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■ Minerva Cuevas, *Drunker* (1995), video transferred to DVD, 1 hr 5 min. Photos courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City



Inebriationism

Alcohol, performance and paradox

JIM DROBNICK

One should always be drunk.

Charles Baudelaire, *Get Drunk* (1970 [1869]: 74)

Beyond the traditional offerings of wine and spirits at exhibition openings, alcohol has acquired unprecedented prominence in art and performance during the last two decades. Drinking in the art context is more than just entertainment, it is an embodied practice, but with an edge: alcohol's potency renders it a paradoxical consciousness-altering agent, capable of creating feelings of cordiality as well as releasing chaotic energies. This article analyses the performativity of alcohol from a threefold perspective: drinking as a performance methodology to produce artworks, events and behavioural states; alcohol as an inherently performative substance that is both the product of transformation (fermentation and distillation) and a transforming (intoxicating) beverage for those who consume it; and alcohol as a relational performance medium through its role in lubricating sociality, which is especially manifested in the burgeoning phenomenon of 'artists' bars' appearing in numerous exhibitions, museums and art fairs. By focusing on the performativity of alcohol in recent videos, process-based artworks, performances and participatory installations, this article explores how embodied encounters can combine pleasure with contemplation to address complex social and political issues. The stimulation provided by alcohol adds a singular dimension to the aesthetic experience of these works – one that can be unpredictable, improvisational, even anarchic. It is through the paradox of intoxication (whether mild or

extreme, convivial or disorderly) that meeting places are constructed, conversations begun, self-reflection engaged, inhibitions lost and the special cultural role of alcohol itself examined.

GET DRUNK: INTOXICATION AS METHODOLOGY

Alcohol figures prominently in the myth of artistic creativity, particularly since the advent of Romanticism, when altered states, self-expression, intuition and the sublime captivated the interests of artists. Many types of substances have been used to seek release from rationalism and to derange the senses (as famously advocated by Arthur Rimbaud), but alcohol has perhaps been the most available and the most persistent over time. Absinthe flowed freely in late-nineteenth-century cabarets frequented by van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, while in the twentieth century all varieties of alcohol contributed to the early deaths of Amedeo Modigliani, Jackson Pollock and Martin Kippenberger. It almost does not matter what personality type the artist enacts – bon vivant, bohemian, social outsider, jet-setter – alcohol plays a role. Even before becoming a professional artist, such as during art school years, alcohol can be a significant part of the rite of passage into one's artistic persona and a form of communal bonding with creative colleagues.

Charles Baudelaire's advice to those experiencing the weight of modernity – 'always be drunk' (1970: 74) – may be the signature dictum of an as-yet-to-be theorized art movement: inebriationism. Despite the poet's elaboration on the various means of getting drunk (with wine, poetry or virtue), the literal

meaning has seemingly predominated for artists since the nineteenth century. According to psychologists Allan Beveridge and Graeme Yorston (1999), the creative aspects of alcohol can be parsed four ways: transcendence, shock, experimentation and exceptionalism. The first considers drunkenness as a vehicle of 'mystical transport', that is, as a catalyst for a transcendent shift in awareness unavailable to the sober mind. As much as artists desire to be visionaries and to create transformative works, intoxication provides the means to reach an otherworldly state. Yet the effects of drunkenness can also be more down to earth, anti-social, and disruptive to those around the artist. The life of debauchery and drinking can be integral to the bohemian lifestyle and its rejection of bourgeois standards of propriety and responsibility. The damaging behaviour brought about by alcohol can be a proclamation of rebellion for the sake of art, the hedonism an expression of irreconcilability with repressive conventions – of *épater les bourgeois* (Beveridge and Yorston 1999: 646). Alcohol also plays upon the trope of the artist as a seeker of extreme sensations, where the intentional delirium provides access to extraordinary experiences and energies. Potent spirits are a form of experimentation aiming to disinhibit the logical mind and liberate creative forces that lead to perceptual renewal. Bruce Conner, for instance, praised alcohol's ability to kill brain cells because doing so elevated consciousness (1996: 327). Yet the damage alcohol wreaks must also be taken into account. Here is where the artist's exceptional nature factors in: drinking may be excessive and depraved, but it evidences a sensitive soul, sparks inspiration and brings forth moments of genius. Artists sacrifice themselves for the sake of art and their contribution to society. Prodigious drinking thus demonstrates one's intensity and heroism (Beveridge and Yorston 1999: 648). These four rationales about the use of alcohol – for mystical insight, the transgression of norms, adventurous exploits and the signifying of difference – carry both mythic and real overtones in the lives of artists.

