Bottles of Art, Works of Alcohol

Abstract: Alcohol has gained a notable prominence in contemporary art, particularly in artists’ bars and other convivial situations at biennials and art fairs. What happens, though, when an artwork features alcohol that cannot or is not meant to be drunk? If the point of drink in contemporary art involves engaging spectators in sensorial, embodied encounters, what remains of the specialness of alcohol when it stays in the bottle? This article examines artists’ multiples and distillation projects where drinking is teasingly possible but downplayed. In these works, partaking is less important than the inebriating effect, in which drunkenness is experienced at a remove, and so infuses the imagination to instigate thought beyond the act of drinking. Even when contained, the intoxicating potential of alcohol has the ability to disrupt norms and aesthetic conventions, as well as to make compelling comments on art and society.

Keywords: alcohol, bottles, artists’ multiples, distillation, contemporary art

Even in the burgeoning scene of food art exhibitions and publications in the past decade, barely a sip of alcohol can be found. Of the artworks and essays featured in the major international exhibitions Eating the Universe: Vom Essen in der Kunst (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf 2009), Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art (Smith 2013), and Arts & Foods (Celant 2015), only one artwork foregrounded alcohol in an obvious manner. Among art historical publications, whether monographs by Michel Delville (2008), Cecilia Novero (2010), or Gillian Riley (2015), or anthologies by Judith A. Barter (2013) or Peter Stupples (2014), only one chapter addresses alcohol specifically. Despite the fact that food and drink share occasions of consumption, and travel down the same alimentary pathway, their emphasis in exhibitions and studies differs considerably. What contributes to the limited presence of alcohol in curatorial and critical projects? Besides the challenge alcohol brings to techniques of representation and the moral qualms it evokes, the aesthetic significance of spirits can be difficult to pin down. The potential for intoxication charges alcohol artworks with a distinct instability, making museums and galleries wary of engaging with alcohol directly. The same equivocation that infuses drinking in the social world—liberating in moderation but destructive in excess—can apply to the consideration of alcohol-inspired artworks. Is inebriation a positive state that leads to freer, more creative thinking or is it a negative one that numbs responses and damages the body? The contradictory nature of alcohol as both stimulant and poison injects a note of controversy into every work involving this substance, thus
FIGURE 1: SUPERFLEX, Non Alcoholic Vodka (2006), labeled bottle, serving plate, six glasses.
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS
distinguishing it from the overall genre of food art. Alcohol tends not to be covered in the domain of food art curating and scholarship because it is less like nourishing cuisine than it is a dynamic, destabilizing, drug-like entity unto itself.3

The buildup to the contemporary mix of art and alcohol has been centuries in the making. Half-empty and toppled wine glasses were a recurring presence in vanitas iconography, portending the temporality of pleasure and the ephemeral nature of life. Pub scenes and riotous drinking constituted a subcategory of genre paintings, such as those by the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Jan Steen, who provided urban, bourgeois collectors a glimpse of rural festivities and working-class existence. With the industrialization of liquor production and the rise of mass advertising in the twentieth century, another graphic opportunity was created for artists by companies such as Campari and Absolut, who commissioned artists as diverse as Italian futurist Fortunato Depero for the former and Andy Warhol (and many others) for the latter.4 While throughout the twentieth century artists continued to represent aspects of drinking and alcohol in paintings and sculptures (think of Pablo Picasso’s 1914 Glass of Absinthe or Fernand Léger’s 1921 Still Life with a Beer Mug), what is most interesting is the postwar transition in art from a predominantly two-dimensional, imagistic practice to one that has expanded to utilize any and all materials. For alcohol, that means a shift from creating visual renditions of bottles and people drinking to making actual bottles of alcohol that can be imbibed as an artwork. Since the flourishing of relational artworks in the 1990s, artist-constructed situations have also provided visitors with opportunities to drink, eat, and interact, even in the museum contexts where Picasso and Léger now reside (see Drobnick 2017b). Such literal examples of drinking break down iconography, por-
with ideas and crystallize artistic intention. While one is unable to drink from a bottled artwork, the glass conveys conceptual possibilities for alcohol, focusing instead on its process of production, social resonances, and political ramifications. Through being bottled, the alcohol in artworks diffuses into other contexts.

What makes bottles of art different from everyday bottles of alcohol? At first glance there are a number of similarities. When spirits are bottled in conspicuously small batches, the affinity between artworks and alcohol is pronounced. Vintages from distillers can be produced in limited quantities, like prints or multiples, and promoted as “editions”; superior years are collected, carefully stored, and auctioned, even becoming investment prospects; and the frenzy for sought-after bottles can pit wine and whiskey connoisseurs against each other, just as in the competition for singular works of art. The tasting and savoring of wine, in particular its sensory, emotional, and cognitive characteristics, generate experiences that can certainly be called aesthetic. Even when mass-produced, liquor bears an aura because of its powerful mood-altering, psychosocial effects, which are akin to the transformative, enlightening experiences fine art is argued to engender in viewers. Underscoring further the permeable boundaries between art and alcohol, the French magazine *artpress* (2008) devoted an entire issue to gastronomy and wine in which chefs, restaurants, and vineyards received the same level of attention as artists and artworks.

