

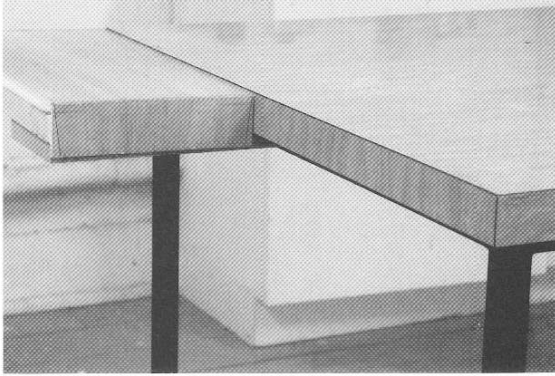
**Stuart Ringholt**  
**Untitled**

*In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life. Marx<sup>1</sup>*

To view a work in the privacy of an artist's studio is to see it in a state accessible to few. One's reaction naturally focuses on the process of creating; the actual work of the work. Amongst the clutter of half finished pieces, fragments of ideas and previously exhibited works one gains insight into a life—a life that in this instance has insisted on arduously but meditatively shampooing and conditioning strands of horse hair still attached to a dead animal's rump, and then spending around 100 hours stretching each individually selected strand of hair across a constructed aluminium frame. In Daniel Buren's words, it is during these moments that the work comes "closest to its own reality".<sup>2</sup> But from the moment it leaves the bastion of the studio it does not stop distancing itself from its reality. So what of this second reality? What volume does the piece emit? *Untitled* is a problematic work to access, even more so when viewed outside the studio context, where all physical traces of the elaborate process of construction are obscured. But beyond the confronting formalism of the piece, a multitude of themes tussle for attention.

The process of decay comes to mind when contemplating the tight weave of horsehair that is stretched tautly across the bones of an aluminium frame, and has become the mask for the head of Stuart Ringholt's domestic horse skeleton. Reminiscent of a violin bow, the horsehair strains against its metal constraints, but no sound is emitted. Rather the frame acts as a confining mechanism between the real and representation. The horsehair exists as a pictorial testament to the stories and experience beyond the frame. Each tiny but sturdy strand is faintly marked with traces of dirt, stains and genetic discolourings revealing the details of the horse's life. These marks have not been bleached out in any purification process. Clearly visible, they remind us of the origins of the product, the living animal who met its fate at the abattoir.

Hair is a potent medium to explore as it straddles the divide between animal and human, life and death. It has obvious feminist connotations and has been employed as a tool of abjection to counter strategies of fetishisation.<sup>3</sup> Horsehair specifically has a history of its own. Used in mattresses,



cushions, fabric and upholstery in bygone eras, it poignantly suggests the realm of domesticity, which is where it is destined to stay in the hands of Ringholt. Intricate sculptural works of wound and matted horsehair have featured regularly in Ringholt's past practice but, unlike the horsehair mask, these pieces leave little opportunity for the viewer to read the stories traceable on their surface. On the mask, however, it is these imperfections that reveal the allegorical narrative in the work: a narrative that is, at times, seeped in traces of taciturn violence.

Ringholt's skeletal horse takes its form through the structure of a discarded kitchen table – four legs and a torso. The veneer is worn through at various points on the table where you might expect its former owners to have had their nightly meal. One imagines that you could lay your head against the worn patches and faintly hear the evening dinner conversation. A silent mark resonating with stories. What is peculiar in this work is the tension the table and the horsehair frame bring about when forced together — nature versus the artificial, the readymade versus the finely constructed. Laying bare the traces of a life in each specific mark, and offering a vital form of protection and resistance against external threats, the horsehair mask also suggests a violence that goes unstated. The physical violence that marks the end of the horse's life, and the delicate violence of the material itself, existing as the numb, dead part to the living form; we can break hair without fear of pain. In contrast, the used dinner table is posited as a cathartic symbol of shared stories. This violence and tension is present but not dominant, existing as a moment that must be confronted and lived through, as with fear, to give way to a utopic ideal that guides much of Ringholt's practice.

This utopic vision is reminiscent of Joseph Beuys' practice. Beuys' performance work *I like America and America likes Me*, May 1974, in which he cohabited a gallery space with a coyote, wrapped in a protective felt blanket, was an attempt to emancipate himself from the restrictive normality of material existence. In much the same way Ringholt's ongoing research based performance works *Embarrassed* are attempts to not only free himself from the restrictive confines of societal norms and codes of social behaviour but to encourage his audiences to similarly confront their fears of embarrassment. A further example of this strategy is his ongoing workshop series, the aptly named *Funny*



*Fear Workshops* (as part of the exhibition *Crimes of the apple worms*, 2004), in which he encourages participants to confront their fears of embarrassment within the safety net of an art workshop, liberated to some degree beyond the white cube of the gallery.

Beuys' practice suggests that the business of artists is not simply to function politically in any material or organisational manner, but in a sense, to bring about change in the world through the example of art. Ringholt shares many of Beuys' shamanistic and entrepreneurial traits, creating opportunities for the audience to physically engage with his art in an attempt to improve not only his own life and consciousness but that of others. *Untitled* sits somewhat at odds with this objective. The sculpture allows for very little immediate audience engagement. This inaccessibility would at first seem to stand in opposition to much of Ringholt's recent practice, but if we return to the multitude of realities now being transcribed onto the work away from the artist's hand, we uncover potential points of access.

Contemplate tracing your hand over surface of the used veneer of the table surface and think of those that have done so before, and the worlds they may have inhabited. Many would have done so, but few within the gallery context. Is it a shared consciousness perhaps, a fleeting moment of meditative respite? Perhaps all that is required from the work in this instance is a small indulgence, to stop and contemplate.

Nicola Harvey

<sup>1</sup>Karl Marx, cited in Rosalind Krauss, 'Informe without Conclusion', *October* 78 (Fall 1996) p 100.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Buren, 'The Function of the Studio' 1979, in Doherty (ed), *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation* (London, 2005) p 23.

<sup>3</sup>Rosalind Krauss offers a lucid account of recent object art and the importance of hair in the work of Cindy Sherman.

See: 'Informe without Conclusion', *October* 78 (Fall 1996).

<sup>4</sup>Harrison and Wood, in *Modernism in Dispute, Art since the 40s*. (New Haven, London 1993) p 220.

ALL IMAGES

*Untitled* 2005, horse hair, aluminium, laminex table.