

## The Fine Art of Repair in New Orleans: A Conversation with Srdjan Loncar



Srdjan Loncar is an artist from Croatia living in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he directs the sculpture department at Tulane University. In both form and content, Loncar's work is concerned with the reproduction of actual, known objects that are variously natural, organic, political, historical, domestic, and mundane. Loncar's method generally consists of carving forms of familiar objects out of Styrofoam and covering them with close-up photographic montages of the objects' surfaces. The result is a distorted mosaic of small, individual, photographic truths, which combined reveal the complexity of observation, recording, and representation. By substituting detailed photographs of the object for real elements of the object, Loncar creates exaggerated simulacra wherein the difference between the actual and the false is diminished and emphasized at the same time. *Scapegoat* met with Loncar in June, 2012, in his studio at Tulane University and at the Good Children Gallery in New Orleans, where we discussed the various ways his practice engages repair, money, value, and commodity

culture in a world where real and fake are increasingly indistinguishable. A partial transcript of our conversation is included below, along with images courtesy of the artist.

**SCAPEGOAT SAYS** As an introduction to your practice as a sculptor, can you tell us a bit about *Fix-a-Thing*? Am I correct in thinking that the *Fix-a-Thing* project came before your more explicit work with money and your various representations of money?

**SRDJAN LONCAR** Yes, *Fix-a-Thing* came first. This is a pamphlet for *Fix-a-Thing* that I wrote with Elizabeth Wallace, who is now an art historian at the University of Georgia, but she was a teacher of mine here at the University of New Orleans, where I completed my MFA.



The suit came afterwards. This is one of the pieces I did first.



fig. 2

It was done in front of my house, but somebody took it a couple days after it was installed. Here is another early piece: I replaced a whole phone booth and left it there. This is one of the aspects I really like—I just leave my work behind and leave it to whatever environment it is in to deteriorate. People often steal it, too.

SS And your *Fix-a-Thing* jumpsuit?



fig. 3

SL Yeah, it is pretty nice. It has my name and everything. I'll put it on for you. It was crazy, sure, but this jumpsuit has a good story. *There* [with jumpsuit on], I'm in character now. I bought this jumpsuit with my father in Croatia when I just started graduate school. I had wanted to do a funny project

for school, like an astronaut—"Croatians Go to the Moon" or something stupid like that—and then I went to buy a jumpsuit and I couldn't find what I wanted, but I met the manager of a clothing store who brought me upstairs where the Russian seamstresses were sewing. So I explained to them what I wanted exactly and they made it! But I didn't use it then... I was waiting for the right moment. When I was preparing a show in Marfa, Texas, I made these embroidered patches for my jumpsuit and started the *Fix-a-Thing* project, which is still ongoing.

SS What about the hammer?

SL It was missing the handle, so all I needed was to photograph it and fix it again, and it looks good now, no?

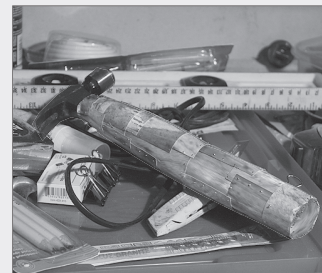


fig. 4

SS Very nice. What else have you fixed for *Fix-a-Thing*?



fig. 5

SL Anything I find; anything that needs fixing. This is some graffiti I fixed in front of Good Children, a gallery where I work in New Orleans, and this is something I fixed

Scapegoat

in nature—a broken tree stump. Here's a wall I fixed, and a brace. I like the beauty of the installation process.

SS What about the burning car? I don't think that is something you fixed, but it's quite beautiful.

SL This is a life-size car, a real car, which I researched to discover that it is the most bought car in America—the Toyota Camry—and it is silver, the most popular colour people buy.



fig. 6

The flames are made of a Styrofoam base, and the photographs that cover it, are similar to those I use for repairs, extreme close ups of red, orange, and yellow images, which are actually photographs of Wal-Mart products. I just went to Wal-Mart with my camera and photographed the stuff that is red, orange, and yellow, but you can't tell what it is in the final collage sculpture form. They stopped me, of course, while I was there trying to get all these photographs, so I had to send other friends to go back and keep photographing to get enough. It is my idea of a "public" sculpture—of the populace, for the populace, I guess. It is the most common denominator, but I think it also suggests the way that we are part of it, that art is a part of it, all of us feeding the flames.

