

# ***Surveiling The Relics***



*Richard Dupont's art speaks to the disquiet that we all feel in today's world of real and manufactured fears of doom as well as the creeping totalitarian agenda of the conglomerates and political and classes. We truly are selling our freedom cheaply.*

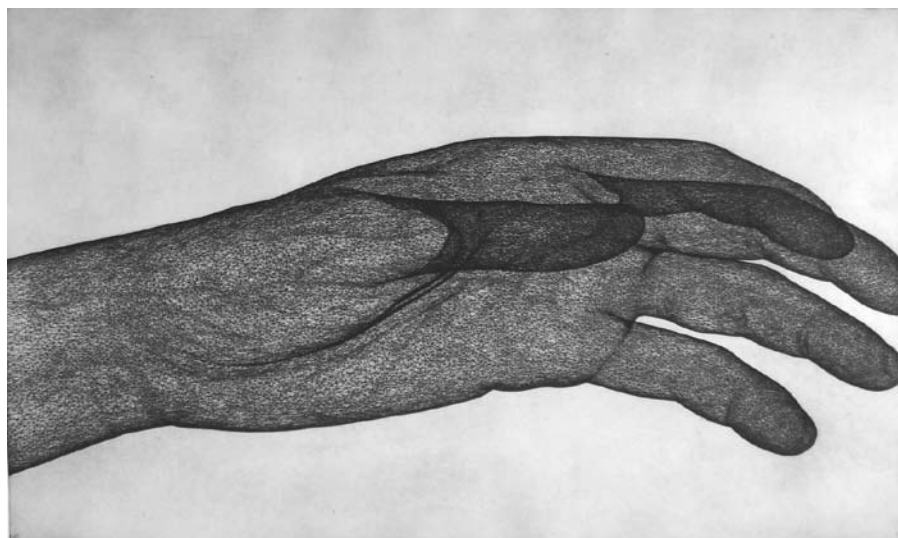
By Hunter Braithwaite

With piles of detached limbs and busts, Richard Dupont's Varick Street studio, in lower Manhattan, resembles less a sculptor's workshop than a military hospital. The body parts, you see, are all touched with an uncanny verisimilitude. They tremble with artificial intelligence. Dupont's sculptural practice, which reached a turning point a decade ago when the artist started making digital scans of his body, examines how the human body (and that fleeting passenger, the soul) has been treated over the years. Sculpture is addressed, but he also uses his art to interrogate expressions of power and control, and how anthropometry, the Victorian science of mapping the body, has morphed over the past century into biometrics. The latter doesn't stop at the symbolic map, but strives to recreate the body through data. This progression finds literary precedent in the Jorge Luis Borges's classic paragraph regarding the pitfalls of mimesis: *On the Exactitude of Science*. In the story, a zealous cartographer maps a kingdom with a scale of one mile : one mile. The resulting effort threatens to destroy not only the map, but also the terrain that it seeks to chart.

These heads are cast out of clear resin and filled with different objects—bottles, rope, old photographs, which become the manifestation of memories. The work casts a large net of historical connections, from Classical busts to East African reliquaries, from Pop to Cyberpunk, from identity politics to police identification. And like so much of American life, it began in a warehouse on a military base.

### The Scan:

Dupont, who was born in 1968 in New York City, studied visual art and archeology at Princeton University from 1987 to 1991. He first began replicating his body in 2001, when he made several pieces of his body compressed by thirty percent. The head was done from scan data, and the body had a more traditional origin—a life cast of his body made in foam. One of the pieces from this era, *Three in One (self-anointed)* (2001) is in the MoMA collection. However, Dupont sought a more exact copy, and in 2004, he traveled to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, in order to truly map his body. This endeavor, which at first seems like a Whitmanesque pilgrimage of self-discovery, is mediated through the contemporary American military-industrial complex.



**Above: Richard Dupont, Phantom, 2007, copperplate etching with aquatint printed on Rives BFK, 39 x 63 inches. Edition of 12 with 6 A.P.. Previous page: Richard Dupont, Assisted Head, 2010, polyurethane resin with studio and personal detritus, found objects, waste, 26 x 16 x 21 inches.**

His first thought was to obtain a scan through some Hollywood production company; however, Tinseltown proved too expensive. As a consolation, the artist paid the defense company General Dynamics several hundred dollars for a full-body laser scan. The resulting data used to construct a “surrogate body,” as Dupont refers to it, is normally sold to arms contractors making blast helmets and flack jackets. It's also sold to big-box retailers such as the Gap looking to design clothing to fit target demographics. It's distressing to know that the same research is equally applied to the clothing and the destruction of the body. Performance is the variable; the body is the constant.

