fox News.

Rather than focusing on this dim picture, I wanted to turn my attention to our waste right now. I sat down with visual artist Bat-Ami Rivlin to discuss redistribution, art-as-recipe, and letting objects destined for a landfill speak for themselves. We got into fears about green colonialism, how her work offers a logic for artists looking to source materials locally, and how she sees her practice as an act of redistribution rather than one of recycling.

With a BFA from School of Visual Arts New York City (2016) and an MFA from Columbia University (2019), Rivlin has had local solo exhibitions at A.I.R. Gallery and M23 in New York City; participated in group shows at Bahnhof (NYC) and Sharp Projects(Copenhagen); and took part in the NADA House Governors Island Studio Residency. Rivlin sources materials from curbs, friends, and surplus stores to be wrapped, gripped, and clamped into found object sculptures. In her work, zip ties vice grip a kayak; screws bind bathtubs in a column; kidney basins cup one another; duct tape presses a heap of extension cord. The objects that make up her pieces appear to barely hold onto one another, or to otherwise fit together perfectly.

Rivlin's work opens up a space to let these objects do their thing—sometimes just one thing, over and over—by centering their function and materiality. Her work can act like a recipe to follow (not unlike Félix González-Torres), but rather than forcing a narrative onto the work, Rivlin urges us to perceive these objects on their own terms.

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I want to start with a quote from your recent interview with Roni Aviv for *BOMB Magazine*. You said: “We’re creating things that relate to our body in such a strong way. They hold our weight, push on our bodies, extend our actions, but they are also anti-bodies, anti-us. As time goes by, they become bulks of things that will never turn into anything. We are essentially drowning in things that cease to perform after 5-10 years, and they can’t do anything else but take up space at that point.” To me, this sounds like you’re describing waste, but I want to ask you more directly: what’s your definition of waste?

The question is a bit upside down, because “waste” is not a material in and of itself, it’s a judgment. It’s true we’re making materials that are completely released from their duties rather quickly. There is a specific, practical relationship that we have with things for a very short period of time before they are deemed waste.

My interest is in materials that are one-liners. We make them with one particular purpose in mind, which means they are “unable” to do anything else. They graduate out of their one use, either because of aesthetic degradation, or because they can no longer maintain their singular purpose and physically break apart.

Like a fence is “meant” to enclose something, or a zip tie is “meant” to hold two things together, and nothing else.

Exactly. They keep repeating it even when we don’t use them, their practical use is still emanating from their form, like a fence still echoing its “fencing function” even after it’s discarded. It still has a relationship to a body because it needs to be a certain size in order to impede you. We’re surrounded by things that consider us—often within an ableist reality—and correspond to human weight, proportions, and so on. Even after they are disposed of, they emit those same characteristics.

How would you describe your personal relationship to one-use things?

There was a point in time where I reoriented my perception of what a “raw” material is, and then it no longer made sense to me to make things out of raw materials. “Rawness” corresponded to “purity” in a way, and if I wanted to make something that related to experience, then I thought I should look at the most common things around me—in the house, classroom, office, and workplace, or on the street.

I thought that it made more sense to create things out of what is most readily available. It was actually cheaper and faster for me to drag a bathtub from the curb than it was to order wood from far away and have someone facilitate bringing it to me. It felt forced, and that was enough proof.

Proof that you should work with objects that are immediately around you?

Yes, so I started accumulating found objects. In the beginning I had the instinct to create narratives with them, but that wasn’t really answering any material questions for me. The object itself is already doing something without me adding a new narrative. When they are paired together, these objects begin to have their own conversation with each other. Suddenly I arrived at the core of what I was interested in: a back-and-forth about what these objects were doing in space.

They’re kind of uncomplicated in that way. They’re not made to cycle through the system and become something else, or serve another purpose. There is a complete overlapping of their materiality and functionality. What is the materiality of something that is only made for one, singular purpose? Where do objects lead us? What is their inherent sense of direction; where does it prompt you to go?

