Range

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When I first saw paintings by Donald Moffett some years ago, I was riveted by their tactility and uncanny evocation of living, breathing things. Likewise, this suite of works on paper created collaboratively by Moffett and Robert Beck in 1997 pos­sesses exquisitely animate and ambiguous qualities. The twenty drawings in the series straddle the line between representation and abstraction in conflating physical, gestural references with a highly controlled ornamental sensibility. They are both sublime and earthly, sacred and profane.

Their simultaneous presentation with a group of paintings from 1956–68 by Italian artist Lucio Fontana begs consideration of the relationship between the two. The similarities and differences are many. Most obvious is the presence of holes and orifices in both bodies of work. In Fontana’s paintings, cuts, slashes, punctures, and gouges are emblematic, whereas both Beck and Moffett have employed such elements only periodically in their production. Yet in this series, the presence of the hole—made by a gunshot and suggesting a wound or a bodily orifice—is a central fact of each piece and sparked the collaboration itself.

Intrigued by a group of Strathmore drawing pads Beck had shot through with a gun, producing compelling perforated objects redolent of a curiously domesti­cated sense of violence, despair, anger, and sadness, Moffett asked to have one to take apart and in some way manipulate its pages. In his studio, he separated the sheets as well as the front and back covers, using the hole in each as the focal point for a drawing. The resulting twenty works became the collaboration known as *Range*, titled retroactively by the artists in 2010.

While not a conventional collaboration in terms of a back-and-forth, discur­sive process, the work exemplifies a collective endeavor in which the whole sur­passes the sum of its parts. Beck and Moffett met during the late 1980s, part of a circle around the gallerist Simon Watson. Both were involved in the activist circles of ACT UP, while Moffett was a founding member of Gran Fury. At this time, col­laboration was galvanizing for many socially committed artists, especially those who agitated to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis. It was understood as neces­sary from an ethical and emotional standpoint. The fruits of collaboration were most strongly manifested in the public sphere of the streets; in the studio, artists tended to retreat into exploration of personal issues and meanings in a sometimes uncertain relationship to their activist identity and commitment. As Buck com­ments, “Your identity was given over to the group.”(1) Putting themselves in the ser­vice of collective identity politics, many artists struggled to define an individual language that could have an equal measure of relevance and meaning.

It was in the wake of this context that the collaboration that produced *Range* occurred, several years after the height of ACT UP’s activities. Both artists were exploring valid forms of personal expression in their burgeoning studio practices, utilizing various media to produce work in which individual and social experience aligned in increasingly nuanced ways.

The shot sketchpad used by Moffett was part of a group of approximately thirty such works that Beck made by the mid-1990s. For Beck, the act of shoot­ing a gun into sketchpads—objects associated with artistic practice but addition­ally connoting the fragility and vulnerability of flesh—was a primal expression of sublimated anger, confusion, and frustration, but also an ambivalent, even poetic gesture.(2) As a teenager, shooting with his father and siblings was a form of indoctrination or rite of passage into an adolescent and adult male identity. In the shot sketchpads and other works where death—human or animal—is implied as the aftermath of the gunshot blast, the metaphoric reverberations of the act are oblique.

Writer Helen Molesworth has commented: “Robert Beck’s work is about the violence of everyday life, in particular the everyday violence of white, middle-class, suburban boyhood. It’s about hunting with your dad and high school shoot­ers; it’s about what you’re able to remember and what you can’t. It’s about the inexorable fact that how we become ourselves is a complicated affair, an almost incomprehensible mixture of DNA and ideology, of family dinners and television programs, of siblings and classmates, or language and silences.”(3) In probing the darker psychological precincts of identity and social life as a reflection of the violence inherent in American culture, many aspects of Beck’s work uncannily resemble that of artists Cady Noland or Bruce Nauman in both their conceptual and material qualities.

Buck describes the impetus behind his own work as a “means to create an index by which I could make sense of earlier, often traumatic experiences that at the time I could not bear, or symbolize, or make legible, so as to endure them, or transcend them.”(4) The resulting pieces point to mysterious events which can be intuited but are not explained due to the absence of conventional narrative and to the presence of multiple possible interpretations. The critic A.M. Homes identi­fied Beck’s work of this period as exemplary of a strain of “evidentiary art” due to its ominous and unresolved qualities. (5) Extending the overt references to the body and to mortality in ways that recall the shot sketchpads are the so-called “wound filler” pieces of 2004, consisting of 25 pound buckets of variously colored mor­tician’s wax penetrated by a single, central gunshot that creates a protruded hole or wound.

