

YOU YOUR SUN AND SHADOW, 2012
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This essay written by Michael Jones McKean, first appeared in the exhibition catalog for 'you your sun and shadow', curated by MJM at the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University in January of 2012. The show included works by: Hany Armanious, Rashid Johnson, Pam Lins, Tony Matelli, Ian Pedigo, Dario Robleto, Haim Steinbach, Sarah Sze, Tatiana Trouvé, and Daniel Turner.

i. objects and shadow

Our eyes are complex sense organs, ones that require a medium—light—with which to register the things within our field of vision: objects, surfaces, colors, contours, and shapes. With light and objects comes shadow: light's inversion, an object's surrogate ghost twin, the most basic evidence that a thing even exists.

ii. the exhibition

you, your sun and shadow is a speculative exhibition focused on a small branch of objects we collectively call sculpture. The artworks contained within these pages (placeholders for the actual) offer up a willfully subjective index of dimensional marks and moves and materials and objects transformed into meta-fictions, each volunteering distinctly eccentric versions of our thing-based world. Though in another universe, only slightly altered from where we now sit, the same show would be viewed as an anthropology of origin-unknown objects, an archeo-catalogue of ambient volumetric displacements, an abridged lexicon of alchemically formed things, an extended mediation on spatially feral mark-making techniques, a depository of rogue shapes that are not screens, or an Inchoate History of Late Sculpture/Objects From Before the Siege. Playfully, in the plastic universe of thought, perhaps the exhibition will masquerade as these things, if only for a moment.

iii. the sovereign object

There is a myth that describes the existence of a truly sovereign object—an object purged of all relationships, a thing emasculated of reference, politic, memory, and discourse. In its amnesia and hermeticism, this object lives in a void—invisible, untouchable, and shadowless, endlessly devouring itself without comfort, pleasure, or pain.

iv. object anomalies

Occasionally we encounter an uncatalogued object for which we haven't yet established a template in our minds. In defiance, the object eludes our attempts at categorization. At the limits of our perception, we're able to understand it only in terms of its otherness: anomalous, aberrant, stray, vexing, deviant, rogue, curious, just weird... a thing. Tasked with processing this unique object, we must actively develop our own neurology, dedicating a small bit of mental real estate to it. The process ensues not by absolving the object's signature strangeness, but by finding ways of incorporating its strangeness into our psyche. To do this, our brains go to work constructing and rebuilding taxonomies. New analogies are made; scripts rewritten; old ideas recalled, unshelved, recataloged, or discarded. This project, although complicated, tiring, and imperfect, is also intensely pleasurable. These odd, here-and-now deviations in space come to us as small gifts that test our private and collective assumptions and, in some way, build our world anew.

v. else as ethos

Embedded within the discipline of sculpture, is a breed of intellectualism yearns not for "and" and "also," but for "else." The concept of else distinguishes itself through a fundamental desire for something that isn't exactly around yet, something slightly out of reach, not even imagined. Although the spirit of else is coded deep within us, it primarily lies dormant as it runs counter to defaults that happily conform to the ease of preformed, off-the-shelf mental orthodoxies. Practicing else is just harder. Else makes demands. It leans on us. It lives in our fever dreams. It keeps asking. But in all of its wanton insistence, the virtue of else lies in its sublimated generative spirit. In its thirst, it trolls for the sweetness of swerve and sex and love and sun and shadows and must, craving the fecundity of creation.

vi. valence

As we move around, we travel through object-fields. These fields are bounded by their functions as much as by the limitations of our vision: a table after dinner, a bookshelf, a primeval forest floor, an unmade bedroom. In each of these spaces, there's an invisible valence generated by the objects contained in the field that also claims hold on them and, momentarily, on us. The valent pull is liminal and delicate, but the tonality and distinct character of each field would be demonstrably altered if something was removed or even repositioned slightly—the magnetism recalibrated, the poem rewritten.

