

From: Justin Beal <mail@justinbeal.com>
Subject: The Un/happy Ending of Jules Dassin's Thieves' Highway
Date: September 7, 2006 11:49:59 PM EDT

Q: WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN FURNITURE? DO YOU SEE IT AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN DESIGN AND SCULPTURE? CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR OWN WORK IN THOSE TERMS?

A: There is a Marcel Breuer chair at the Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut that was Breuer's prototype for his famous tubular steel chairs and was given as a gift to Joseph Albers. It was made with a cut-up Peugeot bicycle frame [1] screwed together to approximate the desired form. It still has the decals from the original bike. It is a great example to me of the space where the hand fits into what is historically written as an industrial process of manufacture. What interests me about this chair specifically is how clearly it illustrates the fact that most iconic modern furniture is designed with found, often industrial, materials that are simply cut and joined. In this sense, modernist design is largely defined by the elimination of "craft" in a traditional sense, by which I mean to include a wide range of specialized hand-crafts including carving,



1

I learned shortly after the completion of this text that it was actually an Adler bicycle that inspired Breuer's design and that he actually used tubular

steel from Mannesmann to make the prototypes for the Wassily Chair. Apparently, the Peugeot decals exist only in my memory.



casting, weaving, lacquering, etc. The process of design is reduced to a series of three operations -- finding, cutting and joining. There is a connection here between sculpture and design as well. The fact that Marcel Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel preceded Breuer's prototypes by nearly a decade provides a connection between the readymade and the conception of modern design. I was thinking about this recently when I was looking at Gabriel Orozco's Four Bicycles, which employs a similar operation of cutting and rejoining. In an essay on Orozco, Benjamin Buchloh emphasizes this cut as "the shifting of a classical sculptural procedure on to the body of the commercially designed object." Elements of the chair, for example, have been re-processed to make another product and thereby submitted both to the operation that produced them in the first place and to a sculptural act. The cut is the dominant gesture in this group of sculptures. The heightened awareness of the edge that necessarily results from these cuts becomes the central point of focus; a focus that gets further complicated as the material from one object re-appears in another. There is another quote that seems useful here, from Kenneth Frampton's essay, Carlos Scarpa and the Adoration of the Joint, "...the joint is treated as a kind of tectonic condensation; as an intersection embodying the whole in the part."

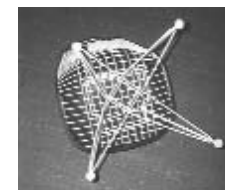
Yes, I am interested in the chairs specifically and the way they become a sort of stand-in for architecture. There seems to be a tradition that every architect has to have his (or her) iconic chair -- Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Saarinen, Aalto, Eames, etc. Vitra has a museum of these chairs, hundreds of them on fancy shelves in building Zaha Hadid originally designed to be a fire station; the chairs are fetishized to a point where they cease to be understandable as furniture. Then there is a whole legacy of chairs in sculpture too -- Joseph Beuys, Franz West... the list could go on for pages. Maybe that is more about the studio? The chair has a specific scale, we are conditioned to understand, almost intuit, how a chair functions in space (is it upside down, unstable, oversized or undersized?). The chair is also a fairly universal cultural signifier, in much the same way we intuit the physicality of a chair, we read it's coded meaning as an indicator of class, culture, etc. The "SOFA chair" photograph [left], for example, refers specifically to an image from Jean Prouve's atelier of an overturned desk [2] as well as Sam Durant's photographs of the undersides of iconic modernist chairs [3]. In the case of Prouve's photograph, the intention is very practical, to show the design of the furniture, which is most visible from beneath, but the overturned desk in the small room draws attention to the action of its upheaval or overturning rather than its design. I think Sam Durant picks up on that sense of unrest in his photographs. A difference here is that I made my photograph by collaging images digitally, which is only relevant in that that digital edit is an extension of the cut and its residue is an additional edge condition.