The labels on bottles of alcohol present opportunities for artists to produce graphic works aligned with their aesthetic practice. One platform, established by Château Mouton Rothschild, a wine estate near Bordeaux, France, that produces some of the world’s most expensive and esteemed wines, features the longest-running affiliation with artists. Since 1924, when Jean Carlu contributed a Cubist composition, artists have designed customized labels, a tradition continued yearly with a new artist after 1945. Over the decades, artists of all aesthetic styles have appeared on the bottles, from modernist giants Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, and Salvador Dalí, to mid-century pop icons Arman, Niki de Saint-Phalle, and...
David Hockney, to contemporary post-media practitioners Robert Wilson, Anish Kapoor, and Ilya Kabakov. The artists are reportedly not paid for their work. Instead, they receive cases of the renowned claret, an exchange system that further underscores the notion of equivalence between art and alcohol.10

Beyond the idea that wine and art are two components of the good life, artist-designed labels evoke the impression that the blending of wine is itself a creative act. Due to shifts in the growing season, climate, processing, and other factors, each year’s vintage bears a singularity—much like the signature styles of the artists selected for the Rothschild’s labels. The images thus provide a visualization of the individuality and originality of the liquid in the bottle, even before it can be sipped and tasted. For Donald Kuspit (2006), writing about the labels of Imagery Estate Winery, the use of artist-designed labels signifies the vintages’ independence, innovation, value, and uniqueness, as well as adding an intimate touch, much like the hand-crafting of unique artworks. The presence of artworks on labels is also a form of marketing, according to John Dickenson (2001), that helps to distinguish small-scale artisanal producers from globalized liquor conglomerates and their plain, easily recognized graphics. Distinctive and intriguing art on the label implies that the taste of the product will be otherwise unusual and interesting.11

The labels for Château Mouton Rothschild vary widely but the overall effect is that the claret expresses the same energy and inspiration as vanguard art. Some artists have chosen to depict stylized versions of grape vines, agricultural scenes, or the Château’s emblematic ram, while others portray table settings, wine glasses, and dancing figures that signify the enjoyment of wine. More abstract labels connote the vivacious spirit of claret through dynamic shapes and lush colors. Whatever the style of the label, as the claret stimulates one’s palate, one partakes of the glass, encompasses both a two-dimensional graphic and a three-dimensional display. Through such dimensional interplay, the label affectively folds together what is on the bottle and what is in the bottle, bridging the divide between the literal and metaphorical senses of taste. Label artwork thus undergirds the correspondence between the aesthetics of fine art and the pleasures of fine wine to lead, ultimately, to a broader expansive concept—the art of living.

Multiples and Readymades

The availability and mass production of bottles appeal to artists working in the genres of art known as multiples and readymades. Marcel Duchamp famously repurposed a pharmaceutical ampoule (50cc of Paris Air, 1916) and Rene Magritte painted surrealist compositions on wine bottles (Femme-Bouteille, 1940–41), but it was the artists aligned with the Fluxus movement of the 1960s who seized upon the potential of bottles to be a resource for serial artworks and editions. Because multiples inherently undermine the unique status of the artwork, they have been used by artists to democratize art and render it more affordable, better able to circulate to a wider audience, and readily adaptable to alternative forms of display.13 Bottled works of art may appear similar to the products of the liquor industry, but with a twist—consumption of the alcohol is traded for contemplation about alcohol. In the art context, the glass of the bottle trades its functionality (hold the liquid until it can be drunk) for framing (position the liquid for consideration and collection). Here the focusing power of glass assumes importance. As Stuart Culver (1988: 107) has identified in his study of department store windows, glass imparts a “supplemental value” that can be perceived but not consumed. For multiples involving bottles, the supplemental value conveyed by the glass intensifies what is conventionally known as an artwork’s aura. With alcohol involved, the concept of aura becomes infused with the buzz of potential inebriation, creating a hybrid phenomenon that I would call alco-aura—an amalgamation of the kick of alcohol and the evocativeness of art.

The alco-aura fizzes in no scene more acutely than the extravagant world of art fairs and biennials. Here the art world covets sponsorship by major distilleries, providing opportunities for alcohol to associate with the high-profile and promotional culture of jet-setting collectors, elite tourism, and blue-chip commerce. For instance, at the 2015 Venice Biennale, Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh Vo curated the exhibition Slip of the Tongue at the Punta della Dogana (otherwise known as the collection of the François Pinault Foundation), and included a potable project: a limited edition series of tequila. The multiple comprised an artisanally crafted crystal bottle, each with a unique label bearing calligraphy by the artist’s father, and, of course, an exclusively refined tequila. Casa Dragones of Mexico provided the liquor, a vintage named Joven that earned Forbes magazine’s “Tastemaker’s Top Tequila.”14 The artist (then living in Mexico) created the edition out of being “inspired by the tradition and spirit of Casa Dragones” and their “shared passion for Mexican culture and the arts” (Casa Dragones 2015b). Contrary to the celebratory prose, themes of horror, sacrilege, and perversion are connected to Vo’s multiple because the bottles feature quotes from The Exorcist (1973).15 A line from Linda Blair’s demon-possessed character such as “Lick me, lick me” (featured on the publicity photographs of the bottle) might refer to the
“sipping” type of tequila Joven exemplifies, but the reference to the film also casts doubt on the supposed virtues of art world collecting. Being “possessed” and acquiring “possessions” become equally tainted with fiendish implications, and Vo’s choice for the number of bottles produced in the edition, 666, implies a mischievous critique of the wickedness of high-art consumerism.

Vo’s project with Casa Dragones epitomizes the current state of artist/distiller association involving luxury branding and art world product placement. These joint efforts enact a potent synergy as the artist gains access to specialized production facilities and the distiller acquires the aura of contemporary art. Both share in and amplify alcohol’s romanticized image and relation to elegant lifestyles. That the publicity generated by these ventures is seemingly doubled—the edition is announced in press releases by both the artist (or dealer) and the distiller, and reviews are featured in both the art and liquor industry media—only adds to the lucrative possibilities. Contemporary art is often castigated for speaking to an exclusive audience and employing arcane conceptual strategies, so teaming up with a distiller yields a product that is undeniably concrete and accessible. For post-medium and post-studio artists engaging in temporary installations, relational projects, or large-scale public artworks, revisiting the medium of a hand-held objet d’art can seem like a return to utter simplicity: a commodity that is discrete, tangible, and straightforwardly transacted in a museum shop or through a gallery website.

