

Free Basin

Constructed of over a ton of plywood by the artists collaborative, Simparch, Free Basin is a full scale skatebowl in the form of a kidney shaped swimming pool with a deep end (7 feet) and a shallow end (4 feet). The work bisected the entire Hyde Park Arts Center Gallery creating an upper and a lower deck. But is it a skatebowl or a sculpture? It depends on whom you ask, which is another way of saying both. The seamless manner a skatebowl is allowed to double as a sculpture is hardly troublesome. If anything, it is the absence of tension between abstract form and backyard functionality, between high and low, that is somewhat problematic. Under these circumstances, justification for placing a skatebowl in a visual art venue could be reduced to the rehearsal of arguments ranging from the familiar to the exhausted as is the case when skateboarding is referred to as an artform. Defining skateboarding as “expressive form in motion,” harkens back to its origins in surf culture. When skate-legend Tony Alva, described the sport as “a release of all your energy out on the terrain, your canvas and creation of your own art” he probably had in mind abstract expressionism a la Jackson Pollock. In its quest for the perfection of form for its own sake, skateboarding is to pavement, what Greenberg argued paint is to canvas. Although skateboarding has yet to establish its own museum/hall of fame, based on Alva’s metaphor, it would only be a matter of time before icons such as Mark Gonzalez would perform in museum spaces.

Made in the spirit of an uncritical altruism, Alva’s metaphor overlooks the tension surrounding any sub-, pop-, youth-, or counterculture’s search for legitimization, a search accompanied by the fear of “selling out.” With respect to skateboarding, the clearest example involves its graphic counterpart, an aesthetic associated with graffiti art, hip-hop and punk culture, arenas in which curators and gallerists have gone slumming on numerous occasions only to be met halfway by trained artists who, although acknowledged as belonging to a particular subculture, see the white cube as the ultimate form of validation. In addition to the oscillating vogue of graffiti art, recent examples of this phenomena would include Barry McGhee, Raymond Pettibon, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. As for skate culture proper, its most official brush with high culture was the Los Angeles exhibition *Off The Streets*. But Gonzalez’s performances in German museums remain the most direct attempt to contain the activity of skating in the white cube. Gonzalez, appropriately enough, performed in white fencing gear, blending in with his environment while challenging it to a duel.

Another argument involves the trajectory of modernist sculpture from its inception to its conclusion; a trajectory that Benjamin Buchloh has successfully argued, can be traced from Constantin Brancusi to Michael Asher, from autonomous object to a critique of context. Sculpture in its transition from pedestal to place can be said to have disappeared, giving way to a rigorous critique of material conditions specific to high culture, conditions symptomatic of culture in general. Yet, with varying degrees of force and naiveté, the production of autonomous sculpture persists in its unquestioning belief in a privileged and idealized spatio/temporal experience of Euclidean space. In this respect, *Free Basin* could be read naively as a celebration of pure geometric form. As for sculpture culminating in a formal, social and political critique of its context, a debt is owed to Marcel Duchamp’s deregulation of aesthetic activity, particularly the ready-made, for exposing the role museums play in designating anything within their confines a work of art. The announcement for the exhibition,

featuring a porcelain basin similar to Duchamp's infamous urinal, is a wink and nod in his direction. In this respect, *Free Basin's* presence at the Hyde Park Art Center is justified simply by virtue of fitting within the space. This reading, however, brings it within the sphere of installation art. Despite the ready-mades' culminating in institutional critique, high culture, not satisfied with an investigation of its own material conditions, has submitted all aspects of life to the hermetic and clinical analysis of the museum, hauling in its confines any and all manner of stuff for the sake of "installation." In this instance, the specimen is skateboarding, in particular bowl skating, whose reliance on isolated and idealized conditions have made it that much more suitable for museum display.

A more dynamic but nonetheless problematic argument involves skateboarding and sculpture's relationship to architecture. Although full blown vert skating didn't come about until the mid seventies, after the introduction of urethane wheels, skateboarding in pools dates back to mid-sixties. The oft romanticized tale of skateboarding's domestication of the built environment - its love affair with liminal urban and suburban topographies (deserted parking lots, stair wells, parking garages, loading docks, plazas) and its assault on public fixtures (walls, benches, rails, stairs) - is largely a product of street skating, a style that dates from the latter half of skateboarding's history circa 1980. Despite the indifference many street skaters express about the construction of facilities tailored to their demands, skateboarding's ideal conditions have always been derived from predetermined forms be they urban or suburban, a distinction that is in fact negligible when it comes to Southern California, the cradle of skateboarding civilization. In the context of Chicago, the decision to model the bowl specifically on the form of an inset kidney shaped swimming pool could refer to a motel amenity doubling as a sign of suburban affluence. This reading reaffirms the class underpinnings accompanying the conspicuous lack of indoor facilities in Chicago versus their presence in the surrounding suburbs, underpinnings indicating that the real source of tension between street and vert skating is ground in class. Yet it is precisely this class antagonism which underscores the romance of street skating. Considered a nuisance, it is often banned. As a challenge to authority it shares an affinity with other urban subcultures. In short, street skating is indulged by suburban skaters looking for thrills beyond their backyard, kicks for which there is no waiver for the soccer mom to sign. In other words, *Free Basin* is the realization of a suburban ideal that on city soil, or pavement as the case may be, is nothing short of platonic.

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