

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY



William Anastasi with Phong Bui

On the occasion of his recent exhibition, "William Anastasi: Raw" at the Drawing Room of The Drawing Center, which will be on view till July 21st, the artist paid a visit to the *Rail's* Headquarters to talk about his life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): You were born in 1933 and grew up in Philadelphia, coming to New York in 1962. Would you tell us more of your early history?

William Anastasi: Well, it no doubt really began with my mother having the idea that the best thing you could be in life was an artist. I heard this as far back as I can recall. Very early I began to draw every day. That's a habit I have not broken. When I was 12, she told me about the Fleisher Art Memorial—it was originally known as the Graphic Sketch Club—an estate left by Samuel S. Fleisher after his death in 1944 to give free art lessons to poor kids. There was an episode that no doubt affected my future history. The first Saturday they put me in a large room with at least 40 other kids aged twelve to sixteen—and there were four instructors. They gave every kid a large sheet of paper, pastels, and "a subject." The subject was "jungle." Well, I put a lion and tiger brawling in the foreground—trees with gigantic leaves in the background, monkeys swinging from the branches—and at the end of the day, four drawings, mine included, were put up on the easels to be chosen as "the best of the day." I guess they voted and miracle of miracles they choose mine and told all of us why! I was, needless to say, in ecstasy. Here I am, only 12, and my drawing was considered to have more merit than the other kids—many of them older. I must have floated all the way home. Of course I couldn't wait for the next Saturday to come around. This time—same instructors, same art materials, same mob of kids—the subject this time is "circus." I thought, this is better than last week. I'll have the same big cats in a cage with a tamer and his whip, instead of monkeys swinging from vines I'll have acrobats up to their stunts up high, there'll be clowns running around, etcetera! And low and behold, I received my first negative criticism. One of the instructors comes up, he didn't like this, and I should change that—and over here, this is all wrong! It was like the bursting of the largest bubble I had ever known. I looked up at him and said, believe it or not, "Don't you know who I am?" I now knew what "devastated" means—I never went back to those classes again. But it would seem that the dream somehow stayed intact for all of that. It wasn't until August 15th, 1960, age 27, that I dated and signed a drawing for the first time as a grown-up. And the following year I would make the earliest piece that I still show. I poured cement into a rectangular shallow wooden form, filled it with cement and trowel finished the surface. When it was half set, I urinated on it. I titled it, believably enough, *Relief*.

Rail: Did that piece have any connection to Duchamp's works, not only his *Urinal*, but the other pieces you saw in the Arensberg Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art?

Anastasi: Without question, even though he didn't fit my idea of an artist as a youngster. I was confused by the fact that, unlike other artists, every piece of his was totally different from every other piece. I remember thinking, "Either he's a genius beyond my understanding, or he's crazy!" I guess comprehension was slow but inevitable. In fact, Duchamp came to my show at Dwan's Gallery in April of 1967. By marvelous coincidence in that same month Bob Ryman had the first one-man exhibit of his landmark paintings on rolled steel from the "Standard" series directly across the street at the Bianchini Gallery.

Rail: Did you manage to see Duchamp after that?

Anastasi: No. But I later met Teeney (his widow) through John Cage, and Dove (my partner) and I were able to often visit her in Sous Grez near Fountainbleu.

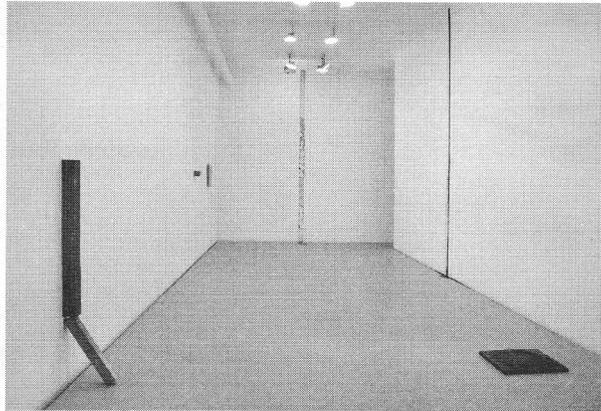
Rail: How did you meet John Cage?