As prevalent as alcohol has been in the history of artistic practice, the drinking has usually occurred either before or after creative activity. If one did not know that Francis Bacon or Mark Rothko were incorrigible drinkers, one could not necessarily tell from their paintings. By contrast, artists since the 1960s have not only drunk heavily, they have integrated alcohol into their methodology *during* the creation of artworks. Here artists take the drinking that always existed behind the scenes, in private, and placed it in the foreground as a strategic and conceptual part of their work. Getting intoxicated is openly acknowledged, performed or documented for the audience, as well as serving as the subject of the work itself. For instance, Gilbert and George, the artist duo famous for their 'living sculpture' performances where art and life are inextricably entwined, utilized alcohol as a method and theme in their early works. The film *Gordon's Makes Us Drunk* (1972) shows the artists drinking in a nondescript interior and repeating the phrase of the title with slight variations ('very drunk' appears mid-way, and shifts to 'very, very drunk' by the end). The calm demeanour as they take their sips challenges viewers to make sense of such a banal activity, as well as to consider the place of the classic beverage in British history, tradition and sensibility. In some ways, such a display of drinking ironically comments on the sober tenets of conceptual art, which radically defined art as an idea or state of mind; if so, what ideas or states would be generated by consuming a bottle of Gordon's?¹ Another work, *Balls: The Evening Before the Morning After – Drinking Sculpture* (1972), renders the act of inebriation in black-and-white photographs, and is named after the Balls Brothers Wine Bar that the artists frequented in London. The approximately 100 images, amassed in a constellation of disjointed frames, deliberately show blurred and choppy scenes taken from odd angles. The cubist arrangement both documents the artists' soiree and approximates the feeling of getting drunk for the viewer. After all, one cannot drink heavily without experiencing the full spectrum of effects, from euphoria at the beginning,

¹ When one takes into account that 1972 witnessed a number of momentous social crises – miners' strikes, massive unemployment, the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin, Bloody Sunday – the artists' affectless performance serves up a disturbing commentary on denial in the British character, particularly when the alcohol facilitates passiveness and detachment, bears the royal seal of approval, and is accompanied by the playing of Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*.

disorientation at going too far, and then ultimately the hangover, as hinted by the title.

Precisely investigating those effects is the *modus operandi* of Francis Alÿs and Bryan Lewis Saunders, who both ingested alcohol and narcotics to test the changes in perception and the feelings they would induce. In *Narcoturismo* ('Narcotourism') (1996), Alÿs walked the city of Copenhagen every day for a week while high from the specific effects of a different drug, including hashish, speed, heroin, cocaine, Valium, and ecstasy, for at least fourteen hours. For the experience of 'spirits', he recorded: 'Difficulties in connecting mentally with my physical state. Inner resistance. Inability to trust my reflexes or sight. I walk clumsily among many strange occurrences'.² Saunders also took a single drug per day in his project *Under the Influence* (2001), but his experiment took the more graphic form of drawing self-portraits. Among the dozens of narcotics, psychedelics and other pharmaceuticals, he also subjected himself to absinthe, alcohol (unspecified) and pruno (homemade prison wine). While his internal state is not articulated in words, the astonishing range of styles in the self-portraits illustrate a remarkable diversity of mental and physical reactions. After their respective projects, Alÿs and Saunders both drifted into a negative spiral – depression for Alÿs and a hospital stay for Saunders, who was diagnosed with mild brain damage (fortunately, it was reversible) (Saunders 2008). The two exercises reveal spoilt expectations; while at the outset the logic may have been to explore the shifting perceptions of the self under (relatively) controlled conditions, which mimics what many people do recreationally with drugs anyway, the results prove the volatility of the substances and the fragility of the ego.

Inebriationism most closely aligns with alcoholism in performances that carry intoxication to its most distressing conclusions – anti-social behaviour and unconsciousness. Ben Vautier delves into alcohol's less appealing aspects with *Drink I* and *Drink II* (both 1962), two instruction-based artworks. The former

provides a command to interfere with the stage's main activities: 'While other pieces are being performed, one performer sits drinking in a corner of the stage. He gets drunk and starts being a nuisance'. The latter goes a step further to become a spectacle in itself: 'Performers drink as much as they can drink, as fast as possible' (Friedman et al. 2002). Invoking the persona of the 'mean drunk', 'being a nuisance' incorporates the dark comedy of the soused heckler into the very structure of a Fluxus performance event, even as it counters (and perhaps satirizes) the movement's vaunted collaborative ethos.³ *Drink II*, while not directly specifying alcohol, implies it nonetheless. Openly encouraging binge drinking, the instruction leaves unsaid what, exactly, is the determining endpoint of 'as much as they can drink', but in the real world it generally means passing out. Both works seem intent on puncturing the ebullient postwar culture of boozing it up, à la the drinking-while-singing performances of Dean Martin and the Rat Pack, by exchanging the era's notable martini-infused jollity for alcohol's crueler, nastier side.⁴