In the nexus of artist, commodity, and distiller, Jeff Koons is probably the most successful artist to date. His 1986 edition Jim Beam – J.B. Turner Train, stainless-steel remakes of the company’s model-train bourbon decanters, recently sold for $33.8 million (Griswold 2014). The paradoxical rhetoric floating around Koons’s liquor-filled multiple applies to other versions of the art/alcohol crossover, including his recent Balloon Venus (2013), a rosé vintage undertaken with Dom Pérignon—that is, the artwork criticizes addictive and delirious consumption while simultaneously offering itself as a coveted and expensive item (Sagansky 2013). The artist’s recommodification of a collectible already existing in working-class basements and suburban man caves layers an art aura upon the brand reputation that Jim Beam’s products already embody. Even though Koons uses the industrial material of stainless steel—“proletariat silver” in the artist’s words (quoted in Inde 1998: 6)—to replace the original train’s porcelain, an
alco-aura still exudes from the work via its shiny surfaces and intricate craftsmanship. Unlike glass, steel does not hint at what is enclosed. However, by reflecting back the viewer in the smoother sections of the train cars (a mirroring effect even more pronounced in the lacquered polyurethane resin of Balloon Venus), Koons’s multiple implicates the audience into the twin affects of “luxury and degradation,” the title of his overall series that appropriated and converted liquor ads and paraphernalia into works of high art. As much as those artworks inflated and then debunked the romanticization of liquor in popular culture, the choice of stainless steel marked an interesting strategic choice. Counter to the publicity about charred oaken barrels, mass production by liquor conglomorates often involves an intermediate phase of storage in stainless steel drums (Hall 2015). It is this transitional phase that Koons’s Jim Beam – J.B. Turner Train suggests by virtue of its pristine material: a state of limbo between cask and bottle, between production and consumption, one that is potentially indefinite because steel protects alcohol from further aging. Caught then between the luxury of artwork and the degradation of aging, the owner of Koons’s multiple can contemplate a version of the everlasting in a commodity.

Luxury, death, and the “life” of the commodity are also evoked by Barbara Bloom’s Titanic (Posh: Port Out, Starboard Home) (1989). The title, referring to the now-mythic ship and the best room to occupy on a roundtrip transatlantic voyage from England to the United States and back, carries more than a bit of poignancy due to the fate of many of the RMS Titanic’s passengers—being “posh” failed to ensure survival as some of the wealthiest individuals in the world perished among the 1,500 fatalities. Bloom’s bottle offers itself as a macabre collectible, connoting the bygone luxury bestowed upon the elite on the doomed liner, as well as foreshadowing the end of the Belle Époque. In the 1980s, the Titanic resurfaced in the popular imagination due to scavengers’ efforts to locate and procure artifacts from the ship’s wreckage—a photograph on Bloom’s label shows an intact bottle resting on the sea floor similar to documentation of the Titanic’s debris field by submersible cameras. Tellingly, the extreme cold and darkness at that depth were ideal for preserving champagne. For her multiple, the artist set out to replicate those deep-sea conditions by subjecting her bottles to lie for seven years at 12,500 feet underwater. Titanic (Posh: Port Out, Starboard Home) alludes to endurance in the midst of disaster, for it has been reported that the champagne recovered from the Titanic likely maintained its color, flavor, and effervescence upon being opened and drunk some eight decades after the sinking (Lavallee 2012). That champagne, the most lavish symbol of excess and “liveliest” of alcohols, drunk at the merest of rituals and holidays, can function something like a memorial, reverses the expectations of celebration to convey a humbling reminder of the limitations of affluence and privilege.

Countering the notion that wealth was required to collect art, Fluxus artists championed the multiple as a means to expand the distribution of their work. Containers such as wooden boxes, plastic clamshell cases, and, most relevant for the topic of this article, bottles served as the means to package different types of editions. For instance, Grappa Fluxus (Box 1, 1993 and Box 2, 1997) featured twelve artist-designed bottles hand-crafted by Massimo Lunardon in Molvena, Italy. Some of the bottles held the eponymous spirit while others remained strategically empty because of odd contours or unusual additions, such as a drinking glass inserted into the bottle or the inclusion of extra openings that rendered the bottle nonfunctional. The playful and inventive containers for this inexpensive, commonplace, but coarse drink—made from the leftover stems, skins, and seeds of the wine-making process—conceptually underscore the elevation of the popular and an embrace of the cast-off, important ethical principles in the Fluxus movement. The variety of drinkable and undrinkable bottles challenges viewers to toast the artists’ humorous delving into frustration, and to savor the irony of a working-class drink served up as a rarefied commodity. To those with ultra-sophisticated palates, however, for whom grappa is considered undrinkable, acquiring the edition would be the easy part; acquiring a taste for the harsh drink itself would be a longer and more agonizing process.