For Moffett, who at the time of the collaboration was at a crossroads in his own work, the emotional timbre of Beck’s shot sketchpads resonated strongly. Following the cessation of Gran Fury’s activities in the early 1990s, he had started to experiment with a private language of form that could convey meaning in an oblique way. By the mid-nineties he was producing abstract paintings with built-up surfaces that were curiously vital and in their suggestiveness of human experience could be carriers of social meaning. Moffett first exhibited these works in 1996 in the exhibition “A Report on Painting” at Jay Gorney Modern Art in New York. Deliberately and meticulously constructed yet fraught with a sense of organicism and vulnerability, they were early manifestations of explorations that Moffett would refine and revisit over the next decade.

The drawings later identified as *Range* coincided with this direction in Moffett’s work. Always starting with the central fact of the hole, Moffett’s embellishments on each sheet took place as a series of largely intuitive, quasi-meditative, quasi-analytical acts. His materials were pencil and chocolate fudge; the oily butter in the fudge allowed it to be easily smeared and smoothed into place in a variety of ornate patterns. His highly controlled, exquisite gestures resulted in a vocabulary of forms resembling an alphabet of drawing—some geometric, some curvilinear, some more highly embellished, some austere and reductive. For instance, one reveals a kind of decorative harlequin pattern, another resembles swirling tear­drops, and in yet another, fleshy protuberances like warts or blisters emerge from a tightly delineated series of ovals. The tonal spectrum from dark to warm brown to yellowish-brown also approximates a range of bodily fluids and excretions while simultaneously evoking the sensuality of sweets and delicacies. Some con­centrated, some diffuse, they communicate a range of sensual, earthy pleasures, as fleeting and fugitive as eating a piece of chocolate fudge.

The work’s title, *Range*, offers various associations: the shooting range; a range of formal vocabularies; the range as a family homestead/domestic environment; to range as to ramble or move about. It is also an anagram for the word anger. Lacking specificity, it encapsulates a corresponding richness and expansiveness of potential references and multiple meanings, as in Buck’s contribution to this publication, “Caption (or the word kills the thing).” In the spirit of artists Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers, he speaks to the impossibility and undesir­ability of fixing meaning.

This collaborative project calls into relief the relationships and the distinctions between Moffett’s and Beck’s individual practices, which are similarly characterized by attitudes of ambiguity and multivalence. Throughout his career, Buck has worked with and transformed objects, whether as points of departure for new works or as artifacts of his own making. The shot sketchpad resembles the artifact of an event—a record of time and of an act. The penetrated paper—a potent signifier of something or someone to which violence has been done—speaks mutely of its own pain. With Moffett’s ministrations, some extending from and some encircling the holes, the blow is implicitly softened. The palliative care of touching and lavishing attention, almost tenderly, on each “wound” symboli­cally rehabilitates and heals it.

The “geography” of *Range* is both physical and temporal. Executed partially in the outdoors and partially in the studio, notions of time permeate the work as a record of a specific, instantaneous act and as a series of extended manipulations. After its initial execution in 1997, it was never shown, largely forgotten, and only recently revisited, brought to light at a time when a seeming sea change has taken place in the art world over a relatively short span of years. Attitudes about iden­tity politics and about relationships between form and content have significantly evolved; exploration of personal language is no longer considered self-indulgent. And on a physical level, manifestation of the passage of time has emerged in the drawings themselves with the seepage of oil from the material used by Moffett, producing haloed effects on the paper. Discolorations have occurred to render the works softer, richer, and riper.

Moffett comments that at the time of their making he had no ambition for these works. For him, they constituted a series of exercises and explorations that to some extent fed into the materiality and tightly controlled gestural practices pursued in the evolving body of paintings that he was developing concurrently. About the work’s reemergence, Buck states that it’s like rediscovering an earlier self, commenting that “it’s as if Donald has uncovered the unconscious of the work.”