SS Where is it now?

SL It's here, dissected now, in the studio. The flames are here. The car I had at a friend's house in the Bywater, you know,



the Upper Ninth Ward, and somebody took it! They stole it for the steel I guess, because it didn't even have a motor. They must have sold it at the junk yard for a few hundred dollars. The piece was done during a show called Prospect 1. I did another installation for that at the Arthur Roger Gallery, with these money cubes and another burning car, a Hummer, but in that piece I created a more religious setting, with the piles of money as a kind of minimal, tomb-like series of cubes, something like Donald Judd, leading to the burning Hummer sacrifice at the end.

SS The Hummer is smaller though, yes?

SL Yes, the Hummer isn't full size in this piece. And, for these flames, the images aren't from Wal-Mart; each is a photograph of burning Iraqi oil wells posted on the internet.



fig. 7

SS So, how did people respond to these, the burning Camry and the burning Hummer in the tomb of money?

SL This was 2008, people liked it. I think so anyway...I had a good response.

SS And what about all your briefcases full of money? Where were they?

SL This was also part of Prospect 1, actually. They had venues all around New Orleans, and one of the venues was the US Mint, you know! I said, man, I have to get an exhibit in there, let me have *that* space! Some critics actually didn't like it because of the space. They thought, "okay, you have that Mint space and so you thought of making money," and I guess they thought it was too tongue-in-cheek. But the idea for the money came before the exhibition.



fig. 8

To tell you the truth, I wanted to do this exhibition a long time ago but I didn't because I was afraid that since I wasn't a US citizen they would just deport me for counterfeiting, because the Secret Service records all those things. But my solution was to incorporate the band that holds the money stack together into the print, so you know it is not money. It is a part of the print.



fig. 9

These are some of the most interesting—the ones that my dogs ate. They just liked them, I guess. I want to cast them in resin as if they are valuable currencies, like some important souvenirs.

SS What did the people at the Mint say?

SL They liked it, it was fine. I mean, I created my own economic system as well, a microsystem. I was selling suitcases full of counterfeit money out of the Mint! It was great. It is the correct thickness for a \$20,000 stack. So, one million dollars per case. The whole golden suitcase holds one million US dollars, but I was selling it for only \$500! Obviously, I guess, I was questioning both the value of currency and the value of the art object, but I wanted to make it as a set up. Part of this also comes from my studies with Elizabeth Wallace and discussions about the economy as a virtual system. But while I was selling these, the economy actually crashed! I didn't do it, it was a coincidence. It was a coincidence, no? I showed that the economy was a virtual system, and it crashed.

The premise of the piece is to put in tension what is virtual and simulated, and what is real. Which is which, in art and in currency? Art and money have a lot of virtual contracts, a lot of promising of what they are based on, promising what they are worth. Before, we had the gold standard; now what do we have? I wanted to make that absence—the virtual economy—present and more tangible to show that it didn't exist, and that's why I went back to wood sculpture as a form of object-making. But, then I had to sell it to see what people would give it as a value, how much would they trust it.

SS To make them ask, "Is this 'really' worth \$500?" and, "will this be a valuable work of art one day?"

SL Exactly, all that comes into play. It is the same with the *Fix-a-Thing* project. What is the role of the "fix," and what is the role of the artist, too? What is my role as an artist? I will provide you with an object or whatever, but what I am providing is also a service.

SS The fine art of repair?

SL That is it, too; it is a tactic to infiltrate the system.

SS In *The Coming Insurrection*, the group Tiquun talk about this—the word "tiqqun" means repair; *tiqqun olam* means, "to repair the world" in Hebrew. What is your repairman philosophy?

SL *Fix-a-Thing* is about fast-paced solutions to fast-paced problems, just like everything else. In the broader scheme of things, what do we have? We have a problem and we say let's plug it, it will look fine, and as long as it looks fine right now, it's fixed, it's good, we can walk away. And people walk away and that's it; they don't need to know about deterioration or anything else.

