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BY THE BILLFOLD • MAY 1, 2014



Chatting With Artist Darren Bader About His Donation Boxes at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Cats and Money

by Sharon Adarlo



Darren Bader is a New York City artist whose work is characterized by his use of seemingly mundane objects and unconventional mediums like burritos, readymades like furniture, and cats. Yes, cats. He had a show back

in 2012 at MoMA PS1 where he corralled living cats into a white gallery space. They lounged on a couch. They soaked up the sun as cats are wont to do. Presumably, they submitted themselves to the heavy petting and affection of lonely gallery visitors. They were up for adoption. But this article is not about cats. (Though I can talk about cats for hours; Bader and I are both admitted cat lovers.)

Bader's style is infused with dry, deadpan wit and uses clever wordplay and ephemera. He [snagged the 2013 Calder Prize](#), which came with a \$50,000 check. Leading up to the award ceremony, he staged temporary installations in Venice that included brown hair floating in a Venetian canal and pieces of chicken on a loading dock. The installations included a cat slinking by the corner of a building. This was titled "cat with invisible hands." Another was a brown tabby on a park bench. This was titled "cat filled with dirty laundry." (We are talking about cats again.)

In the Whitney Biennial, which runs until May 25, Bader [has an interactive piece](#): In the lower gallery of the building, next to the noisy cafe, are two clear, large cylinders that Bader has built on concrete pedestals. Like a piggy bank, they have slots. One is labeled "ALL DONATIONS WILL GO TO NOTHING." The other on the right is labeled "ALL DONATIONS WILL GO TO SOMETHING." Visitors have put in money and other objects, including a thick letter envelope, into the boxes.

I interviewed him over email as he prepared for his next exhibit at the [Andrew Kreps Gallery](#), where he'll have a show opening in the middle of May. We talked about his work, his current piece at the Whitney, and how a person makes money as a conceptual artist. We also talked about cats.

Do you have an artist statement?

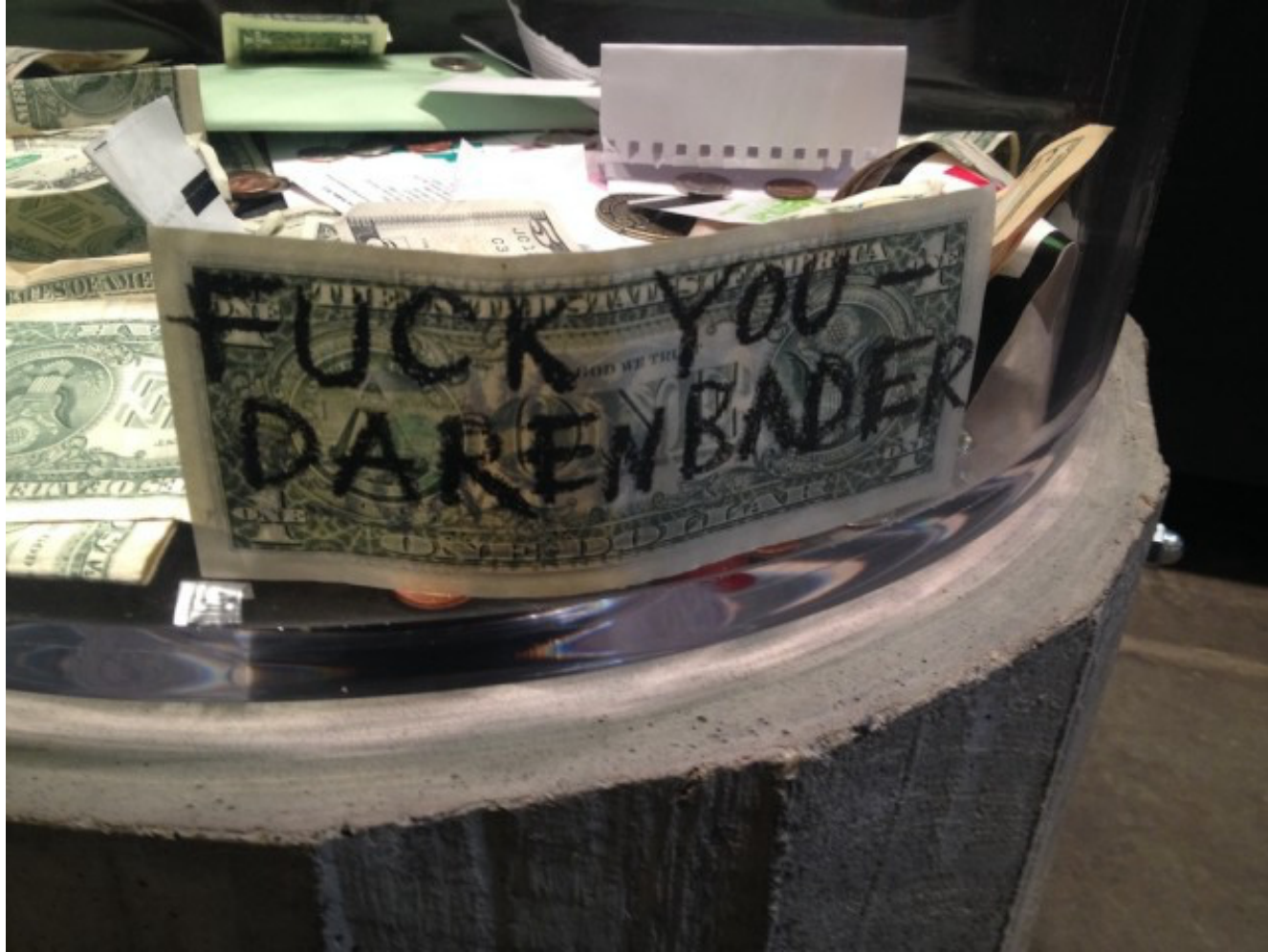
I usually improvise.

