



Art

November 6th, 2012

## INCONVERSATION

## ROBERT LAZZARINI with Jonathan T. D. Neil

by Jonathan T. D. Neil

Jonathan T. D. Neil and Robert Lazzarini met at the *Brooklyn Rail*'s headquarters in mid-October to discuss the artist's newest body of work, (*damage*), which was slated to go on view at Marlborough Chelsea on November 8. (*EDITOR'S NOTE: The show has been rescheduled to go on view November 15.*) Of course, that conversation took place before Hurricane Sandy made "damage" something much more pervasive and tragic for many people living on and near the mid-Atlantic coast. The exhibition will open this month, but time, as we have been reminded, is not immune to damage either.

**Jonathan T.D. Neil (Rail):** You have a new body of work that's going to be showing at Marlborough Chelsea this month, the title of which is (*damage*). How does it depart from what you've done previously?

**Robert Lazzarini:** I was interested in creating a group of works that were affected somehow prior to their distortion. I guess something more aggressive than just representing the effects of use on the object. But I was also interested in the notion of object as landscape, you know, the way an object could become a kind of stand-in for a larger scene. An idea that was actually the basis for an earlier sculpture, "payphone."

**Rail:** How was "payphone" an evocation of landscape?

**Lazzarini:** I was thinking of it as representing the



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

street. At that time my studio was in Hell's Kitchen. I was seeing a change in the neighborhood but there was still a lot of grittiness. There was a payphone on one corner that was beat up. The object itself evoked the grittiness of the past. And it was slowly becoming obsolete. I think I imagined the payphone as this slice of place. Eliminating all the elements of the street until you're left with this one thing. It's a way of thinking about landscape as fragmentary, with "payphone" functioning as a kind of shorthand representation of the street.

**Rail:** Of the works in this new series, which ones do the same for you?

**Lazzarini:** Well, I hope all of them can be thought about as shorthand for place, maybe in slightly different ways. Of course a larger work like "chain-link" fence is going to resonate beyond being read as just an object. But it is still just a fragment.

**Rail:** What's interesting here is that one has to think landscape differently, right? I think when most people hear the word "landscape" they imagine in their minds some 19th century Hudson River School landscapes, which is a kind of vista, which has something to do with a kind of hold or a kind of control over an environment, and that is able to give an expansive representation of that place. Yours is landscape in a different way in that it's a fragment, like a synecdoche, it's a part that gets taken for the whole. So a payphone gets taken for "the street," or for a kind of urban street in particular. Works like "window" might become evocative of "house," but then it's even a little bit more abstract, because we're not talking about an urban house, more of the house in general. Things like the liquor sign or things like the chain-link fence again become these very fragmented aspects of this larger—

**Lazzarini:** Panorama.

**Rail:** Yeah. On a very intuitive level, someone will understand this work as being about a kind of landscape, but then when you really start to dig down into it, you have to ask, so what do we mean then? What kind of landscape are we talking about? What do we mean when we think about landscape? So I'm asking you, what do you think about when you're thinking about landscape in terms of these works? For instance, I think one thing that comes across very strongly is that the work is in some ways about a distinctly *American* landscape.

**Lazzarini:** Yeah.

**Rail:** And maybe that's a way into it because, again, to invoke something like the Hudson River School, it's an American landscape, but the idea of it being *specifically* American isn't there. It's part of the American terrain, it's part of the history of American painting, but as a landscape, you can also think about it in terms of, say, Caspar David Friedrich or landscapes by J.M.W. Turner—there's a whole range and history in which that work plays. But yours is a very different kind of American landscape.

**Lazzarini:** Yes, it's definitely not landscape as sublime vista. I think a closer precedent for this

work within the context of American landscape would be someone like Edward Hopper. He moves away from pictorial landscape as representations of the transcendental towards something more introspective, something more modern. He's describing something that's changing in America during that time. And of course thinking of landscape as fragmentary, Stuart Davis and the Precisionists come to mind. Or to think about landscape through photography, through somebody like Jacob Riis, and the way that somehow, with the advent of the flash, all of a sudden you're able to see, you're getting a kind of insight into the tenement or the back alley or the underbelly of society in a way that you weren't able to before. It's a type of transgression in that you're stepping across this boundary. I'm also thinking about landscape beyond the pictorial through someone like Gordon Matta-Clark. I think (*damage*) plays directly into works like his building cuts. For example, a work like "motel door" builds upon some of the formal issues I dealt with previously in "guns," namely bisecting geometries. The normative door was actually quartered prior to its distortion. So each section was manipulated while still being attached. So, within the context of the fragment, there is also a fragmentation within the object itself. I think that relates directly to some of the things Matta-Clark was doing with "Bronx Floors."

