

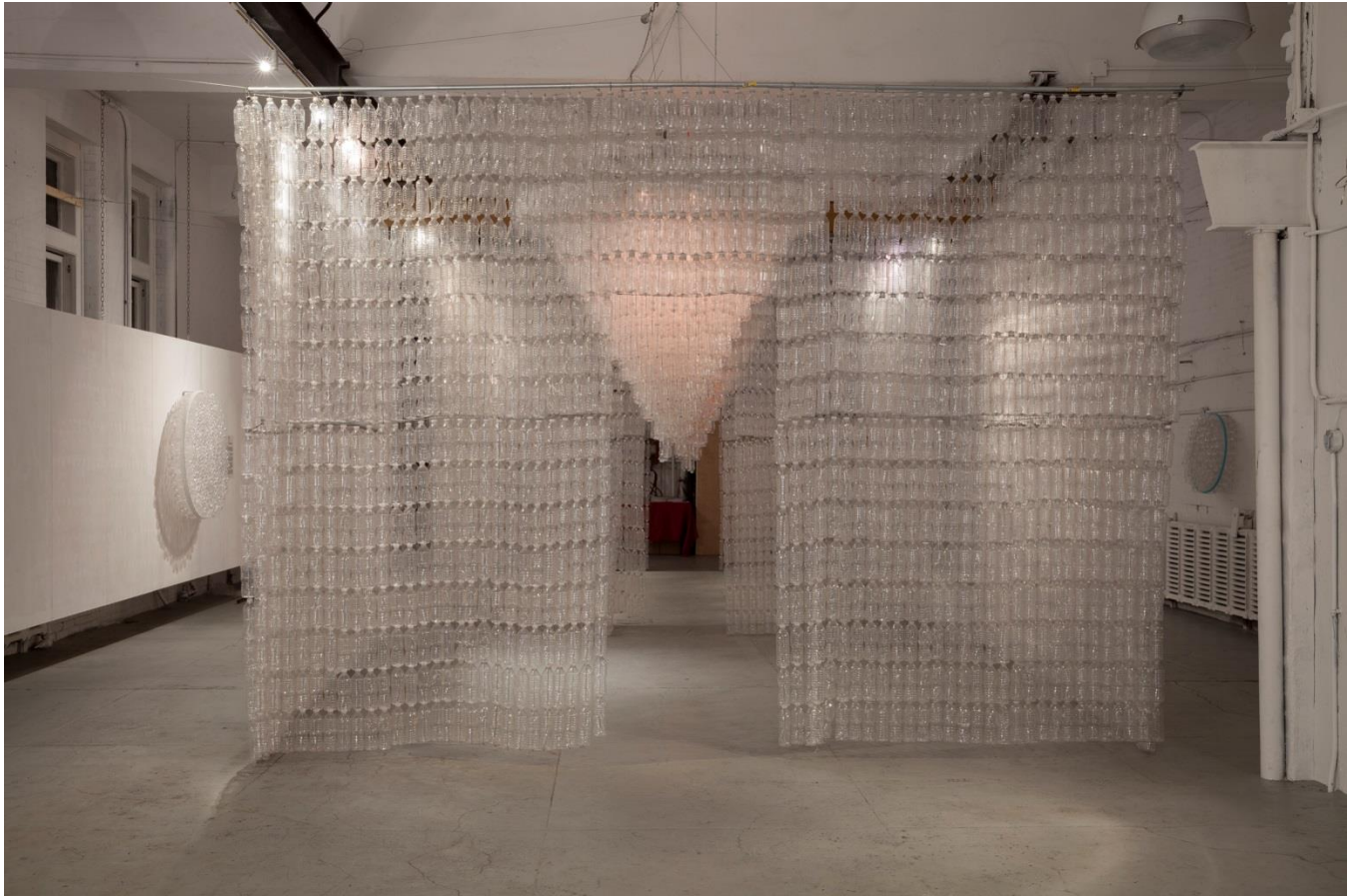
# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## INTERVIEWS

### **Upcycled: A Conversation with Willie Cole**

by Souleo  
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*From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark, 2013

When I first made contact with Willie Cole it was to request that he submit a piece for an exhibition I curated, *Art Enology*. Here I was, a novice curator, reaching out to a living legend for an exhibition that was launching in a mere three months. I never expected him to say yes. I just wanted him to know that I existed, admired his work, and would hound him until he gave in to being part of one of my exhibitions. Fast-forward six months and Cole was one of the exhibiting artists in the first-ever AARP exhibition I curated, *Lasting Legacy: The Journey of You*.

Needless to say, I'm still intrigued by the man who transforms everyday items (e.g. irons, bicycles, and shoes) into works of art that challenge us to see beyond the perceived physical limitations inherent to the purpose of any object.

# Alexander and Bonin

The New Jersey native rose to prominence in 1989, and since then his work has been the subject of several one-person museum exhibitions including: Miami Art Museum (2001), Bronx Museum of the Arts (2001) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1998). Cole was one of the featured artists in *Reconfiguring an African Icon: Odes to the Mask by Modern and Contemporary Artists from Three Continents*, which opened in March 2011 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In his latest exhibition, *From Water to Light*, he presents his newest artistic obsession: water bottles. With these materials he redefines recycling as reincarnation, repurposing over 10,000 recycled water bottles to create chandeliers and rooms filled with a spiritual aura.

*From Water to Light* will be on view until May 31, as the latest exhibition presented by Sumei Multidisciplinary Arts Center at the new Prospect Street Fire House gallery in the Ironbound section of Newark.

