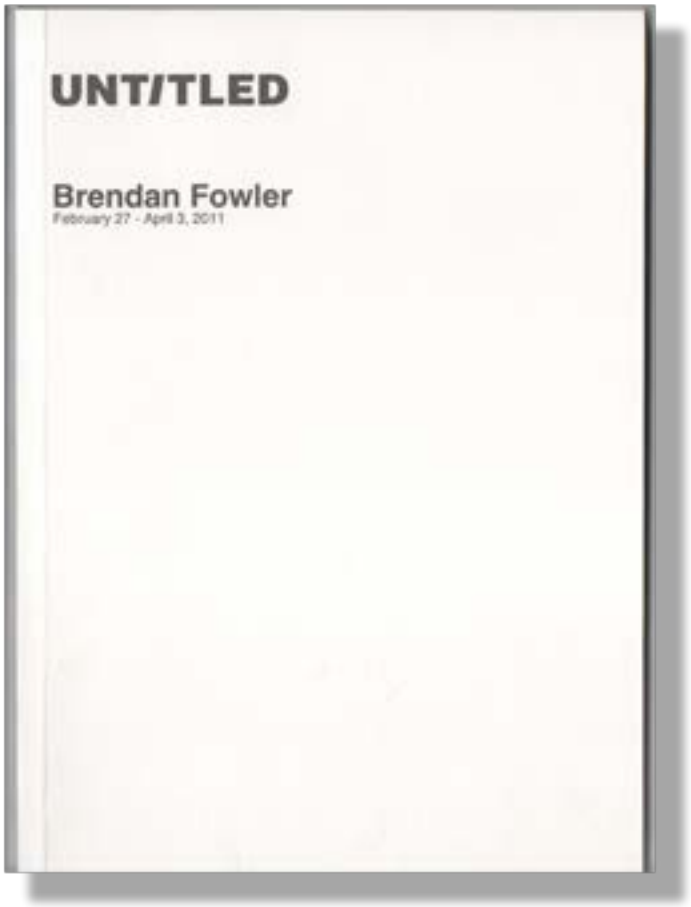

"Brendan Fowler: Re-forming the Parergon." In *Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen* (Spring 2011). New York: Untitled, 2011.

UNT/TLED

Brendan Fowler

February 27 - April 3, 2011

Brendan Fowler

Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen (Spring 2011)

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ESSAY

Brendan Fowler: Re-forming the Parergon
On the Aesthetic Potentialities of Crashing and Cancelling

Brendan Fowler's art provides us with a remarkable occasion to rethink and update Jacques Derrida's "Parergon,"[1] his deconstructive meditation on Immanuel Kant's all-too-brief treatment of the state of parergonality, involving the embellishment of works of art in terms of frames on paintings, prints, and drawings; drapery on sculpture; and colonnades on architecture. In particular, Derrida's essay focuses on Kant's brief commentary on the parergon found in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as well as his more extended treatment of it in the second edition of *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1794). As my phrase "re-forming the parergon" in the above title will demonstrate, Fowler's work—an "interdisciplinary practice,"[2] according to the artist—helps us appreciate more fully how parerga can become modi operandi for rethinking the contingencies shoring up so-called autonomous works of art, as well as crucial links between different genres and fields of interest. These include art, architecture, music, philosophy, and literary criticism, as well as photography, sculpture, and performance. These parerga take into account the many literal and figurative frames, reinforcing and validating art, even though these accouterments traditionally have been relegated to its margins, those unacknowledged spaces carefully separated from individual works to ensure their unquestioned sovereignty.

Bringing into view commonly ignored and marginalized aspects of two-dimensional art and relief sculpture, Fowler's work demonstrates how their adjunct status can be understood in terms of the enormously supportive role they assume in transforming visual information into art, while moving it far from its traditionally conceived monolithic ontology. The peripheral aspects of art, comprising the literal frames surrounding Fowler's photographs, their backing material, and even the gallery walls on which they are shown, as well as the figurative frames of critical and art historical interpretation, including press releases, the artist's comments about his work, and even this text, will be seen as essential components of art. As Fowler has elaborated, "I would like to think of . . . [my] work as having many points of entry, many 'openings,' to which end I think the exhaustion of over information can be a very useful thing. . . ."[3] In this statement both the phrase "points of entry" and the word "openings" can be replaced by the word "parerga" to underscore the openness of Fowler's work and its generous reciprocity with the many literal and textual frames bordering it. An examination of his art in relation to both Kant's and Derrida's parerga will provide an opportunity for making a more complete account of all three approaches, including, most particularly, Fowler's complex documentation of a series of past actions and dynamic forces, as well as its tentative, even contradictory nature as the cancellation of one state and the inauguration of others. Keeping the Kantian and Derridean expositions in mind, we will be able to appreciate Fowler's crashing and cancelling works as forceful conjunctions of the window, the wall, and the world surrounding them and extensions of the types of marginal information traditional works of art usually conceal or deemphasize. In this way, Fowler's work will demonstrate how we can extend both Kant's and Derrida's ideas regarding the parergon. After a consideration in this essay of Brendan Fowler's music practice and his retooling aspects of it when he became a full-fledged artist, we will then look at how these prescient visual works invite us to entertain the question of whether works of art can continue to be reified as solitary objects, before considering how they engage us in a generous understanding of the many supporting mechanisms and networks that help us to rethink their roles as significant players in a far more inclusive theater of artistic operations.