With its engraved box, stately label, and dusty bottle, William Pope.L’s a philosophical solution (2011) appears like other high-end luxury wines. Further inspection, however, reveals a mystery: the label lacks the information oenophiles normally expect about the type of wine, vineyard, country of origin, alcohol percentage, etc. All that is supplied is the word “MUTE” and the phrase “The drink that thinks.” Pope.L’s practice unflinchingly examines the contradictions of race, class, power, and sexuality through grueling performances, confrontational installations, and abject materials. Here, his tactics are more enigmatic and cerebral. Pairing philosophy, wine, and silence may seem odd given the verbosity of the discipline, or even the loquaciousness attributed to the drinking of wine generally, as embodied in the axiom in vino veritas. Muteness can arise because of many reasons—trauma, protest, complicity, refusal, coercion, subjugation. Conflicted forces seem to be at work when the artist describes the contents as a “dark mental liquid” with a “mind of its own,” similar to having one’s unconscious corked up. For Pope.L, consuming the fluid pits the drinker and drink against each other in a match of diminishing returns, for, as he relates, the “thirst-quencher … silences the sipper while versing the sipped.” Still, it seems hard to avoid
the discordant notes of race and class infusing a philosophical solution; the wine’s expense means that it will not meet the lips of a local barstool “philosopher” anytime soon. More likely, the buyer would be a one-percenter for whom the disempowerment alluded to by muteness may never have been fully experienced. Given the artist’s anthropomorphizing of the “dark” liquid, the conversation implied by the multiple may be one of tying the tongue of the drinker, forcing him or her into a position of receptive listening, so that the voice of the drink can be heard speaking truth to power.

Artists have also appropriated and repurposed existing liquor bottles as readymades to be incorporated into their sculptures and installations. Even store-bought items can signify profoundly when poised within a new context, such as in the work of Martin Kippenberger. A prodigious drinker even by the bohemian norms of the art scene, the artist died of alcohol-related afflictions at the age of 44. Not unaware of the danger of his consumption, in Alkoholfolter (Alcohol Torture) (1989) he points to the confining affects of being addicted. The multiple consists of a single Schlösser Alt beer can and a section of the plastic yoke that typically enmeshes a commercially sold six-pack. A ring of the plastic remains empty on either side of the can, causing the unit to resemble handcuffs. One can easily imagine a pair of hands inserted into the voids, with the beer can residing in the middle, thus restraining the would-be drinker and preventing the downing of the desired brew. Such a situation carries both criminal and bondage overtones, two motifs that Kippenberger often alluded to in self-portraits during his career. Yet, some questions remain. Since two cans were presumably removed (and probably drunk) to create each multiple, is the evocation of addiction a confession of the artist’s condition or a mocking taunt to teetotaling naysayers? Regarding “torture” in the title, does it apply to the individual prevented from drinking, or to one who cannot not drink? Additionally, Alcohol Torture might imply that the can itself is experiencing the title’s misery, bound as it is in tight

![Grappa Fluxus, Box 1 (1993), wooden box with doors, containing five blown-glass bottles by the following Fluxus artists: Philip Corner, Jean Dupuy, Geoffrey Hendricks, Alison Knowles, Ben Patterson and Emmett Williams. Each bottle is signed and numbered (incised) by the artist. Box: 36 × 51 × 10 cm. Realized in the studio of Massimo Lunardon, Molveno, in an edition of 8. Courtesy of Raphael Levy, Zurich.](image)
plastic. A classic drinking rationale involves granting alcohol agency and perceiving it to ask for its refreshing taste to be “liberated.” While acknowledging the damage alcohol was wreaking on his life, Kippenberger’s conflicted attachment to drink also implicates collectors in an ethical predicament. By purchasing Alcohol Torture one not only acquires a work by the artist, one also buys the very item (alcohol) that lay at the cause of the artist’s downfall. A hint of complicity, then, accompanies the alco-aura of this readymade whereby appreciation of the artist’s wit and complexity is counterbalanced by the drastic real-life consequences he suffered.

In these multiples, the bottle (or can) serves as a device that contains the potency of alcohol as well as hints at its social context. Bottling, as it were, is a mechanism by which drinking, its lifestyle, and political ramifications find a stable form for contemplation. The strategic allure of bottles for artists involves substituting the crisp taste of alcohol for the savoring of a more diffuse alco-aura. Even though multiples

**FIGURE 5:** William Pope.L, a philosophical solution (2011), wooden box, bottle, unknown liquid, 13.5 x 4 x 4 in (34.3 x 10.2 x 10.2 cm), edition of 20. COURTESY OF ART IN GENERAL, NEW YORK
engage in a form of commercial production, each of the works is invested with art’s values and complexities. That the bottle (or can) comprises a commodity is part of the work’s content, for most of the works reflect upon their own nature as both an intoxicating and collectible product.

**Distilling and the Spirit of Collaboration**

Besides the bottle, alco-aura can apply to the liquid within. Mostly this focus on the alcohol itself occurs through collaboration with professional distillers and vintners, and at times artists introduce unusual conceptual operations to the making of alcohol. Collaboration, though, means something more than just an association with the distiller and a shared purpose to create a special edition; collaboration can involve an integral and extended working relationship in which the artist influences the production and constitution of the alcohol so that the result is distinct from the distiller’s other offerings. Through collaboration, artists go beyond the familiar retinue of art world fabricators to cultivate an interdisciplinary type of creativity with professionals from the fields of wine and liquor. Artists gain intimacy not only with the process of making alcohol, but also with the landscape and atmosphere of the distillery, the organization’s staff and workers, and the surrounding community and its history. Expertise in distillation entails a mix of technical knowledge, firsthand experience, and heightened sensitivities—in many ways the correlate to being an artist. Alcohol typically encompasses a series of stages, starting from the growing and harvesting of raw materials, through to the steps of fermentation and filtering, and finishing with aging and bottling. Deciding at which point to intervene greatly determines the scope of the collaboration and the type of influence the artist can exert.