It is not clear whether Vautier's instructions were ever publicly performed, but three decades later, two artists staged drinking performances that tested the limits and ethics of consumption. Minerva Cuevas' *Drunker* (1995) documents the artist drinking shots of tequila and progressively descending into a state of oblivion. Seated at a school desk, she writes a series of contradictory sentences, some of which become increasingly erroneous as the bottle is drained: 'I drink not to feel, I'm not drunk, I drink to talk, I'm not drunk, I drink to forget ...' (Fisher 2011: 57). The claim to numb her faculties is successful, for the artist relates that in her gradual disintegration she does not remember the last twenty minutes of the performance. But what is it that she tries to forget, to not feel, yet to also articulate? Jean Fisher reads into the contradictory messages the compulsions and failures to deal with trauma, especially that of the suffering inflicted upon Latin American countries by colonialism and capitalism (57). That tequila is both the method

² Francis Alÿs, text from the documentation is integrated into the artwork.

³ Vautier's *Drunk I* could be said to harken back to such antagonistic and anarchic performances as Arthur Cravan's scandalous 'lecture' on Dada (1917), in which he arrived at the venue stupendously drunk, stripped off his clothes and heaved invectives at the audience of New York City socialites, eventually to be handcuffed by police and hauled off the stage (Buffet-Picabia 1979: 15–16). The crucial difference between Cravan and Vautier is that the former exemplified the avant-garde's dictum of '*l'épater le bourgeois*' while the latter contravened the amiable collectivity of artists themselves.

⁴ A performance score by George Maciunas also appears to skewer cultural pretensions about alcohol. *Duet for Full Bottle and Wine Glass* (n.d.) provides a list of actions to take with the eponymous props. By ending the score with 'sipping/rinsing mouth/spitting', Maciunas seems to parody wine-tasting events. See Friedman et al. (2002).

■ Minerva Cuevas, *Drunker* (1995), video transferred to DVD, 1 hr 5 min.

Photo courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City



of Cuevas' action and a major Mexican export underscores the conflicted nature of dealing with trauma when all options are painful, whether they be talking, forgetting or feeling. Gillian Wearing's *Drunk* (1997–9) also presents the alcoholic stupor for viewers' contemplation, though it is not the artist who drinks but a group of street kids to whom she provided alcohol so that she could film the result. The footage is gruesome; it records working-class teenagers bingeing on booze, taunting each other, staggering, fighting, dribbling and eventually collapsing, on three wide screens. Here the fashionability of intoxication is superseded by the reality of addiction (the drinkers are filmed against a white backdrop reminiscent of Richard Avedon's Calvin Klein ads). No transcendence exists in this boozing, just physical and psychological wreckage. An ethical questionability arises, though, and perches on the shoulders of the artist; she argues that the teens were drinking anyway, and would have done so regardless of her supplying free alcohol (Hopkins 2003). Yet, the voyeurism

called forth in the video is uneasy, not the least because the over-sized screens envelop the viewer to the degree that one can almost smell the sweat and wretchedness of the drunks. If alcohol is a proud rite of adolescence, this is bravado gone awry, emptied of any lingering element of heroism.

The striking aspect of artists using alcohol as a method for producing artwork is its immersiveness: to explore intoxication requires being in or inducing the state itself. By drinking, the artists insert themselves into that chaotic arena where the feelings of joy, peril and weirdness of inebriation are made tangibly apparent. Even in the case of Wearing, who does not drink on camera, she purchases the alcohol and so becomes integral to the subsequent actions of the drinkers. Whereas representations of drinking tend to moralize the topic by objectifying and positioning the drinker as an other, often an outcast, in the above works being drunk is problematized from the inside by the presence of the artist and his/her willingness to engage it personally.

BREWING UP TROUBLE: ARTIST AS
DISTILLER, GALLERY AS DISTILLERY

It is interesting to note how, in recent decades, the art/alcohol dyad parallels the proliferation and greater viability of artisanal breweries and distilleries, as well as the serious articulation of an aesthetics of wine and fine liquor by philosophers. The makers of alcoholic beverages now often claim characteristics traditionally attributed to artists, on the one hand, such as innovation, originality and personality, and those that typically pertain to artworks, on the other, such as beauty, balance and complexity (see Crane 2007; Korsmeyer 2002). What has transpired, then, is a twofold shift: while artists have incorporated alcoholic substances into their works, the liquor industry has reconfigured itself in the guise of fine art. In this context, inebriationism involves a kind of seeing double, whereby distillers poach the aura of art for their own products, and artists perform a reciprocal poaching of the aura of alcohol, though often with the supplement of a critical element.