Prior to 2008, when Fowler changed direction by becoming a visual artist, he had been a respected performer on the rock/DIY ("do-it-yourself") underground circuit, making on average 100 or more appearances per year at museums, galleries and rock clubs in both the US and Europe. From an art-world perspective, some of the most notable venues where he performed from 2001-2008 are Deitch Projects and The Kitchen in New York, David Kordansky Gallery and Red Cat in Los Angeles, Jack Hanley Gallery and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, and The Mu Foundation in Einhoven. Employing the moniker "BARR,"[4] Fowler became known for a distinctive half-sung and half-spoken delivery style, presented with the accompaniment of pre-recorded percussion and uncolored bass strings played on his iPod as well as the background of piano music he created on a portable keyboard as part of his performance.

He intended BARR's music to be personal, political, and positive: its chief characteristic, in his words is a "heart-on-sleeve humanist address,"[5] focused on current issues. His performance style took full advantage of his own obsessive-compulsive disorder by imbuing his public appearances with an off-hand and charming conversational style, capable of connecting immediately with individuals in his audiences by putting them at ease and helping them feel less lonely. Fowler characterized the main objective of his performance style in the following manner:

> I am primarily concerned with a very direct address. When I first started doing BARR [,] I was trying to be *so* direct, as direct as I could be. It was speaking over drums. It helped that I couldn't sing and I could only really play drums, but I was into those confines.[6]

Fowler often deconstructed some of his songs in the course of performing them by concentrating on the way they were created as well as on their limitations. Between songs, he would comment on the spaces in which they were being performed, and this tactic helped his audiences to become even more conscious of the event in which they were participating.[7] After performing for BARR's small, elite audiences for seven years and making a number of recordings, Fowler wished to redirect his layered, complex, dense, and self-reflexive style to a wider audience and to create something easily "listenable." For Fowler, the term "listenable" no doubt connoted a different orientation to his music whereby it would no longer need to be understood within the confines of a specific performance space.

"Summary" (2007), Fowler's third record album made with a live band for the first time and featuring its notable "The Song is the Single" is representative of this effort to reach a wider audience. In this song Fowler criticizes the format of old rock-and-roll singles, even as he subscribes to it:

> you make the record at night
> we all know that rock and roll
> is the language of night
> but this got made in the day,
> it was bright
> the drums are fully shaky but the bass is more tight
>
> the song is the single, and the single sucks
> it has never sounded good
> it always sounded bad
>
> what is the song
> the pop song
> is it a conduit?
> to give out the feeling in a compact form
> a short form
> and shorter is better
> because it is physically much easier to share

This urbane late addition to the BARR repertory conveys an updated and far easier-going Punk aesthetic than the mean-spirited earnestness of the 1970s and '80s. Although his music obviously delights in Punk's quest for authenticity, Fowler's approach supplants this earlier aesthetic's brittle harshness with a *sotto voce*, lighthearted cynicism about the constructed nature of the world, including the record industry. Ironically Fowler's knowingly transgressive songs embrace the wry humor of a self-aware poseur, a position hardcore Punk musicians would have shunned.

During the years 2007 and 2008 when Fowler was reaching out to larger audiences, he began to conceptualize a radically different alter ego for himself in the form of a sexy, deliberately playful, and ultimately reprehensible performance persona he decided to call "Disaster,"[8] its name invoking a pronounced dark side while giving him permission to explore a world BARR's humanistic mission precluded. The shift was first catalyzed when a computer virus destroyed Fowler's album masters the week before he and his co-performer Corey Dieckman were to make a scheduled performance at the Time Based Arts (TBA) Festival in Portland Oregon. The two musicians then attempted to realize a new approach in the few days remaining before the show, and their hurriedly concocted routine not surprisingly flopped. Fowler has later recounted:

> the whole thing was pretty much what you would call a 'disaster' . . . . but I kind of loved the thing we were trying to do . . . . I knew that BARR was not the right outlet. So I booked a few shows as Disaster.

While BARR's overarching optimistic outreach, fully in accord with Fowler's justly renowned positive-and-polite approach to the world, necessitated writing all his own music, his Disaster guise allowed him to be, in his words, "bratty and mean-spirited by creating a fictionalized identity," comprised entirely of samples (appropriations) of others' recordings.

