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PUSHZOOMPANTILT, A LETTER TO GRANDMOTHER

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PUSHZOOMPANTILT, A LETTER TO GRANDMOTHER

By

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Abstract

pushzoompantilt is an ongoing body of work that considers the relationship of handmade art objects with found and altered objects of utility and leisure. Addressed herein is an explanation of this relationship between clay form and altered objects seen through the lens of open and closed systems and fixedness.

Schwiesow, Karl, M.F.A., 2017

Studio Art

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Introduction

It is important to observe the exhibit *pushzoompantilt* as a whole because nuanced relationships emerge when the similarities and differences between individual objects are overlaid (Image: 1). I use the film terms, “push”, “zoom”, “pan”, and “tilt” to describe an active point of view, both for the maker and viewer. Individually, these terms are homonyms and can suggest more than one perspective. For instance, “pan” can be a sweeping view through a camera lens, or a utensil used for cooking. “Zoom” in film, is to focus closer, cropping out superfluous information, it is also what kids say in the sandbox when pushing a toy car; you get the idea. These terms refer to actions, active viewership, and/or new perspectives.

While in the studio, I ask what else can an object do or how else can the material be applied? What does this thing or action mean to me and to others? Taking nothing at face value and in direct opposition to “fixedness”, I improvise and push against the predictable.

This inquisitive nature was informed during childhood and early adult years in and around my father’s marine fabrication shop. I was raised with a yard full of rusted chunks of steel, hulls, and housings from boats and other industrial equipment. At the shop, parts and pieces were repurposed and reconfigured. I would watch my father cut apart and reassemble massive steel and aluminum. These metal hulks transcended their discarded status to become a new form relevant in design and utility. My father worked from both recycled and raw materials, employing a heuristic approach to making, learning through trial and error. I use a similar approach.

pushzoompantilt and the larger repertoire of my art is rooted in exploring and expanding the physical and associative characteristics of an object's original intention. I do this using the idea of "open" and "closed systems" and the theory of "functional fixedness". I also use strategies of recontextualizing formal and conceptual characteristics of the found, the industrial, and the handmade. This process weaves together materials and concepts in a way that re-frames meaning.

Studio Strategies

pushzoompantilt presents ceramic forms, found objects, materials and processes. The exhibition artwork softens and opens the original intention of objects by deconstruction, reconstruction, and recontextualization. This effect is illustrated and supported when common objects with specific purpose, and concept, such as a wrench, baseball bat, jack, or pool cue, are physically altered from a 'closed systems' into an 'open system'.

Closed and open systems can be traced to Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General System Theory. This theory defines an open system as an (sic) "...exchange of matter with its environment, presenting import and export, building-up and breaking-down of its material components." and "Closed systems, on the other hand, are held to be isolated from their environment."¹ I use Bertalanffy's definition as a guide for the compound artworks in *pushzoompantilt*. Objects that have one specialized purpose are conceptually limited and belong to a 'closed (conceptual) system', such as specific tools

¹ Ludwig. Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*: 1988 4.

like jacks, wrenches, saws, or clamps. Objects of leisure like a baseball bat, pool cue, or billiard ball are also closed as they were manufactured for one specific purpose. I alter objects so that they may emerge through deconstruction and reconstruction as an open system. This is because the original object and concept has been physically and conceptually broken down, rebuilt, and introduced in a relational context similar to Bertalanffy's "import" and "export" theory.

Psychologist Karl Duncker² coined the phrase "functional fixedness", a term he used to describe a psychological condition in which an individual is un-able to abstractly consider the use of an object beyond its specific or implied purpose and context. For example, hammers are only used to pound nails or lipstick can only be applied to lips. It is my intention with *pushzoompantilt* to resist "fixedness". Resistance to "fixedness" is a part of my formula linking familiar objects with unlikely outcomes through specific fixed language.

Categories One and Two: The Found and Handmade

For the sake of this analysis, I have separated the objects in the exhibit into two categories. The first category includes found objects mechanically produced by and for industry, and the second category includes handmade objects and what I make from raw materials, including from clay, wood, or steel. Combinations of these two categories are often present in one work simultaneously.

² Duncker, Karl; Lees, Lynne S. (Trans) *Psychological Monographs: On problem-solving*. (The American Psychological Association, Inc., Vol 58(5)), 1945

I understand the materiality and associative qualities of an object through tearing it apart. Having spent many years as a bicycle mechanic, I re-defined myself from a mechanic that “fixes” to a technician that “experiments” with form and function. As a technician, I deconstruct a bicycle, exchange parts, combine and alter gear and suspension ratios, all to shift the look and performance. This process piqued my interest in how to change function, and therefore meaning, through static mechanical or manufactured means. For the bicycle could change from being “stock” to “high functioning” demanded my personal perspective had to change. Looking back, I realize I was resisting ‘fixedness’ even as a bicycle mechanic/technician.

