

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN:

Roxy Paine/Bluff

Public Art Fund,

New York, 2004.



Amanita Field (detail view), 2000. Epoxy, stainless steel, thermset polymer, lacquer, oil paint, urethane, aluminum.

Conversation between Roxy Paine and Allan McCollum

In 1995, when Roxy Paine began to follow a preoccupation with intoxication and decay into the world of plants and fungi, he did not begin reproducing a series of individual poppies or mushrooms, one by one, in the fashion of a *trompe l'oeil* sculptor. Instead, he designed a production system that *generated* them. He made dozens upon dozens of unique molds that could be used to cast and stamp out a large vocabulary of similar but varying plant parts and mushroom caps that all bore close family resemblances, but were never replicas of one another. He designed systems to produce lifelike stems and scores of different sized leaves, and figured out a variety of airbrush and painting techniques for mottling and coloration. He invented and organized assembly line routines and combinatorial programs that mixed and matched this growing storehouse of parts into highly realistic plants and fungi. And he did this in a way that reproduced not simply the look of real botanical specimens, but also the passive, monotonous, and codified manner in which vegetation repeats itself and multiplies. He accomplished not only an imitation of the way nature looks, but also, in a phrase often used by John Cage, an "imitation of nature in her manner of operation."

Paine's interest in the nature of an artist's functioning doesn't stop at this flirtation with the idea of making a machine of himself—he also has done the opposite. He has built actual large scale, computer controlled, ingeniously complex factory machines that supple-

ment his table-top handiwork with mechanically produced "paintings" and "sculpture." Using programming codes, he enters data into his machines that should direct them to create sets of exactly similar artworks—and yet, because machinery and materials are not perfectly predictable, art objects are produced with the same range of variations one would expect from the vagaries of a human hand.

The following conversation took place on January 15, and April 9, 2003, in Brooklyn, New York.

AM: One of the things that becomes clear after reading other writings about your work is that there are many different ways to look at it. People make so many different kinds of associations, it's surprising. I'm curious to figure out why that is, because I don't think you could find quite so many different approaches to the same body of work with most artists. I think there must be something in the way you work that invites this kind of rampant associativeness in the viewer.

RP: To me, that's a compliment because I imagine each piece as a field. A field as in a place where the mind can play — a playing field or a court. If we're talking about a basketball court, there are structures in that court — elements and rules, number of players, rules of play, physical boundaries, and time limits. And yet the way that each game progresses is unique and infinitely varied.

AM: It seems that you consciously choose areas that are almost insanely rich in allegorical and metaphorical potential, and purposefully invite certain excesses of association. For instance, you make these industrial-type machines that actually function to create abstract art objects, on the one hand, and then, almost perversely, you also do these kind of intricate, hand-made, extremely realistic models of plants and fungi that could be mistaken for the real thing. It is not immediately evident what these projects have in common and that, in itself,



Drawing Machine, 2000. Aluminum, stainless steel, glass, valves, servo monitors, track, computer custom hardware, ink, paper. 90" x 94" x 90".

makes you stretch your mind, just because you want to figure out why one single artist would do both.

RP: You want to make a connection. I think we're used to a certain homogeneity amongst a body of work. It's more interesting to play with conventions, and I think that's what they are there for. Initially, my work was even more varied, and then over time, it's evolved into two tracks. At first it was as if each piece was its own planet, and then later broke into fragments, floating in space. Then the fragments started to clump and form more of their own gravity. I wanted each project to have its own internal logic and be true to itself.

AM: So you've been doing these different types of things for a long time, and instigating an excess of associativeness in your viewers. Some people define madness as an excess of associativeness. This can be where art and madness kind of blend into one another.

RP: Absolutely. There's some schizophrenia involved in producing these different volumes. They're connected conceptually, but of course there are a lot of different mechanics involved in each body — different structures and ways of making.

AM: When I came upon your piece *Bluff* in Central Park, of course I experienced it in the context of what I had seen of your work in the past. And the tree — being made of stainless steel, being shiny, being so tall, being so impressive in the landscape and standing out the way it did — it had a kind of classical, illuminated beauty to it. It had a surprising



Bluff, 2002. Stainless steel 50 ft. tall x 32 ft. diameter

goodness to it, standing out against the background of some of your other work. Because a lot of your work seems to evoke associations to entropy, neglect, decay, and sickliness — there are a lot of references to fungi, which have so many kinds of negative connotations.

RP: The more base kingdom.

