

a Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 26. Retallack suggests that poethics is a way to engage with the complexity of things and events that do not fit into simple systems and categories

and therefore require new forms of composition and new ways of making meaning.

b Peter Halley, “Abstraction and Culture,” in *Recent Essays 1990–1996* (New York: Edgewise Press, 1997), 27.

c “As Vilém Flusser noted, to abstract means to subtract, and specifically to subtract from objects. Throughout history, abstraction has been a movement away from objects and to information. Flusser avers that this movement has now reached its apogee,

Thinking Through Objects

Andria Hickey

This exhibition is inspired, in part, by a pun. *Poetics* refers to a literary theory that considers how text coalesces to affect a reader; and in visual art, it applies to the form and composition of an artwork. In a play on words, scholar and poet Joan Retallack—whose book *The Poethical Wager* is also the inspiration for the title of this show—inserts an *h*, and thus the word ethics, into her proposal for a new kind of poetics: “If you’re to embrace complex life on earth, if you can no longer pretend that all things are fundamentally simple or elegant, a poetics thickened by an *h* launches an exploration of art’s significance *as*, not just *about*, a form of living in the real world.”^a The word “poethical” advocates for an essential connection between ethical and aesthetic concerns today.

The works by the eleven artists in this show share a formal language and methodology that manifests the complexity of modern life in both the poetics of their form and the ethical positions suggested by their subjects. While they diverge in scale, materials, and presentation, these works share a language of abstraction, using non-representational forms to communicate complex ideas. Each work relates to specific subject matter or ideas that are fundamental to its realization, even if they are not expressly represented. The exhibition wagers that this emerging approach to abstraction is emblematic of our increasing global dependence on structures and transactions that occur largely outside our vision and comprehension. Together, these works also suggest that the use of non-representational forms by artists today embodies an ethical position about critical social, political, and economic issues.

Artist and critic Peter Halley has described contemporary abstract art as “nothing other than the reality of the abstract world . . .”^b Real-world abstract concepts and processes in finance and technology now permeate all aspects of society, from digital transactions made on smartphones to the unprecedented speed of communication, and the influence of algorithmic manipulation in business and politics. Visual symbols, rather than language, now represent a complex web of ideas and processes that persist outside our field of vision. As the world becomes more abstract, images, information, and news no longer provide representations of “real life.”

This “post-representational” world is abstract in and of itself. As such, for artists to abstract what is already an abstraction, they must subtract from the very matter of abstraction itself.^c In this way, the translation of the artist’s subject to the artwork is critical to understanding how these artists work today.

This is most striking in Doug Ashford’s *Next Day* (*New York Times*, pages A1–A28), (2015–2016) series. The post-representational context of catastrophic events and human suffering from acts of war or natural disasters reminds us that images are only momentarily affective in helping us to comprehend an event, or instill empathy in the viewer. Removed from the context of experience, the images that proliferate the covers of international newspapers are quickly absorbed into a constant flow of visual culture—ads, memes, and links, all coded with algorithms that control when and how we encounter information. Our understanding of such information becomes disconnected, distorted, and thus an abstraction of reality itself. This defines our reality even more so today than on September 12, 2001, the day after the tragedies of 9/11 that are obscured in Doug Ashford’s work.

While the works on view have all been made within the last ten years, their formal qualities recall the Modern history of abstraction and non-representational art. In the early twentieth century, movements ranging from Cubism to Russian Suprematism applied abstraction to reflect a rapidly changing, increasingly technological world that was fraught with devastating wars and human crises. By mid-century, American Abstract Expressionism detached abstraction from global events, repositioning it as a reflection of the unconscious mind and a spiritual antidote to a ravaged post-war world. The 1960s saw the birth of Minimalism, with artists further reducing the representational world into phenomenological meditations on pure color, material, and form. Simultaneously, the Latin American Neo-Concrete artists reinvigorated abstraction’s sociopolitical value, using it as a tool for political resistance during a time of conflict and change.