Alcohol is intrinsically performative: as much as it alters those who drink it, the substance is itself the result of a multi-step conversion of base ingredients into an intoxicating brew. The end-product of fermentation and distillation, interestingly, not only records flavours of the originating elements, but also traces of their specificities of place and time. Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, an artist duo who emigrated from Russia and worked in New Jersey in the 1980s, produced *Absinthal Vodka* (1989) made from wormwood growing in vacant lots and broken sidewalks of the faded industrial town of Bayonne (Wallach 1989). Rather than recalling the nineteenth century's magical fascination with absinthe, Bayonne's version references the breakdown of the American working-class dream. That the label proclaims the vodka to represent the 'true spirit of New Jersey' is little to cheer about; the bottle may more likely deliver an anaesthetizing solace to a downtrodden populace eking it out in a polluted landscape.

During a performance tour of the city in 1989, Melamid wryly commented that with Bayonne 'the aftertaste is better than the taste itself' (Drobnick 1995). A more bucolic scene inspired Anya Gallaccio to work with oenologists and vintners in Sonoma County to produce *Motherlode Zinfandel* (2005–7). Part of a larger curatorial project commissioning artists to respond to the California landscape, Gallaccio chose grapes, a significant crop in that locality. Since her work often focuses on the natural cycles of organic materials, the unpredictable aspects of growing, ripening, harvesting, fermenting and blending wine from scratch suited her aesthetic sensibility. To capture the heterogeneous character of the region and its *terroir*, she chose grapes from five areas with distinct personalities that would, when combined, yield a sixth concoction capturing all of the county's diverse flavours. For the artist and vintner, making wine seemed akin to making art because both involved intuition, knowledge, attention to materials and experimentation.⁵

Besides using the equipment of an established distillery, artists have utilized the gallery itself as a site of production. Here the exhibition space becomes not just a place where alcohol-based artwork is displayed or performed, but also generated. The neutral architecture of the gallery converts into a distillery where the magical performance of distillation occurs within the purview of the exhibition. Whether the apparatus appears homemade and makeshift or industrially engineered, the goals are similar – to place the production of alcohol under scrutiny in order to examine its cultural role. Two notable instances of distillation apparatuses in the gallery showcase the making of alcohol, and make a frothy social commentary about culture and intoxication. For Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL), a multidisciplinary art and design collective, the distillery is entwined with social control and the exploitation of human resources in an ultra-efficient, technocratic future. Alcohol is the addictive, narcotic component that keeps citizens blissfully sedated in a feedback loop

⁵ Some of the wine was consumed during a meal performance, *After the Gold Rush*, but for the most part, the artist left it to the collector to decide whether to drink it or not – the ephemerality of the wine is part of the work. Gallaccio has also distilled another multiple, *Eau de Vie de Pommes* (2001), from apples grown in the Swiss countryside (Kino 2006).

■ Komar & Melamid, *Absinthal Vodka* (1989), bottles containing homemade vodka and wormwood. Photo D. James Dee, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



■ Komar & Melamid in front of Bergen Point Brass Foundry, Bayonne, New Jersey (1989). Photo D. James Dee, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



■ (opposite page) Dan Mihaltianu, *Firewater* (1996), performance and installation with video, distillation apparatus and public participation. Views of the artist building the still and the installation overall. Photos courtesy of the artist

of food, excrement, and energy generation. In works such as *The Technocrat* (2003) and *Mini Alcohol Installation + Multifunnel* (2004), seemingly rational design principles are employed towards dystopian ends. Tubes radiate from a central still, leading to funnels inserted into the mouths of generic, humanoid forms. Such installations imagine a society where citizens are fattened with low-cost food in order to produce copious amounts of faecal matter, which is then used as fuel to further drive the system. The pleasure of consuming alcohol serves as the inducement to sacrifice freedom and enjoy one's enslavement within a regime of biotechnological exploitation. AVL's equipment, however, remains mostly on the level of symbolism since the pipes and vats only represent the terrifying potential of science gone astray and engineering taken to its logical and amoral 'solution'.⁶

By contrast, Dan Mihaltianu has actually produced various kinds of liquor in do-it-yourself mini-distilleries built from scratch and using fruits and seeds available from flora in the gallery's vicinity. Since most art galleries are located in cities, the artist's ability to find usable plants is surprisingly resourceful. Even in a landscape of concrete and asphalt, it is possible to discover a *terroir* in the parks and sidewalks that can yield a distinctive brew. For instance, during the weeks of his installation at Art in General in New York City, *Firewater* (1996), gallerygoers witnessed Mihaltianu conducting a durational performance of constructing a distillation apparatus from sections of copper and tubing; cooking, fermenting and distilling raw materials gathered from the neighbourhood, which emanated a sweet, apple-like aroma; and finally bottling the 'essence' of the city in flasks scavenged from its own streets.⁷ New labels with drawings, photographs and texts reflected upon the history and character of the United States, seen through the eyes of the visiting Romanian-born artist. Besides identifying some of the quirky traits of American culture, many of Mihaltianu's labels alluded to alcohol's intimate and intrusive effects on culture, both personal



⁶ Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (2004). AVL has produced an operational still in *Workshop for Alcohol and Medicines* (1998), a shipping container outfitted with distilling equipment, whereby the user can decide to produce either illegal spirits or healing elixirs, depending on their ethical stance.

