

Charles Ray  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 140

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*Tabletop, 1989*



Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Charles Ray's sculptural oeuvre has been the manner in which his works simultaneously allure the viewer in an almost hypnotic fashion while remaining somehow aloof and assertive of their separateness as sculptures. This tension between engagement and autonomy can be traced to the combined early influences on Ray's work of the English sculptor Anthony Caro and the American minimalists Richard Serra and Robert Morris. Ray absorbed from Caro an interest in problems of relationality, that is, in establishing what the critic Michael Fried has called a "syntactic" relation between the various elements in a work. Caro's influence can be seen, as well, in Ray's repeated use of the table as a basic structural device: from 1966 to 1974, Caro made over two hundred "table-top" sculptures whose integrity depended largely on their ability to establish themselves abstractly as pieces exclusively suited to be displayed on a table top. Similarly, of his recent table pieces, Ray has said, "My interest is in the structure between the table and the objects or the relationship between the table and the still life."<sup>1</sup> Unlike Caro's discrete objects, Ray's are actually connected to—in some cases, such as *Table* (1990), actually part of—the tables on which they sit, so that in a Brancusi-like twist, the "pedestal" and "sculpture" become one.

The work of Serra, Morris, and later, Dennis Oppenheim and Vito Acconci encouraged Ray to acknowledge both the performative aspect of his work as well as the importance of the physical and psychological presence of the viewer. In 1974,

Ray began incorporating his own body in various static, "sculptural" compositions. Unlike many of the so-called "body" artists of the time, Ray's intent was never merely to exploit his own presence as a means of evoking the viewer's visceral empathy, but primarily to radically expand the lexicon of possible sculptural forms.

While deriving certain of its attributes from a distinctly Modernist sculptural tradition, Ray's work incorporates simultaneously an irreverent everydayness of address that is more reminiscent of the anti-formal "readymades" of Duchamp or, to cite a more recent kindred spirit, the kitsch shelf-assemblages of Haim Steinbach. The objects on Ray's *Tabletop* (1989), for example, are almost excruciatingly mundane. When one finally recognizes that the plate and bowl and potted plant are rotating at an almost imperceptible speed, it is their very dullness, linked to this potently slow and inexorable pace, that makes the work seem horrific.

*Viral Research* (1986) similarly presents a rather ordinary physical effect, but laden with insidious implications. Here, Ray has connected each of the various glass vessels on the table with glass tubing, visible beneath the transparent surface of the table top. Introducing an amount of black printers' ink into this system, Ray achieves a concise visual illustration of the phenomenon of equilibrium: each vessel remains filled to precisely the same height. This work is not threatening in any obvious way—except perhaps in its fragility and the consequent possibility for the viewer to become stained. Indeed, it is the very possibility—or, as the piece's

formal structure would suggest, inevitability—of "contamination" that gives this work its queasy punch. "I can't really pin that piece down to one meaning," Ray has said. "The initial thing was that some people I know had died of AIDS and I wanted to reflect our cultural paranoia about the disease."<sup>2</sup>

*Table* (1990), one of Ray's most recent works, involves the merging of various objects on the table with the table itself, creating—since the objects are bottomless—a kind of Moebius effect in which outside and inside become one and the same, base and superstructure fused. The sense of the indefiniteness of space and form is exaggerated by the transparency of the materials used.

In a recent interview Ray said, "What I do at ten o'clock in the morning, I can do at ten o'clock at night. I can either work early in the morning or I can work late at night. It doesn't make a difference what I do everyday; if its hot or cold, it doesn't really make that much difference. When the sun goes down, it doesn't make that much difference in my life. I can drive the freeway any time of day. My life is like a peanut butter sandwich that you squashed across the tabletop."<sup>3</sup>

For Ray the table is much more than a pedestal brought down to earth; it functions, more specifically, as a metaphor for the flatness of contemporary society. In these works the artist articulates a cool indifference to the radical equalization of life's dimensions, to the unnerving drift of time and to the increasing disembodiment of place.

Charles Ray was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1953. He attended the University of Iowa and Rutgers University and has headed the sculpture department at UCLA since 1981. Ray currently lives in Tahunga, California.

Lawrence Rinder

<sup>1</sup> Lucinda Barnes, "Interview with Charles Ray," exhibition catalog, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California (1990), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ray, interview by Marc Selwyn, "New Art L.A.," *Flash Art*, no. 141 (Summer 1988), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, p. 10.

#### Works in MATRIX:

*Viral Research*, 1986, plexiglass, steel, ink, 32 x 53 x 36". Lent by Jeffrey Kerns.

*Tabletop*, 1989, mixed media, 44 x 52 1/2 x 35". Lent by the Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles.

*Table*, 1990, plexiglass and steel, ed. 3, 52 3/4 x 35 1/2 x 38 1/2". Lent by Eileen and Peter Norton.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Mercer Union, Toronto, Ontario, Canada '85; New Langton Arts, San Francisco '85; Feature, NYC '89; Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles '90; Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris, France '90; Interim Art, London, England '90; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA '90 (catalog).

Selected group exhibitions:

Feature, Chicago, *Nature* '87 (catalog); Milford Gallery, NYC, *Still Trauma* '88; 303 Gallery, NYC '88; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Biennial Exhibition* '89 (catalog); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Recent Drawings* '90 (catalog).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Clothier, Peter. "Charles Ray: Edgy, Provocative Presences," *Artnews* (Dec. '87), pp. 97-98.

Hugo, Joan. "Between Objects and Persona: The Sculpture Events of Charles Ray," *High Performance*, no. 30 ('85), pp. 26-29.

Knight, Christopher. "Sculptor Takes Himself Out of Picture," *Los Angeles Times* (Aug. 5 '90), Calendar, p. 103.

Pagel, David. "Vexed Sex," *Art Issues*, no. 9 (Feb. '90), pp. 11-16.

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