Dupont became involved in this through an interest in the body issues of the 1960s and 1970s. Body art and performance art, rather than being an upswell of narcissism or the aesthetic arm of identity politics, came to connote sculptural representation. From these scans, he made prints and, most famously, a series of duplicates that filled New York's Lever

House in 2008. These models were around life size—some were slightly larger or smaller—and many were slightly altered. The result was a clear demonstration of the power of technology to shift our sense of what it means to be human.

The head series is a more ambitious move. As smaller objects with more variation, an increased emphasis is placed on historical and critical connections. Simply put, Dupont creates his heads by filling a mold (also based on his head) with clear polyurethane resin and then filling that with a variety of objects. The resulting sculptures are dense archives of information—since the resin is UV-stable, the objects that it contains will deteriorate at an exponentially slower rate than they would in the open air. They are effectively trapped in time and space.

As for the objects that fill the heads, they are the sediment of Dupont's life—the byproduct of a decade of artmaking. When faced with a studio filled with scraps, souvenirs, odds and ends, Dupont knew he had to “figure out a way to reincorporate all these divergent materials back into the sculptural organism.” By embedding his personal effects in these clear heads, Dupont creates something between a time capsule and a personal archive. And since one cannot open the heads to access the information, they take on the role of a reliquary. If we consider a relic to be a splinter of the past that was to have given a secondary coat of meaning, a reliquary also takes on additional worth. These heads are doubly important: first, for what they carry; and, second, for the shape that they take.



Installation view of Richard Dupont's exhibition at Carolina Nitsch Project Room, New York, May 5 – June 25, 2011.



**Richard Dupont, Terminal Stage, 2007–2008, nine cast polyurethane figures, 80 inches tall each, dimensions variable. Lever House Art Collection.**

### *Reliquary:*

Like the map and the territory from Borges's tale, the cultural presence of the head is completely proportional to the physical appendage itself. It is impossible to escape the history of meanings, and Dupont is wise not to try. Instead, his heads exist at the intersection of many different traditions. To begin with, his sculptural practice is related to the masks and reliquaries of West African primitive societies. Dupont especially likes the reliquaries from the Bura people, who lived in Nigeria between 600–300 BC. He has even begun collecting these small sculptures. "They were funerary vessels with the most subtle anthropomorphic suggestion. I like that they are very abstract yet still connect with the physiognomy," Dupont tells me as he holds one that he recently purchased from a dealer.

Since modernism shifted appreciation of these objects, from the ethnological to aesthetic, these exotic fetishes have enthralled artists. While artists like Picasso and Kirchner were attracted to their extreme distillation of forms, perhaps the contemporary

artist might be interested in how these objects, charged by folklore and black magic, similarly streamline the systems of communication, distance, and networking.



**Richard Dupont, Terminal Stage, 2007–2008, nine cast polyurethane figures, 80 inches tall each, dimensions variable. Lever House Art Collection.**

It must be noted that African sculpture was widely received in superficial terms. Artists and critics preoccupied with the formal inventiveness often overlooked the fact that

these objects were spiritual catalysts. Moreover, they found an echo in the iconography of early Christianity. Although relics have always been met with distrust (St. Augustine cautioned, "Let us not treat the saints as gods, we do not wish to imitate those pagans who adore the dead."), the relic is one of the most resilient symbols of faith. And just as our ancestors used them to help grasp divine winds, Dupont's sculpture allows the viewer to visualize contemporary networks of information.

### *Digital vs. Analogue:*

One reason for the success of Dupont's work is his ability to collapse the divide between digital and analogue information. These cumbersome sculptures are the result of digital imaging. Numbers in the sky, essentially. Several years before James Cameron, Dupont constructed an avatar with 2.5 million polygons. This unfathomable number (about ten times more detailed than something from a Pixar movie)

is needed to propel his sculpture into the realm of true mimesis. As such, digitalization and physical bodies rely on each other. The structures of information are not the only thing called into question. Dupont also deals with how we experience any sort of external stimulus. “The dialog between the static object and the transient experience of the digital cyberscape is crucial to me.” Transience is the key element. “The amounts of information are vast beyond comprehension,” continues Dupont, “... we live in a state of cognitive dissonance—unable to process the speed and voracity of the information that comes to us.” Memory becomes a performative action locked inside our heads.

This dichotomy is most fully formed with the photographic head. Dupont, who has been collecting old postcards and photographs for some time now, is “fascinated by the fact that before photography, people were immortalized by the sculptural portrait bust.” For ordinary people, this tradition ended with the spread of photography in the mid-19th century. By inserting photographs inside the head, Dupont conflates the two commemorative models, the image-based and the object-based, and thus asks how we will remember once our lives become more completely digitized.

