

# PROP 65

## Table Breath by Nick Kramer

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It's the lucky consumer who has the luxury of informed choice. California's Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986, popularly known as Proposition 65, requires companies to declare probably carcinogenic traces of listed chemicals in their products and shops. Yet the list of probable carcinogens is long. Warning stickers bring their vague prognosis to everything from plywood to prenatal tea. Manufacturers simplify their lives by labeling not just those goods meant for California, but all goods. Businesses from Starbucks to Disneyland go further, opting for a blanket statement on the front door, drive-thru window, or checkout stand, warding off liability with a simple spell: something or everything on this premises might give you cancer. The warnings proliferate, senselessly, until the well-intentioned Prop 65 becomes little more than a legalese reminder that yes, someday you will die; and that the more stuff you do, the more respiration and digestion you accomplish, the more cell divisions you eke out, the more you tempt that ultimate metabolic project.

Maybe this is why art history nods with grave superstition to artists—like Eva Hesse, like Alina Szapocznikow—who succumbed, maybe, to the particular toxicity of their own processes. Or maybe they just got cancer. Science hasn't yet rooted out the mystery from either disease. There is the before, and the after; meanwhile, the artist's notions and

materials seemingly *pass through* their body, from brain to hand, turning up on the other side as a foreign mass. Then there is the mythology of early death—as if a price might be paid, a lifetime of energy spent in just a few hyperproductive years of cigarettes and resin pours. Whatever it takes, some say, as if the driven artist has a choice. Metastasis overcomes stasis; mutation is your body’s way of casting dice.

Something like chance led Nick Kramer to a Los Angeles foundry better suited to street lamps than to delicate reproductions. The artist asked for one copy each of the following: a flathead screwdriver; an Advair Diskus prescription asthma inhaler; and a portable folding table, the top of which he had covered in Plasticine. A block of two-by-four pine was screwed to the tabletop, and a fist-sized Plasticine wad clung to one long edge. These four vagrant formal elements, we imagine—wad, wood, screwdriver, and inhaler—shuffled across a field, a workspace raked, like one of Rodin’s, by the artist’s finger, until—nailed down, as it were; cast near forever. The result bears the seams from the mold. Perfunctory welds attach the legs, a bit askance. Across the table’s surface are the splotches, discolorations, mattes and glosses that are evidence of incidental reactions. (The aluminum is suspiciously brittle: What impurities does it contain? What leaded risks?) Process “freezes” into art, motion becomes evidence of former motion, and a hand worked clay body drains to a silvery alloy.

Not thinking, exactly, but breathing: *Table Breath* is the image of respiration caught midway. Two elements remain loose—the ergonomic lump of the inhaler rests on a flattened mound; the screwdriver jabs through a hole, leading from the table surface into

the air it straddles—yet both are consigned to place, as if held by the composition's poise.

In the artwork's ultimate phase, there at the foundry, the casting sand inhaled molten metal into its gap, once, deeply, then stopped forever. It's an asthmatic, an emphysematic sculpture. It breathes, barely, pharmaceutically propped up. This table doesn't dance. It just stands there, penetrated, wounded, transfigured, replaced; a commodity sick with magic.

Indeed, some uncertainty remains. What if the artist's mutations cross over to you? What if you "get it"—? Its props, inhaler and screwdriver, its doughy surface, have, or *are*, handles; *Table Breath* tempts the viewer to become the toucher—yet it might should bear the sticker of Prop 65: "This artwork contains chemicals known to the State of California to cause cancer, birth defects, and other reproductive harm." Imagine the artist squatting down; he rests his elbow on the table and the clay of his arm distends to cover its Rubbermaid surface. If the sculpted head is the symbol of ideas, the surface of the sculpted table proposes the possibility of work, diagram, experiment; of regurgitation and ingestion; a cognitive meal. The artist's body presents with its own fashioning, while also formalizing its own contemplation—like the corporeal sculpture's metastasis within the artist's brain. Yet the disease has also been arrested, short of fatal; the idea has only broken off from the bulk of the tumor to grow elsewhere.

The surrealist approach to the operating table comes to mind. But the field of *Table Breath*, spread out like a little intersection or park, hosts another drama: tiny doses of benzene and chromium flying blind into your body like bullets into a crowd. Such is a romantic idea of a frozen avant garde, yet the suggestion of physical hazard continues to figure the limits of an

artist's more conceptual risks. Today, too, environmental dangers are among the most political. The general particulate threat that attends much of Los Angeles concentrates in those misused industrial districts cheap enough and empty enough for artists. Here they are, pouring resin. Here they are, handling trace amounts of lead. One bad risk, or a hundred thousand tiny risks over seventy years, have been known to the state of California to hasten the inevitable.

In the less statistical pathology of art, there is the accident that could destroy; but there is also, equally dire, a payoff: the accident that, like a plastic table imperfectly pushed into stasis, monumentally persists. How many others have taken this same metallic lungful of air? How many will take it again? And who will be bold enough to breathe deeply, come what may? It is like they say of the classics: "See California and die."