2



ATELIER
JEAN PROUVE
School Desk, No. 57

3



SAM DURANT
from Chair #1-6

I recently found a catalog of Martin Kippenberger's exhibition The Happy End of Franz Kafka's "Amerika" at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg (1999). Unfortunately, it is a difficult book to find, but the images of the show are well known -- hundreds of chairs and tables, some found, some constructed, some altered, arranged on a field of artificial turf. The piece includes mass-produced designs by Achille Castiglioni, Arne Jacobsen, Aldo Rossi, a reconstruction of the table on which Robert Musil wrote The Man without Qualities and unique pieces contributed by Jason Rhoades, Donald Judd, and others. Each arrangement of table and chairs proposes a stage for the interview that never exactly happened at the end of the book that Kafka never finished writing and which, by all accounts, Kippenberger never read. Kippenberger's furniture crosses effortlessly between the architectural and the sculptural, through the literal and the theatrical, and carries with it not only the history of each object, but the potential for a new interaction within it. I like that idea of sculpture as a stage for an interview.



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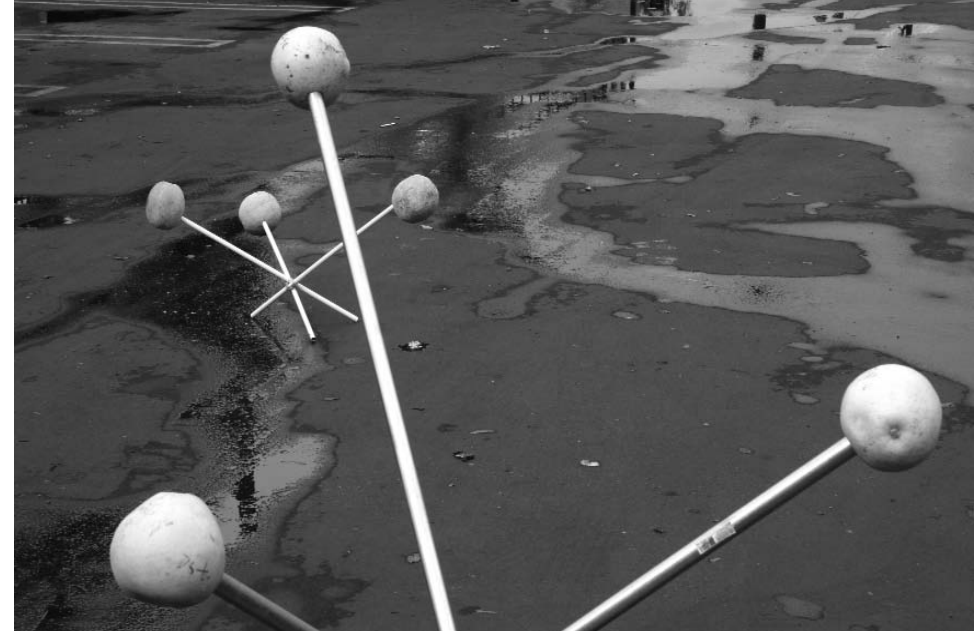
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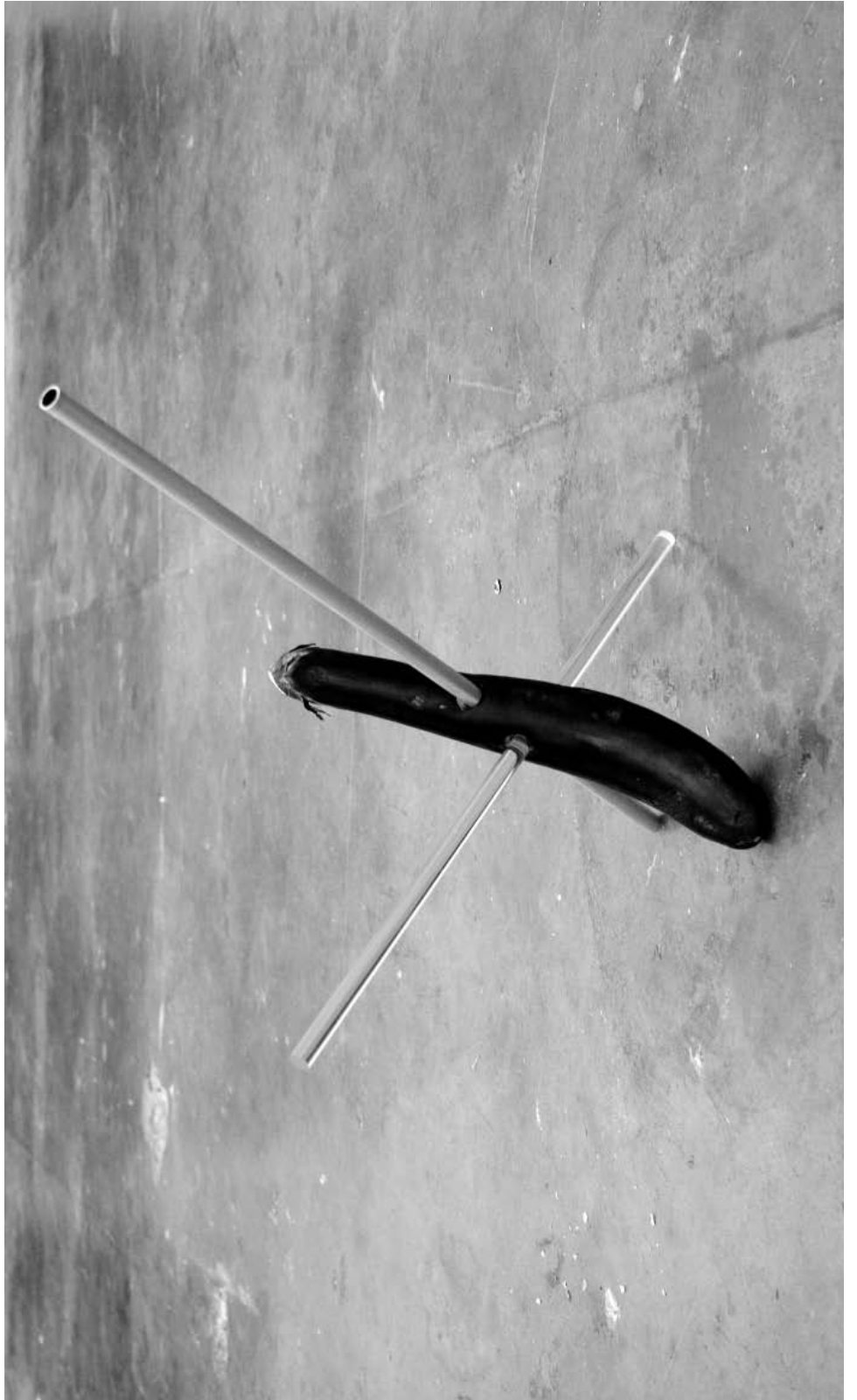
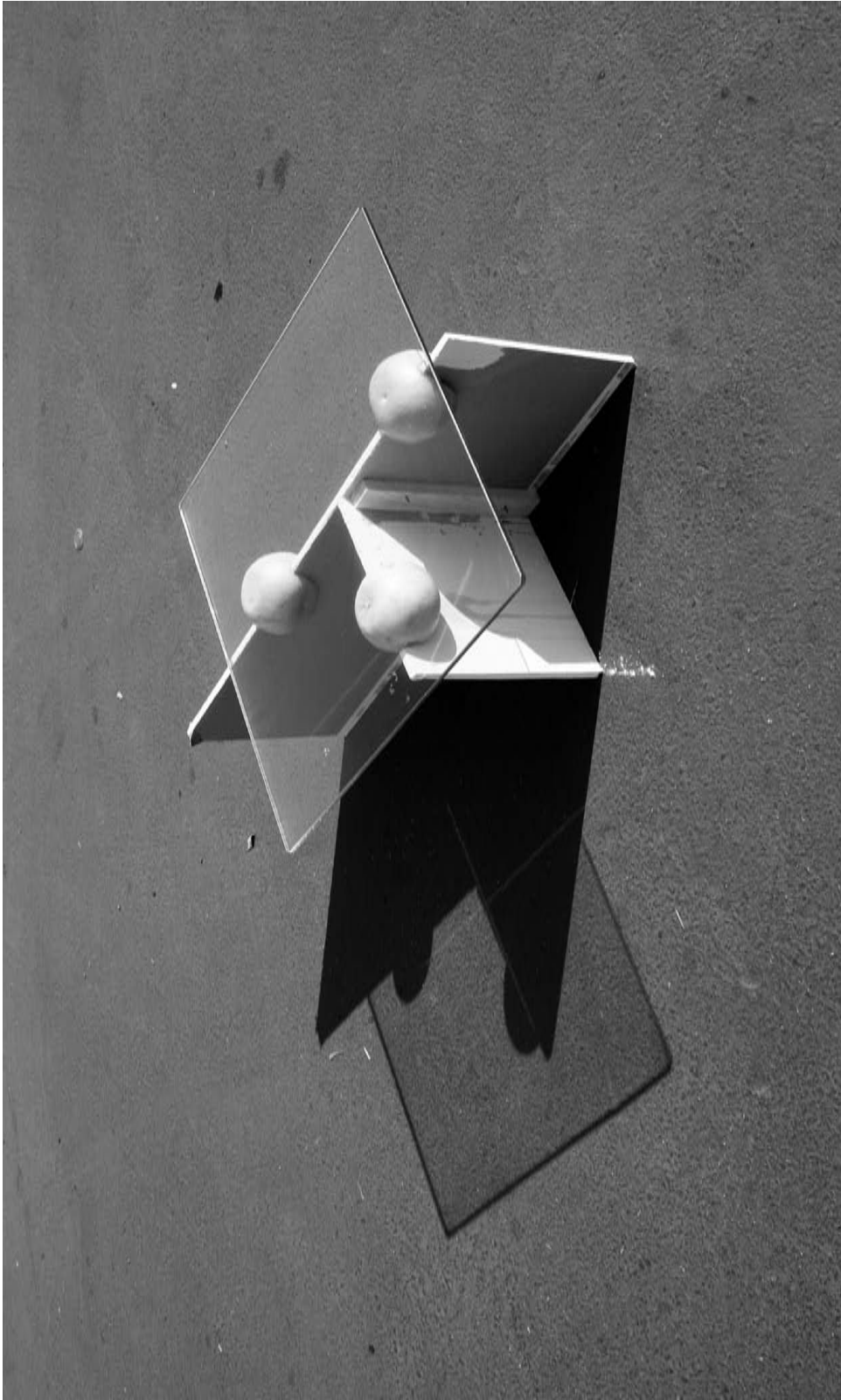
–eugen gomringer