One of the most comprehensive artist-collaborations involved the very soil, water, and land upon which producers depend. On a fifteen-hectare estate in Bolognano, Italy, Joseph Beuys initiated the multiyear project *Difesa della Natura* (“Defense of Nature”) and worked with Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and others to produce wine from the ground up: that is, preparing a sizable tract of land, planting trees and shrubs of endangered species, using organic fertilizers, and coordinating conversations with farmers and residents. The growing of the fruit and making of the wine fit within the artist’s expansive mission to facilitate the “rebirth of agriculture,” including the establishment of an institute to promote environmentally beneficial farming practices and cultivate an enhanced respect for nature’s resourcefulness. Such an ecological mandate aligned with Beuys’s overarching aesthetico-philosophic concept of “social sculpture,” whereby the creativity of every citizen could be channeled into progressive reconfigurations of politics, labor, education, and other human activities. The conclusion to *Difesa della Natura* took the form of two hundred cartons of red wine known as *Vino F.I.U.* (1983). Beuys’s works generally embody a combination of pragmatic, political, and mystical aspects. While demonstrating that wine could be readily made according to ecological principles, and that constructive action could ensure long-term sustainability, the alcohol symbolized the interdependence of humans and nature; in Beuys’s words, “We plant trees and trees plant us” (quoted in Durini 1997: 126). Agriculture and wine-making became the means to counter the alienation that civilization created for itself when it began treating nature instrumentally. For the artist, *Vino F.I.U.* reestablished the symbiotic relationship between humans and the world by enacting a therapeutic reconciliation. The fermentation specific to alcohol’s production even served as a compelling analogue for the artist’s role: art functions as the “yeast” in which creativity transforms the raw materials of society into more salutary institutions (Durini 1997: 124). Distillation, then, refines and intensifies nature’s energies to serve them up in an invigorating brew that boosts human development.

The farmhouse became a temporary studio during Beuys’s preparation of *Vino F.I.U.*, and such a creative relocation of the artist’s practice has been regularized by the establishment of artist-in-residence programs at distilleries like Glenfiddich, based in the Scottish Highlands. Canadian artist Dave Dyment, a 2008 resident, focused on one of the most notable indicators for Scotch whiskies—the time of maturation in oak casks. During this stage the alcohol complexifies and acquires the fullness of its unique flavors. In an era of instant gratification, the multiyear aging that these spirits undergo harken back to centuries-old traditions and expert knowledge passed on through the generations. Scotch whiskies are required by law to age for at least three years in the cask, though many mature for longer periods, and the length of time often operates as a shorthand for value and rarity. The maturation stage for Dyment’s *A Drink to Us (When We’re Both Dead)* (2008), however, far surpassed industry standards, for it intends to lie undisturbed for a hundred years. By burying a specially crafted five-hundred-liter cask into the ground (to prevent evaporation), the whisky will be disinterred in 2058 to be bottled and presented to the holder of a contract bequeathed by the original buyer of the artist’s multiple, who will no doubt be deceased by that time (along with the artist, as the title acknowledges). Current purchasers can only possess an empty wooden box and certificate, and must sacrifice the pleasure of drinking what eventually will be a unique liquor to a future inheritor. In the meantime, the owner can reflect on an updated version of vanitas or, as the artist phrases it, “trust,
history, patience, investment and mortality” (Dault 2009). Because much can happen in a century—to the certificate and cask as physical objects, to the distillery as a viable business, to the international community as a guarantor of stability—the artwork poses a cunning test of the aphorism *ars longa, vita brevis.* The extended duration of *A Drink to Us (When We’re Both Dead)* evokes faith in the distiller’s continued longevity (at 132 years old in 2018, it only has 90 more to go) and in the power of an intergenerational, conceptual gambit to postpone a collector’s fulfillment.

Time also factors significantly in Cornelia Parker’s collaboration with McLean’s Artist Malts, located in Islay, Hebridean Islands. Her single malt Scotch whisky, *Blue Luna* (1997–2015), was aged for approximately seventeen years. Parker’s reconception of the process ignored the standard temporal units, however, and substituted a more archaic and natural system of measurement. As the project’s wording testified, the whisky “matured under the influence of 223 full moons[,] 8 of which were blue.” Rebuffing the periodic tasting normally done by the distillery’s experts, the artist’s concept allowed the spirit to develop on its own, without oversight or intrusion, except by the influence of the eponymous moon. On the night of July 31, 2015, the eighth blue moon of its maturation, the whisky’s color, taste, and aroma were finally revealed and the liquor bottled. Focusing on the moon, rather than relying on other factors that experts would employ to decide on the conclusion of the aging, aligns the project with types of farming practiced in ancient, premodern, indigenous, pagan, and biodynamic agricultural traditions—that is, cultures not governed by large-scale, industrial agribusiness. The moon, therefore, signals an ethos of harmonizing human activities to the cyclical rhythms of the cosmos and nature. As The Old Farmer’s Almanac states, “the Moon governs moisture” (White 1994), and so a lunar influence would be particularly important for the subtle chemical changes occurring in alcohol as it melted in oaken sherry-infused casks. Because Luna also refers to the Roman goddess, a divine feminine principle central to magic and intuition, Parker invests the masculine domain of whisky distilling with the mythopoetics of female temporality and energy.

While artists working with established distillers gain access to production facilities and expert personnel, alcohol also can be made on a small-scale, do-it-yourself basis. Such an autonomous practice affords particular advantages when the artistic concept involves controversial elements. Two recent artworks demonstrated that almost any kind of organic matter can be used to manufacture alcohol by basing their distillations on unlikely and abject ingredients. *Spirit: Remains of the Destroyed Fatty Corner by Joseph Beuys* (2014) is a schnapps made from the remains of Joseph Beuys’s *Fettecke* (“Fat Corner”) (1982), a sculpture made from eleven pounds of butter. The butter was accidentally thrown out of the artist’s studio after his death in 1986, but was salvaged by a colleague, who gave a quantity of the rancid and half-decomposed substance to Markus Löffler, Andree Korpys, and Dieter Schmal to distill homemade 100-proof schnaps.