AM: Yeah, like the evil opposite of plants, which can be seen as positive and inspirational.

RP: Right. Well, the tree is being attacked by shelf fungus, which also implies that it's either very sick or that it's already dead. And no leaves ever appear.

AM: True, but there's a kind of "glory" that stands out at first, before you notice the parasite, the fungus. People often describe trees as majestic, having grandeur. And the word "stainless" even has a moral connotation to it. It's not only the shininess of the metal itself that impacts on the viewer, it's the word, "stainless." "Moral stain" is a common phrase in our own metaphorical language, and the word "stainless" seems to suggest a purity.

RP: It must be my Puritanical upbringing.

AM: Did you have a Puritanical upbringing?

RP: Yes.

AM: The biological world invites so much of this kind of metaphorical projection. Language itself grew out of naming things in nature, plant names are metaphorical virtually by definition, and rooted in metaphor, no pun intended. You focus in on this in a surprisingly intense way. And I guess the stainless steel tree, standing in the context of the dry rot and the shelf fungus and the mushrooms and all the things you make in your studio that are associated with decay and death, paints a kind of image of heaven and hell.

RP: To the fungus, the tree is just food. There's a battle. A tension between them. So, you're saying that the tree is heaven and the fungus is hell?

AM: Sort of. The tree has a kind of heroic and spiritual presence. And then there's this kind of feet-of-clay aspect where the fungus has infested it and is killing it. I can't help it, Roxy, your work always put me in the mind of Hieronymous Bosch! There seems to be an implied moral drama in your whole body of work.

RP: I don't think of it in terms of morality. I do think of it in terms of contradictions. If I establish one idea, I want to question it within the same piece. I'm more interested in the idea of contradictory information being seamlessly embedded in one thing. It's about tension more than morality.

AM: Can you give me an example?

RP: *Bluff*, for instance. On the surface it's about life-forms striving upward to the sky, to the light. And yet it's about death – it's cold, stationary and frozen. Also, there is the material contradiction of a tree being wood, a substance that is ephemeral and decomposes, and transforming it into this seemingly permanent, impenetrable material. Of course, "stainless" is a bit of a misnomer. It should really be called stain-resistant steel.

AM: You seem very attracted to contradictions.

RP: Well, contradiction is an uncomfortable stage. It's unresolved, it's not clear, it can be very confusing.

AM: And you like that. So you allow obvious, unresolved dichotomies to thrive in your work. The machines on the one hand, that are metal and man-made and mechanical and then the organic track of the botanical models and the fungus models and so forth. So, there's a kind of man-made, nature-made dichotomy there.

RP: Well, a dichotomy is a "versus" situation. I am not interested in one idea versus another. It's about two ideas existing simultaneously. The contradictions are present in each track and in each project. *Bluff* is industrial, it's a view of nature through an industrial prism. The process takes something in nature that stands for incredible growth and evolution and then reduces it to component parts and divides it into standardized diameters of industrial pipe and rod. It mimics how we increasingly experience nature—cows are "grown." Crops are optimized genetically for particular characteristics. Everything is treated like an element in a machine. I'm interested in this constant desire to control nature, to make it fit into processes, factory processes. The perfect chicken is the one that is all white meat breasts, and each chicken is genetically almost the same.

AM: And you see this as a bad thing?

RP: I see it as an ever-present thing.

AM: So you're not taking some naturalistic stand against this, you're just observing it.

RP: Well, I'm extremely ambivalent about it. I guess that is channeled into the work somehow. When I'm making machines, I'm working with ideas of mass-production and the industrial sphere, which is about sameness and consistency of product and speed and efficiency. I contradict that with objects that are uncontrolled such as the SCUMAKS, each one unique, subject to natural forces. So it's not about being metallic or shiny or anything. The same with the tree, it's about this industrial vision colliding with this nature vision. It is a combination.

