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Form and Function

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Form and Function

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my parents and brother for their encouragement, humor and unfaltering support.
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Abstract

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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This is a report concerning the body of artwork I have formulated in the last two of my three years spent as a graduate student in the M.F.A. program at the University of Texas at Austin. It provides a chronological description of key works and the influences drawn upon within this time frame. Broken into eight substantive sections, the report reflects an in-depth study on “object-hood.”
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**Introduction**

My work explores both formal and conceptual qualities, as applied through a sculptural practice and method, by means of the examination, meditation and, more recently, research of “found” objects. I have always been a collector of objects; some are obtained in facilities for discarded goods or in dumpsters, just one stop away from the landfill; others are found on beaches and streets; and some are bought to perform a specific function. My focus is on questioning the nature of these objects. “Nature” refers to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. My work deals with the obtainment, removal, change and exchange of function or value, all the while upholding and openly displaying an object’s previous/original cause for existence. The state of “object-hood” requires that functioning things come into existence when the causes that produce them converge and then disappear when those causes are no longer present.¹ In other words, an object must exist in accordance with the circumstances of the time. The objects I choose simultaneously reflect the nature of matter itself and humanity’s determination to make use of and understand it. What a society creates within a certain time frame speaks to the desire that gives rise to these objects, e.g., a propeller and engine vs. a sail for moving a boat through water or the development of deep-sea submersibles for exploring the ocean floor. I am interested in pre-existing objects for understanding their physical and functional nature and the changing desires of humanity that have led or will eventually lead to their disappearance.

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Object and Self

I create systems, environments and new sets of circumstances that ideally reflect both rational/sequential and intuitive/holistic understandings of the world through objects. I strive to gain an empirical knowledge through the process of making, which requires breaking through seemingly fixed conventions that constitute our approach to objects as isolated entities. My work strives to relinquish the perceived gap between self and object. This is not a new concept, and has been a part of artistic practice since as early as the first century CE and is seen in abundance in both modern and post-modern art. The persistent line of interest artists have had, each with a new approach to this concept, speaks to the universality and clear importance of such a topic.

Generally, artists who use Eastern thought and religious concepts as a conceptual springboard choose not to name such inspiration and reference it simply as common knowledge. I use Buddhism in a similar capacity in the sense that I am referring to a specific approach, but one that finds itself involved more in practice rather than belief and can be followed with the utmost dedication without ever having to name it as such. On this topic, Mark Epstein, an American psychiatrist who has written extensively about Buddhism, comments: “Conceptually, Buddhism and modernism are of a piece. Analytically breaking down the edifice of objective reality so that an underlying sheer ephemerality is revealed. Dematerializing the object, be it the artwork or the self.”

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Object and Process I

I have often asked myself where the “art” is located. Does it reside in the finished end result or in the process? I consider myself a process-oriented artist. I choose to begin with an object rather than a concept. Lucy Lippard, author of Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972, reflects on what she terms as a paradigm shift in the understanding of art-making,3 quoting writer Roy Ascott: “To discuss what one is doing rather than the artwork which results, to attempt to unravel the loops of creative activity … leads to a consideration of our total relationship to a work of art, in which physical moves may lead to conceptual moves, in which Behaviour relates to Idea.”4 The following paragraphs will exemplify such works based on process.

In I’ll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours (Figures 1 and 2), issues of response methods and ideas of cause and effect are explored through a collaborative process. Fellow graduate student Samuel Dahl and I intended for the project to explore/showcase less our artistic milieux as individual artists, and more the generation of an honest response to a set of proposed circumstances. I would make a piece, and he would respond and so on. My initial contribution, the sculpture pictured below in Figure 1, also embodied its own cause and effect: a wave-like formation of blue painter’s tape becomes the platform for a makeshift vessel with a balloon as a sail, that leads by a string to a larger balloon, etc. Sam’s response (Figure 2) to my sculpture was a painting that utilized

similar colors and symbols. The process references stream of consciousness and intuitive decision-making.

