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## Art Without the ‘Connective’: A Meaningless Modern Assembly

New York Times art critic Ken Johnson recently offered a recommendation to teachers, “a perfect assignment for a college seminar in the history of modern art”: It’s an exhibition called *Assemblage* at Zwirner and Wirth. Following Mr. Johnson’s advice, I accompanied a group of graduate art students to the Upper East Side to take a look at what the gallery touts as “one of the two most important innovations in modern art.” (The other important innovation is abstraction.)

The assemblage artist assembles his work using objects that suit his purpose: window frames, cigarette butts, cans of Pepsi, discarded typewriters, A.M. radios blaring classic rock – *whatever*. All those objects are included in the work on display at Zwirner and Wirth. An abbreviated though surprisingly comprehensive overview, *Assemblage* begins with “founding fathers” Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters and ends with the work of contemporary figures like Christo, Edward Kienholz and Richard Tuttle. My students found the names impressive. They were less impressed with the aesthetic trajectory: from one-liners about high art and loving arrangements of

everyday ephemera (as one student had it) “the rampant abuse of baby dolls.”

That’s not quite fair: All sorts of material is abused in assemblage. Has any other medium done as much to stifle artistic possibility and individual expression? William Seitz, who organized a 1961 MoMA exhibition called *The Art of Assemblage*, defined assemblage as “setting one thing beside another without a connective” – and that’s precisely the problem. When a medium jettisons the “connective,” form takes a hike, metaphor flies out the window, literalism takes over and galleries stuffed with avant-decoration become the norm.

Instead of breaking barriers, assemblage – along with its bullying descendants, conceptualism and installation – has merely exempted artists from the arduous task of shaping and extracting meaning from form. The promise of assemblage is unfettered creativity; the actual result is a numbing homogeneity. The critic Robert Pincus-Witten, writing in 1984, noted that “there is really very little in [assemblage] which is original, despite the fact that the mode itself flashes the signal reading ‘original.’ “The

legacy of assemblage is a contemporary scene so “original” that it can’t distinguish between absolute freedom and unremitting conformity.

There are few artists who have made compelling work from assemblage, chiefly among them Joseph Cornell, who produced a tender and somewhat sinister poetry by gingerly placing bric-a-brac inside boxes. Still, his achievement is singular – the exception that proves the rule. *The Times*’ “perfect assignment” was indeed valuable. Though not the lesson Mr. Cornell or Zwirner and Wirth had in mind, this is what we learned: Innovation, in and of itself, guarantees *bupkes*; assemblage has been a bust.

*Assemblage* is at Zwirner and Wirth, 32 East 69<sup>th</sup> Street, until Jan. 31.

### ANOTHER EXCEPTION?

There’s more assemblage on display at CUE Art Foundation, a show called *Aristides Logothetis: Speculative Grammar*. Working with tennis balls, belts and men’s wear so garish that it would strain the taste of the most ardent kitsch collector, Mr. Logothetis’ sculpture concerns itself with phallo-centrism – and the cheerful threat of emasculation.

The best piece, a sophomoric joke about ejaculation, is fashioned from a roll of paper towels, some masking tape, insulation foam and a gray tie with a palm-tree motif. The second-best piece is a bunch of tennis balls stuffed in a sack stitched from striped cloth. This is assemblage redeemed by an imaginative deployment of form. (As for Mr. Logothetis’ densely painted pictures of overlapping patterns, they’re place mats in training, unredeemed by anything. This young artist shows promise only in three dimensions).

Though his sculptures and paintings have more in common with the skillful biomorphism of the sculptor Michael Lekakis, his fellow Greek-American, than with the sticky Freudianism of Louise Bourgeois’ plinths and totems, Ms. Bourgeois *has* had an influence on Mr. Logothetis: You can see it in the reliance on secondhand fabrics, and emphasis on bodily discomfort, and the bathos that comes ready-made with each. What sets Mr. Logothetis

apart is a disarming sense of the absurd and a certain forward momentum: This is an artist who employs anti-art means for pro-art ends. The nihilistic herd will consider that a sell-out. I see it as a sign of hope.

*Aristides Logothetis: Speculative Grammar* is at CUE Art Foundation, 511 West 25<sup>th</sup> Street, until Jan. 24.

### PROFOUND AMBIVALENCE

If we take literally *My Life in America*, the title of an exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Leslie Lerner on view at Miller/Geisler Gallery, then we have to conclude that Mr. Lerner is profoundly ambivalent about this country. His pictures of distant horizons and milky skies suggest an apocalypse over and done with; his charcoal drawings of similar vistas are suffused with a dry romanticism; his scrabbly, nightmarish paintings on Mylar channel Goya and Guston; his sculptures of anonymous tract houses are constructed from corrugated cardboard and painted in a ghostly gray. What are we to make of this miscellany?

A profusion of styles often reflects lack of focus. In Mr. Lerner’s case, the medley is part of the mission, which is to distill a sense of place – maybe even of home – from a land that is vast, various, forbidding, and inhospitable. This might not be our America, but it is Mr. Lerner’s. Therein lies the cause of his ambivalence and the despondent pull of his art.

*Leslie Lerner: My Life in America* is at Miller/Geisler Gallery, 511 West 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite305, until Jan. 10.