---

**Figure 6:** Dave Dyment, *A Drink to Us (When We’re Both Dead)* (2008), wooden box and packaging, edition of 25.

*Courtesy of the Artist*
While the artist's estate considered the distillation a violation of the original work's integrity and copyright, Löfler, Korpys, and Schmal argued that it was a genuine homage, an affirmation of the artist's importance, and an experimental means to "taste art history." Given the vitalism that Beuys attributed to materials (especially edible substances such as fat, honey, and chocolate), as well as his own history in wine-making, Spirit logically extends the artist's practice. Influence between generations of artists is often described metaphorically in terms of appropriating and refashioning the old to make something new; here fermentation and distillation reconceived that process as a literal transformation. Indeed, if the works by Beuys carried the autobiographical significance he often claimed (fat, along with felt, reputedly helped to save his life after a plane crash), then distilling their constituent materials could be said to concentrate the artist's life narrative and creative experience into a liquid extract. Can the genie (the artist's spirit) be put into a bottle? Bodies and bottles share the characteristics of being rounded, vertical, with a neck and mouth, and containing fluids. Spirit makes the case that something of the original artist's essence can be rejuvenated even after three decades, if one has the right ingredients.
Blood is another material tied to the “essence” of a person, and it is a substance embodied with charged and multivalent symbolism. Both religion and politics suffuse *Extractum Hominus*, a series of self-described “hootch drinks” by the St. Petersburg–based collective Tajiks Art.34 In the four editions created so far, whiskeys have been distilled from the blood of several specific population groups—gastarbeiters (“guest-workers”) (2009), Russians and Ukrainians (2014), and the artists themselves (2015)—and sold in small- and large-sized apothecary bottles. Despite the differences in the groups, all the liquids are clear and listed at a strength of 36.6 percent alcohol, a number corresponding to the normal human temperature in Celsius degrees and hinting at a humanistic commentary on diversity, i.e., that everyone shares a similar physical constitution (and ends up distilled into comparably looking, and presumably tasting, brews). The timing of the editions, however, positions them more polemically. In 2009 an economic recession hit Russia, and incited a nativist, nationalist far-right movement that inflicted racist violence against immigrants and laborers from bordering countries. The year 2014 witnessed escalating tensions between Ukraine and Russia that culminated in Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea. At each crisis point, Tajiks Art’s alcohol concoctions provocatively reflect on conflict and bloodshed. Regarding the gastarbeiters, the whiskey evokes what the artists identify as the “exploitation of weak by strong in a modern capitalist society where [some] work hard or [are] killed during wars while others just drink whiskey and have fun” (Shtanova 2018), while for the twin Russian and Ukrainian whiskeys, the tagline reads “my blood is your wine,” a direct reference to the Christian sacrament and a nod to the use of ethno-nationalist rhetoric to stoke public opinion and justify military action (particularly on the Russian side).35 Even though donors received compensation for volunteering their blood samples, the deliberately inflammatory use of this body fluid by Tajiks Art simultaneously raised and critiqued the singling out of populations to warn about the horrors of ethnic-based violence and the volatility of politics.

As much as controversial artworks are useful in exposing the stakes of pressing societal issues, proposing actual solutions requires a constructive approach. SUPERFLEX, the Danish art and design collective aiming to reengineer everyday habits and products, views alcohol as a site for intervention to remedy two contemporary problems: addiction and the increasing privatization of culture. *Non-Alcoholic Vodka* (2006) featured a clear bottle with a bold, sans serif blue label, stainless steel tray, and serving glasses. The drink, however, had none of the buzz or alcohol typically expected. Manufactured for an exhibition in the former Soviet republic of Estonia, which houses a dispossessed Russian minority and a high incident of alcoholism and binge drinking, the anti-alcohol bore the taste but not the kick of vodka.36 *Non-Alcoholic Vodka* offered a middle ground between drinking and teetotaling—one could give up the harmful qualities of alcohol but preserve the rituals and camaraderie of consumption.

---

**Figure 8:** Tajiks Art, *Extractum Hominus* (2015), alcohol distilled from the artists’ blood; *Extractum Hominus* (2014), alcohol distilled from Russian blood; *Extractum Hominus* (2014), alcohol distilled from Ukrainian blood; *Extractum Hominus* (2009), alcohol distilled from gastarbeiters’ (guestworkers’) blood.

_Courtesy of Igor Kri Shamanov_
Even more ambitious was SUPERFLEX’s project *Free Beer* (2004), which sought to counter the liquor industry’s legendary secrecy and proprietary control of its brewing knowledge. *Free Beer* established a collaborative approach to developing a free recipe: free as in the sense of “free speech” and being accessibly shared, rather than at no cost (SUPERFLEX n.d.[a]). Working in conjunction with students from Copenhagen IT University, SUPERFLEX adapted the ethos and techniques of open source software, and shifted them from the digital domain to the physical world; the recipe was posted so that anyone could download, tweak, remix, and even sell the beer. The only caveat was that offshoot recipes had to be distributed publicly according to Creative Commons and credit be given to the originators. SUPERFLEX’s recipe, now on version 6.0, includes a blend of malt, hops, and yeast, along with Guarana beans for an extra jolt of caffeine (see Free Beer 2017 and Eide 2009). Besides gradually improving the recipe with each version, the project demonstrated how cultural and pragmatic endeavors could benefit from collective co-creation: not only are restrictive notions of copyright and privatization avoided, but the opportunity of agency stimulates further creativity. In the domain of alcohol, where corporate distillers and breweries would prefer to maintain the status quo of docile consumers, *Free Beer* brings forth an alternative that decentralizes production and empowers people to invent their own beverages.