⁷ This work is part of a long-term project entitled *Great Distillations* that started with *Nineteen-Fifty-Four* at the Kuensterhaus Bethanien in Berlin (1994) and recently featured *Das Kapital – Distillation* in London (2015).



⁸ *Firewater* combines both the artist's personal history (he has lived in New York and has relatives who have emigrated to the USA) and official history (US and Romanian interactions during the Cold War, such as Richard Nixon's visit to Romania, and Nicolae Ceausescu's visit to Washington) (Mihaltianu 2015). *Firewater* also involved video and audio components, as well as audience participation, where the public was invited to taste the distillate, discuss and exchange ideas about alcohol, and share stories, recipes and distillation techniques (Mihaltianu 2017).

⁹ *Firewater's* title no doubt comments on alcohol's role in the colonization and attempt at eradication of the aboriginal population in North America, particularly when liquor was distributed with the intent of undermining Indigenous peoples' cultural fabric. Other projects in Mihaltianu's distillation series include *Balt-Orient-Express Schnaps* (1996) (schnapps referencing the famous train ride from Berlin to Bucharest and remarking on the trials of moving between Eastern Bloc countries), *KulturKonjak* (1997) (cognac made in Vienna evoking the contradictions of the former imperial monarchy), and *The Frontiers Tales* (1996) (a beer made in Canterbury reflecting upon experiences of crossing borders and confronting customs imbroglions).

¹⁰ Mihaltianu (1996) recalls that the illegality of the alcohol production was felt more intently in New York, where people were reluctant to take even a sip, skittish as they were about negative side effects; in European countries, visitors gulped down the brew whenever it was offered.

■ Dan Mihaltianu, *Firewater* (1996), details of bottles. Photos courtesy of the artist

and public: Richard Nixon is captured in a photo-op holding a bottle of beer, a tequila billboard offers itself as comfort to rejected suitors, a lurid *Life* magazine exposé documents a 'bad trip'.⁸ The panoply of contradictory messages about alcohol reflects *Firewater's* origin in an unlikely mash of foraged fruits and plants, as well as the vexed cultural backdrop of alcohol in politics, advertising, journalism and personal lives.⁹ Alcohol plays many roles in the identity of a nation and its individual residents, both positive and negative, rewarding and devastating.

Despite the differences between AVL's and Mihaltianu's intentions, both turn the gallery into a performing manufacturing facility that forces a deliberation upon the interconnection between alcohol's organic origins, the body's biological processes and the resulting social and political effects. The materials of nature, combined with the activities of enzymes and bacteria, produce an inebriating liquid that interacts potently with those who drink it,

which then carries agency into the making of a social order and a nation's history. For AVL, the cycle of consumption, digestion, excretion and regulation yields a brew that delivers ultimate, dehumanizing control. For Mihaltianu, the foraging, fermentation, bottling and rumination yield an elixir for understanding otherness. The artists' distillery apparatuses transform the purposely dull white walls of the gallery into a heady studio of metamorphosis where raw substances become intoxicating beverages. The distillation process in many ways mimics the process of art making – anything organic can be thrown into the hopper to create alcohol, just as any experience can be the grist for art. It is also important to note that the gallery is an illegal location for alcohol production, which is one of the most regulated of ingestible items.¹⁰ The gallery thus acts as the catalyst for transgressions of authority, both in the realm of aesthetics (for art) and of liquor laws (for rogue manufacturing).





■ Los Carpinteros, *Güiro* (2012), Absolut Art Bar, Art Basel, Miami, installation view. Photo Roberto Chamorro, courtesy Sean Kelly New York and Absolut



■ Nadim Abbas, *Apocalypse Postponed* (2013), Absolut Art Bar, Art Basel, Hong Kong, installation view. Photo courtesy Absolut

ARTISTS' BARS: BOTTOMS UP!

