

Prop Carlos Basualdo

Carlos Basualdo is the Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Prop, the dictionary tells us, is the abbreviation of the word *property*, used before the first half of the nineteenth century when referring to any portable or movable object used in a theatrical performance—and later in a movie—with the exception of furniture, painted scenery, or costumes. The word shares etymological roots with the term *proper*, from the Latin *proprius*: one's own. Once again, the “proper” context of the word *prop* is the theater first and then any other event of a performance-like nature. Props are connected to a stage and a spectacle and thus to an audience and the passage of time. They are important parts of that spectacle, one can imagine, but not as clearly meaningful, perhaps, as the costumes of the actors, the actors themselves, or the sets. It may be sensible to imagine that props do not provide a context for the action but the dramatic action itself is the proper context for a prop. They are, to put it succinctly, subordinated to the narrative logic of the spectacle in which they are presented.

CARLOS BASUALDO — PROP

If the term is transported—as a true portable item may very well be—to the visual arts, *prop* resonates with a very different tune. Because it is movable, a prop by definition cannot be a traditional sculpture or, for that matter, an installation. Because props are associated with theater, their relocation to the context of an exhibition space implies that the exhibition is conceived as a stage. To continue the analogy in that context, the action to which as props they are necessarily connected are the gestures of the artist or those of a performer following the artist's instructions. An example could be Franz West's "Adaptives" (mid-1970s–), designed to be manipulated by individual members of the audience, but with the caveat that they are considered "proper" sculptures when displayed statically, outside the context of a specific performance. Consider Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, a performance presented on November 26, 1965, at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf. Could the embalmed rabbit he held in his lap be considered a prop?

Rather than the examples above, a prop in an exhibition context might be better characterized when described as an object to which the status of artwork cannot be unreflectively or definitively attached. A prop might be an object whose role in that context is unclear, so that it would seem to resist being defined as an artwork or accommodate the definition only with unease—and a tacit appeal to its removal. Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* from 1913 may then come to mind, as do many of the artifacts that the French artist Philippe Parreno usually employs in his installations, a quirky bunch that includes pristine Plexiglas walls used to hang paintings, pianos that play by themselves, an array of marquees of different shapes and forms, bookshelves that are in fact hidden doors, blinds that rise and fall according to the timing provided by a musical score, many different kinds of itinerant sounds traversing the exhibition space and beyond, and swarms of labels that scintillate like fireflies.

CARLOS BASUALDO — PROP

In the case of *Bicycle Wheel*, Duchamp declared that he assembled the object for the sheer pleasure of making something that did not exist before. He did not think of it as a work of art for several years, and when he finally did, he had to imagine a new category of objects—the readymades—that would challenge the very definition of art, a category that remains fluid and ambiguous even today. A veritable prop, the *Bicycle Wheel* moved when Duchamp moved, and although it was initially made in Paris, it would reappear in 1916, when the artist established his studio in New York. In its presence Duchamp kept the wheel turning, as the movement reminded him, in his own words, of a fire in a stove. The wheel kept disappearing and reappearing again and again—as a prop does—until its enshrinement in museum collections all over the world attempted to transform it into a proper sculpture, a posteriori.

Parreno's props, or "quasi-objects"—as they were provisionally labeled in the catalogue produced in conjunction with his solo exhibition "Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World," at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2013–14—seem intent on continuing *Bicycle Wheel*'s ambiguous embrace of the notion of art by escaping any possible identification with traditional art mediums. They succeed inasmuch as they subject themselves to the context of a certain narrative, established by the artist, which unspools in the exhibition space, disrupting the presumed timelessness of a traditional museological display. The more the exhibition in which they are presented assumes the form of a play—with the viewers becoming its willing or unwilling actors—the more Parreno's inventions effectively suspend the possibility of being defined as sculptures, installations, or sound pieces. Like any true prop, they are better defined by what they are not, by their very reluctance to be named, by their extreme form of singularity. They are their own and exist in their own time, one that is mutable and passing.

CARLOS BASUALDO — PROP

- 1 Installation's art-historical precedents have been thoroughly considered by art historians, notably Claire Bishop and Juliane Rebentisch.
- 2 Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 387.
- 3 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005),
- 48.
- 4 Eiko Otake, in "Talking Dance with Eiko and Koma" (interview with Philip Bither), *The Green Room* (blog), October 27, 2010, <http://blogs.walkerart.org/performingarts/2010/10/27/talking-dance-with-eiko-koma/>.
- 5 Alain Badiou with Nicholas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: New Press, 2012), 29, 32.
- 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 138.
- Simone Forti, in "In Conversation: Simone Forti with Claudia La Rocco," *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2, 2010, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/04/dance/simone-forti-with-claudia-la-rocco>.
- 7 Huffa Frobes-Cross and Judy Hussie-Taylor, *Conversation with Carolee Schneemann* (New York: Danspace Project, 2012).
- 8 Ibid., 45.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Steve Paxton, e-mail to the author, July 2, 2012.
- 11 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, 28.