The found and manufactured objects in my artwork come directly from popular culture; they might be newly manufactured, previously used, discarded or recycled, but each was generated for commercial exchange. It is important the objects be authentic, meaning that they’re not models or copies of originals or used in the manner intended. They are what they are. I don’t consider these objects as kitsch; instead I use them for their material, associative, and historic relevance. In *pushzoompantilt*, examples would be billiard balls, clamps, hooks, bats, wrenches, and towel racks.

I then subvert the objects from category one through deconstruction and reconstruction. For instance, in the piece *Cue* (Image: 2) I change the straight pool cue to a zigzag. By making it a zigzag the viewer is force to navigate new associations.

Cue is an example how “functional fixedness” is tied to cultural understanding. Likewise, works such as *Obtuse Bat* (Image: 3) and *45 Degree Wrenches* (Image: 4) show how intention misaligns when original utility is changed or overlaid. *Obtuse Bat* and *45*

Degree Wrenches become 'open systems'. The bat and wrench are a bridge to open systems similar to Marcel Duchamp's fountain³. In the work "Fountain" the viewer thinks urinal, understands the title is "fountain", which redefines the object from closed to open.

In the second category of objects I use fabrication methods. These processes tip the hat to my father and craftspeople that make objects from raw material. Unlike found objects that primarily reflect society, this way of working primarily reflects the maker's vision. For instance, the clay pieces in *pushzoompantilt* were made using a methodical system of hand built hollow construction that encloses space. Thumb impressions left in clay are discursive of the artist's presence and are ways of linking the body to the object. Built objects are indexical signifiers for hand-made and often valued by society or culture.

Interpretation: Four Artworks

I treat the found/manufactured objects in category one, and the handmade forms in category two as components for larger compositions. Found/manufactured elements are combined with hand-made elements to form compound compositions. In *pushzoompantilt* I apply the idea of compound objects on a macro level from piece to piece, and on a micro level within each piece.

³ Dickerman, Leah, *Dada*, New York, National Gallery of Art, Washington, and D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc. 2005. 287.

'*Overlay*', is a term used by Lucy Lippard to describe the relationship between the landscape and culture⁴. It is a relevant term to describe the relationships between the layered objects and concepts in *pushzoompantilt*. In my research, I look for parallels between my own work and the combinations of objects and concepts that appear happenstance in landscape and culture. *Concrete Square and Mountain* (Image: 5), *Pile and Mountain* (Image: 6), and *Cylinder and Stone* (Image: 7) are "naturally occurring" examples referential to the industrial and handmade combinations in my work.

In *Analysis of Baluster* (Image: 8), the baluster, under normal circumstances, is an architectural structure arranged to support a handrail. However, *Analysis of Baluster* supplants a linear structure for a three-dimensional grid. The new object is now in contradiction with its utilitarian conceptual and cultural understandings. In its subverted state, *Analysis of Baluster* operates in an open system because it is now a grid and does not function as a handrail. The object is recognizable as baluster but does not function as physical support instead it functions as an idea. The reinterpretation of an object is materially and conceptually connected to artists like Meret Oppenheim, whose work operates between Dada and Surrealist sculptural modes.

Matrix (Image: 9) is an elevated ceramic structure using common scissor jacks, the kind used to lift a car to change a tire. *Matrix* utilizes objects from both categories one and two. The black ceramic grid is hand-built and is a network of systematically formed and connected tube-like structures. In making *Matrix*, I was thinking about civil infrastructure, industrial construction strategies, and systems in general, as well as the

⁴ Lippard, Lucy R. *Overlay: contemporary art and the art of prehistory*. 1983

drawings and sculptures of minimalists Sol Lewitt and Agnes Martin. Art writers Rosalind Krauss and William Dunning describe and interpret the grid in *Grids*⁵ and *The Roots of Postmodernism*⁶ respectively. Krauss' critique helps connect, in this work, category one and two when she states: "The grid is an introjection of the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work; it is a mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself. It is a mode of repetition, the content of which is the conventional nature of art itself." This quote helps visualize a relationship between the physical and conceptual points of view associated with grids and in doing so open *Matrix* to non-linear interpretation.

In my work, Dunning's accounts of what he calls "The Post-Cartesian Concept of 'Self'" which supports the relationships between category one and two by proposing a non-linear or variable relationship between the viewer, the concept, and the object.