**Rail:** The example of Riis touches on the idea that you're uncovering or revealing aspects of a world that, up to a certain point, aren't available to representation. To the extent that Riis's work and other traditions of photojournalism are about the revelation of something unseen, this indicates a kind of damage, damage done to people that is either structural or damage that people do to one another that is individual. And I think the evocation of Matta-Clark is worth a digression, because the '70s is a period in American history when you have, again, economic stagnation. New York itself has undergone a kind of transformation, with the bottom dropping out—it's not a great era in New York City's history. But it also created a freedom for artists to be able to operate within the city in a way that they never had or never would be able to again.

**Lazzarini:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Rail:** Matta-Clark is one of the artists who specifically took advantage of that. And then you think about the oil crisis in the late '70s as a turning point within American history, which leads to the Reagan '80s and a new paradigm of what we tend to call neoliberalism. What's interesting is that your show is coming at a moment when some people might find parallels, historically, let's say, with that earlier moment of deep economic malaise.

**Lazzarini:** Sure. I think the exhibition speaks directly to a sort of financial deprivation, partly



Robert Lazzarini, "Window," 2012. Wood, glass, paint. 48 x 40 x 8". Image courtesy of Nadine Johnson & Associates.

through the dilapidated object and partly the overt subjects of the blown safe and the cash for gold sign, but also through the implied criminal act.

**Rail:** And also because as works, given what they are, they can't draw or don't draw on the kind of situatedness of a place the way that Matta-Clark's work does. It may be more towards something like Smithson's work where there's this real incongruity between the gallery space and this outdoors where these two conditions are overlapped in a presentation—let's say, of rocks from a certain quarry in New Jersey or upstate New York.

**Lazzarini:** Right, with a work like "Monuments of Passaic." Well, thinking of issues of "site" and "non-site," of something taken out of a specific place and placed within the context of the gallery—I think there's a sense that the objects in (*damage*) have been taken from somewhere else.

**Rail:** And so it's exactly not a specific place, right?

**Lazzarini:** Yeah, and that's also one of the ways that I try to circumvent the idea of direct narrative; I'm picking a specific item, but one that functions as an archetype of that item. It's lack of definition allows it to kind of float. Like an idea.

**Rail:** When you're talking about the archetype, let's say specifically with regards to this new set of works, what are you thinking of in particular? These objects, for example, such as the motel door or the window, the standard, double-sash window, or a liquor store sign—these are archetypal because they exist as a collective image? Is this the idea? This is different from the Jungian archetype.

**Lazzarini:** I'm not thinking of something that stems from the unconscious. I'm thinking about it more in terms of an ideal model, you know, something that represents the epitome of a certain subject.

**Rail:** One of the things that you often articulate is this challenge to narrative and of using the archetype as a way to challenge the narrative. So is this more episodic? How is it that the archetype challenges narrative? How is it anti-narrative?

**Lazzarini:** Well, it defies specificity. I think the archetype allows for a certain type of recognition, maybe modeling a more universally experienced situation. The archetype is formless in the same way that the narrative is well defined. So that this formlessness leaves room for the viewer to insert themselves, to be able to project onto the work.

**Rail:** But this doesn't mean having them thinking about the factual characteristics that surround an event, or thinking about it from the standpoint of cause and effect, for example, of what has caused this window to be broken—because that would be too narrative?

**Lazzarini:** With regards to "window," it was important to represent a break-in as opposed to just a broken window. And as to what caused that break-in, I mean specifically that somebody

did it, literally that there was some *body* present that caused that to happen, that broke it or passed through it. But for what reason, or to what ends, that's a narrative question and I'm not interested in the work trying to answer that.

**Rail:** One of the tensions that your work brings up then is this tension between a narrative space, a kind of event space, showing a particular kind of thing that plays a role within a larger narrative framework, and its non-narrative reality, its facticity, or something like this. There are always ways of situating, of trying to, let's say, control the work by thinking about it in terms of cause and effect, of plotlines, imagining those things into a larger set of narrative constructs: plot, character, setting. But at the same time, the work is extremely resistant to this, even though it goes to great lengths to evoke such responses. One of the productive aspects of the work is exactly that it generates this kind of tension. That it's narrative at the same time that it's fundamentally anti-narrative, because there really is no story, there really is no plot, there really is no character, there is no scene. It is fragmentary, and what it does is it produces in the mind of the viewer the set of associations that begin to parallel the kind of experience that viewers have when they see the normative object and they recognize it, but then they see that it's subject to these deformations and they try to understand it as something that exists, again as a tension between two things: between a normative object and between this thing that has now been deformed in some sort of specific way.

