

BRADSHAW, Limited Edition Box, Edition of 40, 2003, Mark Batty Publisher, LLC, West New York, NJ; Including the artist's monograph, *The Art of Dove Bradshaw: Nature, Change and Indeterminacy*, with Thomas McEvelley text, Featuring the 1992 Conversation with John Cage and McEvelley; 6 works: *Plain Air*, 1969, *Spent Bullet*, 1969, Mixed media; *Performance*, 1976, *Contingency*, 1984, *Indeterminacy*, 1993, *Herself in the Element*, 2002; Unique "Special;" Box size: 13 3/4 x 11 5/8 x 3 1/2 inches

BRADSHAW

By Anna Katherine Brodbeck

Dove Bradshaw's portable retrospective, *BRADSHAW: Limited Edition Box*, 2003¹ including her monograph *The Art of Dove Bradshaw: Nature, Change and Indeterminacy* undoubtedly elicits for the reader associations with Marcel Duchamp—associations readily acknowledged by the artist. Calling to mind Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41) and, to a lesser extent, his *Large Glass* (1915-23), Bradshaw reproduces her oeuvre for the collector, accompanied by the Thomas McEvelley monograph on her

¹ Public Collections: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, The New York Public Library, The National Gallery, Washington, DC, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Birmingham Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

work. A self-proclaimed student of Duchamp, John Cage, and Eastern religion, Bradshaw advances and complicates this particular legacy, a legacy with which many artists who began their careers in the 1960s have historically grappled.

There is an overarching tension active in Bradshaw's work, which is key to understanding the unique contribution of her oeuvre: namely its oscillation between nature and culture. McEvelley eloquently discusses this dichotomy in a conversation with John Cage, published in the monograph. Speaking of a piece in which Bradshaw had subjected a chessboard to a liver of sulfur treatment, which subsequently altered the work's appearance as it was exposed to air over time, McEvelley states, "This is really what I see as a main theme of Dove's work...the distinction between nature and culture. The grid of the chessboard signifies culture; the amorphous, changing, process-oriented, unpredictable and hence unknowable ground is nature. And it continues to change."²



Left: *Spent Bullet* and right: *Plain Air* from *BRADSHAW*, 2003

Limited Edition Box provides a perfect example of the paradox of this distinction: while the subtitle of the monograph references "nature," the presentation of the individual pieces in an archival box some-

² Thomas McEvelley, "Dove Bradshaw: Works 1969-1993. A Conversation between John Cage and Thomas McEvelley" in *The Art of Dove Bradshaw: Nature, Change, and Indeterminacy* (New Jersey: Mark Batty Publisher, 2003), 83.

times bows to the effects of nature and other times not. For instance the copper plate behind *Spent Bullet* is partially exposed to the air and records an ever-changing imprint of that opening. The same is true for *Contingency* since its chemistry is unfixed, as well as for *Indeterminacy* in regard to the use of unstable mercury. However other works are rarefied by archival printing, mats or in the case of the mercury which is encased in a glass vial. Bradshaw plays with the nature/culture distinction in each work.

Plain Air (1969-1991) is perhaps the most straightforward exploration of this paradox. This archival silver gelatin print captures the installation Bradshaw created by unleashing two mated pairs of birds in a room with a bicycle wheel hung from the ceiling and a Zen archer's target nailed to the floor, recalling Dada and Neo-Dada emblems. In their dynamic movements among these symbols of human achievement, the birds perform, most literally, the oscillation between the poles of nature and culture. A similar flux can be observed in another photograph, *Herself in the Element* (2002), which presents a nude with her back to the viewer, calling to mind Man Ray's *Le Violin d'Ingres* (1924). In place of Man Ray's F-holes, however, painted on the woman's back are the names of the chemical elements that compose the human body, in descending order by weight. The O around the woman's neck denotes oxygen, followed by carbon, hydrogen, and so on, with the words becoming progressively smaller until they appear illegible (at this scale). The image of the woman's back, which can be seen both to represent the unknowable ground of nature and to reference the Dada master's photograph, is layered with another ambiguous nature/culture oscillation: the linguistic representation of the biological elements that constitute a human being.



Left: *Spent Bullet* and right: *Herself in the Element* from BRADSHAW, 2003

In *Spent Bullet* (1969/2003), a copper-encased lead bullet that was shot is soldered onto a copper sheet, suggesting metaphors of natural beauty rather than of man-made destruction. It is a rare example of the artist's political work, the utopian desire for spent bullets to be retired as works of art or worn as jewelry. *Contingency Pour* (1984/2002), a study in the reaction of silver to liver of sulfur, is complicated and unpredictable; this work clearly identifies change. However, *Contingency Pour* is still encased in mat board, which protects the other works in the box from the volatile chemical, again leading us to consider how the box's individual pieces are contained and displayed. *Indeterminacy* (1993) consists of seven drops of mercury floating in a glass vial sealed with wax. It is indeterminate in the sense that the mercury is not fixed, although a tiny tag affixed to the bottle, reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, warns the viewer not to touch, ingest, or inhale, thus sealing and cordoning off what is naturally hazardous.