SS Some of the objects you choose yourself. But do people also call you, or call *Fix-a-Thing*, to have things fixed?

SL Oh yeah, for sure. Here, in New Orleans, at the Contemporary Art Centre, for example. The curator, Amy Mackie, was pointing out some of the flaws in her office, so I went with her and fixed the light switch. And this, for example, was in Marfa. There was a ledge that people always tripped on, so I fixed it for them. I used styrofoam, though, so maybe in the end it will cause more damage. If someone with high heels steps on it and it goes through, they will break their ankle, maybe. But, of course, this is about the whole futility and absurdity of fixing it in the first place.

SS Have you done a lot to fix things in New Orleans?

SL I fixed a hole in the ceiling of the museum, and some things at Good Children gallery. My first real clients had



fig. 10



moved to New Orleans from L.A. They had these braces on a column, and they asked if I could replace them, but with my photographs. I went over and did an estimate after I talked to the architect to make sure it wasn't in the way of what they were building. So they hired me and it was a great commission. Then, at the Contemporary Art Centre, they worked with me and together we looked for broken things for me to fix. It's an ongoing project. Even the website is always "temporarily under construction."

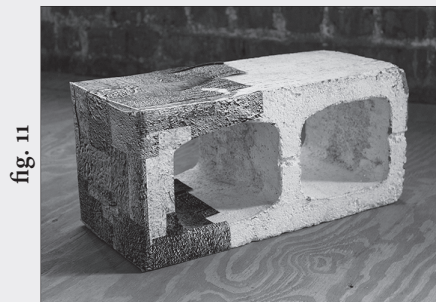
**SS** It's great, with just the crazy hammer and nail graphics.

**SL** It is also about the overall volume of the project. Each object has its own beauty, and quirkiness, and its own story, but the overall effect of all these stories is interesting, too.

**SS** And this led to the money piles? For Prospect 1, was your counterfeit money exhibited both in the golden cases and as large piles?

**SL** I had two rooms, so in one I had the cases, and in the other I had the piles of money. I even had a banking counter there, a banking area with the printing machine, and a little monitor about the purchase value and everything. For the opening I even had bank tellers. I sold over a hundred suitcases, too. They really went! But I still have some money left...we'll see.

**SS** What about the cinder block over here?



**SL** It is one of my favourites, for sure. It is a common material, and it works.

**SS** Is it your most architectural piece?

**SL** It is the most common—the basic unit, the brick! A lot of people think that I just cover over something that isn't broken with some photographs. I don't care. I am fixing things, and I only use raw photography collaged as a way of making the fix. The first thing I ever fixed, really, were bricks in front of my house in the Marigny. The photographs for the bricks came out purple. I left it that way, and it kind of looks photo-shopped, like a strange computer image.

**SS** Some other folks are doing projects about this. Melinda Rouse calls these images low-resolution landscapes, or "lo-fi landscapes," suggesting the space where technology shows us grainy but "good-enough" images. But we don't ever have a real image. You use real photographs, but they have a very grainy, digital style?

**SL** But it is three-dimensional and it is real; it is a real object.

**SS** Are the concrete casts of common objects you are making more recent?

**SL** Yes, very recent. But, I'd already made concrete casts of regular TVs and handguns in 1999 as an undergraduate student. Now I've done one flat-screen TV, but I have a rubber mold so I can make multiples, and some payphones as well, all out of concrete. I am going to be welding the payphones around town, and I can weld it right onto the old payphone booths. It's like a memorial to the object—these old, obsolete objects. And now I am casting so I can make a lot of them. I am going to give them away. I'll ship you one of these TVs to enjoy! They aren't yet obsolete, but it's just a matter of time, no?

**SS** You can start installing the pay phones at night, for sure.

**SL** Oh no, I'll do it right in the middle of the day, in my jumpsuit, with orange traffic cones. Just right there, like that! Some

of these concrete pieces were shown at Good Children as well.

