MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN AND THE SET OF ALL THINGS, 2015
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1.1.13 ○
give me waves that carry the past tubes so fine that they
suck in the least extricable moments (the chromatic escalade
of remembrance) give me moving backdrops films
furs paintbrushes of photons characters tastes give me
markings never before used

Jacques Roubaud, ∈[1]

Beginning in 2011, Michael Jones McKean has made a series of segmented low-relief sculptures whose titles suggest an unnerving, impossible, but seductive universality. Each work is designated by a categorical term preceded by the definite article "the"—*The Republic*, *The Religion*, *The Folklore*, *The Comedy*, *The Garden*—that singly and collectively references the human effort to interpret, theorize, associate, narrate, classify, and collate. An artist whose attention to nuanced verbal structures corresponds with the ontological connotations of his sculptures, McKean's deployment of the definite article functions as a vortex. "The" draws each generic category into a teeming center, a singularity releasing its particular and descriptive potentialities. All that is present, past, or possible is there—a specific, inclusive, yet ultimately inexplicable infinite, a "set of all things."[2]

Within the physical metaphysics of McKean's sculptures, matter is data or information, and, conversely, ideas and images are material substance, all together a kind of overabundance of "stuff" radiating suggestively and persistently across time and place. He explores what he calls a "panned-out, quietly philosophical way of being with objects" and refers to his sculptures as a "slow-form, elliptical, and *material* way of investing in ideas."[3] Like the poet-mathematician Jacques Roubaud's sonnet of sonnets ∈ , designed like the strategic game of *Go* to be rearranged at will by the reader, McKean's sculptures suggest that all that belongs can be endlessly recombined and rediscovered, alternately comprehended and not comprehended.

Blurring distinctions between image and object, between percept and corporeality, McKean's works incorporate both fabricated representations and actual objects, including such found objects as meteorite fragments, hair, makeup, rainbows, bristlecone pine, and soot. As the artist confronts problems of selection and association, he makes choices through an inductive, serendipitous process—pulling things that are at hand from idiosyncratic attention and experience. Yet, this collision is hardly meaningless or purely random. Rather, it relates to McKean's absorption with an enduring philosophical problem of whether the universe is mind-dependent or mind-independent. If things are a projection or condition of human consciousness, then, as Hannah Arendt put it, "things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence."[4] But, if things are independent of human consciousness, then a de-anthropomorphic reality poses new problems of empathy and interrelatedness for humans who are simply a part of the material universe.

The Garden (2014)—exhibited in *we float above to spit and sing* at Emerson Dorsch Gallery in Miami, Florida during the summer of 2014— is representative of the material ontology driving McKean's thinking and process. The piece is a diptych of triptychs consisting of a horizontal arrangement of three large-scale, shallow wall boxes flanked on the left by three vertically-aligned, smaller boxes. In its way, the work begins and ends with light. On the far right, arrayed in white pots, is a taxonomy of stylized, white plants forms. Conspicuously

artificial, they nevertheless imply the pleroma—the abundance, as well as the soft, cellular core—of the possibilities within the set of things called "plants": ovate, lance-shaped, linear, and heart-shaped leaves; feather-compound, compound, opposite, and alternate branching structures; composite flowers; and, cacti, bearing scales instead of leaves. They represent organisms without sense organs, making food from light. At the far left side of *The Garden* is an intimation of light itself, in three squares tinted by illumination, levitating inside the vertically-aligned frames.

Between these capsules of radiant energy, the two interior recesses contain people and things. Seven puppet-like heads with wild, matted hair, as if blown back by a chalky wind, and faces smeared with white markings turn toward the assortment of things in the adjacent panel. Looping chains link the heads at their white collars. They are caught, tethered, and they stare—solemn, wide-eyed, transfixed, looking inward and outward. The bas-relief of things in the next panel has the greatest visual weight in the piece. Fabricated with a consistent black surface, the mass of flattened objects—so utterly and completely different—becomes amalgamated. Flip-flop, banana, taco, book, hat, hammer, nails, arrowheads, glasses, a piece of pepperoni pizza, cell phones, vessels of assorted shapes and sizes, electric candle, and so on: all imbricate in a material union.

A mutual atomic basis emerges in *The Garden*, carbon and oxygen, waves and particles of energy and life. Everything in its evolving, recombinant narrative shares substance, even the humans. Actual meteorite fragments embedded in the piece suggest the birth and death throes of the universe. The meteorite is a random extraterrestrial invasion, a body re-announcing a material infinite and its origins and dissolutions. "A challenge of de-anthropomorphism, or believing in the possibly in objects *without* us, is to break with 'embodiment' as an organizing construct for objects—all 'things' become self-signifying," McKean comments.