The works in this exhibition first appear to be completely abstract, not unlike the autonomous forms created by their historical predecessors. While they are non-representational, the materials used are evocative, and their shapes, scales, and textures seductively redolent. Nonetheless, these forms are intrinsically connected to specific subject matter that is grounded in the events,

as the number of non-things has exponentially increased; we live in a world of images that might just as well be termed post-images since they are coded, the result of programming rather than of traditional representation. In a situation in which the 'non-thing'

and thus abstraction has triumphed, to abstract can no longer mean to abstract non-things from things, but rather to abstract Sachen [stuff/matter] from 'abstraction.'" Sven Lüttican, "Living with Abstraction," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 69 (March 2008): 136.

people, and issues of our contemporary moment. Despite their opacity, they are vessels that contain the stories of places and situations that are far beyond the walls of the museum and far wider than art's self-reflexive historic impulse.

Many of the artists in this exhibition reside outside of the United States, and although their approaches to abstraction are not geographically-bound, they bridge localized, observable situations with broader considerations. Their approach to abstraction mirrors the global systems that traverse borders, geographies, and economies. To that end, many of the artists respond to the social effects of global shifts in economic and political power structures, including urban poverty and racial inequality, the events of 9/11, the effects of war, queer love, and the political framing of cultural monuments. Yet, these subjects are often hidden or buried, and direct narrative references to specific events, places, or people are removed or transformed. Without intimate knowledge of the subject matter or inspiration, the works' meanings remain open, even divergent.

In Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Blue Shield* (2011), a geometric shape is painted directly on the gallery wall, then cut out and installed on the museum's roof. While minimal in form and perhaps best described as an absence, the work specifically references the symbol for the International Committee of the Blue Shield, displayed prominently at cultural institutions and sites around the world to prevent their destruction during conflict. The artist became interested in the symbol after it was painted on the rooftop of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad following the United States' invasion in 2003.

Jumana Manna's anthropomorphic forms *Grid*, *Heel*, and *Amulet* (all 2016) are born from the artist's research into the 16th century El Badi Palace in Marrakech, now an archaeological cultural heritage destination. The sculptures are derived from the crevices of the Palace ruins, yet their formal, material, and titular references—body parts, construction sites, vessels, gemstones—create a broader narrative that calls into question the historical framework of the site today. Abraham Cruzvillegas's new work, *Definitely unfinished poethnical self portrait (with a rusty belt)* (2017) is a visually striking nod to the history of assemblage. The artist sourced found, discarded objects from demolition sites in Cleveland—wood, newspaper rolls, a footstool, deer antlers—to compose a hanging sculpture that elevates the

detritus of the city into a reflection on the chaotic patterns of inequality under the goals of urban expansion.

The artists in the exhibition often take on the role of researchers, anthropologists, or archaeologists. They mine and gather information from a constellation of different sources on specific subjects, applying their findings with poetic license. Instead, information is transformed into concrete decisions about materials, color, surface, texture, and scale. The art objects become symbolic gestures that stand in for, but never fully reveal, their narrative underpinnings.

When *abstraction* functions as a verb, it means to subtract, or remove. However, the complexity of the objects in this exhibition transform, contain, or withhold their subjects. They respond to the abstract nature of contemporary life and create a poetic rendering of real-world contexts to reveal an ethical position. The artworks point to social issues using the formal language of abstraction to avoid the trappings of representation today. Coded objects are reimaged in transformative ways that position the issues and the works as sites for open dialogue. In removing and subtracting, they embody an ethical criticality, creating divergent perspectives and meaning.

Within this framework, the exhibition also considers how museums influence the context of enigmatic artworks such as these. Noting the critical role that wall and object labels play in providing (and often narrowing) meaning for the viewer, *A Poet*hical Wager* takes a unique approach, one that privileges open interpretation. The exhibition has no object labels, so viewers are obliged to first experience the objects as visual matter only. Then, using the metaphor of triangulating—or mapping—information, several triangular benches punctuate the gallery, each holding three interpretive materials for every artist in the show. One text focuses on the subject matter that originated the art object. Another shows images that make visual connections with historical works of art—a web-search like map of art history based on formal qualities alone. The third is a piece of short fiction commissioned by various authors that use the artwork as a springboard for poetic response. By denying a singular, fixed interpretation, this approach liberates the viewer to expand the meaning of abstraction and locate it in a lived reality.