**SS** When did Good Children gallery start?

**SL** It was 2008, and I was one of the founding members. It was influenced a lot by the fact that Prospect 1 was about to happen. So we have a space now, and every month one of the people involved is responsible for something. There are a lot of us now, so we rotate who is working on the space, and who is working on their own work. Right now, Stephen Collier is curating a show called *Heat Wave*. We also have a fundraiser, a group show, and then we each curate a month or so each year. Very few pieces are sold, so I like it because you are there for the work, for the “juice,” not the commercial aspect of it.

**SS** Is *Fix-a-Thing* part of that? It seems like you have a lot to fix, in New Orleans and all over, but it seems non-commercial, too. Maybe you can come fix something in Detroit?

**SL** That would be great because I would like to keep going with this. I am going to fix some things in my hometown of Rijeka, Croatia. It's a global project. There is a lot to fix, and I am also thinking more now about problems at the level of institutions. How can *Fix-a-Thing* start to make fixes like that, at that scale, for education, hospitals, police, or bureaucracy? How do I start to repair that?

**SS** I'm not so sure about the police! I just saw an ad on a bus stop for a community conference about “Police Issues” in New Orleans! Why don't they just call it police brutality? Probably so the police don't show up at the conference to beat everyone up!

**SL** I like that, *Fix-a-Thing* should get on to fixing “police issues.”

**SS** What else is going on with all your money these days?

**SL** I've made some mattresses out of money. They are big sheets, kind of woven together, so you get a nice mattress. But I have to show you this courthouse! I was over in this area during Katrina, in a boat, and this is a crazy building all by itself on a normal day, but look closely, it has the Fascist emblems above the columns, too. “Togetherness” fascist bundles! It says that it is the court of law, not of men. It is a real New Orleans fascist building.



fig. 12



**SS** Have you made any work specifically in response to Katrina?

**SL** There is one piece I did. There were all these refrigerators out on the street. I was photographing them all, and I made a huge grid with just the photographs of the refrigerators. They were just out on the street after Katrina because everything was rotten. They were full of maggots, but on the outside they were great white cubes—another found minimalist sculpture. I made some huge prints of this work, but they were too big to be exhibited.

But, now I am gearing up for gas stations in New Orleans, old gas stations. There are a lot of them that have been abandoned, no one uses them any more. So I photograph them. They are also like minimalist sculptures now, especially because they paint them white so you can't see which company owned them. So, I photograph these minimalist objects and model them out of concrete like abandoned monuments. They are basically chiseled out—you see? The economy chisels them out, and now they are monuments to





fig. 13

fig. 14



economic forces that passed by, that made them. This came into existence, just like this, then they are painted white. They just sit there, and I love it. So, I am remaking them as models.

**SS** A lot are out of business?

**SL** Yes, of course, but then other ones reappear. They keep re-appearing somewhere else. But, that's it, yeah...I'm going to take this jumpsuit off.



fig. 15

**SS** What about the handguns? In Spike Lee's film *When the Levees Broke*, I know your friend from New Orleans talks about all the handguns in the airport, you remember? He talks about how all the people were asked to leave their guns behind if they wanted to be allowed on a plane after Katrina. Are the concrete handguns a response to Katrina or New Orleans?

**SL** These are great, no? I just started making them now in large quantities. This is the last line of defense, really, so I give them to my friends. You can have one, or maybe I should send it to you so you don't have to take it on the plane! It works like this: you keep it on your night stand or whatever. If you have an intruder, you just throw it at them. It is a stone-age technology. Take one, really. You only have one shot, but at least you can say you have a gun for self-defense, just like everyone else. ○

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**BIO** A native of Croatia, Srdjan Loncar moved at the age of three with his parents to New Orleans, where his father worked as an agricultural inspector. When Loncar was seven, the family returned to Croatia, where he spent his teenage years and went on to serve in the Yugoslav army's border patrol. In the meantime, the civil wars of the early 1990s broke out. After being part of the fighting in Slovenia and the break up of the Yugoslav army, he avoided military duty by applying to the University of New Orleans, and thus returned to the Crescent City in 1991. He completed an MFA there, and he is currently the director of the sculpture program at Tulane University, also in New Orleans. His work has been exhibited throughout the US, and his project *Fix-a-Thing* is online at [fix-a-thing.com](http://fix-a-thing.com).