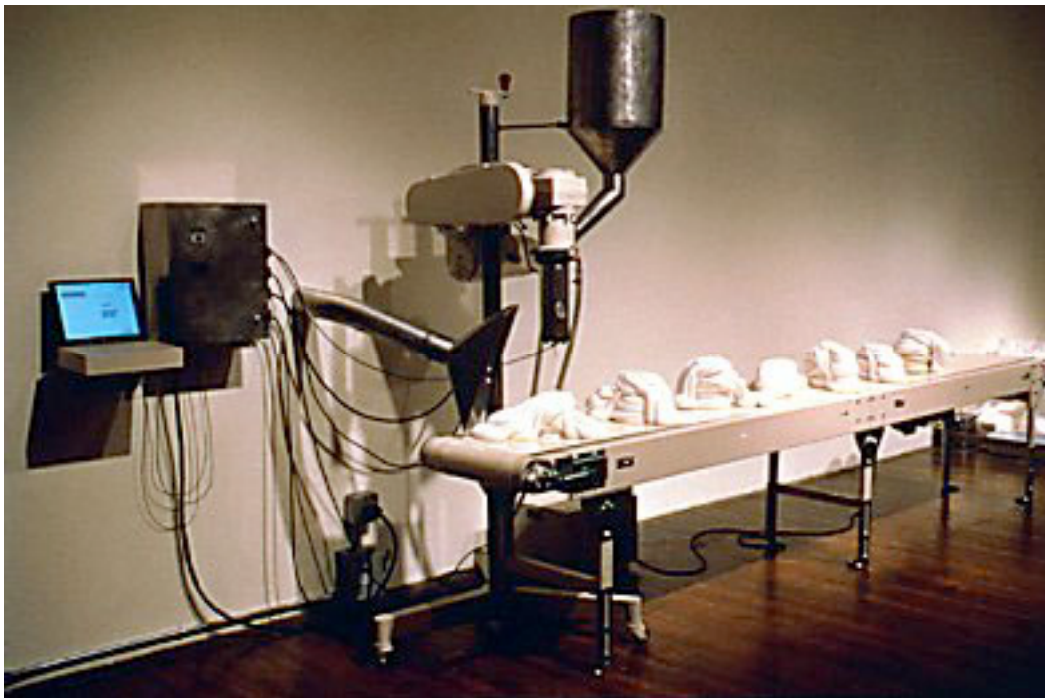
AM: Maybe the reason I'm harping on a kind of moral drama being played out here is also because I'm reacting to the context you've constructed with your machines. You

make these mechanical devices that produce artworks, and when you consider these alongside your plant and fungi replicas, it seems like you're creating a reference to that level of fantasy and metaphor where things "happen by themselves" without anyone really having to *do* anything. Fungus is especially symbolic in this sense, it can grow so fast, even overnight.

RP: Yes. We use the term "mushrooming" to describe just that.

AM: And you said you had kind of a Puritan background. So, putting all of that together, I have to bring up the concept of work. And my impression of you on a personal level, is that you're kind of a workaholic!

RP: That's probably true. Sometimes I feel like the only thing real is work. I know that sounds absurd.



SCUMAK (Auto Sculpture Maker). 1998. Extruder, cooling system, Teflon, electronics, stainless steel, polyethylene. 163" x 81 7/8" x 55 7/8".

AM: Yet artistic labor is often felt to be qualitatively separated from "real," "productive" labor, and it is wonderfully paradoxical that your work is also filled with this romanticization of laziness — which in our culture is considered "bad." Sloth, we call it, it's considered a sin. One of the things we love about machines is that they save us from labor. So there is a powerful contradiction between the amount of work that you put into an object and the resulting effect of effortlessness. I mean, the enormous amount of effort that

goes into your making your highly detailed, handmade models and your factory machines is quite opposed to the implied dreaminess of dry rot and fungus magically growing by themselves, these signs of sloth and neglect. So to me, this is a project with a lot of moralistic overtones.

RP: I like to set up this idea of labor-saving devices, things happening on their own accord. I build it as an idea. It's not, of course, as you were saying, true that they are effortless, but it's important to set that up as a starting point. It is a meditation on labor and work; I don't intend to take a moral stance about it. Still, I have very strong feelings about labor. If I'm not working every second, I'm immediately overcome with waves of guilt. I can never enjoy doing nothing. Maybe part of the work is struggling with that. Maybe the work is about guilt.

AM: This makes me think of your piece, *Bad Lawn*. I don't think a city dweller or even a country dweller would know what that phrase can really imply to a suburbanite in a tract neighborhood! What were your associations to that title?

RP: Yes, *Bad Lawn* is about suburbia, metaphor, property, nature, and control. It's about the association of neglect with badness, and how nature left alone will spout up unwanted entities. *Bad Lawn* is a catalogue of all those entities. It's also about the tension between the metaphoric mind and the cataloguing mind.

AM: Botanically, was the piece made largely of weeds?