Even my relationship to making changed. I didn't want to make anything new, because my relationship to making a new object began to feel false, in a way. I didn't need to *create* anything anymore.

To me, recycling always has a certain relationship to the future. I want to think of my work as anti-anything-other-than-now, where it has an inherent site-specificity to the present.

When you're reclaiming a one-use object from the curb, there's an aspect of recycling by opening up a new space to talk about one-use objects and interrogate their use values. Do you consciously think of your work as recycling, or is this more on a subconscious level?

It's more about redistribution than recycling, because recycling assumes that the materials become something else. To an extent, the work points to their un-recyclability. Someone could buy the pieces and put them into a museum or private collection, and then they sit in a warehouse. Is that really recycling?

To me, recycling always has a certain relationship to the future. I want to think of my work as anti-anything-other-than-now, where it has an inherent site-specificity to the present.

I agree. The idea of redistribution places things more into a context of the present rather than the future, because recycling demands that something will continue to function in the future. Recycling plastic will turn it into something else, but redistribution keeps it in its present, existing state.

Yes. How did we structure our reality with these objects, and what are they actually doing? Redistribution is a way to talk about how we structure things around us, and if we bring the idea of recycling into it, it's as if to ask how far behind we are in terms of being able to recycle anything.

Not only are you picking things up from the street, you're also scavenging, borrowing, taking from friends, and even buying from surplus stores, which exist solely because companies make too much of their products and don't need them all.

I even have things from you!

Yes! I gave you a foam mattress pad once. I never saw it again.

You will soon.

Can you talk about why you're interested in sourcing materials directly from people, or from surplus stores?

Sourcing from different places and people helps point to the universality of where these things are. They're on the street, in your house, your friends' houses, your workplace—they populate everywhere. At the same time, site-specificity and locality are addressed when sourcing from people. They're given to me right after they've been used, or in the case of surplus stores, before someone has ever used them. Sometimes things are priced half off because there are just too many. These events are all exit points, because these items aren't wanted anymore.

For example, a B-grade bathtub deemed defective because of a scratch won't be sold for full price, so it exits the system that would have otherwise sold it at a high-end store. So does a used tub thrown out because a landlord is renovating. These are two exit points that spit these objects out, though the objects still function the same, and emanate the same use.

This reminds me of an idea you expressed to me over email, of being interested in materials that are “already at the periphery of produced objects.”

There's a constant, systematic spitting out of surplus objects. Someone decided there is more demand for something than there actually is, so they repeated its production over and over. But when objects are reduced to their practical uses, there's an opportunity to talk about how something can be engineered in a way that affects its very material.



Bat-Ami Rivlin, *Untitled (400 bedpans)*, 2020. Kidney basins, installation view from NADA House Governors Island Studio Residency, New York, NY.

Let's talk about a recent example, *Untitled (400 bedpans)* (2020), which is a site-specific installation you did at the NADA House Governors Island Studio Residency, NYC, in 2020. The work consists of 400 kidney basins placed together to form a circle that suggests a spiral pattern.

Yes! I recently had a two-person exhibition with artist Anna Holtz at Sharp Projects in Copenhagen, titled *Excess and Surplus*. I made a version of that piece from Governors Island with the help of the gallerist, Ilethia Sharp.

Why rename the kidney basins as bedpans?

Because that's how it was sold to me the first time, which was really great.

Was it a surplus store?

Yes, they mislabeled them as bedpans. There was something noteworthy about that mistake. Someone working at the store probably looked at the basins and had an instinct about what they are and what they do. The name "bedpan" comes from keeping them under a bed at night, whereas "kidney basin" is more descriptive of how it might be used. There's something interesting about someone's intuition to interpret what these objects were made to do, eventually arriving at "bedpans." There's something similar with cable ties in the works. "Zip ties" are used in the title, but cable ties are used in describing the materials that make the work.

How was it restaged in Copenhagen?

