

## **Lucy Puls: [just you]**

**By Dena Beard**

In Lucy Puls' *Notae* (Funk and Wagnalls Standard), 2003, a dictionary's pronunciation key is glued open to reveal marginalia inscribed by the book's previous owner. Words like "Paraplegic, Psychiatric, Vietnam" float over the page like some haunting prose poem. A professor as well as an artist, Puls helps her students detect semantic relations between words. Yet *Notae* embodies the grasping uncertainty of that search: close inspection of the splayed pages of the Funk and Wagnalls reveals five ghostly fingertips carved by Puls into the surface of the paper itself. They seem to press anxiously into the book, seeking answers and finding none.

On the subject of words, the 1978 edition of the *Petit Robert* dictionary defines 'subjectile' as a "surface serving as support (wall, panel, canvas) for a painting." This antiquated term rises to mind when looking at Lucy Puls' recent pieces, which alternately rest upon thick flesh toned shelves or thin racks. Each shelf is of intricately carved wood or cast polyurethane—a laborious process to create what is a mere support structure for the work itself. In her attention to this aspect of visual display, Puls seems to be pointing towards the shelves' deeper context for the work as a whole. Despite *Petit Robert's* rarely used technical definition, writers Antonin Artaud and Jacques Derrida use 'subjectile' to describe an immaterial rather than a material support. For them, it serves as a way of expressing the paradox that makes a work of art essentially unknowable, a place where we can trace "the trajectories of the objective, the subjective, the projectile, of the introjection, the interjection, the objection, of dejection, and abjection." When we engage with an artwork it is the subjectile that haunts us, extending beyond, through, and behind the work's material representation to inscribe in it the very impossibility of re-presentation itself. This perhaps sounds rather unnerving, but it is within this notion of the subjectile that we can play with ideas and emotions disallowed to us in normal spaces. It is in this area of confusion, misrepresentation, and misrecognition that we can intimately observe the activity of our own mind, safely and without witnesses.

It is in precisely this way that Puls' works articulate the quiet intimacy of introspection even while staged in the public space of the gallery. Here, the membrane between the interior and the exterior, the meaningful and the meaningless, is permeable, revealing the unpredictability, the doubt, and the mystery of our non-knowledge. It is here that the subjectile haunts us, much like the trace of fingertips searching for the words Paraplegic, Psychiatric, Vietnam haunt Puls' re-appropriated Funk and Wagnalls. Bounded by, resting upon, suspended within plastic space is an investigation into our reality, our world. Prompted by this anxiety, Puls asks: "How do we make images and ideas into form? What makes an artwork real to us—the image, the idea, or the material?"

"I know that I know nothing" goes the Socratic paradox, and so all wisdom must begin with confusion and wondering. In the early nineties, Lucy Puls' wondering began with physical wandering, a series of voyages through local charity shops where she encountered the abandoned detritus of consumer society: piles upon piles of records, worn-out Barbie dolls, stereo systems, paperback self-help books, crocheted blankets, old computers, heaps of plastic dinnerware. With equal parts playful curiosity and aesthetic deference, Puls challenged herself to find the most devalued items; eventually, she found herself buying up stores' entire stock. Like an amateur detective, she sought out the objects that society once cherished and then, by some tacit agreement, decided to reject. Purchased in bulk, these castoffs were taken back to Puls' studio, to become the material basis for more scientific investigations.

In Puls' *Lodix (Large, Folded)*, 1999, 'lodix' translates to mean blanket, cloth, bedspread, coverlet, or rug. Like most of Puls' titles, this is a literal index in scientific terms (categorized by genus), yet the Latin is ambiguous enough to open our imaginative interpretations. The mathematician Henri Poincaré, laying the foundation for chaos theory, said: "the aim of science is not things themselves—as the dogmatists in their simplicity imagine—but the relations between things; outside those relations there is no knowable reality." Puls' titles refer to the productive confusion of non-knowledge (the active state of unknowing) and also hint at a material process that involves breaking down these castoffs to find their repressed content—to determine, as Poincaré suggests, how they work relationally. Encountering the objects of her inquiry en masse, Puls often leaves them in their found state, submerging the entire arrangement of consumer culture detritus into a rectangular casing of translucent resin. These polymerized coffins make

a suitable housing for her collections; like dried tissue, the overburdened resin often cracks or contracts, leaving bits of interior exposed. This process— reactive, physically demanding, and very toxic— demonstrates Puls' intention to have her production methods be replicable, as though being performed in a laboratory or factory environment. Perhaps this is a reparative gesture, a way of conferring back onto the objects the conditions of manufacture that once gave them value. Or perhaps Puls wants to understand the anxiety of their economic status, simulating the trauma of their birth into a world that would eventually dispose of them. Possibly this is the real essence of the unease these works produce— the masses of abject objects, suspended in yellowing resin like primordial fossils, force us to consider our own disposability.