RP: Well, weeds are one subcategory. I use five or six different species of weeds and three different fungus species. And then there are other features of neglect in distinct zones; some of the grass is brown and dry, some is very sparse, and there are puddles and very muddy zones, and then a zone where the earth is dry and parched. It's a seamless whole, but also a catalog.

AM: Did you specifically research what is called a "weed" and what is not?

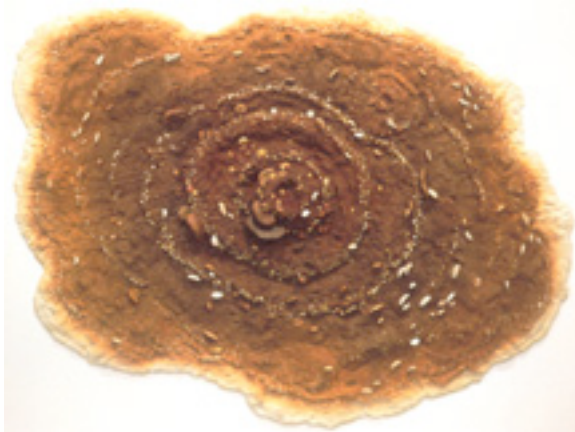
RP: Yes, well, what is a "weed"? There's no separate, genetic category. You are told at a young age what is a weed. A weed is what's undesired.

AM: A socially constructed category.

RP: If you're trying to grow corn, and you have roses, the rose is a weed. It's about desire, and our minds, and our constant need to catalog and differentiate and put things into categories, sub-categories, sub-sub-categories — to file them away, and not think about them.

AM: Does the fact that something is on the edge of being ugly make it more beautiful to you? Or does the fact that other people have been trained to see certain things as ugly; does this make those things more beautiful to you, because of the conflict?

RP: Its more about how our minds and perceptions can shift, and how interesting *that* is. Not whether something is beautiful or ugly.



Fungus, 1998. Wood, aluminum, steel, enamel, polymer, oil, lacquer and Bondo. 96 x 120 x 10 inches.

AM: Okay, now I think I'm beginning to understand. In *Bluff*, the tree is being eaten away by the shelf fungus, and because we identify with the tree as the more advanced life form, we see the process as a kind of tragedy. But while it may be death to the tree, it's sparkling life to the fungus! Moral situations can always be looked at like that, I guess. If you look at things anthropocentrically, cancer is horrible. If you're looking from the position of the cancer, it's great. The black magician Alistair Crowley once said he loved looking at rotting corpses because the maggots and the decay

were such beautiful, positive signs of life's will to continue on!

RP: When something dies, we think of it as the stopping point.

AM: Fungi can be read as signs of transition between one life form and another, really. Things are recycled.

RP: In terms of the cycle, fungus is necessary. They decompose vegetable matter first, then the bacteria and microbes come in and can work with that material. I've read that without fungus we'd have a mile deep of vegetable matter everywhere because all the dead trees and vegetation would never break down.

AM: So a fungus is a kind of natural regulator in a way. Like the enzymes in the body or something.

RP: Yes, it's very cleansing that way.

AM: So maybe I was being too dramatic when I described *Bluff* as a battle between life and death, because you don't really see it as a triumph of one thing over the other, it's more the triumph of the cycle itself. That's something you're interested in, paying honor to the cycle.

RP: Yes, that is definitely more interesting.

AM: Still, it's not easy to look at a fungus and see something beautiful. So, really, your work is very defiant in this regard. A defiance against that kind of moral view that casts certain natural things in a repulsive light.

RP: Well, it's important to have a more complex relationship with something negative rather than simply categorizing it as disgusting or revolting. But sometimes when I'm looking for mushrooms, and I turn over a cap that's full of maggots or transforming into black slime, I can be repulsed.

AM: Is it a personal goal in your work to conquer or master that repulsion and not feel it? Sort of like the way a doctor or a medical examiner or a mortician might have to master it?

RP: Partly. There's a desire to address the repulsion, and to understand it because it's such a strong feeling. Anytime I have a strong reaction to something, I want to figure out why. It's also a necessity in order to deal with these decaying things. The way a doctor has to get past it.

AM: But repulsion, it's got to be connected with a fear of losing control. I would guess that along with the wish for things to happen by themselves, there's also a fear of not being in control, a feeling of things going out of control and getting worse.