What was your thought process behind the clear donation boxes at the Whitney Biennial? What's the meaning behind them for you?

Nothing and something are both such commonplace, universal, potent, and ignored words.

How often do you collect the contents of the boxes? How much money have you amassed? What other things have people put in the boxes?

The content, whether money or other content, will be collected after May 25th. I don't know how much I've amassed. There's certainly a nice quantity of things other than legal tender — some I've been able to identify: bumper stickers, a credit card, museum literature, invite flyers. (There's one \$1 bill that has "Fuck You Daren Bader" written on it — awwwww.)



How have people responded to it?

There hasn't been a whole lot of response. The work was designed for the main lobby, but due to issues with daily operations it's been installed on the lower level. Not a lot of people notice it. Many people have asked me where my piece "was"?

Were you annoyed when your donation boxes got relegated into the lower gallery? I thought it was a very interesting piece that perhaps should have been placed somewhere more prominent.

I was disappointed, but not annoyed. The Whitney Biennial can't accommodate everyone ideally. It's just what happens.

Have any idea who wrote "FUCK YOU DAREN BADER?" Guesses? (I also saw someone wrote you a letter.)

(Really? Someone did? I'm flattered.) I have one idea about the FUDB, but it would be a friend. Not sure if it was him. It has to do with the single "r" in Dar(r)en.

Where will the contents in the box marked for nothing go to? Will you burn them?

Fire, I don't know. But they're not going to be used by anybody for anything monetary. Trying to find purest means of nothing.

What are the purest means of where nothing will go to in the end? Do you have any possible thoughts on this? Do you have any possible scenarios already planned out for the nothing box?

I haven't given it a whole lot of thought yet, but the purest means would be sudden, unmediated nothingness. This is pretty much not going to happen of course. Fire could work, submersion could work, burial could work,

digestion could work (hmmm, maybe?), some dissolving agent perhaps. We'll see I guess, but I'm going to have to decide at some point.



Where will the contents in the box marked for something go to?

TBD after May 25th.

For the something box, do you have any possible scenarios?

No, I'm definitely not going to think about this until I have to. Sure a few ideas have come (and gone) through my head, but that's beside the point.

How did you get into art? I read you also majored in film/tv.

I studied art history simultaneously (Old Masters Style). I also found myself making experimental films without being conscious of the experimental tradition. These two influences/languages helped me understand a certain freedom in what we're probably calling art in this discussion. From there, I decided the art world would likely be less resistant to my caprices than the film industry.

How did you support yourself in the beginning as you were building your career? Do you currently have a day job? If no day job, how do you pay the rent and bills etc.?

I worked for artists, galleries and museums. Mostly admin positions. My current day job is thankfully making my own work. I pay the rent and bills through sales of work, which come through my three-and-a-half galleries.

What are the three-and-a-half galleries? The only one I am aware of is Andrew Kreps.

Sadie Coles HQ in London, Galleria Franco Noero in Turin, Blum and Poe in L.A. (where my last solo show was).

When you do your conceptual pieces such as the burrito piece and the cats in the gallery, how do you make money or monetize these seemingly banal, ever changing subjects? I heard Marina Abramovic sells photographs and DVDs of her performances.

