Consumption and the Self
Elisabeth Wetterwald Interviews Joe Scanlan

Elisabeth Wetterwald (b. 1969) is an art critic who lives and works in Paris. She has been a regular contributor to art press, NU, Parachute, *and* Zero-two, *and is the author of* Rue Sauvage, *a collection of essays on AnnLee, Boris Achour, Alain Bublex, Maurizio Cattelan, Pierre Huyghe, Bruno Peinado, Anri Sala, Joe Scanlan, and Tatiana Trouvé.*

She has published catalogue essays on Pierre Ardouvin, Lee Bul, Giorgio de Chirico, Jimmie Durham, Mona Hatoum, Pierre Huyghe, Mathieu Mercier, Alain Séchas, Erwin Wurm, and Pierre Joseph, among others.

ELISABETH WETTERWALD: In a text published in *Documents sur l'art*, you wrote that the objects you make "often have the uncomfortable posture of only passing through the art world - where they are momentarily frozen - before returning to their mundane uses". This seems like an inversion of Duchamp's gesture. Instead of demonstrating that it is the artist, and then the institution, that decides what a work of art is, you put forward propositions which then may be actualized - not by the institution, but by the buyers, who from that moment have their role changed from that of a collector to that of a user.

JOE SCANLAN: What gets lost in the gesture of the Readymade is the fact that a social system of use has to already be in place in order for the gesture to be recognized in the first place. Readymade strategy is nothing more than a cheap power grab, a consolidation of thousands of anonymous actions and opinions in the hands of a clever few. It's a kind of personal and institutional solipsism: first in that Duchamp behaved as if urinals had never existed before he noticed them, and second in that art institutions continue to adhere to the belief that, like all visionary artists, Duchamp did the urinal a favor by elevating it to the status of a work of art.

I believe that a compelling object has the ability to determine it's own fate, whether an artist intervenes or not. A compelling object determines its own fate largely by making its attributes readily apparent to a discriminating public over time, to the extent that the people cannot resist buying it – and not only buying it but also telling other people, friends and strangers alike, about it too. At some point, the object's identity takes on a cultural life of its own, one that tends to make all of the people who participate in its circulation relatively equal.

Invention, 1999
C-print, 14 x 11 inches

EW: Can you give an example?

JS: In 1999 I introduced a product called *Catalyst*, which was a small carton containing six acrylic tears that could be applied to the face with cosmetic glue. I organized the shooting of a color photograph (*Invention*, 1999) of a woman wearing the product that

was used for all the publicity pertaining to the premiere of the product, as well as its package design. When the show opened at D'Amelio Terras in New York, *Catalyst* could be purchased for 20 USD from several horizontal display units I made (*Display*, 1999). Eventually I displayed them in galleries throughout Europe and the U.S. as well as in several boutiques in New York, and sold the entire run of 1,000 – well, all except for a few examples that went into my archive. It made no difference to me whether any of these things were accepted as art, since, in my work, success is not a matter of status but of circulation. In the case of *Catalyst*, I knew the piece was succeeding when I would hear stories about people showing up at parties or just walking down the street, wearing the product. If someday a mint copy of a *Catalyst* packet ended up in the collection of MoMA, that would be fine with me. However, unlike Duchamp, I don't think that would confirm *Catalyst*'s status as a work of art. It would merely acknowledge what had already been confirmed through the ambient commerce of everyday life.

EW: It's a very pragmatic point of vue and maybe also a way to get rid of conceptual art and its residues…

JS: I am very pragmatic about my approach to art, which usually means that I am trying to reconcile the needs of my life with what I see as the blindspots or shortcomings of art. I was weened on Pop art and Conceptualism, and like and hate them both. Pop art celebrated commerce but wanted to exclude the people who made it possible.

EW: What do you mean?