The curatorial decision by gallerist Marianne Boesky to exhibit these drawings alongside paintings by Lucio Fontana unquestionably animates our reception of them. It complicates a reading of the works as documents of their own time, instead positioning them as part of a larger continuum of investigation about the potential of meaning that these gestures inherent in the works communicate. Fontana simultaneously defaces and valorizes the canvas. In each of his paintings, the combination of implied violence and exquisite delicacy, achieved by means of variations in the handling and distribution of the cuts, holes, gouges, and perforations—sleek and assured or roughly agitated—gives each work a strength of presence and a distinctive identity, underscored by variations in the choices of color as the monochrome backdrops and relative smoothness or roughness of facture. This reverberates with Beck’s decisive temporal gesture of shooting the sketchpad and with Moffett’s deliberate, laborious two-dimensional renderings on each sheet.

For Moffett, Fontana has had an additional role as an antecedent with whom he has grappled over time. “He’s always been there,” comments Moffett. “Fon­tana’s forthright act always rang true to me—the strike, the blow, the cut, the insult. There is always an unfolding social history (and cultural history) that feeds my work. And that history (those histories) necessarily and casually take violence for granted. So the question for me, fifty or sixty years after Fontana’s famous cut, becomes then what? Now what?”(6) In his own paintings from 2004 onward, Moffett has employed holes and cuts in the canvas as key elements. Whether meticulously rendered and neatly framed with embroidery and zippers, as in a group of works from 2007; or fashioned in a roughhewn way, as with his 2004 series “Painting from a Hole;” or in more recent pieces with multiple holes, these function both compositionally and metaphorically in the way they address desire, the body, and the body politic.

Moffett’s kinship with Fontana has been noted by several previous writers, and his work was first exhibited alongside the older artist in 2007. In the accompany­ing catalogue, critic Anna Blume wrote, “Moffett begins with abstraction that moves towards bodies…(7) Inversely, Fontana’s approach can be said to begin with bodies and move towards abstraction. Describing the impulses behind his work, Fontana said, “Man today is too bewildered by the vastness of his world, he is too overwhelmed by the triumph of Science, he is too dismayed by the new inventions which follow one after the other…What is needed is an absolutely new language…which gives expression to this state of despair, of existential anguish.”(8)

For Fontana, the cuts and orifices gouged into the works were redolent of cosmic mystery, signifying worlds opening up beyond the surface of the canvas. In this respect he was very much of his time with attitudes consistent with others of his generation whose imaginations were fired by the nascent discoveries of space exploration and a sense of the unknown that was revealing itself to humankind in ways never before imagined. The heroic implications and intended representa­tions of limitless space behind Fontana’s work belie their earthly, sensate qualities and their intense corporeality which resonate so directly with that of Beck and Moffett. In the older artist’s work, as in that of Beck and Moffett, pleasure—psychic, visual, corporeal, and erotic—is integral and becomes inseparable from violence, which is also poetic. Tactility, concavity, convexity, back-to-front, right­side-up versus upside-down, are not fixed but rather fluid designations. As writer Bill Arning has said of Moffett’s work, “Depicting everything and nothing, they are a meditation on time, mortality, and the beauty of our finite lives. (9)

Beyond specific visual and psychic correspondences between the paintings of Fontana and the suite of drawings by Beck and Moffett, intriguing parallels exist between their practices, in spite of the approximately half-century separat­ing the two. All three artists have made work that defies conventional catego­ries and classifications and that moves back and forth between distinct media. Writer Lawrence Alloway described Fontana as “the enemy of media purity…[who] chooses the ambiguous borders between the arts, where paintings look like sculpture and sculpture meets painting halfway, in a series of overlappings and conflations.” (10) The mid-twentieth century period in which Fontana matured and developed is marked by a dynamic evolution of artistic language, to which he himself was a major contributor. A primary innovator at a time when the pictorial and spatial vocabulary of modernism was changing to reflect a new language of form and ideas, Fontana’s attitudes mirror that of others of his generation but surpass them in his expansive urge toward experimentation to redefine artistic genres and meaning. (11)

Important historical distinctions, of course, should be noted when con­sidering the juxtaposition between Fontana’s paintings and the Beck/Moffett collaboration. Foundational to Beck’s and Moffett’s work is conceptual art and its emphasis on genres, materials, and acts in the service of ideas. Building on this legacy and furthering its development in their own practices, the artists’ shared commitment to activism and to the sphere of the social has indelibly inflected their individual and collaborative work. In Moffett’s paintings, drawings, photo­graphs, and mixed media installations, references to history and politics, to ethics and morality, to desire and to the body, recur in ways that are at times evident and highly charged and at others, more covert and subtle, but no less palpable. Like­wise, Beck’s conceptual practice has given form to his ideas about identity and the self in a manner that is sometimes understated and oblique, as in his recent corpus of drawings based on personality assessment tests, and sometimes more pronounced, in ways ranging from his shot sketchpads to his recent decision to use his own name as material, changing it from Beck to Buck, which comments on subjectivity and the significance of the “Name-of-the-Father.”(12) For both artists, ambiguity is a key component of how their work communicates meaning, as is the notion of layering, which suggests alternative realities and multiple viewpoints.

