



New York FAX

from David Humphrey

Allan Wexler at RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, 4 January–8 February

Two years ago, the architect/designer Allan Wexler made a table on which four cups of coffee sat connected by rubber tubing. It was called *Coffee Seeks Its Own Level*. If one person at the table tried to drink alone, the coffee would flow into the other cups and overflow onto the white tablecloth. The tablecloth was stained with evidence of ritual dysfunctional behavior, in which function is defined as strict, almost ceremonial cooperation. In his most recent exhibition, Wexler has made a ceramic coffee cup in the shape of each stain on that same well-stained cloth. The configuration of cups is a dribbled cross that is loosely aligned with the position of the absent drinkers. The bottom of each cup, in the new piece *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups* (1991), sits on top of the stain from which it was generated. Like an imaginative anthropologist's reconstruction from scant evidence, Wexler visualizes possibilities from data detached from their original contexts. At the bottom of each cup is a thin brown stain that one normally finds on the bottom of one's finished coffee. These new cups help to redeem the cloth from the embarrassing stains by making them look intentional—metaphorically returning the stain from the cloth back into the cup.

Each of Wexler's pieces stretches the designer's preoccupation with form and function to extraordinary limits. He has paused to reconsider every element that makes up a particular object or place. In his reflections on the dining room table, for instance, the connections between table and room, chairs and diners, the inside of the room and out, the furniture and the materials from which it was made, are all explored and elaborated. Each element of the subject is broken down to its constituent parts in order to be reinvested with new functional or symbolic capacities. Wexler's design grammar is built, among other things, from homologous structural resemblances, like a rising set of parallels between the ground, the floor, the bottoms of feet, tabletops, hats and roofs.

Wexler positions himself as the humble enabler of possibilities rather than a promoter of idiosyncratic visions. His rhetorical modesty is perhaps more common to designers, who easily recognize when they are in someone's service, than artists, who thrive on a fiction of autonomy. The successful designer usually disappears into the intimacy that evolves between people and everyday things, while the artist's name remains a frequently overbearing element that is rarely over-

looked by a collector. In *Braun Aeromaster 10-Cup Coffee-maker*, Wexler inserts himself as the re-designer of this object by carefully mounting the array of disassembled parts in a handy carrying case with tools and instructions for reassembly. As *homo faber* mankind has happily constructed a world in which we depend on things to manage our daily lives, we sometimes fail to recognize objects as our creations, and are prone to imagine ourselves as their conditioned effect, as serving their purposes. Wexler's objects are correctives to this situation: he builds into the object an illuminated history of its own pre-functional life which helps to keep it from slipping into functional invisibility. In *Body Furniture* (1991), the hardened shirts that form the backs of chairs enclose the sitter like a straightjacket. The blurring of the distinction between the user and the used becomes a caricature of the constraining relationship between objects and people. Wexler's humor is corrosive of instrumental and utilitarian sensibilities; he plays the function game seriously but undermines its rules with surrealist wit.

The largest and most ambitious piece in the show was *Crate House* (1991), consisting of four wooden crates on wheels that, when opened, become a fully functioning living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. By producing an unexpected and ingeniously efficient twist on the mobile home, he reasserts our power over the house instead of its power over us. This "house" is a kind of turtle's dream in which the mobility and freedom of imagination is echoed in the dwelling: it is an inside-outhouse. If alienation has become our habitat, then the itinerant *Crate House* is an appropriate dwelling that cleverly links transformation with transportation.

There is a curious moral undercurrent to Wexler's objects, a kind of playful pedagogy that seeks to renovate our perception and behavior toward the manufactured environment. These objects introduce an element of symbolic ritual to events like having a cup of coffee. They gently insist on illuminating the complicated interrelations between users and the things around them.

Allan Wexler
Coffee Stained Coffee Cups, 1991
Wood, paint, stain, shellac, cotton and ceramic
34" x 38" x 48"
Photo: D. James Dee