Most of my examples of performance and alcohol have so far offered cautionary lessons about excess and demonstrated the negative consequences of indulgence. Since the ascendancy of relational aesthetics in the 1990s, however, participatory occasions featuring alcohol and drinking have primarily focused on engaging audiences through hospitable, fun and congenial encounters. Before I address an example of such works, it is interesting to consider what is probably the most visible contemporary commingling of art and alcohol: art fairs, in particular Art Basel, which has iterations in Miami Beach and Hong Kong, as well as its namesake city in Switzerland. A deal with Absolut vodka, and its cultural arm, the Absolut Art Bureau, has generated a number of artists' bars that have attracted notable media attention. No opening would be complete without alcohol, and Art Basel, among other art fairs, now considers it a missed opportunity for revenue if a distillery or liquor distributor is not signed up for a sponsorship. Visibility during a short-lived but exhilarating event such as an art fair, which caters to a high-end class of collectors, dealers, curators and connoisseurs, is now irresistible for name brand luxury purveyors such as Moët, Hennessy, Ruinart, Krug and especially Absolut, reported to be the most popular spirit in the world. True to the company's art-savvy advertising, it uses the sponsorship privilege to facilitate artists' creative production – elaborate themed installations that serve alcohol, provide a stage for talks, performances and music, and are accompanied by a 'cocktail collection' of artist-designed drink recipes featuring Absolut vodka.¹¹ For the moneyed patrons of Art Basel and other fairs, Absolut's 'art bars' are functional oases where one can find both relaxation and reinvigoration amidst the otherwise frantic and enervating art-dealing context.¹²

As populist and enjoyable as Absolut's art bars are, they tend to be judged sceptically if not dismissed outright by art commentators. Some of the reaction pertains to the art fairs' explicit mercantilism, tainting every artwork

in their domain. Art fairs originated to develop markets outside of the dominant centres of New York, Paris and London. Their evolution into a mainstay of the art world in the 1990s–2000s, though, occurred partly because organizers realized that some compensatory features had to be mixed in to temper the collecting frenzy of the one-percenters and provide engagement for a more general audience of non-purchasing fairgoers. A significant addition was the commissioning of installations and participatory projects by emerging and established artists, of which the Absolut art bars form a recent variation. While there is no doubt respect for the artists Absolut has chosen – to date they include an international range of artists from diverse aesthetic positions, such as Los Carpinteros, Jeremy Shaw, Ry Rocklen, Adrian Wong, Nadim Abbas, Mickalene Thomas and Yazan Khalili – ambivalence remains about the underlying motives: Are the art bars opportunistic? Are they compromised by the association with Absolut? Can entertainment for the elite maintain a critical edge? Can pleasurable encounters be taken seriously as art?

If one steps back from Absolut's involvement and considers the works on their own, their aesthetic merit stands out. The projects, like traditional artworks, are authored and titled. All are thoughtfully conceptualized, manifest socially relevant themes, and tend to self-reflexively comment on the context of the fair. Aesthetically, they are consistent with the recognized practices of the artists, and can be complex, even virtuosic, in execution. The artists will even admit to being challenged by the commission and being forced to expand their practice in innovative ways (see Bailey 2013). For example, Los Carpinteros, an artist collaborative from Cuba, produced *The Güiro* (2012) at Art Basel Miami Beach that foregrounded Cuban culture and its conflicted situation in the United States. The large-scale, ovoid, gridded construction alluded to a Cuban musical instrument as well as a panopticon, so that patrons sipping at the bar not only could partake of Cuban musical traditions (and culinary ones too as the drinks featured tropical

¹¹ Collaboration is an integral part of the projects, and Absolut supplies a professional mixologist to assist the artists (Absolut n.d.).

¹² Absolut's art bars have been staged not only at Art Basel locations, but also documenta and Art Dubai, among other exhibitions (Absolut n.d.).



■ Nadim Abbas, *Apocalypse Postponed* (2013), Absolut Art Bar, Art Basel, Hong Kong, installation view. Photo courtesy Absolut



■ Mickalene Thomas, *Better Days* (2013), Absolut Art Bar, Art Basel, Basel, installation view. Photo Roberto Chamorro, © Mickalene Thomas, courtesy Absolut



fruits and spices), but they were also subjected to surveillance from within and without the structure (Halperin 2012). In another example, at the 2013 Hong Kong Art Basel, Nadim Abbas' *Apocalypse Postponed* ensconced visitors in a sandbag-walled 'cyberpunk bunker', filled with dystopic videos of alienation, technology gone awry, and an overall siege mentality from a future war (Absolut n.d.). The drinks combined aspects of Asian culture with futuristic nutraceuticals, such as lapsang tea, puffed rice and ginseng on the one hand, and calcium tablets and space-age vacuum drink packs on the other.