Although he knew the assumption of Disaster's quixotic identity could not possibly last as long as BARR, and he frankly wanted it to be only a brief interlude in his professional career, this moniker and its implied connections to chaos and mystery provided Fowler with the ability to make an almost complete break from his past by moving from musician to full-fledged visual artist. In particular, this new role did so when he utilized it to parody the vicious excesses of the Neo-Punk groups AIDS Wolf and Jay Reatard, whose work represented a particularly heinous Punk exoticism, coupled with a pronounced urban primitivism notable for its negativism. A Canadian group, Aids Wolf based its name on the misguided perception of wolves as AIDS carriers, able to pass the virus to house pets, who in turn would infect the people around them. The second group, consisting of the now deceased American garage rock musician, Jimmy Lee Lindsey, Jr. from Memphis, Tennessee, who called himself Jay Reatard, made such downbeat albums as "Teenage Hate," "Grown Up, Fucked Up" and "Not Fucked Enough." Fowler reveals his main reason for being so incensed by these groups' attitudes in the following statement:

> The truth, though, is that those kinds of names stress me out to the point that it's almost, like—AIDS is not funny or clever as the tool for which they are trying to use it. It is so poorly exploitative, so senselessly done. At best it reduces AIDS to this kitschy ominous "other" of the past, which it is not at all. AIDS is still real and it is a fucking holocaust.[9]

Fowler's indignation was no doubt fueled by his own very generous nature, and, in part, by his past experience working as an assistant between 2000-2002 for the artist Chris Johanson, whom he describes as "sincerely want[ing] to reach and help people . . . outside of the gallery system."[10]

Even though Fowler's approach to Disaster and his condemnation of these two groups' messages was moving his work into the questionable realm where critique is often colored and co-opted by the ideas it condemns, his choice of deliberately irritating samples of work by these and other such groups helped to distance himself from this material by keeping ironic quotation marks around it. Fortunately, then, in his very few Disaster performances, he managed to raise mainly the ire of the musicians on whom he was passing judgment as well as their most devoted fans. More importantly, the process of assuming an alien and fictional identity allowed him to make the extraordinary discovery of recognizing destruction's enormous potential as a creative force, an insight leading ultimately to his move from music to art and from public performances to the series of cancellations and crashes for which he is now known. The press release for his first exhibition at the no-longer-active New York gallery Rivington Arms in April 2008, a show featuring his silk-screened and painted fictive posters terminating performances with both AIDS Wolf and Jay Reatard, clearly demonstrates the important watershed the entire Disaster episode represented. It reads:

> Fowler's most recent performance project/band, Disaster, began as a direct address to what he sees as the growing roster of bands with socially questionable names. . . . In doing so, Fowler created a project he himself would find morally negligent in hopes of understanding their motives. Using rough and obvious samples, Disaster intends to appeal as much as irritate. This darker spirited performance stands in stark contrast to BARR. . . . Fowler's work is about exploding the process of creation as much as it is about continuously navigating the turns of basic existence, while documenting and celebrating the journey, scrapes and all.[11]

The dramatic switch from BARR to Disaster became the subject of an early visual work of art in 2008 entitled *Disaster LP*. For this exhibition, Fowler made a prescient assemblage consisting of a record cover he had originally designed for BARR; this cover in turn served as a background to superimpose the emotive resonance of his new band's name, "Disaster," by employing great amounts of enamel paint, applied in a "violent, aggressive, and dumb manner." The final piece consists of two overlapping frames: one comprising the aforementioned Disaster cover slipping out of a pristine white frame; the other the white frame itself. That same year Fowler continued the theme of Disaster's fictive identity by making two posters for concerts which Disaster was scheduled to play with AIDS Wolf and Jay Reatard, entitled respectively *11/16/07* and *11/18/07*, before revoking them by superimposing each of the posters with the stenciled word "cancelled" in bright red enamel paint. When Fowler showed the works a second time at Rivington Arms, he was "thinking about how art functions" and about "exploding the process of creation," so he had the two framed posters paired together in one overarching frame, thereby adding this second frame to document the event as yet another stage shoring up the work. He decided if he exhibited these works a third time, the twice-framed posters

would be provided with yet a third frame. Each reframing was an additional support and also a breakthrough to the sustained growth heralded by the now personified and literalized "Disaster." The term and the band's name served as an ideal pivot between past and present as well as between destruction and creation, providing Fowler with a new mode of working by putting these posters and their information under the seemingly contradictory erasure/pressure of additional frames—Derrida's *sous rature*, multiplied and repackaged, so to speak—thereby placing them in the contradictory position of both presenting multi-staged information while representing cancellations of it.