It felt completely counterproductive to pay to send these cheap, half-off medical items to an art space in Copenhagen, so it made more sense to me for the gallery to source the same medical surplus in the local area. Those kidney basins that were used were also renamed in the artwork as bedpans, but they look totally different: they're white rather than pink, and are thicker than the kidney-bean shaped ones I have in New York. If you were to close your eyes and reach into a kidney basin area in a surplus store, you would get something different in different locations, because the aesthetics of practicality vary from place to place.

Do you consider those two separate pieces the same work, or two different works?

Two different works. It has the same title, but if it's restaged in a different place, it's a different work.

Another example, that I think you also recreated for *Excess and Surplus*, is the 2019 piece *Untitled (LED, cord, duct tape)*, which consists of a circular LED light bulb plugged in with a cord and ballast, aggressively taped to the ground.

When I created this work in New York, I went for the orange Home-Depot-style extension cord. Talking to Ilethia, who runs Sharp Projects, she said the most common colour for them in

Copenhagen is yellow. So the piece in Copenhagen ended up using different colours, but in that way remained truer to itself, rather than insisting that the gallerist find an orange extension cord in a place where that's not the most common colour for it to be. I'm not able to, nor do I feel an interest in repeating every little detail when making the LED-duct-tape-extension-cord piece. There is nothing about that preciousness of detail that relates to the content of the work.

I gave Ilethia a list of things she needed to get and an instructional drawing, and she did it over FaceTime with me. She was marvelous; she treated it like art, so it was difficult to convince her that it's just duct tape for now. It's not really art until enough of its parts are in place. I'm not precious about each stroke of duct tape, so why should she be? If the object doesn't act like the object, then we're missing the point. When the instructional drawing does its job, and one reads the instructions to assemble the objects, that brings the drawing closer to the work.

Would you say that both of these examples are instructions-as-art? As in, the work itself is not just the materials, but also the instructions on gathering and using the materials, like Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991)?

That's an interesting question. The instructions include the title, the "grocery list" of objects that I've decided to highlight in the piece, and often a drawing. It's always a collection of things and what those pieces do to each other. In pieces that include an instructional drawing, the content is in the list of actions that make up the work's creation, not so much that the instructions comprise the piece itself. The instructions are half of it, and the other half is how the object, or objects, act.

We often think about objects as if they are passive, but I believe they have a lot of agency. When I make the work, I often think about redistributing this agency among material things.

Do you think your work could inspire others to make their own pieces? I'm thinking about viewers wanting to try making their own version because they think it looks cool, so other people could echo your work.

That would be really cool. I think it does open a door to looking at combinations of things as actions, agendas, and agents in the world around us, permitting us to "misuse" them, like duct-taping something aggressively to the ground, because tape is meant to be taped, even when it looks completely wrong. If my work ends up being the access point, or gives someone permission, to use these objects like that later on, that's amazing. It's like making new recipes out of collections of objects.

I agree. It's a recipe rather than a set of instructions—something intellectually and aesthetically interesting to look at that others could try to recreate for themselves. This creates a language to rethink and reorganize one-use things, while offering a way for them to be used again in a different context.

Or, their one-use-ness prevails even when you insist on using them in a different context.

Do you think your work reimagines waste or debris as a site of innovation?

No. We often think about objects as if they are passive, but I believe they have a lot of agency. When I make the work, I often think about redistributing this agency among material things. Materiality is an active agent in the work (and there's a long lineage of thinkers I'm borrowing from, such as Lambros Malafouris and Karen Barad), so I'm not reimagining anything, I'm just giving space to the material.

I can't project my thought process onto an object as a one-way street. It came into my line of vision and presence, it affected me first, which made me want to take it to my studio. I'm trying to make room for a back-and-forth between me and the object, as opposed to saying, "We have made the judgment that this is waste, so I will reimagine it as something else."

I've been thinking about green colonialism—the idea that environmental movements under capitalism end up reinforcing the existing inequities we see today. We might end up trading oil barons for wind barons. Knowing that your work deals with redistribution, what could other artists do to make sure systems of redistribution or replacement don't end up repeating the inequitable systems that got us here in the first place?