The problem of what belongs to the corpus, of how to identify and organize it, resonates within McKean's work. Georg Cantor, the father of modern set theory, said "A set is a Many which allows itself to be thought of as a One,"[5] touching off still-unresolved mathematical—but not only mathematical—debates about the nature of reality and infinity.[6] In conversation, McKean references Luis Borges's short stories "The Library of Babel" and "The Aleph," stories of the infinite as a library and of an elusive, mystical spot where infinity coalesces and can be witnessed. The two stories show the author's acquaintance with Russell's Paradox that the "set of all things" both can *and* cannot contain itself.[7] Therefore, the "many" and the "whole"—whether seen metaphorically as in "The Library of Babel," abstractly as in set theory, or visually and tangibly as in McKean's sculptures—are inclusive and exclusive, brimming and empty, fragmented and complete.

Since even unlimited, self-contained material (such as the infinite set of cardinal numbers) sustains exclusions or paradoxical constraints, overarching explanations remain elusive. The problem becomes one of selection, pattern-making, and storytelling within boundless possibilities. Ultimately, McKean says, "The sculptures suggest narration, yet lack the most primary tools for cogent storytelling—beginnings and endings. The sculptures in their visual stillness, never settle down narratively, solidifying into one thing. This plays with the brain's innate appetite and hardwiring for patterning, meaning making." His observation is comparable to Umberto Eco's assertions that the list, a particular type of narrative pattern, has an "irresistible magic" that makes "infinity comprehensible" and that "we like lists because we don't want to die."[8] While some of McKean's earlier works, such as *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows* (2007), dealt more directly than his recent work with hubris and the human desire to know and to master the elements, his sculptures and installations have always conveyed circular narratives analogous to the physical absence of beginning- and end-points in sculpture.

Completely self-sustaining, *certain principles of light and shapes between forms* (2012)—an ambitious installation looping through the interior and the exterior of The Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska—involved such a cyclical, enclosed narrative.[9] Jets of harvested and reclaimed rainwater were shot into the air above the building by a 60-horsepower turbine pump driving the water from six 10,500-gallon storage tanks through galvanized piping. Depending on various factors, rainbows formed between the sprays of water, while along the path of the rainbow-making apparatus inside the building, a number of objects were

installed: a 5000-year-old Campo del Cielo meteorite, a conch shell from Micronesia, a handmade American quilt from 1880, a glass prism, and a bristlecone pine tree.

Each object contains a back story of cultural reference and association, and each coincides with interconnected narratives of cellular, chemical, and cultural evolution fundamental to the ontological problems presented by McKean's work. Simultaneously highly structured and randomly occurring, they are, as Roubaud's puts it, "waves that carry the past…[a] chromatic escalade of remembrance." For McKean, as a sculptor, these objects—all objects—also emit the back story of volumetric displacement, which ties into the material philosophy in his work; the fact of the object's physical presence forces a reflective encounter.

The encounter that emerges in the case of *certain principles of light and shapes between forms* is an object lesson within a type of infinite set, containing everything yet confined by its principles. The intermittent rainbows are a case in point. They demonstrate complete luminosity, the possible parameters of atomic energy's waves and particles, and allude to the full range of organic and inorganic substance, a span echoed by the other objects in the piece. The unspoken force of conceptual wordplay emerges, too: the rainbows are "circular," "overarching" but "elusive," products of "volumetric displacement," and—most significantly—always present, even when they are absent.

The critique of solipsism is inescapable. At any given time, a rainbow may or may not appear, depending on such variables as weather, the declension of angles, and time of day. The viewer may or may not see one. Yet rainbows are omnipresent in the piece, latent even if they don't develop. Viewers who presume that the rainbow only exists if witnessed presume many things, none of which is expansive or inclusive: that humans are the center of existence; that phenomena exist for human pleasure or use; that things don't matter if they exist outside of personal awareness, and so on.

In the post-internet zeitgeist, where, as McKean notes, "the internet settles into banality – becoming elemental," the rainbow project also elicits time as an elongated, stuttering form. The normality of shifting continuously between various screens and tangible experience produces a slightly surreal mental state in which image becomes thing and thing becomes image and the two converge in a flattened, compressed space. "Almost counter-intuitively, the analog materiality of sculpture-making has an ability to tell strange truths about our shared post-internet condition." The combination of found objects and fabricated ones in McKean's work seems analogous to the simultaneity of image and materiality in a post-internet age.