At this point we need to resist the temptation to reduce Fowler's multiple frames to an anecdotal episode by considering them solely in terms of the many recriminations and threats issued by the two Neo-Punk groups whose music and names he had parodied, and we need to move beyond regarding his works as sympathetically sharing, through an obvious pun, the uncomfortable predicament of being framed as the guilty party. Admittedly, the accusations were intense when AIDS Wolf and its most dedicated fans voiced their consternation about Fowler's criticism of the band's name on its blog, but Fowler assiduously restricted his critiques to works made for the art world, and he exhibited them only within its network, thereby demonstrating his overall intent at this strategic point in his life to use this situation as a springboard to the larger and more contemplative arena of the art world. For the New York gallery P.P.O.W.'s show "History Keeps Me Awake at Night, A Genealogy of David Wojnarowicz," Fowler made *Poster for Dialog with the Band AIDS Wolf* in the form of a Globe Poster-style print with the prominently headlined date "Tuesday, April 8, 2008," and he purposely restricted the work's subject to a narrative account of his recent exchanges with this group. A recounting of this exchange was particularly relevant to this show since Wojnarowicz had been a well-known AIDS activist and tragically died from the virus. Among the other clips of information included in this poster, Fowler presented the following two AIDS Wolf goals posted on its Myspace page:

> We are a cult. Our intentions are unclear. We bring ill will.
>
> AIDS Wolf embraces the hate. If they can't draw you in, they will make you run away cursing and bitching.[12]

Directly below the citation of these AIDS Wolf statements, Fowler provided a record of his motivations and actions:

> In my piece, which was a fake poster made after the fact for a show that I was supposed to play with Aids [*sic.*] Wolf, it said "horrendous awful hurtful stupid name, NOT OKAY AT ALL" where a brief description of their band would go. Among other ideas, the work was meant to address public language, social responsibility in naming and, *conversely*, the problems of someone—in this case, myself—playing the role of "name police." Honestly and truly I would never have guessed this would offend them at all, considering all that I knew of their band and the vibe surrounding it.[13]

Far more important for Fowler's work than the specifics of the public debate with AIDS Wolf was the major shift in his own thinking this dispute catalyzed, for it plunged him into the new realm of transforming musical samples into full-fledged art-world appropriation and encouraged him to begin thinking about how a calamity could be reframed as an eminently creative act.

When considering this transition, it helps to take a retrospective view of Fowler's years of writing and performing music, when he had established a clearly discernible pattern of self-consciously analyzing, in his lyrics and performances, his subjects, his means, and his mode of presentation, including the seemingly off-hand conversational asides he made between songs. Fowler's aforementioned personal injunctions, "thinking about how art functions" and "exploding the process of creation," pertaining to the making of his first crashes, is key to his development of a series of tactics begun with his cancellations, continued with the crashes he still makes, and now evident in his present installation at UNTITLED where his work enters into dialogue with the handsome new space conceived by New York architect Andrew Ong and the subject of the gallery itself. The title of this show, "Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen (Spring 2011)," noted throughout the exhibition in strategically placed purple silk-screened cards, is both a title and a nontitle: it honors the gallery's refusal to be named, while paying homage to its two owners and their determination not to hamstring their gallery with a pre-ordained (titled) program.

In addition to Disaster's hypothetical peregrinations, Fowler has indicated a possible source for his crashes in the dramatic sessions of the free-jazz drummer Milford Graves, who would sometimes wear chains while practicing, as a type of conditioning restraint, to ensure the continuation of his exhilarating liberated and liberating style. Trained himself as a free-jazz percussionist in college, Fowler is deeply sensitive to the powerful force drums can enact when they function as hypnotic rhythms, disturbing irritants, and grand crescendos,

capable of breaking through one cycle or sequence to initiate others.

Certainly music is a vital source for Fowler's visual crashes: he regards them as synaesthetic pieces, resonating between sound and sight. He has, in fact, recounted how as a teenager he found the carefully structured yet seemingly improvisatory sound of the band Storm & Stress to constitute "amazing structures. . . [when] suddenly they [the musicians and their performances] would all come together in this 'smash/crash,' which would affirm these really tenuous sounding compositions by [a] moment of sheer violent, jagged force." He remembers these times as especially propitious peak experiences, "It's like the sound of glass breaking, that sound has such a resonance for people as that *uh-oh* moment. It is so loaded."[14] Although this visual/aural component of the crashes is a significant one, the artist has also listed a number of earlier broken-glass works of art important to him. This august lineage includes Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23), Robert Smithson's *Hypothetical Continent-Map of Broken Glass, Atlantis* (1969), Barry Le Va's *Shatter Scatter* (1968-1971), and such recent works as Walead Beshty's FedEx mailed pieces, and Tauba Auerbach's op-art dot paintings, works Fowler recognizes as being predicated on "the mathematics of shattering."[13] On another occasion Fowler has pointed to Gordon Matta-Clark's architectural cuts and the photographic documentations of them, as well as Kelley Walker's early disasters, as works having affinities with his own crashes. Even though Charles Ray's meticulous casting of a 1991 Pontiac Grand Am, totaled in a fatal accident, is an abstraction of a car crash rather than an instantiation of one, Fowler has been intrigued since high school with this piece's ability to conflate reality with abstraction and to restate the question of art's spirituality. When constructing his crash, Ray posed the intriguing question of whether "ghosts. . . inhabit the actual physical molecules of the structure, or . . . if you were to duplicate the geometry, would the ghost follow?"[16]