Q: WHERE DOES THE FRUIT ENTER IN AND HAS THAT BEEN A CONSISTENT ELEMENT? ARE YOU DEALING WITH SPECIFIC HISTORICAL REFERENCES IN YOUR USE OF PRODUCE?

A: Originally, I was into the fruit because I wanted to make sculptures that would not last, that had to be photographed. I was interested in the space between the sculptural and the photographic. Then I became interested in how the organic element gave the sculptures duration. I was using old furniture and building materials and fruit and all three have certain similarities as sculptural material. A brick and a lemon, for example, are both fairly universally recognizable forms that read as unit from category of objects ('bricks' or 'lemons') rather than as a specific or unique object. In other words, you can find either almost anywhere and, though no two are alike, all are fairly similar. In much the same way that a person will immediately understand the physicality of a chair, he will understand the color, mass, texture and value (that is important), of both the brick





and the lemon. I had a studio visit with a sculptor whom I like very much and he got mad at me for wasting fruit because I used a lemon in a sculpture. I had tons of wood and photo paper and paint and equipment in my studio, but he got mad about the lemon, which I think is ridiculous.

There is obvious reference in this organic/industrial pairing to Arte Povera, specifically Giovanni Anselmo's Untitled [5] or more contemporary work such as Urs Fischer's Rotten Foundation [6]. In both cases, the juxtaposition of organic matter with building material invites two distinct, but not necessarily contradictory, discussions -- the organic as a stand-in for the human in relation to the built environment and the relationship of the organic and the durable in a larger economic value-structure. Dieter Roth might be an example of the former and Gabriel Orozco of the latter? I mentioned that chairs have a history in sculpture, so does produce... you take on all that history when you deal with fruit.

The introduction of the organic material as the stand in for the human follows naturally from the sort of hackneyed critique of modern design's denial of the human need to eat, digest, shit, etc. The grapefruit table [p.6], for example, inverts the still life by taking the fruit off the surface of the table and placing it within its structure. Though the violence of the cut in the fruit is tempered slightly by the fact the act of cutting becomes nearly banal when applied to produce, the fruit is a stand in for a human body -- the fruit is to the sculpture as the human is to the building. The mold, the drips, the flies, etc., illustrate the inevitable impossibility of containing a human organism within a structure made of glass and steel and sheetrock. This idea is carried to its logical extreme with the cucumber in Greenhouse/Goldfinger [right].

In the case the grapefruit table, the pressure of the glass accelerates the process of decay. Ultimately, the functionality of the object will win because even when the grapefruit is gone, the table remains. In contrast, the eggplant piece relies structurally on the organic material; the vegetable holds the poles in tension until it deteriorates and gives way. There are a lot of plays on language and translation in this work too -- like the idea that lemon is an anagram of melon. One of my favorite things about the eggplant piece [p.7] is that the materials can be listed in American English (eggplant, plexiglas and aluminum), or British English (aubergine, perspex and alluminium). I was thinking at that time about the following quote from George Orwell's The Road to Wigan Pier:

As you can see by looking at any greengrocer's shop, what the majority of English people mean by an apple is a lump of highly-coloured cotton wool from America or Australia; they will devour these things, apparently with pleasure, and let the English apples rot under the trees. It is the shiny, standardized, machine-made look of the American apple that appeals to them; the superior taste of the English apple is something they simply do not notice.

4



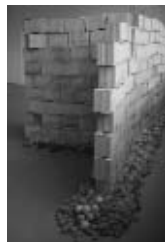
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Quiet Afternoon