Derrida, continually refusing stable definitions, observes: “the subjectile is that which lies between the surface of the subject and the object.” Like Puls' resin coffins, there is both danger and reparation implied here; the possibility of losing one's self (or one's mind) in the process of trying to make form from thought. The title of Puls' 2010 exhibition at Electric Works, “Repossessed: Brief Madness,” references that porous relationship between subject and object. Nearly five million people have lost their homes since the onset of the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008, yet the effects often seem invisible. Puls illicitly entered these foreclosed homes to photograph and gather evidence of these effects, and “Repossessed” shows how we as human beings are intertwined with our socio-economic world at every level. Objects, presumably taken from these abandoned sites, are strewn about on the gallery floor. The objects become stand-ins for their human subjects, exemplifying the wreckage left in the wake of a deregulated market.

Even before the 2008 economic crisis, Puls had begun trading in her charity shop *derivés* for more pointed wanderings in regions of digital exchange. She prowled the “free” section of Craigslist, seeking out castoffs as they began to accumulate on the sidewalks outside of homes. This led to curiosity— as well as apprehension— about the way that information and images circulate in the digital age. In works such as *Ad Hunc Locum (Puppies)*, 2005 and *Ad Hunc Locum (Plastic Dinnerware)*, 2007, viewers must experience, actively engage with, the sculpture in both physical and digital space. In a significant departure from the material treatments of the earlier resin-based works, the castoff objects encountered

in *Ad Hunc Locum* are casually arranged—scattered on the floor, placed on boxes, or tacked to the walls in deceptively makeshift assemblages. Photographs of suburban sidewalks piled with discarded objects are digitally printed on transparent fabric and draped over the objects, covering them in a way that you might cover a sofa to ready it for storage. Tethered by photographs back to their original homes, these objects seem to represent their absent owners' own story of ejection.

In 2008, at the height of the crash, Puls began a more furtive search. As the piles of free goods on sidewalks became more frequent occurrences, it struck her that these accumulated objects often served as the only marker of a foreclosed home. The objects were decoys for the actual castoff—the house itself. With the help of a real estate agent, Puls gained entrance into these surrendered homes and began to meticulously photograph their component parts. Like a forensic pathologist she documented worn carpets, moldy ceilings, scratched wood veneers, and faded wallpaper, looking for a cause of death. Gaston Bachelard said that “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace... the values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths.” Puls' images reveal these uninhabited houses as containers of memory—they have a relationship to our reality as humans, our essential struggle to find a place that in protecting us confers the freedom to escape consciousness. Each photograph exudes a kind of loneliness, telling a story about the failure to secure this right. If mass media depends on projecting a timeworn Romantic ideal—the individual spirit triumphing over all odds—then Puls' photographs conversely show the ejection of the individual into the hostility of our real socio-economic environment, where global economies don't actually protect the collective good.

Finally, Lucy Puls is interested in geometry. *Recinere* and *Geometria Concretus* consider the photograph as a kind of sculpture simultaneously in 3-D and 2-D space. In both series, spatial perspective is lost in that the edges of floors merge with walls, becoming a single horizontal or a jagged line, bisecting our view. The colors of plaster, stucco, Formica, wainscoting, veneer blend together to become a single mass. In this, Puls is exploring the mutability of phenomenological space while she extends geometric perspective—negative shapes emerge, interior volumes are illuminated, and we imagine ourselves meandering through these modern ruins. In *Geometria Concretus* (12-09), 2012, the outline of a

luminescent rectangle of dirty gold carpet is traced in its interior by bright white gouache. It is a space both ecclesiastical and morbid—indicating a new floor plan, an opening up; or a chalk outline, a closing off. Geometry was originally intended to enhance the instrumentality of vision. It was a means to calculate our experience of seeing and relating to the world. The lines, shapes, and scale present in Puls' *Recinere* and *Geometria Concretus* mirrors the earlier, more minimalist vocabulary present in works like *Equate* from 1987, but Puls has since intensified their relationship to our lived reality.

The traditional rectangular composition of *Geometria Concretus* (12-09), 2012 rests on one of Puls' oddly shaped polyurethane shelves. The off-white color and plastic appearance of these shelves does not connote value in our contemporary moment—they are cheap, mass produced substances which become brittle with use and yellowed with age—and they seem at odds with the glowing interiors of the artwork proper, despite the abject content depicted therein. With these shelves and with the piles of abandoned clothes, stripped appliances, and castoff figurines, Puls points to the primordial intelligence with which we negotiate materiality in the subjectile realm. It is here that we are given permission to consider what value implies, providing us with a private space to dream, escape, and explore the phantasmagorias of our interior life.

1. *Paul Thévenin and Jacques Derrida, Antonin Artaud—Dessins et portraits, Paris: Gallimard, 1986, pg. 63.*
2. *Henri Poincaré, Science and Hypothesis, New York: Dover, 1952 (1905), pg. xxiv.*
3. *Thévenin and Derrida, pg. 79.*
4. *Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, pg. 6.*