In addition to this lineage of notable works that represent important precedences for the broken glass in Fowler's crashes, the opposing dramatic emphasis on framing and repeating it a number of times over in individual works is a paramountly important component of his work. Crucial to this theme of framing is the metonymical force it assumed in Fowler's music, when his eminently associative and garrulous performing style—regularly focused on the parerga of the actual theatrical conditions—both supported and made possible the presentation of his music. "I always remembered," he reminisced "that I was making an art project even when I was existing in a touring underground rock/DIY world—it's like I always needed some sorts of constructs, some sorts of conceptual parameters to ground what I was doing, really to dictate my practice."[17]

Fowler's personal mandate to discover art's distinct mode of working by detonating the creative process, when considered in terms of the tensions arising from uninhabited crashes markedly constrained by multiplied frames, leads us back to the beginning of this essay and to Derrida's dryly humorous and erudite discursus on Kant's brief comments on the parergon. But before analyzing this French philosopher's ideas on this topic, it helps to note a design similarity between Derrida's essay and the cover of the catalogue *CANCELLED* for Fowler's fall 2009 show at Joel Mesler's New York's Lower-East-Side Rental Gallery, UNTITLED's immediate predecessor.[18] Derrida's "Parergon" conspicuously begins *in media res* with prominent internal margins demarcated visually and structurally through attendant non-sequiturs. The function of these pronounced breaks is to announce the essay's design and intent: the piece begins prophetically with the initial phrase "economize on the abyss," appearing perhaps as an imperative or more simply as an observation to emphasize no doubt the forthcoming deconstruction and consequent ongoing *différance* its discussion of artistic frames and supports will provide. Derrida's essay ends significantly with the neologism "economimesis," referring back to the beginning, perhaps to imply and interrogate the slippery and often invisible complex network of supports buttressing works of art and constituting an overriding economy of representations, marking both themselves and the works of art they frame, when the two are closely studied and evaluated in tandem. In this way, with a remarkable sleight-of-hand and nimble wit, coupled with an arsenal of rigorous analytic techniques, Derrida deconstructs his own work, putting it into play as a series of presentations and re-presentations capable of continuing to change and transform the parergonal economy it attempts to understand.

For *CANCELLED*, a catalogue, as Fowler explains in his "Author's Note," that is a collaboration with the publisher, the cover comprises pages torn from an un-named source, presumably a magazine, which feature an interview with the artist and reproductions of two of his works.[19] Like Derrida's essay, it begins in the middle, starting with the phrase "and you know" and continues on the back cover where it then breaks off with the self-reflexive inquiry, "I was wondering about your reproductions of interviews. I know that you prefer not to acknowledge that . . . ."[20] Significantly this stylistic device of starting an interview in the middle and resisting any type of conclusion reenacts the same approach Fowler employed the year before in the 2nd Cannons publication on his work. Transforming an interview into an exposed and extended conjunction or bridge between two hiatuses—undefined parerga bordering on an abyss—correlates well with the artist's early recognition of his own fascination with endings as remarkable aesthetic frameworks:

> Sometime around high school I realized that I often liked endings as much as beginnings. Endings can have all the drama associated with something coming to a close, and then all of the infinite po

> tential associated with beginnings. I think of cancelling as a way to infuse that potential into the space vacated by the thing that has been cancelled.[21]

In recognition of this observation, we can look at Fowler's cancellations as both endings and beginnings, eminently approachable works manifestly remaining in a fecund in-between state.

Considered in terms of Derrida's "Parergon," the open-ended cover of Fowler's catalogue frames his work; it is an abbreviated intellectual support in many ways similar to the dry humor characterizing Derrida's emendation of Kant's reflective judgment as a "frame [that] fits badly," and a means of enacting a "violence of the framing [that] multiplies," since: "It [Kant's reflective judgment] begins by enclosing the theory of the aesthetic in a theory of the beautiful, the latter in a theory of taste and the theory of taste in a theory of judgment." "These" Derrida emphatically adds, "are decisions which could be called external."[22] Like Fowler's cover and the layout of Derrida's essay with its pronounced breaks, forming internal margins in the text, Kant's reflective judgment—his acknowledged reason for writing his third critique—is built around the abyss of human imagination, Derrida's "this place . . . as a place derived of place."[23] Like this nowhere kind of fantasy space, Kant's reflective judgment is predicated on the difficult yet necessary role of being forced to construct or assume criteria (his famous "purposiveness without purpose") for understanding. This understanding is predicated on the combined lens of space, time, and causality working in concert with the imagination as a means of trying to comprehend the phenomena of beauty by relating it to aspects of the ultimately unknowable noumenon (the thing in itself), even though it is clearly separated from it. Since reflective judgment is limited to formulating and interrogating phenomena as opposed to noumena, it is confined to the project of constructing multiple possible frames and supports for the work of art it in turn is critiquing. Thus, Kant's reflective judgment is both an intrinsic part of the creation of the work even as it is also extrinsic to it: it is both an ongoing contingent set of internal supports and external frames, constituting the articulation of an internal lack and the outside scaffolding buttressing this lacuna and thereby validating it as art. In doing so, the tentative frames constituting reflective judgment transform art's lack into its often-vaunted "compelling mystery." As Derrida enigmatically muses,

> And what if it were the frame. What if the lack formed the frame of the theory... What if the lack were not only the lack of a theory of the frame but the place of the lack in a theory of the frame?[24]

Considered in this sense, Fowler's series of cancellations and re-framings can be regarded as dramatic instantiations of this "lack of a theory of the frame" that frames his works internally and externally, closing and setting them off as separate and specialized undertakings, becoming declarations of the so-called autonomous works' inability to exist without the assistance of a host of parerga.