JS: I mean, think of how bitter Warhol and Koons and Kendel Geers were about being sued for copyright infringement, as if, by being artists, they were somehow above the social fabric of society – ordinary businessmen and designers and consumers – who generated their coveted subject matter in the first place. I'm also thinking of how, over the years, historians and critics have tended to interpret Pop art as a "critique" of popular culture, as if the thought of art being just plain popular was too horrific to bear. Actually, the thought of art being popular *is* too horrific to bear. Unfortunately, Machiavelli was right when he said that once you acknowledge the power of a certain class of people, you have pretty much ceded that power to them as well. When the Pop artists decided that comic books and film stills were more interesting than brush strokes and picture planes, unwittingly or not, they turned the power of art as a cultural standard over to the masses. It's been a losing battle for privileged or high-minded art ever since. Conceptual art is proof of that, since it wanted to critique

commerce but needed the endowment funds of museums and biennials – in other words, the stock market – in order to exist. So, it seems to me that an art capable of merging Pop art's enthusiasm with Conceptual art's inate skepticism would be a very practical way of pushing through the turgid post-pop and post-conceptual clichés of contemporary art. There are many good examples of this kind of forward hybrid movement. The first one's that come to mind are musical: The Sex Pistols, Iggy Pop's *Lust For Life*, Nirvana. But there are good art examples too: Kippenberger's hotel drawings, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, David Hammons. I like Barbara Kruger too ; I love how she invented a critical style and then completely commercialized it. It's too bad Michael Asher never realized that his next move should've been to make a brand of himself and start doing Michael Asher brand institutional critiques. He could even put the little ™ logo after his name.

Anyway, it became very practical and simple and clear to me about ten years ago that the only thing left for artists to do was to invent their own products and introduce them as works of art. And the more particular the product, the greater the likelihood of success. In other words, if I can come up with something that is essential to society and yet only I can make, then I have both defined and guaranteed an integral role for myself in society. For example, I have developed a kind of portable bookcase (*Nesting Bookcase*, various models, 1989-present). It has a large bottom case inside of which four or five gradually smaller shelves can fit, or "nest". There is also a length of fabric that serves both as a carrying strap when the shelves are nested and a structural device when the shelves are stacked. Now, you cannot find this particular object anywhere else in the world. Six billion people and I am the only one making this thing, so if you want one you have to either come to me or take the idea from me. It really doesn't matter, because if you come to me then you're buying my work, and if you take it from me then I have the conceptual cache of having invented a sign that is circulating on its own in the world, and that will eventually come back around to me, too. So its a win-win situation.

EW: How are these new objects that you introduce in the market disassociated from the frenzy of invention and over-consumption that are the basis of liberal societies ?

JS: On the level of commerce, they are not disassociated at all. In order to be what I want them to be, and do what I want them to do, they have to be part of the flow of everyday things. On the level of production and distribution, however, my practice is greatly disassociated from modern life as we know it. As one person who makes almost everything himself in a limited amount of time and on a limited budget, my work is completely precious and pathetic compared with the productivity and

commerce of industrialized nations. I might as well be an eighteenth century blacksmith compared with McDonald's or IKEA or Sony. In that sense, I'm not a pop artist so much as I am a folk businessman.

EW: But why do you precisely have this will to add something in an already saturated market with a vast number of more or less useful objects ?

JS: I think because I'm more interested in dignity than power. Dignity is a kind of power, but it is conditional power that only comes, if it comes at all, on one's own terms. I guess the real answer to your question is that I have an ego and still believe in the notion of the self, of the autonomous individual, and yet I also believe that the best way to achieve autonomy as an artist is to become an entrepreneur. I'm romantic that way. In any case, nothing that I add to the world lasts very long because of its more or less useful status. Everything I make is transient and happily doomed, if not literally then at least virtually. That lets some of the pressure off of any anxiety I might feel about adding more things to an already saturated world. It's like gardening. I don't worry about adding more tomatoes or sunflowers to an already saturated vegetable market, so I don't worry about adding new art or ideas to the world, either.

EW: For your tomatoes as well as for your art, its a question of quality. You don’t care about profit…

JS: Yes! My whole inspiration for becoming an artist was based on the fact that, given the boring efficiency of capitalism, not one company was making the kind of bookcases or cosmetics that I wanted. In the end, it was cheaper and easier to just design and fabricate my own than to go on shopping forever, looking for the perfect accessories. So, rather than getting a full-time day job in order to be able to afford to have my ideas custom built, I took the time to figure out how to make them myself. Time is more important to me than money. If I have to choose between having more money or having more time to myself, I usually choose to work less (and have less money) so I can have more free time. For me, free time is the pinnacle of success. As soon as I start thinking that I need to make more of something or distribute it more aggressively or look for more opportunities, I can feel myself starting down a path of misery rooted in the modern fantasy that more stuff, produced more quickly, distributed more widely and priced more cheaply will lead to more money and happiness. Warhol tried that, and people forget what a colossal failure his first brillo box show, his first flower show, his first film releases were. It's only in hindsight that the ridiculous poetry of his work transcends its crude commercial origins. I have different role models than Warhol because I think the Factory approach to making art