These six artists’ projects show that collaborating with distillers, or taking control of one’s own distillation, inspires a creative rethinking of the process, politics, and effects of alcohol’s production. Challenging the ingredients, timing, methods, expertise, ethos, marketing, consumption, sponsorship, and social context of alcohol, these works emphasize ideas rather than terrain. They bring to light practices involving a range of relations: a holistic rapprochement between humans and nature (Beuys), intergenerational transactions of knowledge and care-taking (Dyment), subtle feminine and cosmic influences (Parker), art historical connections (Löffler, Korpys, and Schmal), ethno-national ramifications (Tajiks Art), and DIY innovation and sharing (SUPERFLEX). While some of the brews would no doubt satisfy connoisseurs, it would miss the point if flavor alone served as the guiding factor. Good or bad, evaluating the taste is less important than exploring the implications of alco-aura, in particular who controls the methods of distillation, what informs the politics of production and distribution, and how beverages can operate conceptually and aesthetically.

Bottled works of art convey that even when ingestion is avoided, alcohol possesses an unpredictable and anarchic potential. Bottles (and cans), however, offer only the appearance of containment. For artists making multiples, like Danh Vo and Jeff Koons, the intoxication of wealth percolates through the works, which can fuel the mania of art speculation. Other artists evoke social conflict and addiction, and William Pope.L and Martin Kippenberger both endow their bottles with power that can be dangerous to taunt or cannot be resisted. For the vanitas-themed works by Barbara Bloom and Dave Dyment, the
trauma of disaster and worries about the inevitability of one’s death persist even if one refrains from taking a drink. The distillation works of Beuys, Parker, Tajiks Art, and SUPERFLEX challenge business-as-usual industry practices and force a consideration of the larger issues of sustainability, inclusivity, and social freedom. The preponderance of glass in these works shows how the vitreous dialectic collects and intensifies alcohol’s inherent aura and changes it even more in the artistic context. 37

The format of the multiple, for alcohol-based works, performs as a strategic and impactful device. To Joseph Beuys, multiples served as a “condensation nucleus” that disseminated ideas as the objects traveled, and emanated more powerful and lasting meanings than if the thoughts were directly stated by the artist. 38

The choice of the term “condensation” takes on particular significance in the domain of alcohol. As a major step in the distillation process, it separates out impurities and consolidates the spirit. At the risk of applying Beuys too broadly, bottled works of art exemplify the condensation process on aesthetic, political, and literal levels: just as the alcohol becomes concentrated to be bottled, so too do art ideas and comments about society become strengthened and more tangible. Fairy tales, popular myths, and religious stories often designate bottles to be the source of magical potential (by containing mysterious messages, wish-granting genies, or an endless supply of liquid), and in this text the bottles of art and works of alcohol tend to express potential through the variety of meanings they can evoke. Even though corked and capped, the inebriating affect persists. Do these alcoholic works formulate a new genre within contemporary art practice? At this rate of production, museums may soon be installing bottle racks, liquor cabinets, and wine cellars.

NOTES

1. Concerning the “essentialness” of alcohol, historian Tom Standage (2005: 9–11) theorizes that agriculture began as a way to consolidate labor in order to harvest grain by which to brew beer—making alcohol the source of civilization (see also Gately 2008: 2–5).

2. That chapter focuses on alcohol in pre-twentieth-century painting (Bart 2013b). Interestingly, one finds more discussion of the links between art and alcohol in books focusing on the social history of beverages, such as Phil Baker’s (2001) study of absinthe. Other liquids in art, such as water and milk, have been the topic of extended analyses (Clarke 2010 and Hayes 2008). See also Nichols (2014) and Putnam (2015).

3. Analogously, the popular press provides further confirmation of the difference between food and alcohol by generally designating separate reviewers for restaurants and wine.

4. On Campari, see Galleria Campari (2010); on Absolut, see Lewis (1996).

5. Elsewhere I have explored artworks highlighting the participatory and performative aspects of drinking (Drobnick 2013, 2015), and in this article my focus will be on surveying works in which alcohol stays (mostly) bottled. Also note that the presence of actual alcohol is significant for this article, so I will not be addressing works that utilize empty liquor bottles, such as those by David Hammons (as much as I appreciate his sculptures).

6. To demonstrate the contrast, there are works that involve tasting, but which generally are not multiples. Takako Saito’s Liquor Chess (1979), for instance, requires players to periodically sip from the similarly shaped bottle. Even though the liquors differ in tint from dark amber to pale yellow to clear, once moved from their initial positions the sense of taste is needed to confirm not only the rank of the piece but also to which side it belongs.

7. Recently, two limited edition whiskeys sold for more than $1 million (Blouin Artinfo 2018), reaching prices equivalent to artworks at auction.


10. See De Rothschild and De Beaumarchais (1983), and for the full list of years and artists, see Château Mouton Rothschild (n.d. [a]). Furthering what the Château calls the “fruitful dialogue” between aesthetics and alcohol is the vineyard’s own Museum of Wine in Art (Château Mouton Rothschild n.d. [b]).

11. Others types of artists’ labels done in association with vineyards include Liam Gillick’s grappa Gatto Parlante (2003), AR Penck’s Riesling Schlesischer Madonnenberg (1992), and the labels by Janis Kounellis, Clegg & Guttmann, Richard Long, and Julian Schnabel for Le Vin du Musée (1986), bottles of red wine produced by the CAPC Musée in Bordeaux.

12. For an extended discussion of the sociological and philosophical complexities of taste, see Bourdieu (1987) and Korsmeyer (1999).