RP: Well, control is another idea that I'm fascinated with. What I can control and what can't be controlled is a tension I'm very interested in. I am a control freak and a workaholic. Obsessive-compulsive disorder. You can think of the tree as my OCD monument. How we seek to control, particularly in the way we name and classify things — that's a form of how we control nature. Why do we need this degree of control, and why do we seek to control what is uncontrollable in nature? It's quite fictional and temporary, this control. And yet we hold on to that idea with everything we've got.

AM: You obviously have an interest in scientific thinking, and science is rooted in its antagonism to superstition, to emotional thinking.

AM: That's something that I really seek to meld in the work. *Bad Lawn*, for instance, has a metaphoric side, but then it has this analytic, scientific and cataloging side. Looking at the different species, and cataloging them.

AM: So it's all very paradoxical. And if we didn't have scientific thinking, we'd always be afraid of getting lost in poetic devices.

RP: It's a tether.

AM: Exactly. It's a touchstone of control or sanity. And yet, like you say, it's not such an easy distinction to make.

RP: Right.

AM: How is it you fell into or chose botany and mycology specifically?

RP: I haven't really been that interested in animals. It's an over-run territory. The metaphors are too specific and grounded. And also, when I first started dealing with fungus and weeds I was interested in consciously foregrounding these aspects of nature so that they weren't just backdrops for something else. I'm consciously not making animals or insect a focal point.

AM: Why would you not, for instance, be equally interested in, say, geology, which really is the background?

Painting Manufacture Unit, 1999-2000. Aluminum, stainless steel, computer electronics, relays, custom software, acrylic, servo monitors, valves, pump, precision track, glass, rubber. 110" x 157" x 176".

RP: I am. The machines, I think, are really connected with geology. There are references to earth processes, to molten lava or magma, sedimentary layers, stalactites, changes in form compounded by time and repetition. They're very fast when compared to geologic time, yet still slow in relation to factory time.



AM: It's very spooky in your studio, when periodically one of your machines will turn on by itself and something will move, dip something into something, like it's not you that's doing it. Even though you built and programmed the machine! It's uncanny.

Painting Manufacture Unit, 1999-2000. Aluminum, stainless steel, computer electronics, relays, custom software, acrylic, servo monitors, valves, pump, precision track, glass, rubber. 110" x 157" x 176".

RP: Repetition is something important in the work. Repetitive tasks are what machines are good at. It's a fact that one layer of this plastic would not be interesting, but forty or a hundred layers produced under vigorous forces like gravity and thermal/fluid dynamics are interesting.

AM: Your work has so much repetition in the mechanical processes that you invent, and in the vocabulary of plant parts that you create, and the way you use them over and over again in different ways each time, and the way you create plants that seem to repetitively proliferate. But repetition is an interesting phenomenon that can be read in different ways. For instance, in terms of labor, it can be associated with striving, learning, determination, productivity and growth. But it can also be suggestive of enervation, entropy, absence of creativity, neurosis, or boredom. So, what is it about repetition that you find important, and how do you see it functioning in your work?

RP: I think repetition gives meaning to life. I think our minds have evolved to respond to repeated motifs. Repeated endlessly, some actions are much more interesting than they were when done only once. One mark on a page is not as interesting as a thousand marks or a million marks. One isolated branching incident is not that interesting, but repeated endlessly, it reflects something essential about growth in our existence.

AM: You often repeat similar types of objects — you've done a number of metal trees, for instance. Before you did *Bluff* in Central Park, you did another stainless steel tree for the Wanås Foundation Sculpture Park in Sweden. How did the first tree come about and how did it differ from *Bluff*?



Bluff, 2002. Stainless steel 50 ft. tall x 32 ft. diameter

RP: Well, the first tree was called *Impostor* and I was very much interested in this idea of making a "fake" in a Swedish forest, a very obvious fraud that was trying to fit into this forest, but failing utterly. And I was really seeking to explore ideas of permanence and impermanence and death and decay.

AM: Did it have the fungus on it?

RP: No, it didn't. So, that was the germ of the idea, and Wanås gave me the opportunity to test it out. Technically, I had very little idea of what I was doing the first run. I just dove in.

AM: How were your ideas refined with *Bluff*?

RP: I wanted to push the scale. Also

the forms became more complex. There are additional elements like the fungus, dead and "broken" branches. *Impostor* had a certain awkwardness which I liked, but in *Bluff*, the awkwardness is more fluid.

AM: So the one in Central Park was a lot taller?

RP: Yes. Everything has grown, and other ideas have become more important in the work, like systems, establishing a language.