The bar by Mickalene Thomas for Art Basel took a more historical, familial angle by revisiting the 1970s parties that her mother threw to raise money for those suffering from sickle-cell anaemia. *Better Days* (2013) blended vintage furniture and household items with movies from the era, along with works by the artist's friends, to create a homey installation with stuffed chairs, wood panelling and shag rugs. As the artist remarked, visiting the bar was like entering one of her painted tableaux, with the added complement of DJs, performances and drinks conjuring the era's domestic vibe – jello with fresh fruit, watermelon and kahlua (Bailey 2013). From these brief descriptions, it is clear that the art bars are not just superficial decor, clever stage sets, or promotional displays, they are immersive, participatory interventions. To dismiss them as a mere extension of Absolut's advertising ignores the fact that most large-scale projects will involve a funder of some ilk. Established artists are familiar with dealing with collaborations and funders, and generally know how to maintain their artistic integrity within financial realities. Besides, who wouldn't want to enter into a fleshed-out version of one of Thomas's paintings or photographs, with the added amenity of a retro gelatin cocktail in hand? Still, the presence of Absolut is a dominant and influential factor. The hyper-oxygenated atmosphere of the art fair may be too matrixed with the sensibilities of dealers and collectors to give the artists' intentions just measure. Deal making can easily segue from the display cubicle and halls of the fair to the

seats and environment of an artist's bar, and so appreciation of the artwork risks compromise as just another backdrop to conducting business. Would a museum, then, be a better location? Museums themselves are not free from market forces; economics are engrained into any cultural institution, even when masked by rationales of education and moral elevation. But they can offer alcohol for free, or at least inexpensively, and so the profit motive is less pronounced. And artists would be less beholden to an alcohol sponsor's overt marketing and publicity machinery. Yet, there is a frisson at play in artists' bars situated in the museum as the presence of alcohol creates tensions between the history of the institution, its mandates and audience dynamics (see Drobnick 2017).

One way to counteract the context of the museum is to defuse expectations of virtuosity and preciousness. The bar installations by Dean Baldwin, for example, deliberately employ an amateur, DIY, scavenging aesthetic, or what the artist self-proclaims as 'dorkiness' (see Clintberg 2012). *Mini-Bar* (2007) wryly appropriates the sensibility of the eponymous hotel room liquor repository as a walk-in, claustrophobic tavern stocked with miniature, single-shot bottles served by the artist/bartender. It comfortably accommodates only about three patrons, but during a typical event many more can be observed squeezing in and elbowing to get a drink. While ostensibly embodying relational aesthetics' conviviality, *Mini-Bar* literally (and wittily) fulfils the 'micro' aspect of Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) concept of microtopia. *Mini-Bar* takes seriously the notion of pleasure. Contrary to the conventional museal *habitus*, à la Bernard Berenson or Kenneth Clark, where bodily enjoyments are held in check so as to cultivate visual epiphanies, Baldwin disidentifies with bourgeois rectitude and unleashes a populist, inclusive club-like scene. Breaking etiquette about 'no touching', sobriety and quiet contemplation, *Mini-Bar* disrupts the museum's Apollonian ambience with a carnivalesque atmosphere of noisy, tipsy, entertaining transgression. Baldwin's particular ingenuity involves exploiting an under-utilized

opportunity in museum budgets. While funds for artists' commissions have been cut, institutions still need to launch their exhibitions. By savvily commandeering the money normally used for catering, the artist strikes a deal to both produce his performance installations and to stage the museums' opening events.¹⁵

Another method for destabilizing the museum context involves the incongruity of the artist's bar. Baldwin's *Ship in a Bottle* (2011) comprises a 1952 Nordic sailboat extensively outfitted with vodka, wine and other spirits and bar paraphernalia, along with snacks such as sardines, biscuits, jams and pickles (Adams 2015). The beached sailboat serves as the centrepiece of Baldwin's solo exhibition 'Q.W.Y.C.' (2015) at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, and commemorates the closing of the museum due to the building's conversion to condominiums. Q.W.Y.C. refers to a fictional boating association – the Queen West Yacht Club – an elite-sounding name but one sporting a cartoonish emblem with broken harpoons, a bandaged life preserver, a dripping bathtub stopper, and puddles with a discarded bottle, oysters and scuba gear (the cost of a membership, apparently, is just \$2). Drinkers partaking of the boat's alcohol and provisions act out a role somewhere between an upmarket version of *Gilligan's Island's* castaways and a downmarket version of *Howard's Way's* socialites; in either case, *Ship in a Bottle* satirizes the vicissitudes of gentrification in a vital arts neighbourhood and memorializes the unmooring of one of its main institutions.

Alcohol tends to cause blurred vision, blinding some critics, perhaps, from being able to see past Baldwin's evocation of cordiality. For instance, one reviewer asks whether the sociality elicited by the artist's bar is 'sincere' (Bruneau 2015). Amazingly, after fifty years of poststructuralist theory and forty years of postmodernism, artworks are still being challenged on the basis of authenticity. That performance-oriented works tend to be the main target of such critiques reveals a persistent distrust of participatory, sensory, pleasure-based works involving multiple and paradoxical levels of affect and intention. If

¹⁵ Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2011). Fittingly, Baldwin has earned a Smart Serve license from the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (Adams 2015).