13. Multiples share the characteristics of scarcity and relative inexpensiveness with artists’ books and print editions, which are often discussed in tandem (see, e.g., Dyment and Elgstrand 2012).

14. The multiple, entitled Danh Vo Special Edition Panta della Dogana 2015, was also included in the display at the Danish pavilion (see Cascone 2015; Casa Dragones 2015).

15. Casa Dragones also created another special edition tequila in 2012 that alluded to death and the macabre in conjunction with the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco. He adorned the bottle with a version of his sculpture Black Kites (1997), a human skull covered in a checkerboard pattern, that crosses the Western trope of memento mori with the Mexican carnivalesque tradition of the Day of the Dead.

16. Bloom’s multiple could also be considered a contemporary form of sumptus. In addition, the work recalls the legend of the unbroken bottle of champagne upon the Titanic’s christening—an unlucky omen.

17. As philosopher Fritz Allhoff (2008) describes, alcoholic drinks flowed during the ancient discussions of Socrates and Plato about which would eventually contribute to the founding of Western philosophy and ethics.

18. The gallery’s description hints at sly visual cues, such as tiny tongues hidden in the box’s monogrammed design that appear to be tied with ribbons or foliage. The artist also suggests that purchasers take a bottle and “go to your therapist, uncork one, and just have it do your thing” (Art in General 2011; Art + Auction n.d.).

19. The edition of twenty multiples was produced in collaboration with City Winery as a fundraiser for Art in General, an alternative gallery in New York.

20. Readymades refer to Marcel Duchamp’s repositioning of everyday objects into the frame of art to critique the notions of authorship, style, and originality. While Duchamp never made a liquor bottle readymade, the first “true” readymade (i.e., one that was not adapted or changed) was reputedly Bottle Rack (1914). What is notable about this readymade is the absence of the bottles that would normally be found on such an apparatus during its everyday
use. One could surmise that the liquor bottle multiples mentioned in this article complete the maneuver that Duchamp’s Bottle Rack introduced a century ago.

21. Interestingly, several years after the making of Alcohol Torture, Schlösser Alt would market a series of collectible cans that incorporated artists’ work.

22. A painted self-portrait from 1981–82, with the same title as the multiple, depicts the image of the artist’s hands manacled to a Schlösser Alt beer can. Another painting from 1982 features a fistled hand and two emptied cans (one crumpled) attached to the canvas.

23. The suffering triggered by the restraint, where the beverage tempts the thirsty drinker but lies just out of reach, recalls the type of hellish tortures imagined by religious clerics in the early modern period to deter their flock from acts of gluttony (see Drobnick 2004).


25. During this project Beuys also produced graphic works, sculptures, and video. The acronym F.I.U. stands for Freien Internationalen Universität (Free International University), an open-ended organization that Beuys co-founded in 1973 to re define education as a continual process of fostering creativity in every individual and as a forum for furthering the democratic potential in all aspects of society.

26. Beuys was also influenced by Rudolf Steiner’s holistic philosophy and biodynamic farming principles.

27. Since 2002, Glenfiddich has hosted residencies for approximately two hundred international artists to spend a summer on the premises creating work inspired by their experience at the distillery. Artists are encouraged to follow their own path and very few of the resulting artworks created over the years involve alcohol (Glenfiddich 2018).

28. For Glenfiddich, 12, 15, 18, and 21 years are standard in its “collection” of whiskies; the oldest it has offered is 64 years.

29. Indeed, for Dyment, the “logistical difficulties” are as integral to the work as the whisky itself (Glenfiddich 2008). Such a deferred transaction, i.e., buying something one can never possess, also points to the futility of ownership. The resolution of the piece involves a mortal reversal: when the whisky is disintegrated from its cask, the original purchaser will have been buried in his or her own casket.

30. Since 2012, McLean’s Artists Malts has commissioned artists to publish editions alongside a custom-made batch of single malt Scotch whisky. Besides Parker, artists such as Charles Avery, Rodney Graham, Laure Prouvost, Ben Rivers, and Rose Wylie have created print and multimedia work to accompany their respective bottles (McLean 2013).

31. McLean’s Artists Malts (2013). A blue moon is the relatively rare event of two full moons appearing in the same calendar month. Besides an edition of thirty-five bottles of whiskey, the project featured a set of lithographs charting the full and blue moons during the maturation process and a photograph of a shot glass imprinted with a full moon.

32. The taste was said to be “reminiscent of Parnesan” (Rass 2014; see also Clark 2014). This schnapps, as well as the whiskies by Tajiks Art and SUPERFLEX’s brews below, were the only drinks discussed in this article for which I could find a reference to people actually tasting them.

33. One might even compare the kettles used in distillation and the resultant bottles for the schnapps to the womb, whereby Löffler, Korpy, and Schmal engineer a “rebirth” of Beuys’s spirit.

34. See Shtianova (2018). Tajiks Art is composed of artists, scientists, and critics, and includes biologist Alexander Efremov and artist, curator, and critic Kirill Shamahom, among others.

35. Russia and Ukraine are among the heaviest drinking countries in the world, ranking fourth and sixth, respectively (Hess, Frohlich, and Calio 2014).

36. SUPERFLEX’s project predates by almost a decade similar products by commercial brewers such as Seedlip Drinks and Diageo now on the market promoting the health and societal benefits of dealcoholized spirits. See SUPERFLEX (n.d.[b]).

37. Even when the multiple involves a can, as in Kippenger’s Alcohol Torture, the contents are still under pressure, and so liable to bubble out and explode under certain conditions.

38. Beuys quoted in Blume (2015); see also Schellmann and Klüser (1980: 2).

REFERENCES