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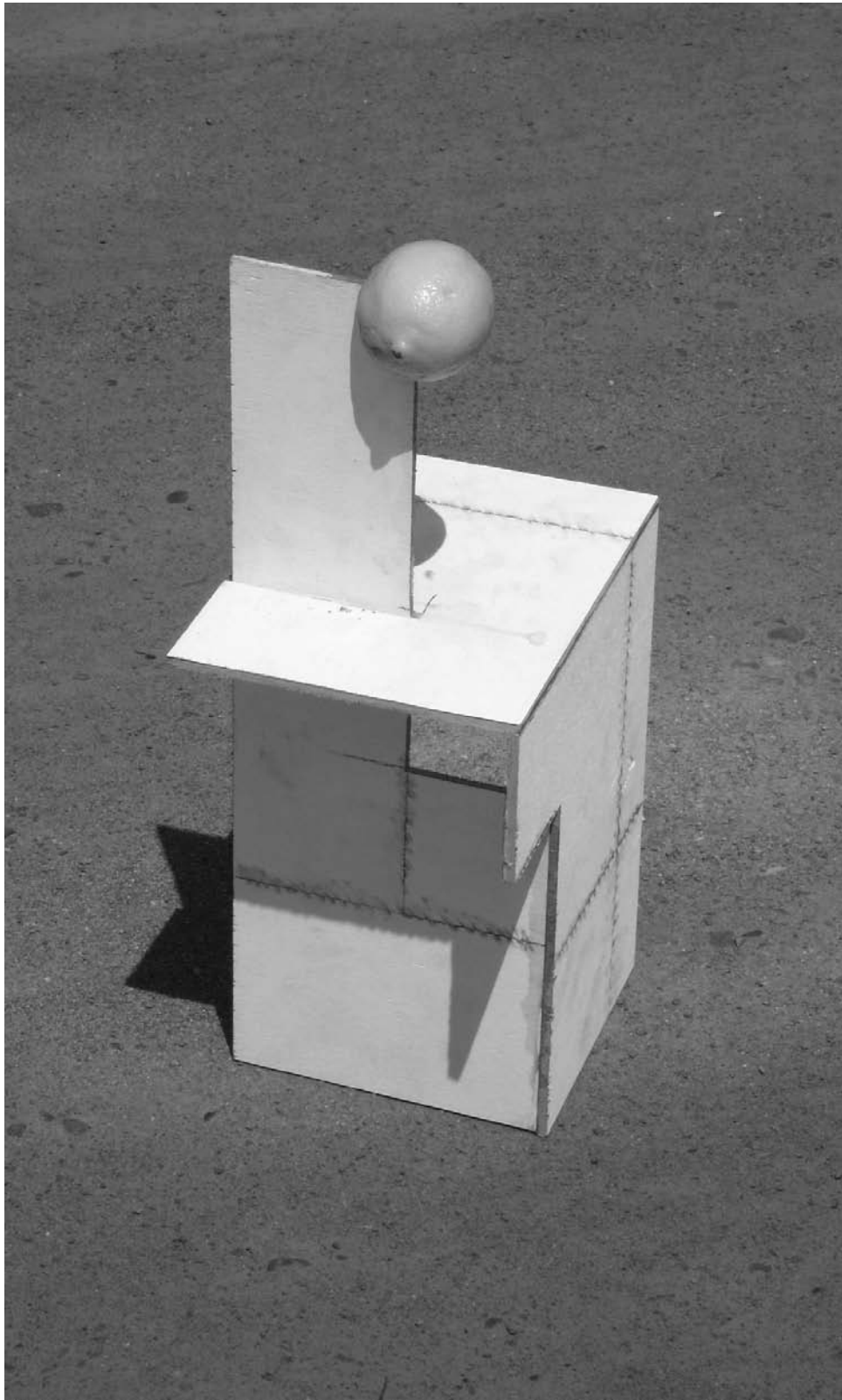
GIOVANNI
ANSELMO
Untitled

6



URS FISCHER
Rotten Foundation







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Justin Beal

In Orwell's case, the apple symbolizes the product of American mass production, which I guess is another way of thinking about fruit (produce/production). Around the same time, I saw a Jules Dassin film from the late forties called, Thieves' Highway, another allegory for American capitalism. It is a film about a WWII veteran-turned-truck driver, avenging the death of his father at the hands of corrupt fruit-dealer, by racing to get the first apples of the season from Fresno to the produce market in San Francisco. There is an incredible scene when one truck rolls off the road in Altamont and crashes at the bottom of the hill, crates of apples fall from the bed and continue to roll down the hill for an impossibly long time after the truck comes to a stop [7]. In an interview recorded years later, Dassin explains that they could only shoot that scene once, that the apples just continued to roll and everyone was amazed. It is a pretty dark portrayal of American commerce. Thieves' Highway was also the last film Dassin made in the United States before being black-listed by the House Unamerican Activities Committee. In an effort to keep themselves out of trouble, or perhaps just to save patriotic face, the studio tacked a completely incongruous and moralistic "you can't take the law into you own hands, son" speech to the final scene without Dassin's consent. I guess that was his un/happy ending.