■ (opposite page) Dean Baldwin, *Minibar* (2007). Photos courtesy the artist



everyday socialities seem more ‘natural’ or ‘real’ than those in the art world, it is only because their scripts are more familiar, normalized, habitual and rehearsed, as performance studies theorists from Erving Goffman to Richard Schechner and beyond have demonstrated.¹⁴ The fundamental question regarding the sociality of artists’ bars is not whether it is sincere or real, but how can such conditions so readily engender hearty participation? What uses, aesthetic or otherwise, can drinking be put to?

Another superficial criticism links artists’ bars to the phenomenon of the ‘experience economy’ recently transforming the retail and marketing strategies (as if art had not always been involved with experience). As outlined by B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore (2011), the experience economy no longer emphasizes the intrinsic qualities of the product, but the broader spectrum of lifestyle and theatricality surrounding the brand’s overall identity (see also Schmitt 1999). Creating memorable events – that is, experiences – for buyers is the key to generating consumer desire and loyalty. Experiential artworks, whether in the museum or elsewhere, operate in a profoundly different manner than experiences in the retail sector. Firstly, many of the experiences in situations such as artists’ bars are unpredictable. Even when the parameters seem fairly defined, the bringing together of people and alcohol can conjure unusual and eccentric results. Secondly, the experiential turn in art and museums seeks not to disassemble visitors’ critical faculties or to reinforce an unthinking loyalty, it opens the aesthetic encounter to the agency of beholders so that new and diverse knowledges can be produced. There is pleasure, but mixed with criticality; fun, mixed with reflection; entertainment, mixed with investigation. Participatory performances veer towards being affirmative and pleasing – otherwise why would people want to join the event? Fun, though, should not be taken at face value; playfulness can always harbour serious content. For artists’ bars, the pleasure of drinking softens one’s defences so that issues and critiques slide in under the cover of enjoyment.

POSTSCRIPT: THE MORNING AFTER

The accelerated pace of the contemporary art world signified by the proliferation of alcohol cultivates a bingeing, hyperactive sensibility (parties, openings, biennials, art fairs, instant blogging, top-ten lists), and psychoactive substances may seem essential to meeting the numerous demands to attend exhibitions, know the latest trends and players, and withstand the information flow. The pressure to keep up can afflict any member of the scene, whether they be artist, dealer, curator, critic, collector, consultant or merely an interested observer. What should one do when the stimulants fail to waken, the sedatives stop numbing, or the alcohol damages more than it helps?

Benjamin Blanke and Claudia Kapp's *Cold Turkey – An Invitation* (2014) offered assistance as the logical and compassionate endpoint to the art and alcohol phenomenon. Conceived for the series of projects titled Hotel Marienbad sponsored by the KW Institute for Art, Berlin, *Cold Turkey* recognized that outside of the 'iconography of inebriation' and the epic

quantity of 'Dionysian celebrations' in the art world, 'the destructive element of drug consumption [can be] easily eclipsed' (KW Institute 2010). The artists' solution? A detox programme held in a hotel room with actual medical and therapeutic specialists from the Berlin hospital Gemeinschaftskrankenhaus Havelhöhe. In the tradition of European spas, combined with the method of radical intervention, strung-out art professionals could receive treatment for addictions in a confidential, comfortable retreat. It is an open secret that blue-chip galleries offer rehabilitation for their mainstay, celebrity artists. Blanke and Kapp extended that kind of premium support service to anyone in the broader art population seeking recovery. As much as performance involves embodiment and states of consciousness, the care of artistic selves is a practice that often goes unrecognized until a moment of crisis forces the need for intervention and guidance.

Alcohol's connection to performance can best be characterized as paradoxical. It is a substance generating creative altered states

¹⁴ On the 'scriptedness' of drinking and sociality across cultures, see Wilson (2006).



■ (opposite page) Dean Baldwin, *Ship in a Bottle (Le Bateau ivre)* (2011). Photos courtesy the artist

■ (this page) Benjamin Blanke and Claudia Kapp, *Cold Turkey – An Invitation* (2014), performance-installation at Hotel Marienbad 009. Photos courtesy of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

yet it can lead to complete unconsciousness; it is an intoxicating and transformative material that is also the product of transformation itself. Moreover, as a lubricant for forms of sociality in the art world, it both helps and hinders the appreciation of art. Beyond simply providing a buzz, the performativity of alcohol presents an opportunity to shift consciousness, extend a conceptual challenge, disrupt expectations and offer a provocation to consider the act of drinking in personal, social and political ways.

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