Anastasi: In 1965, preparing for my exhibit "Sound Objects," Virginia (Dwan) called me and said that the Foundation for Performance Art—I much later learned it had been founded by John Cage and Jasper Johns—was going to have their annual art sale to support avant-garde performances, and she asked whether I'd like to give a drawing to this cause. I said yes, gladly. A week later, she called again, asked whether I'd be in around six a certain evening, I said yes, and she said they'd sent someone to pick up the drawing at my loft. The elevator bell rings—it was an A.I.R. loft—I take the elevator down and there's Cage, whom I had never met. "I'm John Cage. I'm here to pick up the

Bui, Phong. "In Conversation: William Anastasi." *The Brooklyn Rail*, July/August, 2007

730 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10019
TEL 646 336 7183
FAX 646 336 7185
WWW.GERINGLOPEZ.COM

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY



William Anastasi: *Raw* at the Drawing Center, April 21–July 21, 2007. Photo by Cathy Carver. Courtesy of The Drawing Center.

drawing that you're donating. I've heard that you're about to do a show titled "Sound Objects," and if you have the time, I'd love to see the works and hear the sounds." I said yes, there was the time. We got on the elevator and went up to my chaotic space. He was wonderfully responsive to the various works, and that was the beginning of our long friendship—though the extreme closeness with the daily chess games did not begin until twelve years later in 1977. But the closeness lasted for the rest of his life.

Rail: And at some point, in between the ride on the subway from your home to Cage's, you began in earnest to make your Subway Drawings, even though you'd started them in the '60s.

Anastasi: Yes. The difference with the later ones was, by religiously playing two games of chess everyday at five they became a form of meditation.

Rail: There's a continuity between Duchamp's ready-made objects and Cage's chance operation. Could you talk more about that?

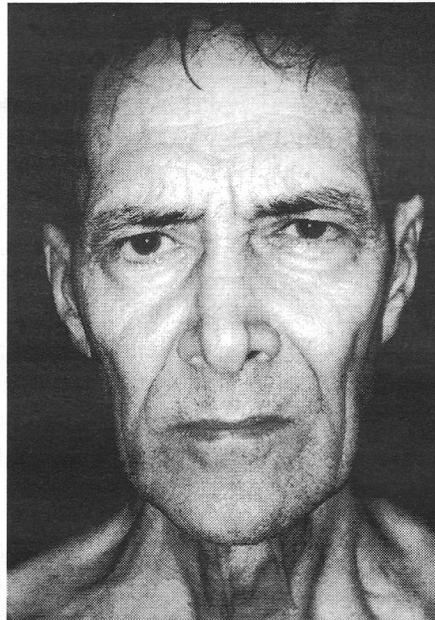
Anastasi: Thinking back, it seems quite logical in terms of how, for instance, my piece *Relief* has an inherent obvious connection to Duchamp's *Urinal*, but to his masturbation piece as well, which was clearly also a forerunner for Pollock's drip paintings. At the same time it contributed to my thinking about the whole question of "beautiful" and "ugly" as simply prejudices. You know, Heraclites, years before Plato and Spinoza, wrote that the most beautiful thing in the world—or "cosmos" depending on the translation—is a pile of random sweepings. How marvelous! Just remember what the night sky has there for us if we've ever seen it on a clear night in the country or from a mountain top—"random sweepings" of stars and planets that make your heart skip a beat. And, going from macrocosm to microcosm, this same susceptibility informs my very early detailed drawings of used toilet tissue.

