



The Fix: Tobias Sternberg's Artful Repairs

by Elena Goukassian

One afternoon in October 2015, I left the *Sculpture* offices early to take a broken recycling bin to a nearby contemporary art gallery, thinking how ironic that such objects are themselves non-recyclable. When I arrived at Transformer—a nonprofit gallery that supports emerging artists and experimental concepts—I was greeted by a man in a white lab coat, who inspected my offering and broke a piece off, admiring the material properties of the blue plastic. He created a numbered tag for the bin, wrote me a receipt, and told me that I would be contacted when it was ready for return. Berlin-based Tobias Sternberg (the man in the white lab coat) has been touring “The Temporary Art Repair Shop” for several years, hosted by galleries

around the world. The concept is simple: Sternberg sets up shop and invites people to bring things that are “broken, faulty, disproportionate, ugly, unsuccessful, inappropriate, and/or in some way not suitable for [their] intended purposes”; he then “fixes” these would-be discards, transforming them into unique art objects, which he returns to their owners at the end of the “exhibition.” Sternberg’s objects vary widely, both in terms of subject matter and success. Although the repaired objects never go on display as a part of his projects, he meticulously documents their transformation on his Web site <<http://atrepairshop.com>>. Looking through his archive of 26 objects created in Washington, DC, some of the most suc-

cessful pieces are those altered to serve wholly new functions. There’s a working doorbell made out of old phone parts, a broken box fan transformed into a case/drying rack for wet paintings, and a broken vase turned into a lamp.

Other projects are more conceptual. *Drippy Black*, for instance, attempts to save a failed artwork. The woman who brought the painted particle board sculpture had made it herself and saw it as a major failure. Instead of fixing the object, Sternberg wrote up a four-step “Recipe for saving a failed artwork” and handed it off to his non-artist brother, Joakim Sternberg, who, in accordance with the instructions, broke it apart, glued it back together into a square-ish shape, and painted

it drippy black. Inspired by an art collector’s comment that she liked “big and dark and drippy paintings,” the repaired piece serves as a subtle, humorous jab at the ridiculous expectations of the art world and art market.

At times, Sternberg’s object-fixing gets political, as in the case of a broken wooden goblet—a typical tourist trinket. When Sternberg noticed “Art of Ukraine” written on the bottom, he immediately thought of Crimea and whether or not the location where the object was made was still considered Ukraine. The armed struggle in Eastern Europe at the time reminded him of the strange concept of war tourism, which is why he decided to turn the cup into a “flowery mortar grenade.”



Left: Broken recycling bin from Sculpture editorial office. Right: Re-use, re-use, re-use, 2015.

The best DC work originated with a broken lamp brought from the local branch of the Goethe-Institut. *Office-Fan of Change* poetically renders the historical relationship between Germany and the U.S. in the form of two computer fans lightly blowing air under a wooden lampshade inscribed with the text: “Please align air-flow Eastwards.” On his Web site, Sternberg explains, “Specifi-

cally the weakness of the wind in combination with its persistence pleased me. That wind of change, which has for better

and worse been blowing at Germany from the U.S. for the last 75 years or so, has clearly had a huge impact on German society and culture.” He also draws a connection to the Scorpions’ song “Wind of Change,” which he remembers listening to as a child after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Sternberg obviously cares about objects and the stories behind them, always asking people who come to his repair shops about their relationships to the objects they’re dropping off and why they find them useless. In Washington, many of the people who brought objects were artists themselves—like the one who got the painting drying rack made out of an old fan. Most of the objects were, in fact, broken, but some were

more symbolic. Two women brought in rings from broken relationships, for example, one of which Sternberg transformed into a fishhook.

The idea of re-using and recycling pervades the project. (Considering that Berlin is a city obsessed with clean energy and composting, it’s no surprise that Sternberg came up with the idea while living there.) Sternberg transformed our recycling bin into an exemplary repaired object. He broke the bin apart into the smallest possible pieces and reconstructed them into a vest, “stitched” together with multi-colored plastic zip ties. When I picked it up, Sternberg explained that he thought of the plastic pieces as the contemporary equivalent of ancient pottery shards. As he

writes on his Web site, “A pot breaks easily, but pottery shards last for thousands of years.” In a post-apocalyptic future, pieces of plastic like the ones from our recycling bin could be repurposed to create something new and potentially useful. Why not stitch them back together to make post-apocalyptic clothing?

Walking back from the gallery, carrying the vest on a plastic hanger (a nice touch), I got a lot of strange looks from fellow pedestrians. This could be the future of fashion if we don’t take care of our planet, I thought. It turns out “The Temporary Art Repair Shop” is much more than just a quirky project that encourages creative reuse. It also has a prophetic dark side.



Left: Failed sculpture from Sireen Jawdat. Right: *Drippy Black*, 2015.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RIGHT: CORINNA LORE / BOTH: COURTESY THE ARTIST