7

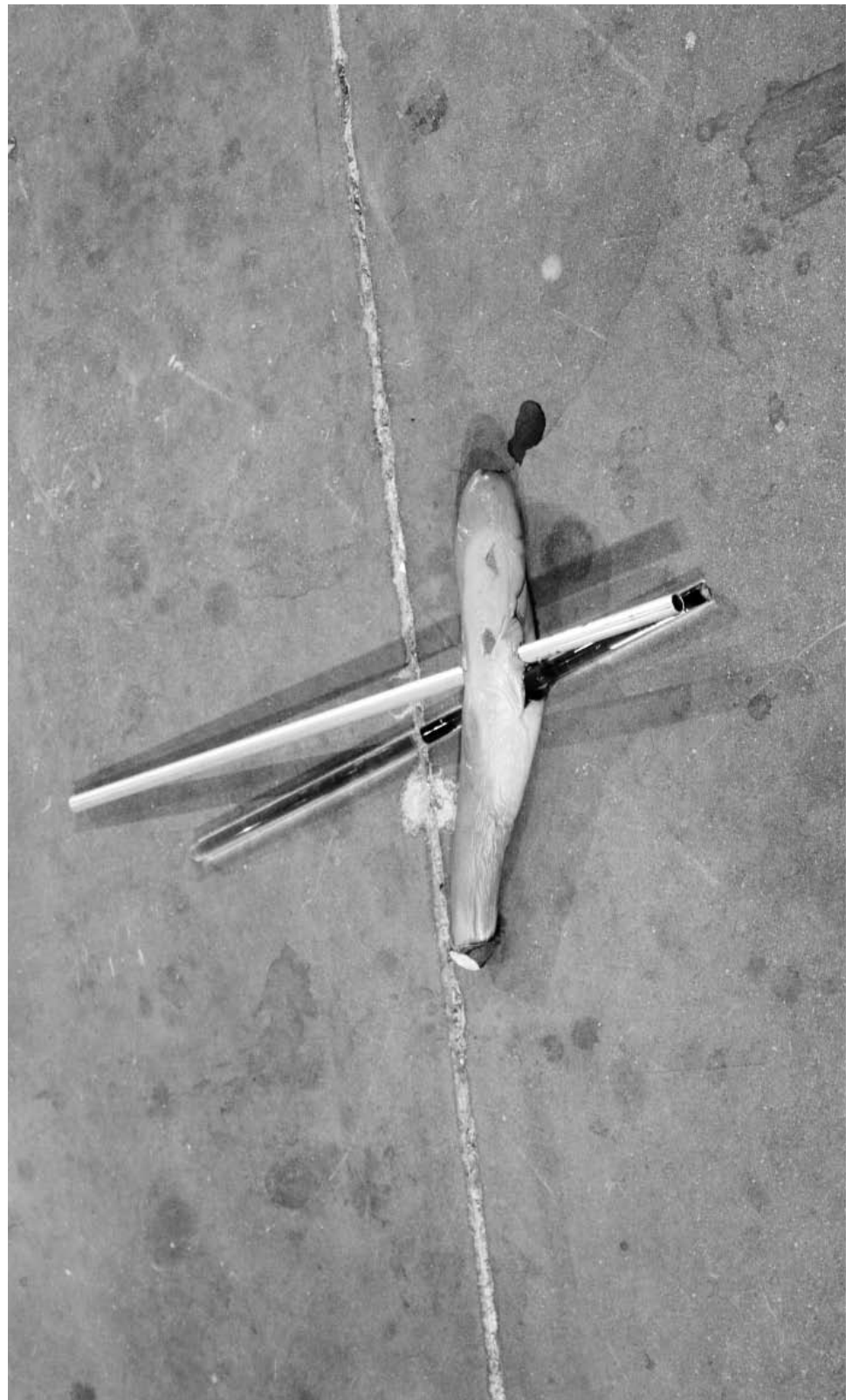


JULES DASSIN
Still from Thieves' Highway

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United States Department
of Agriculture
Victory Garden Poster (c.1941)



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Justin Beal is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, California.

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Note: This is the first of several "Pamphlets for Friends," a series designed
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