Many of the works are not the actual objects you see in the temporary space of an exhibition, but certificates of authenticity that explain how to (re)produce the work and live with it (if not “in storage”). There’s often a great deal of verbal instruction on the COA that presents guidelines (often quite non-restrictive). In the instance of the burritos, they were sold as the piece they were, “chicken burrito, beef burrito.” The cats were not sold. I just issued a COA to the person(s) who adopted.

Not quite clear: You sold the physical burritos that were displayed, or sold a COA with the words “chicken burrito, beef burrito?” Did anybody eat them? Did you eat them? Were they trashed instead?

I sold the COA with the title, i.e. medium, of the work and an additional text to frame the work’s parameters.

During the exhibition, the museum staff encountered a couple of bites, and a bisection. I didn’t eat them. They were trashed weekly (unless bite marks or serrated plastic knife marks were evident).

Did you screen who got to adopt the cats? Did they go into any famous art collectors’ homes? Friends? What kind of people adopted them? Did anyone name a cat after you? Have you kept track of the cats? (I am a cat lover.)

The cat adoptions were managed by a cat rescue NFP. I don’t think any of the cats are in any “prominent” collections. No friends either. Just some good cat lovers.

I haven’t kept track of the cats. (I’m a cat lover too.)

What was the average amount of cats you had in the gallery at PS1?

Probably around 1.85 to 2.2.

Any thoughts on money? Do you think money/capitalism pollutes the “purity” of art making/creation? Is art making even pure?

I think it’s naive to think money pollutes any art “purity.” I mean of course it does, but of course it doesn’t. Art making is pure insofar as it’s a mirror of itself, but if one wants to find some sort of success—whether as a voice “alone” or as a something engaging a commercial framework—one is, or exposes oneself to being, in bed with money.

Have you ever made something just for money, thinking it would sell? If yes, what was it? Was it a success?

I’ve recently had some projects made “just for money.” I’m hoping they

might sell. But they're not about profiting.

Do you have art groupies or stalkers? And if yes, how many and what kind of people were they? Your creepiest encounter?

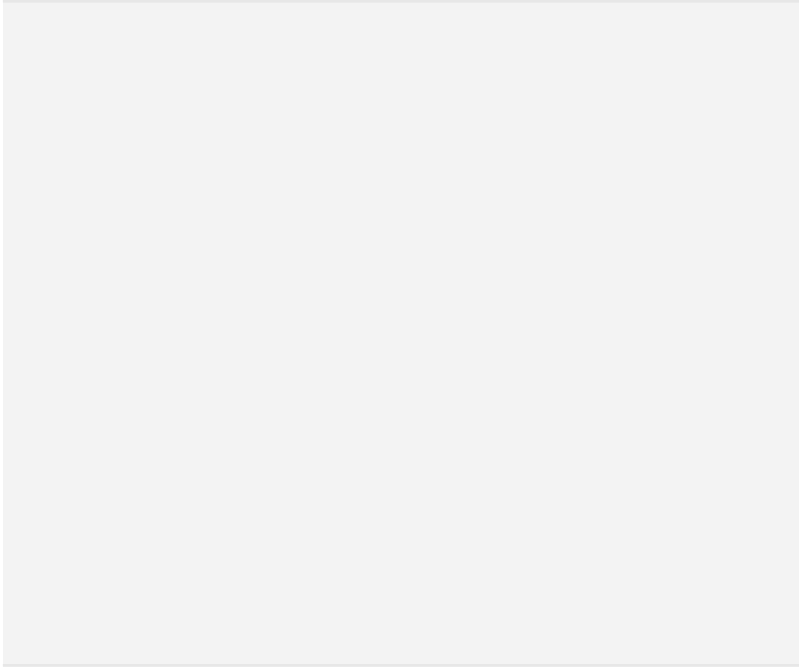
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Sharon Adarlo is a writer and artist based in Newark. She can be found at [her personal website](#) or [on Twitter](#).

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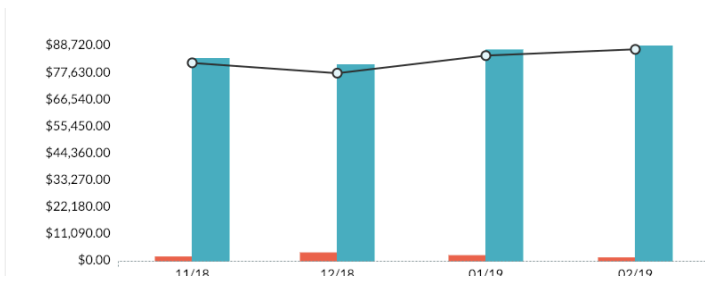
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