is obsolete. My philosophy is to make things in a manner as synchronous as possible with society's desire for it. My role models are David Hammons and On Kawara and Agnes Martin: invent a simple, precise working program, get a nice room, and start making work at a speed that you can live on. Make a painting, take three days off. Make a sculpture, take a month off. Control production in such a way that the prices only go up, and keep enough inventory for yourself to profit from the increase over time. In the business world, this kind of managed output is called “inventory velocity,” which is a more fluid and responsive production philosophy than the old-fashioned factory model. But just as Warhol found poetry in modern industrial production, I think there is poetry to be found in postmodern inventory velocity. Plus, I just love the term.

EW: The concept of inventory velocity implies to take the publics demand into account. In that way, it seems like a departure from the romantic idea of creativity and production. Most of your works are conceived in order to be used by consumers; they are influenced by and adaptable to other people's needs. And you, as a creator, you tend to disappear…

JS: What you've described is a fundamental change in the way people engage the world. I think we are shifting away from being attracted to obvious effort, to the biggest flash or the loudest noise, and shifting toward smaller gestures that are not so obviously invested in the power of spectacle. Partly because we don't trust spectacle anymore – but also, and more interestingly I think – because spectacle signifies a lack of confidence. I think we've learned that if an artist has to try so hard to convince us of something, then what he is saying must be disingenuous. Like Jason Rhoades or Thomas Hirschhorn. The beauty of inventory velocity is its recognition that contracts between individuals are more likely to occur when they are perceived to be mutual. This doesn't mean that people who practice some kind of responsive production are nicer than people who don't. It only means they’ve realized that a mutual subjectivity is essential to everyone getting what they want. The danger of inventory velocity is its presumption that people actually know what they want. Consequently, inventory velocity doesn't generate very many surprises because it is designed to systematically eliminate the unknown, to minimize waste and risk. In that respect, I'm much more interested in inventing things people might not need than in asking them what they want and then making it for them. For me, the most beautiful moments in life occur when you come across something that you never imagined you wanted to see – and yet there it is and you love it. Fantastic! Thank you.

In order for that revelation to be possible with my artworks I have to disappear, or at least sink into the background so that people can have a more direct relation with

them and feel like they are making decisions of their own volition. Of course they are not acting independently, because I have controlled every single detail they are considering – color, material, shiny or matte finish, etc. – the whole arsenal of seduction. The less people feel that control being exerted on them, the more likely they are to use my artworks – to destroy them, basically – and that's what I want. What's the opening line of Hiroshima, Mon Amour ? "I love you because you destroy me." That's me talking. Or that great funny black poem of Sylvia Plath's, Lady Lazarus, where she recounts her suicide attempts as if she were a carnival attraction.

EW: *DIY or How to Kill Yourself Anywhere in the World for Under $399*, a how-to book that shows Annlee building her own coffin, is closely akin to this idea…

JS: In the United States, the greatest performers are the ones who kill themselves. Elvis. Marilyn. James Dean. Kurt Cobain. Some say that this is because we feel a tragic loss of love and potential that has been wasted. All the movies and music that we will never know, or have, because they are no long alive to make it. Maybe. I think these performers are the greatest because we appreciate the fact that they did us a favor. They understood that to be loved is also to be destroyed, and rather than leave that job to their fans or the paparazzi – like John Lennon or Lady Di – they did it themselves and saved us the trouble of having to kill them later. They understood that in order to be truly loved, they needed to dispose of their limited physical bodies so that their unlimited virtual images could live forever, and move freely about the world and be in a million places at once, and never have anything to compare to except other images.

I was very happy with the installation of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's installation of the AnnLee show in Zurich, because they decided to display the contract pertaining to AnnLee's status and distribution in the same room as my *DIY* coffin. I guess they really liked the idea that, legally and commercially, you have to kill yourself in order to be free.

This interview first appeared in Rue Sauvage, *a collection of Elisabeth Wetterwald's essays published by Les press du réel, Dijon, in 2003.*