A Poet*hical Wager

Oct 7, 2017- Jan 28, 2018

Abraham Cruzvillegas

1

Itchy blind self portrait drinking a Colimita beer by the patio, under the shade of the Pomarrosa tree, remembering the late Valentín Campa after reading Terry Eagleton's 'Hope without optimism' while I listen to the beautiful version of 'La Martiniana' with Tinito y Porfirio's duet, but really wanting to have some cashews before going for dinner, whatever the Paleolithic menu at Lardo could include... 2016

Black and red acrylic paint on newspaper clippings, cardboard, photographs, drawings, postcards, envelopes, tickets, vouchers, letters, posters, flyers, cards, recipes, napkins, and steel pins on wall
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

3

Definitely unfinished poethnical self portrait (with a rusty belt) 2017
Dimensions variable
Various found objects
Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Rashid Johnson

2

Shea Wall 1970/2017
Per Allan Kaprow, shea butter, cinderblocks
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, NYC

Lara Favaretto

4

361 C 2012
Wool, found painting
133 x 67 3/4 x 2 inches
Collection of Richard Chang

5

Momentary Monument - The Library 2017
2,136 vintage books containing 2,136 folded photos from the artist's archive
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Franco Noero, Torino

Iman Issa

5

Heritage Studies #5 2013
Aluminum, vinyl text
35 3/4 x 90 1/4 x 35 3/4 inches
Collection of Lonti Ebers

6

Heritage Studies #28 2017
Painted wood, brass rods, vinyl text
63 x 43 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Rodeo, London

7

Heritage Studies #29 2017
Painted wood, copper rods with copper plates, vinyl text
73 x 48 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Rodeo, London

Doug Ashford

8

Next Day (New York Times, pages A1-A28) 2015-2016
Archival inkjet print on Epson Hot Press Bright paper
Set of 28 prints, each 22 x 13 1/4 inches (sheets each 27 x 18 1/4 inches)
Edition of 5 + 2 artist proofs
Courtesy of the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

Abbas Akhavan

9

Study for a Blue Shield 2011
Section of a wall, removed, painted and placed on roof
Dimensions variable
Hart House Permanent Collection, University of Toronto, purchased by the Art Committee 2015-16

10

If the first metaphor was animal 2017
Cotton elastic bandage, plaster, fiberglass
24 4/5 x 22 x 38 7/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

11

after untitled, single ply facial tissue 2017
Paper
90 x 102 inches
Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

Jumana Manna

12

Grid 2016
Bone (camel and cow), wood
79 1/4 x 74 x 18 inches
Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery, NYC

13

Heel 2016
Pigment, aqua-resin, fiberglass, lacquer, metal scaffold, wood, foam
83 1/2 x 74 1/2 x 27 3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery, NYC

14

Amulet 2016
Plaster, fiber, lacquer, metal scaffold, wood
73 1/4 x 84 x 27 inches
Private Collection

Oscar Murillo

15

Black Paintings 2017
Canvas, paint
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery

16

Untitled (Frequencies) 2013 - ongoing
Nine canvases in aluminum and Perspex frames
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Tariku Shiferaw

17

F.U.B.U. (Solange) 2017
Acrylic on stretched plastic
64 x 54 inches
Courtesy of the artist

18

Sky Might Fall (Kid Cudi) 2017
Acrylic on stretched plastic
64 x 54 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Emanuel Tovar

19

Cantos Baldíos 2017
Two musicians, aerophones, clay block
23 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 23 3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Páramo Galeria

Mario García Torres

20

the strange things my eyes see n/d
Bronze, metal dust on canvas
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

21

Tetela n/d
Single-channel black and white HD video, sound
00:19:00
Courtesy of the artist and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

MOCA

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
CLEVELAND

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