**Souleo:** *When we first spoke months ago you stated that you started using everyday objects because they were readily accessible and practical in terms of economics. With your current exhibition you are focused on recycling as reincarnation. So does the use of everyday objects now have a more spiritual motivation for you?*

**Willie Cole:** The objects that I use I see as them finding me, more so than me finding them and looking for an object. I see an object and suddenly I recognize what I can do with the object. So in that sense there is an energy or spirit connection to the object. I am exploring the possibilities of these objects. The water bottle is a new object but in terms of shoes, bicycles, steam irons and hairdryers I scratch the surface of these things when I begin to use them.

**S:** *So how did the water bottle find you?*

**WC:** I have a friend who has a beautiful pond in his front yard and he has fish in his pond. We're drinking water and when my bottle was empty I began to shape the bottle into a fish. That made all the connections between plastic and recycling, the ocean and all that stuff. That's how I decided to use the water bottle as a building block. Using it now is somewhat a political act because I am adjusting and solving a problem, the problem of too many plastic bottles in landfills. Then I began to think about the basic element of life, which is water, and it comes in a bottle. When we drink the water we replace the liquid in the bottle with air, our breath. To me that becomes your spirit. Water is a life force and it ties into my philosophy on life that all things are one and the same thing.

**S:** *There is a strong spiritual element to all of your work and you tap into that with this current exhibition through the idea of transcendence and reincarnation. So what spiritual elements and teachings had the greatest impact on you with this project?*

**WC:** With this project I would say Buddhism or something like Buddhism. For years I have been inspired by West African religions but never practiced it. I had practiced Buddhism for many years. I think there is only one sort of spirituality and different practices are created. They all are pretty much the same teachings or different aspects of the same teachings.

**S:** *It's the idea of oneness that all energy comes from the same source.*

**WC:** Yes. If you think about life on a molecular level, if you break anything down it's all the same particles and made from the same minute energy.

**S:** *As an artist that concept must give you freedom to create anything from all sorts of objects as you've done with shoes, steam irons and so forth.*

**WC:** It does. I say that I can make anything out of everything and everything out of anything. I challenge myself to do that. Sometimes it takes longer than I'd like which is why I work in series as I try to master the thing. I made art out of irons for 15 years before I switched to bicycles. I do shoes steady now since 2005 but it's all the same thing to me. It's a different object on our level of everyday perception but once you see it as a particle the possibilities are endless.

# Alexander and Bonin

**S:** *At the exhibition, viewers can donate their own recycled water bottles as a show of support to the environment. As an artist do you see part of your role as moving people to action on important issues?*

**WC:** Not all the time. Mostly it's about awareness. My intent is usually discovery to prove to myself that everything is everything. In the case of the water bottles I want it to be bigger than art in a gallery. But also I need the materials. My installation took 10,000 water bottles and my production rate is dependent on how many bottles I get.

**S:** *There are presently large bodies of water bottles floating in the ocean like islands. Much of your work is said to be a critique of the consumer culture that creates situations like this. So how does this project fit into that recurring theme?*

**WC:** Consumer culture is not my deliberate catalyst to make anything, but it is a critique of my work that I've accepted because I use objects consumed by everyday people. I hate shopping since there are too many things to choose from. To me it represents an order and the ego. Culture is driven by the ego of the shopper. So much of what life could or should be about is masked by our obsession with buying and owning and wanting something we can't afford. The water bottles are my conscious attempt to make political awareness.

**S:** *On your website the tagline is "contemporary artist, perceptual engineer, ecological mechanic and transformer." Do you ever find yourself having to negotiate between these identities or are they all just one?*

**WC:** They are one but they are names given to me by others. I thought they were interesting since I never cared for the word artist anyway. I am more of a perceptual engineer. I change the way people see everyday objects the same way advertisers change the way we see the world. In the 1970's I was a painter and had a son in 1978. He would watch "The Transformers" and when the toy cars came out I found it inspiring. I saw first a car then a lion and it made me think about transforming objects and that's why I use that word [transformer]. They are all aspects of what I do but they are the same.

**S:** *I read a quote from you that pretty much stated that you feel as if you don't fit into the African-American art movement because artists transcend labels. Yet it's arguable that much of the art world is not as enlightened as you'd hope. So how do you handle that duality of wanting to transcend race but knowing race is still and may always be a factor in the art world?*

**WC:** The thing I am pushing against is my own self-limitations. I recognize that labeling is part of marketing. But if you look at most of my work outside of steam irons it's not about race or growing up in the ghetto of New Jersey. I am exploring greater things than that. I've been post-black since the 1960's. We are black and making art but that shouldn't be a label. We should be artists until it's important to say that we are black. I want people to see my art as art. America has this fascination with the other and wanting to label the other. They've categorized to control the world and the way we see the world and our symbols of beauty. From 1955 to 1968 I was very unattractive because black awareness hadn't kicked in yet. I had a big nose, nappy hair and big eyes. But after 1968 I was suddenly a handsome brother. I was born colored then I became a Negro, then Afro-American, then black and then African-American. They all had to do with how other people saw black people.

**S:** *People may not know this but you started a band in 2006 called BlackGomez. How does being in a band inform your role as an artist?*

**WC:** BlackGomez is me and my kids. It is a one-man band but my two daughters do harmonies in the background. I don't make money at it. I need some creativity that is not about earning money. It has more freedom to me. I play the guitar and had one my whole life. Music especially, non-vocal, it takes you to a certain place. I listen to ambient music for meditation and to relax. I listen to jazz too as it's expansive with concepts. Bebop takes chord structures and changes the melody. That's what I do with my objects and improvising on the visual harmonics of the object.

From Water to Light continues at the new Prospect Street Fire House gallery (56 Prospect Street, Newark, New Jersey) through May 31.