I don't know. It does make sense to me that the same systems would produce the same things. If the recipe is that we use land and resources to protect and uphold our ability to continue the same wasteful way we live now, then we are going to end up doing the exact same things without some sort of radical restructuring.

To me, making work has to actively consider what the materials are doing right now. Without that there is just a fantasy that lulls us into believing green energy sources are without flaw, without thinking about what you just said. I think there needs to be some sort of reconsideration of how materials act. What are the systems that bring them into being? What are the agendas behind the systems that bring them into being, and who benefits? I think your concern is a really valid one.

Do you draw inspiration from science fiction at all? So much of your work is grounded in the present, but I'm curious to know if you pull from a source that isn't in the now and is instead entirely made up.

I think the work that I make usually suffers when there is a symbolic narrative suggested for it. It diverts your attention from what's in front of you. I try to erase myself from the work, because it's not really about me or my own personal narrative. That makes it difficult for me to draw inspiration from science fiction, or any kind of fiction. But science fiction also takes from our current reality and where things are going, and that's what I find interesting about it.

When I first saw this question before we met, I thought, “What does this have to do with anything?” [laughs] But then I realized that, actually, if we are talking about the orientation of objects in space (borrowing conceptually from Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*), we can think about the orientation of an object in space as the extension of where that object is going, or where it’s directing us to go. Science fiction also asks where we are going. It’s interesting that a lot of science fiction is oriented toward apocalyptic realities, because that is where we are headed.

Thinking about your question has made me feel like there is something to be said about the constant fear of what we are going to do with all this shit once it's truly too much. I think that is a Western fear, because people in other parts of the world are already living with our shit. Science fiction is supposed to be some other time, somewhere else, but I think we are slowly getting the sense that it’s coming closer to us. Other countries are no longer buying our trash from us, we can’t dump it there anymore, and we’ll soon run out of lakes to poison.

Could you talk a bit more about why you actively try to move away from narratives, including the work being read as something personal?

I’ll start by saying that it’s ultimately impossible, but I’m interested in clearing space for the object to do what it is already doing. Part of projecting a personal narrative onto it is to suggest the object is passive and I don’t have to consider what it does on its own, as though it’s just a symbol with which I can do something else.

That makes me think of painting, because using paint is a vehicle for portraying something else—a personal anecdote, a history, a story. It often comes off as though this narrative matters more than the pigments, the ground stone, the tube, the canvas, and even the hand used to squeeze it.

Brilliantly put. Those strategies are talking about a different kind of space. Sculpture exists in space with us, and I’m really interested in that. The idea, for me, is to have sculpture with us right now, as opposed to recreating a mystic space, memory, or fantasy somewhere that *isn’t* necessarily now.

It’s almost as if your work is trying to push itself as far away from you as possible, so that others can see it as an object itself, frozen in time.

Right, even though that’s impossible, because I’m the one who put it there.

It’s interesting that so much of your work is made up of things that are taped down, gripped, yanked, pulled, stretched, held in tension, cemented, or nailed together. There is an overwhelming sense of things being intentionally bound, held, or placed together so that they are essentially frozen.

Yes, but in such a way that they could also come undone.

Are there other artists working in this space of materiality and redistribution that you’d like to show with?

I don't know if it's so much about redistribution, but SoIL Thorton comes to mind. I see those works more as redistributions of function rather than of materials, which I find really interesting. I also think of K.R.M. Mooney, who manages to funnel space, progress, and body into singular material moments, and Quay Quinn Wolf, who recontextualizes materials into deep, quiet messages in space.

Daniel Sharp (b. 1994, Grand Rapids, MI) is a Queens-based artist, musician, and interdisciplinary organizer.

Special thank you to Bat-Ami Rivlin for her participation in bringing this piece to fruition and for sharing generously throughout this conversation.

Editorial support by Angel Callander.

Transcription support by Madeline Rae.

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Further Reading:

- Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*
- Lambros Malafouris, "At the Potter's Wheel: An Argument for Material Agency"
- Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity"