

Divinity and Meaninglessness in Ben Kovascy's *Off Cuts*

One of contemporary art's chief concerns is the history of art. "The connectivity between objects, ideas, people, and institutions that is the core of the art historian's attention" is also, we are told, the focus of the contemporary artist¹. Contemporary art's statements are constructed by appropriating, criticising and discussing ideas or forms from art history: "Its raw materials are example and influence, suggestion and orientation, trial and error"². Ben Kovascy's *Off Cuts* (2012), in *Here & Now 2012* at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, manifest this current in contemporary art. Art history, as much as wood, is the medium for Kovascy's discourse. As such, a reading through the lens of art history will be the most productive approach to his sculpture. Ultimately, *Off Cuts* is an essay on the contingency of significance and meaning.

By arranging smaller pieces of wood as timber blocks with patterned faces, Kovascy makes a formal reference to the arts of marquetry and parquetry. Begun in Asia Minor before the birth of Christ³, the arrangement of wooden veneers for decoration, either figural as with marquetry or geometric with parquetry, achieved great popularity in Europe after the Italian Renaissance. This art required much skill and care, and marquetiers were in demand amongst the aristocracy and royalty of Europe⁴.

Kovascy has cut away much of the timber bricks that he assembled, fashioning them into the shape of a twig. Each slender branch displays the internal organisation of the coloured wood used in its construction. Although this arrangement is visually striking, the most important formal property of *Off Cuts* is

¹ T. Smith, 'The State of Art History: Contemporary Art', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 92, no. 4, 2010, p. 368.

² T. Smith, 'The State of Art History', p. 368.

³ P. Ramond, *Marquetry*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002, p. 13.

⁴ See P. Ramond, *Marquetry*, p. 18 and 20.

probably its placement upon a raised surface made by the artist⁵. The practice of upraising exalted objects or people is ancient: King Solomon, of the Old Testament, “made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with fine gold”⁶. Kovascy’s sculptures are elevated metaphorically, by their connection to historical techniques of presentation, into an exalted space. The curatorial presentation of *Off Cuts* enhances this effect. In a room filled with darkness, *Off Cuts* is illuminated by lights on the ceiling of the gallery. The significance of light in Western art and religion as a sign for divinity makes the illumination of *Off Cuts* a venerating procedure. The earlier-mentioned technique of marquetry also serves to impress *Off Cuts*’ divinity upon the viewer. Marquetry was a technique frequently used to ornament religious objects with images of divine figures or events⁷.

These art-historical associations seem to sanctify *Off Cuts*. Objectively, however, there is nothing sacred about these objects. In fact, they are exceptionally mundane; only twigs; everyday pieces of wood that we imagine discarded on the ground. Their title, *Off Cuts*, magnifies their insignificance. They are, this title suggests, just waste from the floor of the artist’s workshop. Moreover, decorative forms have been viewed with hostility by important Modern artists, and Kovascy’s reference to marquetry in *Off Cuts* subtly increases our sense of its inconsequentiality. In 1914, Wassily Kandinsky defined “ornamental form” as “the form belonging mainly to external beauty, which can be, and as a rule is outwardly expressive and inwardly expressionless”⁸. In 1907, Paul Klee expressed similar sentiments⁹. *Off Cuts*, then, occupies an uncertain terrain, hovering between divinity

⁵. Email correspondence with the artist, 28 August 2012.

⁶. *New English Bible*, 1 Kings 10.18.

⁷. See P. Ramond, *Marquetry*, pp. 14-17 for a number of excellent examples.

⁸. W. Kandinsky, ‘The Cologne Lecture’, in C. Harrison & P. Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 97.

⁹. P. Klee cited in M. Brüderlin, ‘Introduction: Ornament and Abstraction’, in M. Brüderlin (ed.), *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between non-Western, modern and contemporary Art*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 17.

and meaninglessness. It's significant qualities are disrupted by the formal associations I have outlined.

The relationship between emptiness and profundity has been a major concern of Modern art. Early abstract artists such as Kandinsky were concerned that their work would be seen as ornamental and therefore without substance¹⁰. Ironically, by the 1960s, expressionlessness had become a key objective of some influential artists. Frank Stella once claimed that: "All I want anyone to get out of my paintings . . . is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion . . . What you see is what you see"¹¹. Jasper Johns makes similar comments in his discussion of *Corpse and Mirror* (1976/77): "It had . . . all the qualities that interested me – literalness, repetitiveness, . . . order with dumbness and the possibility of complete lack of meaning"¹². These statements seem to stifle any further inquiry or thought. What we see is paint and canvas.