**Lazzarini:** I think you're touching on some pretty significant points in general. Of course the main one being, as you said, a repetitive movement between comparing this sort of paradoxical object with one's mental construct of the normative object. Part of that occurs because of the material veracity. I mean it's exactly the suspension of disbelief. By transforming the object using the same materials as the original object somehow makes a small part of this unlikely situation plausible. I think there's an interesting correlation between that shapelessness of narrative and the expansion and contraction of the forms of the objects. It's also there in the exhibition in the disruption of pattern. This is something that I was working through directly with "blood on wallpaper" in 2008. I was interested in transforming pattern into an endless variation, all based on an original repeat. That disruption is most overt in "fence," with its meandering diamond pattern, but it's also there in chain with "padlock" and in the shutters in "window."



Robert Lazzarini, "Gun (v)," 2008. Steel, walnut, 105. x 6.5 x 3". Image courtesy of the artist.

**Rail:** And all the works have a very direct relationship to a body, to a body that has interacted

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**Lazzarini:** Yeah, I think it's interesting to think about how the viewer is going to position themselves in relationship to the corporeal entry points in the work. The way that a body has interacted or created the damage in the object. The size of the openings are very specific—how the viewer situates themselves through the broken window, or in the space of the safe, those are

really important associations for me.

**Rail:** Why? Why the body now indicated in those moments of doing damage, of the body as the device of damage rather than the way that the body is implicated from the standpoint of the viewer who tries to reconcile a kind of scene?

**Lazzarini:** Well, because I think it implicates the viewer. It puts the viewer within the act of breaking into a home or squeezing through a cut fence. I think that's an interesting correlation, drawing a relationship between the physical participation within a subject and the physical participation of the viewer viewing the work of art.

**Rail:** The works that came just prior to this were "guns," "knives," and "brass knuckles," which are things, objects, that have a very implicit relationship to violence of one sort or another.

**Lazzarini:** Sure.

**Rail:** This next chapter takes that implicit violence and actually registers a set of effects. Now we're not necessarily just looking—well, we are, I mean, you're looking at the results of gunshots.

**Lazzarini:** Sure, in the street signs.

**Rail:** You are looking at cuts, in terms of cuts through the fence. To the extent that the brass knuckles are indicative of a kind of more primal, ballistic punching-through or a sort of damage that's done with the hand—

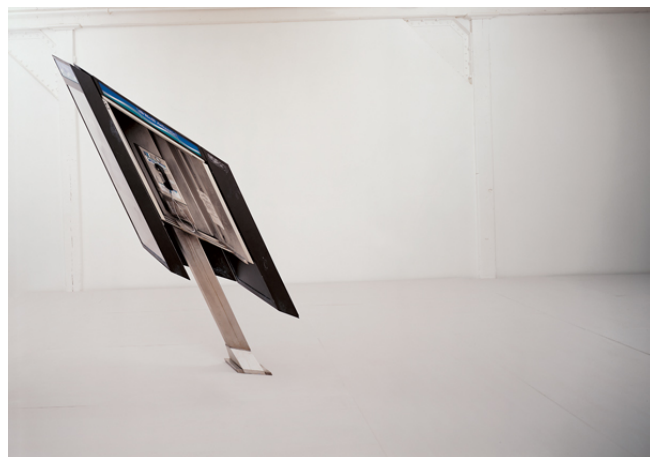
**Lazzarini:** Beating.

**Rail:** Yeah, there's a way that that prior set of works set up a kind of violence or a kind of potential that is now being effected in this next set of objects. Is it fair to characterize it in that way?

**Lazzarini:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Rail:** Whereas before it was the objects themselves that were subjected to these deformations, now there's a kind of doubling—there's the damage that is being subject to a kind of deformation.

