

Mark Dion: New England Digs

David Winton Bell Gallery

List Art Center

Brown University

Providence

January 26 to March 10

Review by Michael Cochran

In their book, Adhocism: the Case for Improvisation, Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver write that “an individual can create his personal environment out of impersonal subsystems, whether new or old. By realizing his immediate needs by combining ‘ad hoc’ parts, the individual creates, sustains and transcends himself.” The term “ad hoc” meaning “for this specific purpose” aptly describes Mark Dion’s exhibition in The Bell Gallery at Brown University’s List Art Center. Titled, “Mark Dion: New England Digs,” the exhibition was organized by the Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton in collaboration with The Bell Gallery, the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Lit in a bright, non-dramatic light, the two rooms of the Bell Gallery are beautifully filled with enigmatic remnants of three digs organized by Dion and resemble a cross between an art exhibit and a historical display. In an interview during the installation, Mr. Dion explained that even though the archeological term for his sites is termed “insignificant and disturbed,” he “takes nothing as insignificant.” Interspersed along the walls are color photographs taken by Bob Brane documenting the digging, cleaning and sorting process by over 90 volunteers, many from Rhode Island School of Design, Brown University and UMass-Dartmouth. Between the photo groupings are back-lit display cases with objects arranged by form and color, i.e., spheres or white glass containers. On the floor are several large glass-covered sarcophagus-like containers each filled with its own colored or textural material. One contains rusted metal objects, another undifferentiated white glass fragments, each glistening in the brightly lit room. Nearby on low pedestals are an old rusted safe and a crushed hot water heater, no longer functional but now existing as gritty mysterious objects.

In the smaller back room are three magnificent wood cabinets fashioned after 19th and 20th Century display cases. Each is filled with carefully organized, not by function, date or origin but by form, color, texture and pattern. The contents of each drawer are carefully arranged in a mosaic that blurs the histories of each dig site into an enigmatic jig saw puzzle. One sees a drawer of old shoe heels next to a drawer filled with carefully composed cocktail “swizzle” sticks, buttons and combs. It appears that all materials were gathered in a Post-modern methodology and assembled in a Modernist tradition according to formal design elements.

As Dion states in the beautifully designed catalog, “These digs are not interested in objects at their point of production but rather are obsessed with producing meaning through reanimating objects after the end of their use.” When asked what will happen to all the materials after the scheduled exhibitions have been completed, Dion remarked that they would probably be properly “disposed of.” In other words, ending their role as art materials and returning to their previous incarnation as refuse. An interesting metaphor for life itself or is it just adhocism at its best? Mark Dion poses the ultimate question.