Left: *Spent Bullet* and right: *Contingency Pour* from BRADSHAW, 2003

In conversation with McEvilley about Bradshaw's work, Cage notes how "Marcel Duchamp said, speaking of Utopia, that we won't be able to reach it till we give up the notion of possession. And this work of Dove's confronts possession completely."⁵

³ Ibid.



Performance [1992 Metropolitan Museum Postcard] from *BRADSHAW*, 2003

Text:

Fire Extinguisher [renamed *Performance*, 1993]

Dove Bradshaw, American, b. 1949

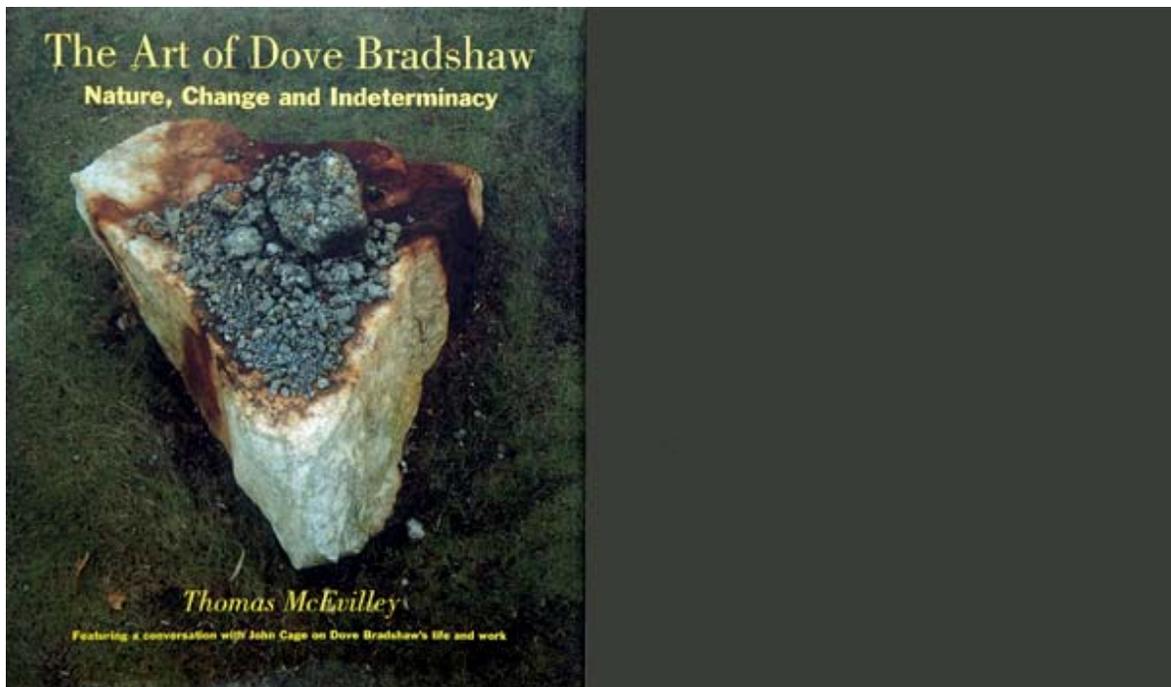
Gelatin silver print, 6 7/8 x 4 11/16 in., 1978

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Gift of Mr and Mrs. Robert E. Klein, 1989 1989.1095

In 1976, the conceptual artist Dove Bradshaw “claimed” a fire hose in The Metropolitan Museum of Art by posting a label next to it that identified it as her work. Next, she had the fire hose photographed, produced postcards of her piece, and quietly placed them in the Museum’s store. They sold briskly. This postcard reproduces the photograph, *Fire Extinguisher* [Performance], now in the Museum’s collections.

As a multiple, *BRADSHAW*⁴, defies the aura of scarcity afforded a unique object, promoting a more democratic conception of possession since it is an edition of 40, albeit a limited supply. This possibility of multiple possession is played out most creatively in a piece included in the box, *Performance* (1976-1992), in which Bradshaw appropriated a standard fire hose inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as her own work. She then made a postcard out of its image, slipping a stack at a time amongst the postcards of her peers in the twentieth-century racks in the Museum gift shop. Though the staff knew it was not Museum-produced, they became complicit and sold Bradshaw's postcard for years. The silver gelatin print used in this original postcard was eventually accessioned into the Museum's collection, followed by the hose itself in 2007. This skewed notion of possession—that Bradshaw could “claim” a fire hose as her own art, have a self-published postcard sold to visitors in the gift shop, and in turn prompt the Museum to acquire the original photograph for its collection in order to produce its own postcard fourteen years later—represents a guerilla alternative to the traditional circuits of ownership and distribution. The Museum has since mounted a wall label next to the fire hose, identifying it as Bradshaw's work, thus completing the circle.



⁴ Each LTD Box contains a “Special,” a 7th unique work added as each work was acquired



Left: *Spent Bullet* and right: *Indeterminacy* from *BRADSHAW*, 2003

BRADSHAW, Limited Edition Box ultimately complicates the dichotomies of nature versus culture and unique object versus multiple, all while challenging classic notions of possession and distribution. Like the wild birds flying between the bicycle wheel and the archer's target, Bradshaw's work is alive, even when contained in a closed box.