Fundamentally, McKean asks a simple question: "Why make sculpture now? When measured against the incredible speed of image production and consumption today, it seems perverse to make a sculpture—there's something unreasonable about it, but it's that quality I'm attracted to." His studio practice, based in his early training in ceramics, includes a multiplicity of approaches, such as carpentry, set design, mold making, and sewing, which support the conceptual bifurcations in the work. The studio, he says, "is like an organism that metabolizes objects, materials, and substances, an elaborate, idiosyncratic system for choosing, processing, and collating forms."

Objects—however they are constituted—are, for McKean, dense with information and mysterious at the same time, and there is "a moment where making itself becomes a surrogated form of intelligence, one where, if I'm doing it right, the studio's IQ supersedes my own." Such intelligence is sensory and rooted in the physical—that is, *mind-independent*. In the de-anthropomorphizing that underlies McKean's practice, the hierarchy between humans and objects disappears, and tenderness toward both emerges.

Tenderness demands awareness of vulnerability, and the implications of injury are central to *colors passing through us* (2014). In the shallow frame on the left side of the diptych, changing colors of the spectrum pass in shimmering waves across green screen fabric. On the right side, within a collage of objects coated with meta-anthracite (the carbon compound known as graphite), a fabricated broken arm is wrapped in a cast, the fingernails of its immobilized hand polished a vivid, sickened green. Rods and bones protrude from the truncated arm where the elbow would be. Within the compilation of things in the work, vitamins, morphine, and

psycho-stimulants recall the desire to extend life (but deaden pain) and the dependence of life and consciousness on matter, with its entropy, dissolution, and chemical reintegration.

The disembodied arm is traumatized. The mortality hidden by a normal body's wholeness and vitality has been exposed. *colors passing through us* echoes the mystery and the aura of a reliquary where the anima resides in a physical fragment. From the material ontology within McKean's work, a "strange animism" arises. "I'm interested in how animistic thinking, something typically associated with primitivism, seems to naturally overlap within advanced technological societies—from the belief in the provenance of organic fruit, to the magic of wifi signals, to invisible stores of metadata archived behind every event, object, or image," he says.

Don Delillo's creepy, philosophically vast, and visually acute novel, *Point Omega*, suggests that the point of utter destruction—the omega point—is only an abstraction if it is considered as pure speculative philosophy and physics, distant from personal experience.[10] This is part of the point of McKean's sculptures: that humans need to stop thinking that things matter only when they narrow down to the "us." The representational nature of McKean's work draws attention to the idea of less abstraction and more empathy. The animism he perceives arises from underlying codes of shared substance—the *thingness* of being. Discerning the potential within this set of all things, "a type of empathy emerges extending to objects in the most generous, open-minded sense," and in this empathy, McKean says, "our dominion over *things* dissolves, and when objects choose to visit us, we won't assert ourselves onto them."

[1] Jacques Roubaud, ∈ , trans. Katheryn McDonald, *RIF/T: An Electronic Space for Poetry, Prose, and Poetics* 4, no. 1 (1995): http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/rift/rift04/rift0401.html.

[2] The term "the set of all things" is generally constrained by the condition "that [contain unifying elements]." However, "the set of all things" also concerns the question of what belongs within infinite categories. See the entry for "Set Theory" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (First published Thu Jul 11, 2002): http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/entries/set-theory/.

[3] All quotations by Michael Jones McKean are from a conversation in the artist's Richmond, Virginia studio on March 13, 2014.

[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958): 9.

[5] Georg Cantor, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (1883): 204, quoted in Rudy Rucker, *Infinity and the Mind: The Science and Philosophy of the Infinite* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995): 191.

[6] For an interesting discussion of recent and historical debates about the ontological problems presented by set theory, see Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011).

[7] "Russell's Paradox," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (First published Fri Dec 8, 1995; substantive revision Thu Jun 26, 2014): http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/russell-paradox/.

[8] Susanne Beyer and Lothar Gorris, "SPIEGEL Interview with Umberto Eco: 'We Like Lists Because We Don't Want to Die,'" *Spiegel International Online*, November 11, 2009: http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/spiegel-interview-with-umberto-eco-we-like-lists-because-we-don-t-want-to-die-a-659577.html. See also Eco's catalog for *Mille e tre*, the exhibition he curated for The Louvre, exhibited in the fall and winter of 2009-2010: Umberto Eco, trans. Alastair McEwen, *The Infinity of Lists* (Rizzoli: New York, 2009).

[9] See the project website: www.therainbow.org.

[10] Delillo's *Point Omega* (New York, Scribner: 2010) begins and ends with a detailed description of Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.