**Lazzarini:** Yeah. So a concern of mine has always been the idea of the historicity of the object. Thinking about the object not as this new or ideal thing but as something that's lived in the world and has been affected. So this really just builds upon that. Like, what is the lifespan of the object? In the fence, the various rust spots and drips and oxidation of



Robert Lazzarini, "Payphone," 2002. Aluminum, steel, silk-screened Plexiglas. 108 × 64 × 40". Image courtesy of the artist.

metal speaks to something that has endured a certain passage of time, suggests a history of use in the world without representing people. This is an uninhabited landscape. So It's a kind of vocabulary of time and wear overlayed onto the object; (*damage*) presents an extension of the idea that an object has a lifespan, but also reveals the aftermath of this physical event.

**Rail:** I think that that's one of the things that marks a real break or a real difference in this work—that these things, which people are familiar with, archetypal things, now have something that has been done to them, that is more than just the patina of time and use.

**Lazzarini:** That's true. And part of this discourse is one that hinges on the relationship between representation and abstraction. Certainly distortion is a type of abstraction, but you can also think of the affectation of the object as a potential type of abstraction, a sort of rupture that takes the object out of its normative state.

**Rail:** When you say affectation of the object, you mean——

**Lazzarini:** Damage. So for example, in the case of the street signs, beyond distorting the words on the signs, the bullet holes also obscure their legibility. So those two things are being compounded, the affectation, i.e. the damage, and then the distortion.

**Rail:** When I think about the cut in the fence, for example, I think of other strategies of abstraction within the history of art, particularly Lucio Fontana's.

**Lazzarini:** Absolutely. I think the street signs in particular recall the cuts and punctures of Fontana.

**Rail:** An attempt to make a mark which is not one. I want to try to dig a little bit deeper into the question of abstraction, about how this work is trying to ask that question either anew or differently or trying to challenge standard notions that we have about what abstraction is, an abstraction that is no longer related to the ones we're familiar with from Modernist painting or even from Minimalist sculpture.

**Lazzarini:** I guess one could think about it as a kind of reorganization of sorts. That the algorithms I use to manipulate the object are redistributing the data. The exact same data that's in the normative object.

**Rail:** So we could think about this almost like a cubist move. A pulling apart of the conventions of representation, of its grammar, and reorganizing it. This gets us back to before abstraction, as the grid and negation in Mondrian's hands, or abstraction as purified expressive sensuality in Kandinsky's hands. It sounds like it's closer to something like the diagrammatic abstraction that one finds in math and science, curves that describe other curves or complex higher order phenomena. Distortions of damage give us a way to think about something like derivative abstraction, that's systematic and chaotic at once. But at the same time, it's very gestural, right? You're thinking about the kind of gesture that a cut in a chain-link fence is.

**Lazzarini:** Sure.

**Rail:** The kind of gesture that a body moving through a plane of glass is.

**Lazzarini:** Sure.

**Rail:** The kind of gesture that shooting a gun at a road sign is.

**Lazzarini:** And there are art historical precedents for all of that, so for me it's not a paradigm shift, it's something that I grab on and utilize within the work. It's at once a formal device and subject.

**Rail:** They're all formal devices that speak specifically to a kind of content, right? And that content is, as you've mentioned, criminality.

**Lazzarini:** I would say that's a subtext of the work, but yeah.



Robert Lazzarini, "Safe," 2011. Metal, paint; body 51 × 27 × 29"; door 8 × 28 × 66". Image courtesy of the artist.

**Rail:** What about these places is particularly interesting to you? I mean, this kind of chain-link fence is not just a chain-link fence around a children's playground, but a chain-link fence that has razor wire on top of it, or a motel doorway that is evocative of a specific kind of motel. Why is that landscape interesting?

**Lazzarini:** I think all of these objects represent different types of places. So you've got the street, you've got the industrial park, you've got suburbia, you've got maybe the strip mall or something like that. I'm interested in how all these things together imply something larger. Maybe in the way a collage functions?

**Rail:** Yes, but is it that they are these interstitial spaces that we're aware of but sort of only pass through. They're the kinds of spaces that we don't have a lot of contact with but only some sort of limited contact with?

**Lazzarini:** A peripheral contact with. That relates back to the idea of the archetype, something that's ubiquitous and at the same time it just fades away. It's somehow always in view but we don't really examine it.

**Rail:** Do you view it as a kind of damaged landscape?

**Lazzarini:** In some ways I think that "liquor sign" is the most profound piece in the show. It speaks to a damage within society that is not easily seen, something that wreaks havoc in a way beyond any specific act of physical violence. It's insidious. The Riis reference is interesting here

because it shows how something just needs to be illuminated—your head just needs to be turned at the right time.

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