Using car jacks to lift *Matrix* recontextualizes the purpose and concept of the jack without physically altering it. The manufactured jacks (category one) support the handmade structure (category two) and together signify precariousness. We/audience know not what it is or what it means. The fired glaze, clay and steel are all impervious. The jacks suggest action, contrary to the static grid. So, despite its familiarity the viewer is left accepting what *Matrix* isn't to define what *Matrix* is.

The sculpture, *Index* (Image: 10) illustrates intrinsic and "open" relationships between form and materials. The objects, from category one and two, are operating as

⁵ Krauss, Rosalind, *Grids* October, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979) 46-50

⁶ Dunning, William V., *The Roots of Postmodernism* 1995

closed and open systems against and with each other, simultaneously. The billiard ball, because it is a sphere, is resisting the action of the clamp, thus subverting function. Conceptually and physically, *Index* shows the flexibility of an open system' and a resistance to 'fixedness'. This assemblage stems from Dada and can be understood like Marcel Duchamp's 'assisted readymade', *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and Man Ray's *Gift* (1921)⁷.

Lastly, within the exhibit *pushzoompantilt* is an artwork titled *Pushzoompantilt* (Image: 11). This work is an example of the language play between noun and proper noun. This language play shows the flexibility of possible meanings for the viewer(s). By combining objects that generate an inconclusive narrative, there exists a dependency between open and closed systems. Through the lens of an open system the viewer experiences the piece visually first without terminology. The verbal occurs second, allowing for sensory experience to influence the specificity of language. When the viewer experiences language first and sensory second it is a closed system because the term is attached to the object. When the viewer experiences the sensory first and the terminology second it is an open system because the sensory is emotional and is not easily defined. In the piece *Pushzoompantilt* I am counting on both to move laterally, so a parasol is a parasol (closed system) but the parasol in this work is also a circular painted object (open system). In this singular mode, items belong unto themselves and the relational possibilities. What I attempt to do in my artwork is knowingly balance

⁷ Leah Dickerman, *DADA* 2006. (Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* and Man Ray's *Gift* are from the same text.)

open and closed systems together to create a third option that by nature is inconclusive. In this way, the piece, *Pushzoompantilt* illustrates what I refer to as a compound object in form and concept. In regard to categories one and two, as previously explained, the parasol is from category one because it is a found object that has been manipulated, the ceramic biomorphic form is from category two because it has been fabricated, and the industrial cart falls between the two categories as it has both found/manufactured elements and fabricated elements.

Conclusion

The exhibition *pushzoompantilt* resists fixedness by altering familiar materials, objects, processes, and language with strategies of open and closed systems, in addition to deconstruction/reconstruction, and of recontextualization. (the bike wheel, self, material, process, concept..)

In the near future, I plan to continue working similarly allowing decisions to percolate. I am curious to see how digital realms might add an additional overlay.

Images:



Image: 1, *pushzoompantilt*, 2017



Image: 2, *Cue*, 2017

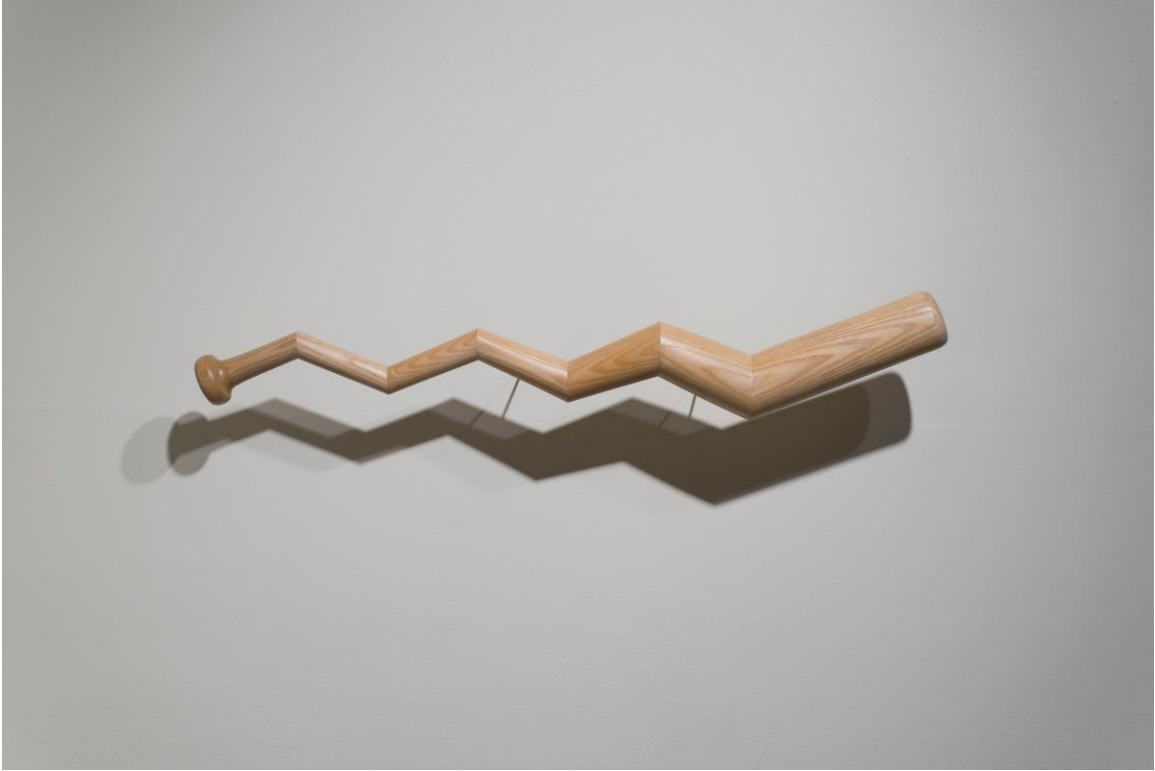


Image: 3, *Obtuse Bat*, 2017



Image:4, 45 Degree Wrenches, 2017



Image: 5, *Concrete Square and Mountain*, 2014

Image: 6, *Pile and Mountain*, 2015



Image: 7, *Cylinder and Stone*, 2017

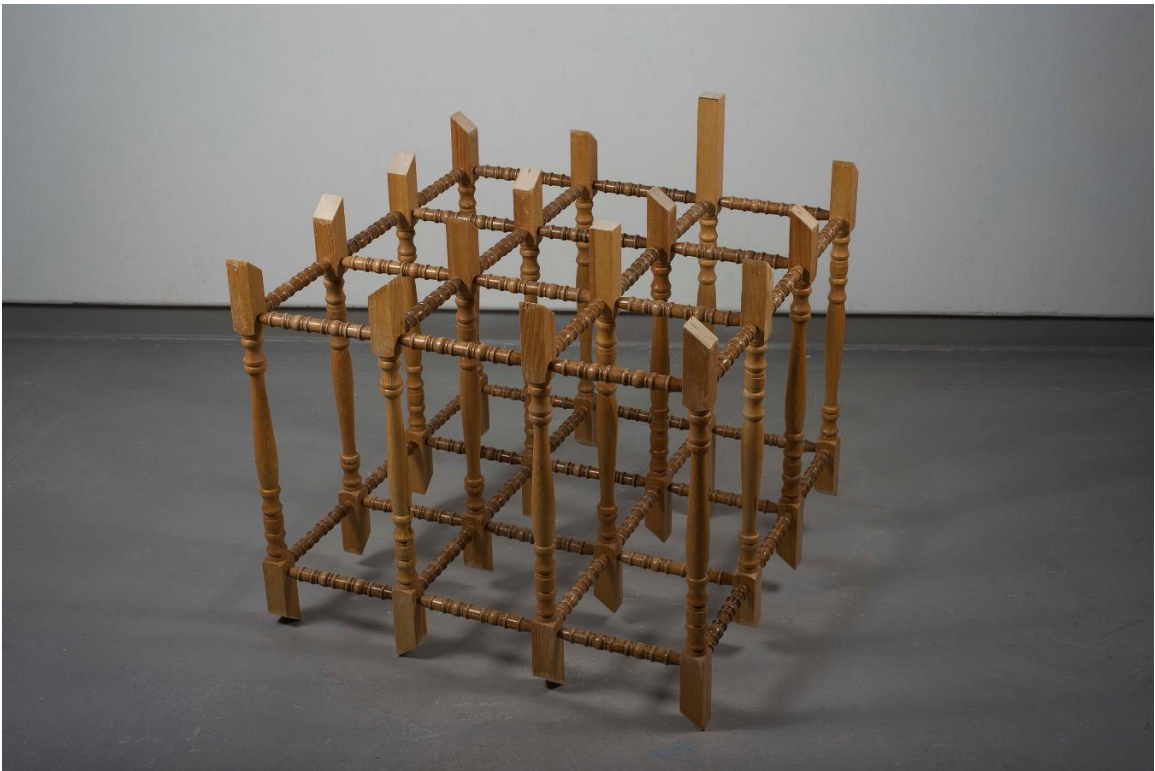


Image: 8, *Analysis of Baluster*, 2017



Image 9, *Matrix*, 2017



Image 10, *Index*, 2017



Image: 11, *Pushzoompantilt*, 2017

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