Perhaps the greatest degree of distinction between Fontana, Beck, and Moffett consists of the universal, existential dimension of Fontana’s work which departs from the concerns of the younger artists, who have often mined their own personal histories and identities as subject matter or starting points. Yet the distinction eludes easy analysis or categorization. It is the presence of such paradoxical qualities that tie these bodies of work together, despite their very different historical moments and points of genesis. “Violence, bodies, wounds, holes, camouflage, mimicry, memorials, erasure, guilt, corruption, sex, and death—even my own!”(13) says Buck about the subjects that underlie his work. His gesture of shooting sketchpads, made evident in the fact of the holes in the center of each page, is partially nihilistic, partially fatalistic, and partially an expression of pain in acknowledgment of loss, seemingly far from the heroic exuberance of Fon­tana’s holes and slashes, which at the same time embody doubt and uncertainty.

In the early 1960s, Fontana said of his work, “I was thinking of those worlds, of the moon with these…holes, the terrible silence that causes us anguish, and the astronauts in a new world…man arrives, in mortal silence, in this anguish, and leaves a vital sign of his arrival.”(14) At a remove from such exalted existential pro­nouncements is the younger artists’ conviction about human pain as the result of cultural, social, and psychological forces. Yet in all of their work, ideas about silence, anguish, and pain are acknowledged in a deeply sensate, almost profane way. Fontana’s paintings have been described as “at once sensual and symbolic, tormented and alive;” these attributes also characterize the *Range* collaboration as well as the individual works of both Beck and Moffett. For all their differences, they pulsate with a shared sense of the animate and of trauma as a generative force, vibrantly refusing to be named.

**NOTES**

1. Robert Buck in conversation with Donald Moffett and Elizabeth Smith in New York City, April 22, 2010. All quoted comments from the artists, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this conversation. Since June 2008, Robert Beck has been known as Robert Buck, having used his surname as ‘material’ for an artwork itself.

2. Alex Dodge, “Shot on Sight: A Conversation with Robert Beck,” *Swingset*, Issue 3, 2003, pp. 30–35.

3. Helen Molesworth, “Robert Beck,” in *Robert Beck: Dust* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2007), pp. 42–43. This essay was reprinted from the catalogue of the exhibition *Robert Beck* at the Opalka Gallery at Sage College in Albany, New York, 2006.

4. Robert Buck, “The Story of Robert Buck,” unpublished essay, 2010.

5. A.M. Homes, “Robert Beck,” *Artforum*, February 1995, p. 91.

6. Donald Moffett in correspondence with the author, May 7, 2010.

7. Anna Blume, “Entropy of Abstraction: The Hole” in *Donald Moffett: Mangle Me* (New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery, 2007). This catalogue accompanied a project presented by the gallery at FIAC, Paris, in which twelve works by Moffett were exhib­ited together with two works by Fontana and two works by Andy Warhol.

8. Lucio Fontana, quoted in Lucio Massimo Barbero, “Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York” in *Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2006), p. 23.

9. Bill Arning, “The Cathedral Project,” *Time Out New York*, Aug. 5–12, 1999.

10. Lawrence Alloway, quoted in Barbero, op. cit., p. 37.

11. Art historian Enrico Crispolti traces a lineage for Fontana’s work from Picasso to Tinguely and beyond in his essay “The Originality of a Master of Anticipation,” in *Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York*, *op. cit*., p. 60. Fontana can also be appreciated as an important precursor to others from the 1960s onward whose practices further ques­tioned and blurred conventional boundaries of media, yet as a European and as an artist whose preoccupations were multidisciplinary his impact was distinct from that of Donald Judd, for instance, whose theories about art as “neither painting nor sculpture” were forcefully expressed in his critical writings of the early sixties and then furthered in his own work, with foremost influence on developments in American art.

12. Buck explains the premise behind his name change in “The Story of Robert Buck,” *op. cit*.

13. *Ibid*.

14. Lucio Fontana quoted in Enrico Crispolti, ed., *Fontana* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1999), p. 39.

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