Figure 1: *I’ll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours*
Once one begins to conceptualize a process, it filters through and becomes the responsibility of the thinking, categorical mind. Within the collaboration and several of the works that follow, it became increasingly important for me to work at a pace that would not allow the conscious mind to make corrections or to analyze. This attempt in manifesting imagery in response to the intuition alone is similar to the Buddhist notion of “no-mind” or “original-mind,” which is said to be accessed by stripping away such things as sensation, desire, intellection, and most importantly awareness of “I”. This notion is
often associated with ideas of emptiness. Emptiness does not mean nothing. “There is a fullness to Buddhist emptiness, a spaciousness that both holds and suffuses the stuff of the world.”5 Within the context of no-mind I am interested in gauging and making visible the invisible processes we participate in on a daily basis with the use of everyday materials such as tape, string, paper, etc. Mark Epstein writes on this subject that, “This capacity to know things as they are, qualified by mere existence, is what links the artist, the meditator and the psychotherapist. Each opens up the possibility of bare attention and transitional space; each permits a peek at the play of emptiness that underlies conventional reality.” Epstein continues that, “Buddhism is important to art at this moment because it both speaks to and serves as an antidote for the self-conscious nihilism that has become so prominent in our deconstructivist ideologies.”6

Materiality plays an important role in my sculptural practice. In this piece and the next few, most of the materials I used were found in my studio in an archive-type reservoir, collected over a period of time. These materials included scraps of wood and clay considered unusable rests, tape, tubing, tattered lane line buoys, flags, broken umbrellas from a lifeguarding job and miscellaneous other items. I was interested in transforming the mediocrity of such everyday materials into the “extra-ordinary.”

Once a piece or a part of it is made, I then allow for editing. I attempt to separate this process as much as possible from the intuitive stage, in order to reap the benefits of both approaches.

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Most important for these works and this process is the Buddhist notion of “co-dependent arising.” The term refers to the arising of samsaric phenomena, that is, all phenomena that are vulnerable and exposed to the ultimate impermanence of all things/products. “For anything to arise or come into being, there must exist the conditions for its arising. Whatever is, is a function of the conditions that allow it to exist, and it, in
turn, allows all other phenomena to exist. Everything is related to everything else.”

As with *I’ll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours*, I began *Sustainable Entropy* (Figure 3) with a gesture, a single mark, and each decision, each mark, would then lead to and be dependent upon the next. The installation morphed and changed over a two-month time frame in which the piece was constructed, deconstructed, constructed again, and on and on.

The Sanskrit term “Maya” refers to illusion. For example, Maya is seeing a rope as a snake. This refers to our visual perceptions, but also appearances perceived through all the senses, including sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations and their capacity to create illusion through distortion. The installation *Sustainable Entropy* inhabits the entire space in such a way that it creates disorientation in the viewer. Paths that travel along the ground double as roads and change direction heading up the wall etc. The sense of disorientation created here would ideally encourage the viewer to question the space in a new way, as well as its capacity to destabilize the senses. In creating an alternative reality with, again, the forms of the everyday, the viewer is perhaps reminded of this tendency to distort and is encouraged to question how well we really know our surroundings.

Although my interest in the transformation of an entire space has not subsided, I did, however, realize that the pieces eventually needed isolation in order to be more effective. The work did serve as an ideal representative for the concept of “co-dependent arising,” with all things in the field of vision, but my goal of examining “object-hood”

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was getting muddled by the effect of an overwhelming installation. This realization led to the beginning of a series of works in which a similar process was utilized; the end result, however, was a work, a sculpture isolated and given space in which to expand in materiality and conceptuality. I allowed myself much more editing. Similarly, this new isolation served to better project the intended purpose of the series as a sort of question without a rational answer, referencing the use of Koans, particularly employed in Zen Buddhism. The question is not of dogmatic religious belief but one of feeling and intuition that is not rationalized. One that includes the field of both subject and object.

The sculptures pictured in Figures 4-7 below (Protection, Tied Down, Marker and Clean Up), as with all the works discussed thus far, focus on the following qualities: objects that are at times barely manipulated and others unrecognizable, that reference the world in which they were made, incorporating a reality into the work rather than purely imitating it, in turn making the method and the subject matter one and the same. Method and process override the end result. The making becomes an exploration, a struggle between letting go, controlling, constructing, destructing, pushing, pulling, ordering and disordering in an attempt to break down fixed/assumed boundaries and perhaps generate the unexpected.
Figure 4: *Protection*

Figure 5: *Tied Down*
Odd relationships between salvaged rubbish, environmental elements and the newly store-bought provoke and perhaps disrupt our usual acceptance of these often unexamined and overlooked objects. Weight and balance, strategically mimicking that found in the everyday, create hyper-sensitive relationships between the work and the viewer -- that is, by placing the objects in a setting that somewhat reflects their original purpose, the viewer is allowed access through familiarity, followed by confusion with respect to its altered state, leading to a much closer examination of the object.