Responses to the abstraction of abstract painting have come mainly from two polar positions. The first of these is illustrated by Terry Smith's response to Frank Stella's *Die Fahne Hoch!* (1959): "A huge, black, weighty object looms over us. . . . Stella's premeditated process of forcing out illusionistic space . . . is felt by us as a slowing down of our experience of time, a stretching out of the present toward infinity"¹³. Rather than thought and inquiry the experience is one of immersion. Rather than engaging the viewer intellectually, something in Stella's paint and canvas affects Smith in a weird, ineffable, psychic way. The opposite pole, represented by Joseph Kosuth's analysis of what he calls 'formalist art', presents pure abstraction as pointlessly empty. "Formalist art", he suggests, "is only art by

¹⁰ W. Kandinsky, 'The Cologne Lecture', p. 97.

¹¹ F. Stella cited in T. Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, London, Laurence King Publishing, 2011, p. 27.

¹² J. Johns cited in M. Brüderlin, 'Ornament and Paradise or the Triumph of the Surface', in M. Brüderlin (ed.), *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between non-Western, modern and contemporary Art*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 167.

virtue of its resemblance to earlier works of art. It's a mindless art. Or, as Lucy Lippard so succinctly described Jules Olitski's paintings: 'they're visual *Muzak*'¹⁴.

Off Cuts' ambiguity, with markers for both importance and insignificance, refers to this long art-historical discussion about profundity and emptiness. Surely, though, Kovascy wants to do more than describe an art-historical discussion. What is the statement that *Off Cuts* makes about this discourse? Another turn to art-history will help us here. Italian artist Giuseppe Penone has carved many trees by gradually removing the growth rings from wooden beams in order to expose the internal structure of the material. See, for instance, *Tree of 12 Metres* (1982-82). Penone claims that his work with carved trees "shows, with the language of sculpture, the essence of matter and tries to reveal . . . the hidden life within."¹⁵ Penone's artistic act, the "'discovery' of the tree"¹⁶ within the wood, has great relevance to Kovascy's *Off Cuts*.

We have assumed so far that Kovascy's sculptures are of twigs. Might they not, as easily, be of saplings? Or trees? By resolving the pure abstraction of parquetry into symbols of growth and life, does Kovascy posit some hidden, metaphysical significance within the abstract paintings that artists like Stella or Johns and, in Australia, Fairweather, Crowley and Tuckson spent years producing? The answer can only be "perhaps." *Off Cuts* fails to properly assert its significant or insignificant status. *Off Cuts*, a title which proposes the latter, is only a title. In fact, "the timber was carefully sourced for attributes like contrasting or complementary colour or density."¹⁷ Some of this wood has sentimental value: "My father had a large, old, priceless piece of African Wenge sitting in storage in his workshop. He

¹³. T. Smith, *Contemporary Art*, p. 29.

¹⁴. J. Kosuth, 'Art after Philosophy', in C. Harrison & P. Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 844.

¹⁵. No author specified, 'Giuseppe Penone: The Hidden Life Within', <http://www.ago.net/giuseppe-penone-the-hidden-life-within>, 2011, (accessed 30 August 2012).

¹⁶. R. Lumley, *Arte Povera*, London, Tate Publishing, 2004, p. 56.

gave it to me a long time ago as a present as he knew I would one day find a use for it.”¹⁸ Still, these facts are basically incidental; there is nothing intrinsically significant about Kovascy’s sculpture, and naming it *Off Cuts* demonstrates the contingency of any meaning and importance.

Ultimately, this is what *Off Cuts* has to say. Techniques of presentation, art-historical associations, titles and personal experiences all affect perceptions of significance and consequentiality. Years of discourse about meaningfulness and meaninglessness have been a distraction because no factor establishes an object’s sanctity or importance authoritatively. There is no artist or art-historian that can give an image or talisman more consequence than the viewer is willing to ascribe to it. That it is an artist, rather than an art-historian, making this iconoclastic statement, is typical in contemporary art where, as Terry Smith has suggested, artists and art-historians increasingly find their concerns overlapping¹⁹. Smith gives the examples of Tacita Dean and Josiah McElheny. Seniority and fame, it seems, are not prerequisites for participation in important art-historical and theoretical discussions.

¹⁷. Email correspondence with the artist, 28 August 2012.

¹⁸. Email correspondence with the artist, 28 August 2012.

¹⁹. T. Smith, ‘The State of Art History’, p. 368.

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