It is telling that there is little distinction placed on whether the images are personal snapshots or mass-market postcards. They are memories of a place or a person; it doesn't matter if they are from Dupont's life or found pressed in a used paperback. Dupont's work deals at the concordance of private and public, of unique and idealized. The connection to Classical sculpture, which I have avoided until this point, immediately comes into focus. For the Greeks, memorial busts had two tasks: to capture the individual's essence, and to blend the personal into a matrix of classical ideals. While we have long moved past classical ideals, we are a society of standardization and averages. Dupont's heads do not represent the one platonic ideal, but the median of innumerable lives and experiences. In the vast



**Richard Dupont, Collection Head 1, 2011, cast UV stable polyurethane resin with studio and personal detritus, found objects, 26 x 16 x 21 inches.**



**Richard Dupont, Memory Head, 2011, polyurethane resin with studio and personal detritus, found, salvaged, recycled objects, foodstuffs on artist's pedestal, 26 x 16 x 21 inches.**

flow of digital images and status updates, the distinction between our experience and the lives of others becomes less and less distinct. The heads suggest that social media, by demolishing the borders between public and private, also make the individual completely anonymous.

#### **Pop:**

When considered as a result of the combination of public and private, especially in regards to the body and its social manifestations, Dupont's work is a clear successor of artists such as Bruce Nauman (b.1941) and Jasper Johns (b.1930). Nauman taught Dupont that the body could be the raw material of a piece; that it could be transformed through “matter-of-fact process-oriented operation.” He is also indebted to Johns's early work, which the artist made directly after leaving the Army. Dupont sees this work as a response to the depersonalized treatment of the individual. Indeed, *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) links the overarching institutionalism of the military with the fractured bodies of those who live within it. Above the semiotic bull's eye, Johns cast parts of his body out of plaster and then placed them in small compartments. The impression is an indictment of the postwar military-industrial complex (one that exists today relatively unchanged), wherein citizens are at once reduced to interchangeable cogs and tasked with manufacturing the instruments of their inevitable demise. This seems relatively dystopian, but post-Hiroshima and post-9/11 America is not exactly an inviting place. That Dupont began this section of his career with a trip to a military contractor speaks to the degree that this way of life has been naturalized. Biometrics is predominantly used in American society not to wage war or to protect against external threats, but to control and categorize citizens like Dupont.

#### **Criminology:**

This, too, has a precedent. Modern biometrics began in the mid-19th century when Alphonse Bertillon (1853–1914), a French law enforcement officer, developed a method of

anthropometry to counteract problems of deception in modern society. Soon thereafter, one William Herschel (1833–1917), a civil official in charge of keeping the colonized country of India under wraps, pioneered fingerprinting in 1858. In the United States, fingerprinting first became widely use to control the traffic of Chinese women used for prostitution in the mining towns in the 1880s. This system was quite helpful with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882, which forbid Chinese immigration for ten years.

These are not technologies of oppression in and of themselves; they have traditionally moved forward under the guise of public safety. But it is also telling that any attempt by the government to map or catalogue its citizens has been met with resistance. Skepticism of the Social Security Act of 1935 was so great that the Post Office was asked to issue the social security numbers because it was assumed that the American public trusted the postman more than the president. However, recent years have brought a change of public opinion. The Patriot Act, coupled with Web 2.0, have brought upon a systemic loss of privacy. Alongside this public relaxation, technology has improved exponentially. “Now we have iris scans—gate analysis—finger scans,” says Dupont. “We are all available for targeting at any time. We are walking GPS.” However, this is not classical surveillance, since we offer up so much of ourselves on the Internet. “It’s staggering how much you can find out about people by Googling them,” says Dupont.

From his studio, one can almost see where the World Trade Center should be. When the towers fell, Dupont and his family were living ten blocks away. They



**Richard Dupont, Transformation Head, 2010, polyurethane resin with studio and personal detritus, found objects, waste, 26 x 16 x 21 inches.**



**Richard Dupont, Cyclops Head, 2011, cast UV stable polyurethane resin with studio and personal detritus, found objects, 26 x 16 x 21 inches.**



were forced to evacuate, an experience that no doubt affects his consciousness. “A number of artists of my generation emerged during that period with a particular thread running through their work—a certain uneasiness.” So while the work is not dystopic, it does reflect a societal march towards the Orwellian. A line from *1984* fits nicely: “You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overhead, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.” Although these heads are transparent, they attest to the need for darkness. At night, we have our dreams, our love affairs. These become memories. They become the relics that we hold dear. Δ

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