AM: How long did it take to make the *Bluff*?

RP: Well, several months of planning, and then two or three months of branch fabrication, and then a week of installing it in the park.

AM: Did you copy an actual tree?

RP: No, it's more an amalgamation of different species. I've processed the idea of a tree and created a system for its form. I take this organic majestic being and break it down into components and rules. The branches are translated into pipe and rod. I use 28 different diameters of pipe and rod. Where a branch is tapering constantly, I translate it into 5 inch pipe connecting to 4 1/2 inch pipe connecting to 4 inch pipe, and so on.

AM: Did you combine the looks of a number of different species with *Impostor*, the way you did with *Bluff*?

RP: In Sweden, *Impostor* responded to the various species that were in that forest. Mostly ash. But here in Central Park, the tree was still very much an amalgamation.

AM: But as with *Bluff*, it had a relation to the site itself.

RP: Yes, it has elements of the species that are present in the park, for sure, but I think it could have also existed in different sites.

AM: Let me ask you about the title "Bluff." In your work there's almost always a kind of "bluffing," a kind of fooling-the-eye trickery. But to make sculptures of trees or mushrooms, one isn't required to make them look as real as you do. Why have you chosen to make things look so real?

RP: One urge I always have is to present the facts and to present events without embellishment and frills. At times, it feels mannered to stylize. I'm creating the facts of a species. I'm not recreating one mushroom that existed. I'm not casting this mushroom or tree and then replicating it. I'm taking the species and translating it into a series of elements and rules for how those elements are combined.

AM: Right. Like the vocabulary of plant parts you made to generate the poppies in *Crop*.

RP: Yes, there are 25 "mother" leaves, which beget 700 unique children.

AM: So you're not exactly replicating *specific* organisms, but still, you're creating an effect that requires the viewer to look very close to see if something is real or not. Why do you have to go that far?

RP: Well, I'm not interested in playing a trick on people.

AM: Okay, so your viewers generally know the mushrooms aren't real, but at the same time, you make them appear real. Why?

RP: For one thing, it's about a shift in perception. I like them to be a hallucination, a vision, perhaps a nudge out of a habitual mode of seeing. When I go into a forest, particularly if I've been in a city for a while, my senses are numb. After an hour or two, there's a shift in perception and I start to see different species of fungus everywhere. Small differences and details become important. I approach that in the work, a taste of that shift.



Crop. 1997-98. Lacquer, epoxy, oil paint, pigment. 58" x 96" x 72".

AM: So you invite a person to look at things extremely closely, more closely than they're used to, but you're not exactly trying to fool the viewer, like a *trompe l'oeil* painter. Still, I notice a kind of commentary on certain strictly formal issues in your work, most obviously in your machine-made artworks. You've described these

works as being "about the materials themselves." It's hard not to associate this idea to certain minimalist and post-minimalist artists from the 60s — the *Scumaks* seem almost satirical in this context, like they're imitating Richard Serra's *Splash* pieces, but without the artist's glorified bodily presence involved. You've "mechanized" self-referentiality in art

with these pieces, and it's so humorous to me, but I can't help but think that you have a certain nostalgic respect for that kind of art.

RP: One could look at the machine pieces as a logical extension of minimalist ideals. The *Scumaks* can be seen as revealing the essential nature of this plastic, polyethylene. Also they are being produced by an industrial process without human intervention. However, other ideas present in those pieces directly contradict minimalist notions. The pieces would not be interesting to me if those contradictions were not embedded in them.

AM: It's interesting how you mechanize that balance between the representational extremes of the fungus and plant pieces and the formal extremes of the machine-made artworks — there's a deadly humor there that I really appreciate, coming from the era that I come from. Those process artists from the late sixties, they railed against allegorical thinking, that one thing should stand in for another, they were obsessed with the factual, the "thing in itself." They were rebelling against exactly the kind of pictorialism that you practice so calmly with your mushrooms — and you do it right alongside the hyper-formalistic *Scumaks*. The fungus pieces aren't attempting to be "facts" in the same way that the *Scumaks* aim to be facts-in-themselves, they're the exact opposite, they're only aiming to be real as *depicted* facts.

RP: Well, they're the facts of a species. It's not like painting a picture of mushrooms, even though I think there's a fertility of association. I'm not creating metaphors for moral edification. I'm not *eliminating* metaphor. I'm letting them be, I'm letting them breathe and exist if they want to. I'm not trying to eradicate them.