Rail: This may or may not at all have any direct references to your work, (I know that you knew Dick Higgins and his wife, Alison Knowles, and the whole Fluxus scene) but out of curiosity, were you well aware of Piero Manzoni, whose work had a significant impact on the as-yet-unnamed Arte Povera movement right after he died in 1963?

Anastasi: Well, we're both of Italian lineage and born in 1933. We both used our own waste matter as an art material in 1961; I urinated on cement in an open box, Manzoni canned his *merde*. A big contrast is that I've never been interested in drinking and have a distaste for travel. On the other hand, Manzoni, according to his friend Enrique Baj, became a heavy drinker and wanted to travel-travel-travel after making *Merde di Artiste*—Baj expressed the view that his friend may have experienced a kind of illogical claustrophobia after that gesture, as though the artist was somehow himself in that airtight can—that it was this that led to his constant traveling and heavy drinking, which is after all another form of traveling.

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

Rail: One of the things I was thinking about as I was reading Tom McEvelley's interview and his writings about your work, is how he is very involved in the tautological aspects of what you are doing. Each work is what it is, it doesn't replicate something, it doesn't represent something, it just exists as what it is. There is an enormous difference between locating the position that a work of art holds within an art historical continuum, and trying to understand what a work of art reveals to us. So in regards to your current exhibit, which is a small selection from the much larger body of work that you've been making since the early '60s, it occurred to me that there is an incredible consistency of the appearance of unseen forces that are operating within your work to articulate the relationship between the seen and the unseen. For example with *whatwasit youwasit (propped II 1965/2007)*, this piece is standing here because of gravity, it's an acknowledgment of gravity. The same can be said of *Issue*, (the vertical wall removal), and *Untitled* (the poor piece of 1966/2007).



"Self-portrait" by the artist. 2006.

Anastasi: But then gravity is involved in all five pieces.

Rail: That's true. Have you always been conscious of that element?

Anastasi: I can't say that it's ever been that conscious in the making, and maybe that's good; it's not there to be conscious. It either works or it doesn't. There's that story of a lady admirer of Dali asking him if it was hard to make a painting. He said, "No, it's either easy or impossible!" Everything in here is simply possible. There's that physicality and the related physicality of each piece to the others, and to my work as a whole.

Rail: What does this mean to you—*aestheticized*?

Anastasi: Where my aesthetic-prejudice-of-the-moment is inserted.

Rail: You think it's driving the kind of decisions that are being made?

Anastasi: Absolutely. It's the motor for every artist. If Cézanne's aesthetic-prejudice-of-the-moment had not been in the driver's seat, he would not have left those 'failed' landscapes. He didn't even bother carrying them back home. I'd want to let them hang around for a while to let them sink in a bit. But it was the aesthetic prejudice that directed him at the moment. What some artists do now—I'm certainly one of them, and Duchamp had a lot to do with it—is

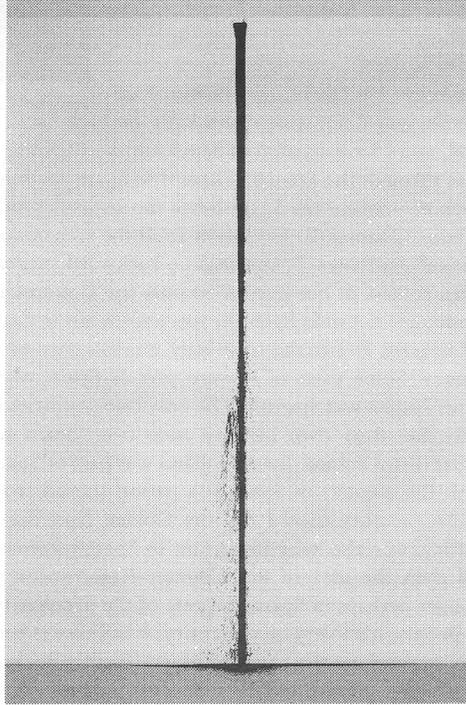
GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

to try the utmost to circumvent that, and still do something of lasting value. The quote that comes to mind here is from Herbert Spencer, who also intuited evolution before Darwin published. He wrote, 'All science is either physics or stamp collecting.' I think in the post-Duchamp, post-Einstein world the artworks that may ultimately have the best hope of escaping the latter characterization are those most in sync with the former.

