

Darren Bader is a unique and, at least to me, controversial figure that has curated, made art books, installations, collaborative projects, and is an all around art-world insider-outsider. Being an insider-outsider is exactly what makes him so confounding because he uses this insider-outsider data along with the viewer's supposed eruditeness, to confuse the status-quo's complete dependence on text and redundantly institutionalized interpretations. At bottom he is ultimately a lover of the readymade, yet he adds to this history using a very specific type of knowledge – both art historical and fashionable/trashy taste, to then bewilder expectations. The readymade is used here basically as a set function that can be particularized using anything (stuff) – the theory of Peter Halley, a kangaroo's visceral interaction with a lobster, a famous artist's sculpture, windings that could be decoded yet don't lead to much elucidation anyway, a currently vogue or better yet, played out pop song, random images culled from Google (which is now quite rampant, yet arguably wasn't when Darren was starting), a piece of lasagna ostensibly injected with heroin, the entire film E.T., just purchased burritos, the world map cut-up and rearranged, an iguana, multifarious covers used for the same Virginia Woolf novel, the cover of Esquire magazine, the whole idea of animal activism, a watermelon and some change, etc., etc. You get the drift. He has seemingly become a complete empty vessel, using any such thing he wants in place of himself, yet produces installations that mix and match these appropriations in assemblages with seemingly no logic or linearity other than his own private idiosyncratic selection. Of course the “just because-ness” bothers people, yet also mechanizes some hermeneutic rumination that I would argue is not just gas.

Darren usually doesn't use wall labels, or titles his work something that is hard to

attach to the work itself, adding to the mystery and disjunction of logic. Darren has curated well-known artists into his own shows and collected a percent if sold, acting as a dealer, curator, and artist all at once, sometimes making his work a guess-who game. He seems to be a pictorial nominalist, believing truth and quality are based on social codes, contexts, and language as opposed to some universal in-itself. When Darren uses other artist's work in his assemblages he re-materializes the dematerialization of the work's excessive discursivity (baggage). His project has similarities with Duchamp, Fluxus master George Brecht, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Robert Barry and to a large extent Christopher d' Arcangelo, an artist who performed unauthorized actions at major museums as well as being a committed yet tragic anarchist. Some of Darren's earliest works were sending long and flippant, but meticulously worded, proposals to major museums ridiculously asking if he can tape sandwiches to the wall, defecate next to a sculpture, mail in matzo, have a baby crawl around in chewed gum, and other strange and obviously rejected inquiries. His proposals always (maybe) feigned complete earnestness, and contained highly educated and mock-pretentious explanations making historical connections to his proposed action. Although these were obviously rejected he would get equally earnest responses and sometimes detailed explanations of rejection. These call and response writings were made into a very entertaining book called James Earl Scones. The beauty of this book lays in the absurdity of our artistic condition, ironically playing with the notions of "anything" being art as long as it can be talked about, yet needing respected institutions to ratify the action. This early work, which published obviously bad (in the greatest way), but ironically humorous exchanges between artist and power lay the groundwork for what was to come and ultimately become "successful", as Darren is now

represented by three major galleries as well as having a solo exhibition at PS1. He works quickly and without worry, with an accelerated rate due to the freedom of his practice. While many individual works may become forgettable, the whole conception of his project intellectually and poetically sticks to the mind, forcing the viewer to respond to a work that is almost impossible to even believe. His whole being and cult of personality becomes a part of the equation. What will he do next? How did he pull this off? Why does he always use food, babies, and animals? For an inquisitive mind his work becomes a set of challenges and unpredictable entertainment, finally leaving room for a personal response not overly mediated by "readymade" interpretations, yet paradoxically can be intellectualized as meta-art to a whole new level. It seems that he can do anything he wants without footnote, explanation, or didacticism.

This kind of radicalism, or "don't give a damn attitude" has been completely accepted by the art-world, sort of. His press release for the PS1 show stated, "Over the past decade, the relationships between culture and those who produce and consume it has changed radically. Art has not been excepted from these shifts. As art has become more commodified, subject to re-performance, pressed into new contexts by curators, and recycled by other artists, conventional notions of object-hood, authorship and ownership have been evolving. Darren Bader (American, b. 1978) works with these expanding boundaries of art's use and circulation. Often using culture he appropriates from a range of media—film, music, text, digital images and work made by other visual artists—Bader treats such material as "readymades" that he presents democratically within the framework of his exhibitions alongside found objects like fruits, furniture, and sometimes live animals. Working with a lyrical absurdity in the space between sculpture, writing and

curating, the artist humorously complicates the hierarchies that underscore the economies of cultural production and reception." At this show there were animals to be adopted, highbrow books on display, a Bob Dylan song, curated artists displayed, and a salad bar. Pedestals with different vegetables were lined up and the viewer would choose what he wanted in the salad, while a hired museum worker mixed it for you in a typical salad bowl. All twenty fruits and vegetables of a given day were thrown into the same salad bowl. While this was an egalitarian and beautiful moment of participatory art, the whole show also seemed like a cynical take on relational aesthetics, an insider-outsider response to insider art, while at the same time truly giving moments of humor, light heartedness, and novelty.

Darren's work is easy and risky, complicit and critical, all at the same time. Everything can be read into, because as knowledgeable art-world insiders that is what we are trained to do. Its simplicity and humor becomes relaxing like idling on Facebook, loafing around at the mall, and I guess just gallery hopping in general, looking at paratactic images and going from one image to another with really no reason other than our intuitive desires. However, he irritates our critical faculties, creating arguments and logic to defend our pretenses of what art must be to fit inside of an established institution. He is definitely doing something very smart and well conceived, yet it is so dandyish and seemingly effortless, it is perhaps hard to fully accept because we know there must be something socially fishy going on, he must be a great correspondent, he must know the right people, he must be privileged and from New York and so on. Yet the avant-garde's circle and social scene has always played a large role in the mobilization of an artist's career. Darren exposes the very criticism he may receive. Activism in a gallery will never

truly work, relational art seems to be for people who only want to eat salad to stay in good shape for their networking persona, any object in an art space of contemplation will become food for thought, and so on. Bader is so exciting as an artist because of all the contradictions, the aporia of authorship, and the clear intelligence sometimes obfuscated with utmost foolery. He knows exactly what he's doing but more importantly he knows exactly what we think he is doing and coyly plays with that. His work is rigorous as much as it is witty, playful, prankster, surreal, and confusingly profound.