Figure 6: Marker

Colors, signs, shapes and form act as their usual characters, sending off signals of danger, warning, safety or comfort, etc. without, however, delivering the final word. As
Richard Flood states in an article on art in the Twenty-First Century, this new body of work is “[n]ot about delivering last words or winning a debate but about questioning everything from its formal properties to its place in the world.” ⁸

Figure 7: Clean Up

Products, impermanent phenomena and functioning things are all synonyms in Buddhist debate. This connection can be directly expressed by my method of exploring materials that are deemed as disposable and often have a clear and short-lived purpose. Cardboard boxes and plastic bags, discarded tubing, broken umbrellas, old water hoses, cheap store-bought fasteners, concrete bricks, old bags of unused clay, stickers and tape are just a few of the commonly used materials in this series of work.

Object and Process II

Most of my work deals with bodies of water and the objects/instrumentation used in such environments. My interest in employing water-related forms stems from intense personal experiences with water (e.g., as an ocean rescue lifeguard) as well as such grander interests as the great impact water has had on evolution and environment and, finally, an association of the ocean being an entity too large for the conceptual mind to understand. Earlier works have included hoses, rescue floatation devices, buoys and markers and the colors related to such forms; more recent works utilize oceanographic instruments for measuring and collecting information for environmental research. Scientific objects refer to the processes of scientific method. Victor Weisskopf, an MIT professor, writes: “In science we must always begin by asking questions, not by giving answers. In this way we contribute to the joy of insight.”9 Albert Einstein in a similar vein once said, “If we knew what we were doing it wouldn’t be called research.”10 Both Buddhist debate and scientific experimentation are rooted in setting up situations through which to better understand the nature of reality. Science, like debate, becomes the vehicle. But as with any vehicle, especially in relation to my work, it is only a means by which one travels from one point to the next. “At one point Buddha says that no one,

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10 Frequently quoted without specific citation.
having used a ferry to cross a river, will want to carry the ferryboat with him. It has served its purpose and for the journey ahead it is valueless.”

What my earlier work infers about the “co-dependent arising” of phenomena, my later work insists upon. Scientific method quite literally relies on a system of cause and effect and the interrelated process this denotes, e.g., a computer program must work in order to generate the data picked up by sonar. In these new sculptures, I use objects that were used to create rational information and estimations as to the workings of the world and that at the same time embody the unconceptualized, no-mind qualities of the Buddhist concept that speaks to a truth without the use of the rational mind. These are both legitimate and valuable ways of understanding, where each aspect might help reveal the other.

The processes for these more recent works differ from the earlier ones in that they require a much longer time for exploration and research. I find it necessary, in a study of “object-hood” and function, to refer to past function. To do this, one must first understand how an object functions. A water hose is a fairly easily grasped entity, whereas an ocean bottom seismometer or a sonar-equipped underwater fin are much more complex forms that generally do not fit into the convention of common knowledge. These new objects require that I learn more about sound waves and the effects of centrifugal force and movement on objects etc. So consequently, these objects have a much slower unfolding process.

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Object in Form, Function and Design

Some of the objects I have recently collected were constructed for scientific purposes. For example, the “493 Vehicle of Instrumentation,” better known as the “493 V-Fin” (see Figures 8 and 9), built by a company specializing in environmental monitoring, is a high-speed, dihedral-winged device made of fiberglass. It is weighted with lead towards the nose of its triangular form to achieve the object’s parallel orientation to the ocean floor as it is towed from behind a boat. Many of the devices I am finding and choosing to work with, such as the 493 V-Fin and sphere-shaped seismometer cases (for an upcoming piece), are complex mechanisms that nevertheless utilize simple geometrical forms or some of the most ancient forms found in nature. The

Figure 8: 493 V-Fin in studio space
493 V-Fin has the same shape as the head of a Tiktaalik, an extinct lobe-finned fish that lived 375 million years ago during the late Devonian period. Both utilize this shape for the same function, i.e., to maneuver in the water in parallel positioning to the ocean’s bottom. There is an imbedded logic in these simple geometrical and natural forms that enables them to transcend any one specific incarnation. Imbedded in the signification of all form is the mythology and consciousness of all time, not simply sequentially, but wholly in the present.
Object in Form and Action

As an anchor is built to stop, to be grounded, to be stationary (Figure 10: Water/Metal); a fin is built for movement (Figure 9: 493 V-Fin). I am concerned with upholding the non-action or action of an object. Setting the 493 V-Fin into motion in my sculpture is an attempt to portray the object in its natural state from the past, and in turn,