Rail: Let's focus again on *Issue*. When I come up close, I can see that there's a point here where the layers of paint are gaping out from the wall one eighth of an inch, and you could easily pull them off; so you had to make certain decisions about where to stop. Are those aesthetic decisions, or...

Anastasi: No, the decision was in the recipe—*Draw two vertical lines 4 ½" apart from floor to ceiling on a plaster wall. With a chisel and hammer chip the surface away within the lines to a ¼ inch depth. Pile the debris at the base of the removal in a mound as wide as the strip, extending onto the floor at a right angle from the removal.*

Rail: Actually, in its vertical form, there's the same physical assertion between *Issue* and *one gallon poured*,



William Anastasi, Untitled, 1966/2007. One gallon of industrial high-gloss enamel, poured, dimensions variable. photo by Cathy Carver. Courtesy of The Drawing Center.

which doesn't quite look as if it needed a whole gallon of paint...

Anastasi: But it did, though a little at a time. I had small cupfuls handed up to me by an assistant and I carefully emptied each against the wall. The little curved horn shapes on the wall near the ceiling were made by the edges of the cups—they weren't supposed to be there, but they are there.

Rail: How do you value these pieces you initially did in the '60s when you reenact them now? Does this manifestation have any greater or lesser value for you than when you originally did it in the '60s?

Anastasi: No, nothing that I am aware of—I don't value them differently. All that I hope for is that the result corresponds to my aesthetic-prejudice-of-the-moment. For instance, when we were deciding where to put this piece it became clear that everyone there—myself excepted—wanted to deck over this one-inch gutter that goes around the room between the wall and the floor. I would never change the room if it could be avoided. I guess my instinct is to accept what's there, like a part of nature—don't fuss with it.

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

The architect did his job, now I'll try to do mine. When the piece is done it may not conform to everyone's aesthetic sense, it might not even conform to mine, but so be it.

Rail: One thing I noticed about *Displaced Site* is that when I get within three feet of the piece I can smell the plaster dust from having opened the wall. I'm attracted to it in one sense because I love the beauty of white plaster and the sheerness of the plane of the wall, and what it means to make that. But at the same time, when I think about the concept of the filling of the box with the debris of the void that holds it in the wall, it similarly evokes a certain space as well as a spatial relationship to my body.

Anastasi: Well, like many artists of my generation, I know a thing or two about construction and industrial materials.

Rail: Are you comfortable with the perception that you've never been a career artist?

Anastasi: Well, my favorite pretence is that I don't care one way or another. Although in the last year or two, my work has been more visible among young artists and scholars, and I do think that's more important to me than the rest—

especially regarding the young artists. In most ways, none of us can control the public reception of our work. I showed *Free Will* in a large group exhibition titled "Into the Light" at the Whitney Museum a few years ago—the piece presents on a monitor a live closed-circuit video view of the corner behind it. An artist friend—an artist much better known than myself—said to me, "You know Bill, this is what it is with your work—the viewer has two choices—it's either a total hoax, or it's the best piece in the show—with no possibility in between."

Rail: That certainly reverberates back to your reaction to Duchamp: "Either he's a genius or a crazy man."

Anastasi: (*Laughs*). At the end of the day, it may be that ambivalent feeling between the two that keeps me going as an artist. I suspect that's what keeps all artists working till the end. Maybe it's insecurity or some sort of anxiety. You can certainly see that clearly expressed in Picasso's very last drawing, his self-portrait of 1972—this skull with huge eyes, somewhat of an antic spirit, conveying a volatile combination of vulnerability and sheer terror. **BR**