Kant's eminently hermeneutical reflective judgment removes any vestige of a stable foundation for understanding the aesthetic and redirects it to an ongoing process of heightened cogitation about art:

> [W]hen the aim is aesthetic, then the imagination is free, so that, over and above that harmony with the concept, it may supply, in an unstudied way, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding which... employs this material not so much obejectively, for cognition, as subjectively, namely, to quicken the cognitive powers...[25]

This subreption whereby the aesthetic (beauty) is displaced from art objects to the ongoing process of the viewer's responsive frames of thinking about art becomes part of its parergonal assembly, which Derrida wisely theorizes as a "reflective hinge" whose ongoing dynamic "comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking."[26] Although his verbs suggest that the parergon's roles are confined to physical pressures, they are clearly epistemological, so that art's ontology—the proverbial question of *what* constitutes art's presence—is amplified to include the different inquiries of *when* and *where* does art actually occur, a line of questioning Fowler's work is well equipped to embrace. It eloquently does so in this UNTITLED exhibition *where* individual pieces—revealing both backs and fronts of framed, stacked, and colliding photographs—acknowledge their past lives in the artist's East Los Angeles studio, *when* these images were printed, laid out, readied for the artist to photograph them, and then placed in racks before being transported to the New York gallery. The many different situations reflected in Fowler's works, *where* the thematic of framing virtualizes outside literal and figurative supports, demonstrate what an open-ended series of structures parerga can become *when* art's perimeters surpass clear definitions and its many liminal adjuncts—representing traces of different times and spaces—thematize its potential to point and embrace outer and inner limits. Both art and its many frames are reciprocally defining propositions in Fowler's work: they, in fact, require each other and only acquire legitimacy when seen in terms

of their ongoing relationship of mutual articulations. In this sense Fowler's works are eminently deconstructive, since they exert pressure on the internal contradictions making up discrete works of art and their attendant literal and figurative frames that had formerly been naturalized through tacit exclusion to reinforce the accepted conceptual system of autonomous works of art. His work, moreover, demonstrates how these different elements can be destabilized and ruptured by critiquing the many foundations appearing to sustain them. Fowler's works thus function as meta-texts about art's actual mode of working instead of only subscribing to the materialistic effects Derrida derisively calls the "metaphysics of presence."

Working in tandem with this ongoing deconstruction of the parergon are Fowler's photographs of black-and-white mirrors prominently displayed in this UNTITLED exhibition. These mirrors symbolize the continued ability of his art to reflect the world around it by including aspects of it within its parameters, even if only momentarily like Robert Morris's famous mirrored cubes shown in the New York Green Gallery in 1965. The mirrors are crucial in instantiating the idea of porosity so important to the parergon's ongoing *différance* in general and to Fowler's work in particular. Their state of ongoing mirrored reflexiveness, moreover, serves as a key for the entire UNTITLED show, since they transform Fowler's work and its many surrounding frames, including the gallery itself, as well as the different perspectives photographically documenting the different states of his work in the studio, into a series of concretized glances whereby the work sees itself metonymically as a set of related positions. This situation is similar to such fifteenth-century Northern European paintings as those by Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck, and Hans Memling, among others, in which mirrors are situated inside the works, often decorating monstrances or reliquaries to serve as harbingers of a different and highly spiritualized world that can only be accessed indirectly through the divine mediation these works of art mimetically represent. A similar, yet far less otherworldly dialectic is played out in Fowler's pieces, which re-enact earlier instances of seeing, so that one gazes at the overall work at the same time one takes in sets of ricocheting and reflecting glances, documented by both the photographs and superimposition of backs on the fronts of some of them.

The many scenes capable of being seen in this art belong to the work's past and the artist's own experiences of it. In this manner the viewer actualizes the work's sight even as it is concretized by the work's capacity to see related constellations of intersecting and colliding framed moments that break up vision even as they construct and enact it. Through this complication of vision, Fowler's overall work is able to establish both outward and inward sightlines, creating a dispersed interplay of presences and absences with the capacity to catalyze a virtual hermeneutics of seeing. His works permit sight even as they deprive viewers of their customary autonomy by dazzling them with the chiasmatic orchestration of openings and closures, permitted and obstructed views, frontal glimpses and rearview impositions, transforming, in the process, photographs into objects splintered into different perspectives, so one is bewitched even as one's view is partially blinded by twisted overlapping and intense conjunctions bespeaking past velocities now frozen in time. Space, then, in Fowler's works comprises clustered torsions of inner and outer references. In the press release for his UNTITLED show, Fowler reinforces his take on this approach in the following enumeration of the elements comprising his work and his allusion to its different vectors of competing forces:

> There are so many details swirling, so many frames, backs of frames, wood screws, cups of stain, ink cartridges, rolls of paper and film and computer files and text. . . .[27]

Since Derrida does not discuss the ability of works of art to incorporate gazes, whereby the works can see themselves seeing even as they are being seen, we can conclude that an understanding of the profound thematics of perception crucial to Fowler's work enables us to extend Derrida's excursus on both the latent power and problematics of the parergon into the realm of art's ontology by ascribing to it a mise-en-abyme-like structure. In this situation whereby one or more resemblances within a work of art mirror aspects of the overarching art circumscribing it, frames are nested within frames so that a work's relation to itself becomes one of its most important subjects. In this situation the outside is brought inside the work and serves as an ongoing economy of interior/exterior exchanges. In addition to simple duplication, the work as mise en abyme is involved in a type of recursion, a system of layered or nested codes with one inhabiting another so that portions of the system are able to fold back on themselves by re-presenting themselves. Recursive works exhibiting this hall-of-mirrors condition appear to be eminently self-aware, thereby permitting a type of artificial intelligence to be imputed, even though such consciousness is mimetically feigned, not actually a component of the work itself. And yet, this mise-en-abyme-like recursion endows Fowler's work with the appearance of a heightened sense of ontological readiness. This situation of self-same or slightly varied models of a work within the work and similar such works of art about the art superintending them thematizes deconstruction's claims to meta-structural status, especially when it surmounts the constraints of a given perspectival frame and, through the strategy of unearthing tacit polarities, is able to point to paths outside it. Frequently the doubling of nested imagery can be interpreted as an overturning of boundaries and frames, so that the external

ones come to be viewed as iterations of those inside a work and vice-versa. Continuing in this line of thinking, the mise en abyme can also be regarded as a parergonal hinge, a type of ongoing chiasmus capable of thematically carrying out the job of both proposing a series of self-same images while cancelling them out. This duplicative trope continues Fowler's overall goal of creating works through the oxymoronic strategy of cancelling, crashing, and then framing them, resulting in a dynamic point/counterpoint, a see-sawing of the creative/destructive/restrictive processes formative to this art.

This recent body of work at UNTITLED moves away from Fowler's earlier performance posters and flower pieces. In doing so it diverges from the artist and his own biography so that the work more abstractly re-presents itself and its own history. While Fowler has often pointed to the flowers in his art as harking back to his childhood, his mother's many cards to him adorned with pictures of flowers, and the pleasant walks with both her and other relatives where flowers along the way were duly noted, he has also explained:

> I have *more-so* thought of the flowers as being an exhausted form, something which is simultaneously there and not there. Flowers announce themselves as present and *aesthetic*; surely they are the oldest and most universal signifier of aesthetics after depictions of the human form itself, a fact [or form] . . . of complete exhaustion. In spite of (or perhaps in addition to) all the other various signifiers they may pack—fertility, death, the life cycle, flowers at once declare themselves as "here, aesthetic" and "empty, exhausted." In this way they create a feedback loop by which they continually empty themselves, reducing their image to further static.[28]

And he adds the prescient observation, "The potential for flowers to abstract past meaning is so great."[29] In addition to evacuating flowers of meaning, the word "flower" is itself a potent synecdoche for the artist, since the simple transposition of the letter "l" in his last name "Fowler" converts it into "flower."[30] Even though Fowler is no longer making works with flowers, his recognition of the type of dreamlike condensation and displacement occurring in these works, an abbreviation achieved in the UNTITLED show through strategic use of overlapping and multiplied parerga both inside and outside the work, coupled with the eloquent visual rhetoric of nested images, culminates in the cancellations and crashes with their multiple frames and their potent ability to catalyze a remarkable series of memorable dialectic moments. These acute states are similar to the ones critic Walter Benjamin termed the "now of knowability," when historical continuity explodes and present and past come together in moments of heightened awareness.[31] At these times, past and present moments seem to be punctuated with remarkable porosity, resembling the quickened velocity of cogitation traditionally associated with truth's happening. All of this is worth recounting, since the many accouterments adding to the work's frozen moment also make up its chief supports—the parerga—contributing to Fowler's overall artistic practice and the power of his work. Fowler recounts his multi-mediated and eminently multistoried approach to flowers and their relation to his crashes in the following narrative:

> I was sort of looking for a placeholder, and I saw that red flower print paper that they have at deli's [*sic*] to wrap bouquet in, "a-ha!" I think that was my main departure point this time around. And beside the fact of me taking the picture, or drawing the illustration, or screening the image which then maybe gets distorted or deleted or negated or whatever a little more from there, there is the fact they are all going into the crash pieces right now, which are themselves about creating an active freeze of time. A still of this violent act, the crash where all of the players are improvising, playing free[,] and then hit on the same note. *Boom!*[32]

Although the crash pieces might appear to be only grand explicatives and frozen relics of past accidents, they can also be considered—as Fowler's statement so clearly indicates—spectacular moments when the traditional work of art per se and many of its appurtenances, including the artist's ongoing desire to "demonstrat[e] process,"[33] are brought together in a momentous freeze frame, an implosion of the discrete art object and many of the supportive elements traditionally hidden along its parameters.