Within this concept, there are unusual moments when a set of objects within a field develops dimensional clarity and continuity. A sweet contingency emerges, a special form of solidarity: object harmonics. We realize that these aggregative, seemingly random forms in space are linked in an ontologically and spatially meaningful way. Our mind shutters off whole chambers in devotion to these few things in space. The fullness of the light and the triangles and distinctions of you and it vanishes and, for a moment, things feel infinite and complete—majestically, ecstatically human. As you bask in the eloquence of this suddenly interconnected world, off to your right, in your vision's periphery, something shifts. Perhaps just a shadow. Your gaze immediately switches back to the object-field as you stagger to reclaim the brilliant balance of the moment. But it has passed, and the feeling of realness, wholeness, interconnectedness, and satiated empathy becomes rounded and dulled. This visit to a kaleidoscopic world dims, and space, which only movements ago exceeded earthly dimension, rushes back to the limits of corporality. As you survey the object-field, still drunk in the secret afterglow of the moment, the sweet ecstasy you felt seconds earlier tips mournful as you realize this moment cannot be repeated, never prompted on cue. Three and a half seconds tick by; we stare into the field, and the objects remain, volunteering.

vii. circles become spheres

Imagine a Venn diagram that travels with you in your mind's eye. Picture the diagram as a screen, an interface overlaid on all you see and do, its triad of circles making silent adjustments as you move through your day. You see a piece of paper. There is an image on the paper. Its appearance indicates it is not a photocopy or a true photograph, but an inkjet print. As you try, with difficulty, to discern the quality of paper with regard to the saturation of ink into its fibers, your Venn diagram shifts suddenly, and an image comes into focus. It is figurative, outdoors, high-noon light. It is Oprah. *The Color Purple* Oprah, sun-bonnet-and-flower-dress Oprah, Spielberg's Alice Walker's Sophia's Oprah. The cogs of your Venn diagram rearrange themselves again. You notice this print is a film still turned into a jpeg, printed out from a Google search. Oprah's image, living now on cheap copy paper, was rephotographed as it lay on a wooden surface, an oak table. You suddenly remember that you are sitting with your screen, your feet placed solidly on the floor, eyes trained toward the incandescence of your monitor. Oprah glows like an angel from the atomized pixels of your laptop, a 13" MacBook Pro; the interface is Tumblr, overlaid on a Skype chat window, and you realize the sun is behind you; its starburst reflection hovers bright over your shoulder, held on the surface of your screen; your eyes refocus, landing on its skin-oil smudged surface as the silhouette of Oprah dissolves into pure glare-light reflection. The gleam feels sacred as it rebounds and touches the lens of your eye, and all these jangly layers of information compress like nova into crystalline meaning and, in the Venn, the circles become spheres.

viii. the comfort of stone

Standing on a stone. The solidity of stone is comforting and reminds us that it is okay to be still for a while and slow down and relish the stone. With our body weight on this dominion of stone, swaying from our heels through the arch of our feet to straining toes, we rise. We feel our weight again as we crest. The dance is ours but still fixed in ancient communion with our stone. Our chest expands, we breathe and, for a moment, we believe the stone breathes with us. Our toes gradually depart, and we float above.

ix. confidence man

When you see magic performed excellently, you're witnessing the honed gap separating our accrued knowledge and learned beliefs of how the world is supposed to work from some event we simply can't account for. The fixed laws and wisdom we draw upon daily are momentarily thrown into doubt. In this way, I'm very curious about how a sculpture might lie to us. Even as we stand in their shadow, objects are often unreliable narrators of their own embedded histories.

x. sculptural time

In many ways sculpture can never truly be narrative because it lacks the most essential tools to narrate—a beginning and an end. More and more, our brains are hardwired to skillfully follow narrative arcs coded in books, films, theater, songs, and YouTube’s ubiquitous bubble, floating left to right. But time is conscripted in sculpture differently. For all of its material edges and volumetric limitations, temporally sculpture doesn’t have the advantage of “the end” as a conceptual tool to construct meaning. Time enfolds, wrapping back on itself, and, in the process, sculpture swallows time’s arc.

xi. an exhibition is a value system

The exhibition is a sustained attempt to build a psychic space where straightforward logic doesn’t always win, where things without readymade functions congregate and play, where silence never suggests absence, where meaning drifts in suspended determination, and where sculptures possess restorative capabilities.