

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Don't Trust Anyone Over 30" competition in 2003, which requested proposals from emerging artists age thirty and younger, living in New York or New England. Under 30 was juried by Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Barbara Hunt, Executive Director, Artists Space, New York, and Barbara Krakow, President, Barbara Krakow Gallery.

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REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: cA/t4 Damaged in Source Lot, from *The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification*, 2003–2004 (detail)

Julian Montague



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The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification, Installation View, 2004

Prince of the Roving Life: Julian Montague's Stray Shopping Cart

By Steve Hunt

In *The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification*, Julian Montague examines a pervasive feature of our urban environment. At first glance his project seems to fit into the branch of Conceptual art that documents everyday objects and/or events. The work of Douglas Huebler epitomizes this approach. In *Variable Piece No. 20*, of 1971, Huebler used a series of black-and-white photographs to document his specific physical location for an eleven-minute period (at thirty second intervals) while he played a game of basketball. The subject of this work is not the event but the method used to record it. It is not significant that we see *Huebler* or see Huebler *playing basketball*. Any person or event would suffice. What matters is the explicit fact of reportage, executed with clinical detachment. Although *Variable Piece No. 20* would not exist without the game it documents, the game is merely the pretext for a demonstration of photographic veracity. The documentation remains indifferent to what it represents.¹

Julian Montague's *The Stray Shopping Cart* project appears to embrace a similar approach. One could imagine any piece of stray urban detritus such as cars, tires, or bottles being documented with a system of identification very similar to the one he has devised for shopping carts. A distinction between "class" and "type" could be used to identify the objects, and flow charts could document their relation to a "source" and anticipate their possible transition to other classes and types.

Julian Montague earned a degree in Media Studies from Hampshire College. He has shown his work in solo and group shows at venues nationally and internationally, including Black and White Gallery, Brooklyn; Central House of Artists, Moscow; Art in General, New York; Spaces Gallery, Cleveland; Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo; and Real Art Ways, Hartford. His work is in the Progressive Insurance Collection. He lives and works in Buffalo.

Yet to see *The Stray Shopping Cart* project in only this way overlooks its originality. Although shopping carts are identified and documented, the system used is *not* indifferent to them. As the artist states, the purpose of his system is to investigate the “peregrinations of the shopping cart.” In addition to providing evidence of their *de facto* physical presence, then, Montague wants to map their movements—in a sense, to follow them as they wander through the city. So what we have here is something perhaps closer to a chronicle than to a straightforward system of identification. His project lets the shopping cart tell the story of its adventures as it finds its way through the world. But, exactly what *kind* of story is being told?

The kind of story being told bears an interesting, if not ironic, resemblance to that delightful precursor of the modern novel, the picaresque tale. In sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain, when the Spanish Empire was in decline, a genre of narrative fiction emerged that had, as its hero and protagonist, a low-life, an outcast, a scoundrel, and a stray—what

cA/t4, Damaged in Source Lot, from *The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification*, 2003–2004



cB/t7, Complex Vandalism, from *The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification*, 2003–2004

the Spanish call a *pícaro*. These novels documented the travels of the *pícaro*, wandering from place to place and from situation to situation, eking out an existence (usually through a combination of deceit and trickery). Written in the first-person, the picaresque novel gave voice to someone on the margins of an empire in decline.

Unlike the protagonist in modern fiction (i.e., the tragic or romantic hero), the *pícaro* is not guided by a vision of him/herself as a moral agent. The *pícaro* has no clarity of purpose and has no goals in life—he/she has neither motive nor mission and is simply the plaything of fortune. The narrative structure of the picaresque novel was designed to emphasize this fact. The chapters follow each other in rapid

succession, revealing the abrupt changes of fate that befall the hero. Each chapter is an isolated episode in a tale of fortune and misfortune, documenting the struggles of the *pícaro* drifting through the world. The story has no resolution. In the end the *pícaro* remains a stray and an outcast.²

These features are found in the story of *The Stray Shopping Cart*. The shopping cart is presented as a kind of *pícaro*, an outcast on the margins of our own declining empire, whose peregrinations are documented in a sequence of isolated episodes via photographs and flow charts. Like the *pícaro*, the shopping cart is subject to the same vicissitudes of fortune, finding itself mired in a snow bank here, crushed by a snowplow or thrown into a lake by vandals there, or left stranded at a bus stop. And, like the picaresque tale, Montague’s story has no resolution. Our “hero” (i.e., the shopping cart) never achieves the clarity of purpose in life that allows the protagonist of modern fiction to emerge victorious over fortune. Like the classic *pícaro*, our protagonist remains mired in the world, defenseless against the ravages of time and fortune.

This recalls vividly the situation of Don Pablos, the inveterate rogue and drifter from Francisco de Quevedo’s masterpiece of 1608, *El Buscón* (The Swindler). Quevedo’s novel charts the peregrinations of the diminutive Pablos, whom Quevedo refers to as the “Prince of the Roving Life.” We follow Pablos as he moves from city to city and from swindle to swindle, alternately finding and losing the material security he so covets. As a classic *pícaro*, Pablos never transcends his mortal situation in a moment of introspective clarity. He never comes to a complete recognition of the futility of his endeavors or of the need to take control of his life. Rather, he keeps plodding along, trying to make ends meet. Pablos is a kind of “everyman” who shows us how to get by in life, persevering despite the odds against survival.

Julian Montague’s *The Stray Shopping Cart* project is the tale of a kindred spirit. His shopping cart is indeed a wanderer, a “Prince of the Roving Life.” Like Pablos, the stray shopping cart is tossed about by the winds of fortune, but like Pablos, it endures in a complex and hostile world. Battered, crushed, and frequently left to rust in the rain, the stray shopping cart remains a constant and ineradicable feature of our urban environment. It is Montague’s grasp of the subtlety, poetry, humor, and implicit universality of the story of the stray shopping cart that accounts for the originality and charm of his work.



cB/t14, As/In Refuse, from *The Stray Shopping Cart: An Illustrated System of Identification*, 2003–2004

Steve Hunt co-curated the exhibition “Face Your World: Jeanne van Heeswijk” at the Wexner Center for the Arts with Carlos Basualdo in 2002. He has written on the work of Ann Hamilton and H. C. Westerman.

¹ For a full discussion of the work of Douglas Huebler see Ann Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001), 135–140.

² For a full discussion of the features of the picaresque novel see Stuart Miller, *The Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1967).