In conclusion, Brendan Fowler's work provides us with cogent ways to rethink art's ontological status and Derrida's extended meditation on Kant's profundatory look at the parergon by posing a series of epistemological questions pertaining to *when* and exactly *where* does art occur and by raising, moreover, the specter of Kant's *a priori* as yet another frame for rethinking the parergon and its close structural relationship to still another enabling adjunct, his theory of reflective judgment. In his latest work at UNTITLED, Fowler continues his overall project of bridging photography, sculpture, architecture, and performance. In addition, he emphasizes the even more abstract idea of frames and framing *when* his images of a black mirror and a white one underscore the overarching metaphor of mirrored reflexiveness as yet another type of parergon and an additional means for nesting images, so that the work is able to accommodate elements outside its traditional purview.

These mirrors present viewers with blurred reflections of themselves as well as with a series of grouped photographs to establish a number of inner and outer perspectives both in and on the work, particularly the different times *when* it was fabricated, assembled, stacked, and readied for shipment to UNTITLED's gallery *where* Fowler's installation then engages in a conversation with the gallery space by constructing additional walls to reflect, quote, and comment on the architecture *where* it is being shown.

[1] Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon" in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, French ed., 1978), 37-82. This special term, pronounced pa-rur-gon, is of Greek origin; it combines the prefix "para, "meaning beside, alongside, by, related to, subordinate, with the word "ergon," connoting work, deed, action, that which is wrought or made, referring often to a work of art.

[2] Brendan Fowler, *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5* (Los Angeles: 2nd Cannons Publications, 2009), p. 42. This observation is from an interview conducted with the artist and which appears in this title appropriated from an un-named source.

[3] Press Release for "Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen (Spring 2011)," UNTITLED, New York, February 27-April 3, 2011.

[4] Brendan Fowler, conversation with author, 3 February 2011. At first Fowler decided on the name "BARR" as a joke: it was spelled "Bar" and stood for "Brendan's always right." Later this association seemed too clichéd as did the ongoing joke of raising the bar that was frequently made when his moniker was mentioned, so Fowler decided to change it to the proper name "Mick Barr" after his friend, the avant-garde heavy-metal shred-master guitarist as a "funny and confusing tribute." Subsequently Fowler decided to use the more anonymous, simpler word "BARR" since it carried "less baggage."

[5] All the quotations ascribed to Fowler, unless otherwise noted, come from this extended conversation with Fowler on 3 February 2011 in his Los Angeles, which continued the next day.

[6] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, p. 42.

[7] Fowler continues this process in his 2011 show at UNTITLED. "My exhibitions," the artist explains, "are always, at least in part, about drawing attention to the actual exhibition staging itself." Press Release for "Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen (Spring 2011)."

[8] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, p. 42

[9] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, p. 44.

[10] Ibid., p. 46.

[11] "Brendan Fowler Last Disaster/ First BARR at Rivington Arms," http://www.theworldsbestever.com/2008/04/09/brendan-fowler-last-disaster-first-barr-at-rivington-arms/, consulted 23 February 2011.

[12] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, n.p.

[13] Ibid.

[14] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, p. 50.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Charles Ray in "Charles Ray's '*Unpainted Sculpture*,'" "http://www.artsconnected.org/collection/100518/charles-ray-s-unpainted-sculpture?print=true, consulted 26 February 2011.

[17] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, p. 53.

[18] Rental Gallery became UNTITLED in the fall of 2010 when Joel Mesler entered into a partnership with Carol Cohen. At that time the gallery moved to Orchard Street and changed its name to UNTITLED.

[19] Brendan Fowler, *CANCELLED* (New York: 100% / Rental Gallery, 2009).

[20] Ibid., front and back covers.

[21] *ISBN-10: 0-9820559-3-5*, p. 50.

[22] Derrida, "The Parergon," p. 69.

[23] Ibid., p. 38.

[24] Ibid., pp. 42 and 43.

[25] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing , 1987), p. 185, Section 49, "On the Powers of the Mind Which Constitute Genius."

[26] Ibid., pp. 52 and 46.

[27] Press Release for "Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen (Spring 2011)."

[28] Brendan Fowler, email to author, 2 March 2011.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Brendan Fowler, conversation with author, 2 March 2011. Although Fowler did not consciously think about flowers in relation to his name, he agrees with this interpretation and recalled, as corroboration, an incident during his childhood when a fellow student called him, "Brendan Flower."

[31] Leland de la Durantaye provides an excellent discussion of this enigmatic and often misunderstood Benjaminian term in his analysis of Agamben's major sources, including Walter Benjamin, cf. Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 113ff.

[32] *CANCELLED*, back cover.

[33] Press Release for "Brendan Fowler with Joel Mesler and Carol Cohen (Spring 2011)."

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