Figure 9: 493 V-Fin

create a piece that also functions in the present. The 493 V-Fin sculpture consists of a fairly large metal mechanism that rotates at a relatively low speed. The V-Fin hangs from one side of a beam that is attached to the base in a way that it can rotate both on a vertical axis as well as a horizontal axis. On the other side of the beam hangs a plexiglass cube filled with water having the equivalent weight as the V-Fin. Whatever action is taking
place in the cube of water will be reflected in the V-Fin’s positioning. Action is affected by present circumstance, which inevitably reflects processes of the world such as gravity, mass, weather, space and time. In addition, the plexiglass cube is specifically designed in such a way to allow changes in the water it contains to influence the V-Fin as a result of evaporation or dripping through a valve. Similarly, the ice block attached to the anchor

![Image of an anchor with a yellow rope](image)

Figure 10: Water/Metal

in Water/Metal melts in accordance with its surroundings; it is completely dependent on its present circumstances. Metal and water are utilized in these sculptures as measuring tools of time, to remind the perceiver of the temporal nature of the objects and processes we observe.
Buoys or markers (see Figure 11) denote a specific place in space. They establish a “sense of direction” and are similarly dependent on environment and the space they occupy. Objects or products may, depending on their function, become process, and from process become more easily the responsibility of the perceiver. Process also involves the perceiver’s position and relationship to the piece. My hope in my sculptures is to move the attention from the product to the process and from the process to the perceiver’s awareness – pulling the viewer from the position of isolated observer to being intertwined in an interdependent relativity. “The observer” and that which is “being observed” become part of the same reality.

Figure 11: Untitled
Object and People

I have become increasingly involved in every aspect that can be explored in and through these objects. This includes the people who work with, produce or have had experience with them. Shortly after acquiring the 493 V-Fin, for instance, I began my investigation of the object through telephone calls and emails to the company that manufactured it. This differed very much from my former way of exploring “object-hood,” which relied on intuition and pre-existing knowledge of the object alone. I spoke several times with the owner of Endeco, the manufacturer of the 493 V-Fin, and found that my understanding of it increased tremendously through his explanations. Although I had read the information on the company’s website, it was human interaction that activated the object for me.

I recently met with Yosio Nakamura, a scientist in the University of Texas Geophysics Department. My current project, which is developing into another kinetic sculpture, this time with sound, involves spherical glass-encased “ocean bottom seismometers.” See Figure 12. When the glass hemispheres are struck with mallets, the fundamental qualities of the glass will produce sounds that can be displayed on a monitor by means of one of the actual seismometers.
Professor Nakamura was part of the team who put the first seismometer on the moon, escorted by the astronauts of the Apollo 11 mission, and he has headed research with ocean bottom seismometers for forty years. As he showed me around the building, he introduced me to anyone we happened to come across as the artist who will find a use for his seismometer casings that had been brought to UT Surplus, essentially as discarded trash.
Object and Qualities of Material Form

In the attempt to observe the fundamental qualities of an object, it would seem also necessary to consider its physical substance and properties. An object’s material presence, similar to our physical self, is traditionally defined by its current state of being. It also exists, however, as a composition of more elemental components, of constantly moving atoms that have existed since the beginning of time. As stated both in Eastern thought and in physics, every object is a part of every other object, because things/objects inherently lack permanent limits.

My interest in the use of water in particular is in the understanding that water relates directly to the most ancient elemental processes. A single drop of water could be millions of years old, as could the components of metal and even “man-made” materials. “Water covers 2/3rds of the world and the waterways are not only the life-blood of our civilizations, but are also the fluid from which life itself, and ultimately, humanity, has sprung.”

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12 Donald Kuspit and Chris Burden, Chris Burden: Beyond the Limits (Ostfeldern, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1996), 23.
Conclusion

The connections I have made this past year with the scientific objects described above have altered the way in which I understand the world. T.S. Eliot once wrote, “In order to arrive at what you do not know, you must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.”13 These experiences have been particularly rich, and they inform the pieces from an experiential perspective.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.14

T.S. Eliot

Bibliography


Vita

Christina Lorena Weisner was born October, 22, 1982, in Richmond, Virginia, the second child of John and Claudia Weisner. She began her studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2001. In the summer of 2003, she attended a summer abroad program in Perugia, Italy, where she studied Italian culture and language, followed by a fall semester in a fine arts program in Cortona, offered by the University of Georgia. In 2006, Christina received her B.F.A. in Sculpture and B.A. in World Studies from Virginia Commonwealth University. In 2007, she continued with her studies in the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Texas at Austin. In May 2010, Christina graduates from UT with an M.F.A.

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