

SOMETHING ADAPTABLE

K.R.M. MOONEY

Jesse Stecklow

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Could you speak about the work you've been making in the last two years and what generally motivates you as an artist?

JESSE STECKLOW

A lot of my interest has been around pursuing modes of aggregating material or more specifically data collection, and how that might manifest and function through a sculpture. I've been thinking about art objects as human-assisted traps through which information can flow. I'm exploring mediating experiences to varying degrees through those objects. Things are often motivated in a reactionary way. Sometimes it's just about an object that I feel needs to exist as a precedent for conversation. I get a lot of pleasure out of that.

KRMM

It seems as though data takes on different forms or materials through your work. You've been specifically looking at, for example, organic compounds, rather than immaterial data, which is possibly less implied as a byproduct of technology.

JS

Yes, I like to consider technology with a really broad view; like a knife as a technology for cutting. In that sense, I take a zoomed-out idea of data, as I'm not only interested in using new modes of collecting information but also concerned with how those systems might apply when referred back to the larger realm of materials and structures. That's something I was thinking about a lot in the exhibition I curated at Chin's Push. Data could manifest as the spores of a mushroom or glue-trapped insects or any kind of material that was leaving an informational trace, like a sort of drawing. It's important for me to keep the

SYLVIA KOUVALI

term “data” open. It has been sequestered to a tech area that I feel is limiting. There’s something intimate and specific about concerning oneself with the movement of airborne material through a room.

KRMM

In your last exhibition at M+B, you introduced sound into your works. How are you thinking about sound and its relationship to space and the work, as another element of relational or assembled materials and forms?

JS

The sound work is another avenue through which to push different types of material information that I’m collecting. I like to think of it not so much as a sound work but as a kind of scalable sculpture or a sound-based mediation on a sculpture. It can fill an entire space and then recede back to its physical container. The most recent sound pieces have involved first making sculptures with the intent that they will produce noise in the future. The tuning forks and the sound devices, architectural models, and ball bearing games that house them, do this. These have a specific kinetic quality. Making these compositions involves working with a sound engineer, my friend Joseph Stewart, and making a lot of different recordings. These get loaded into a soundboard, building a kind of custom instrument from which to compose; using the existing objects and materials as a repertoire of noise-based gestures. The sound has been a really exciting way of working intuitively within a conceptual structure.

KRMM

Through sound as an embedded element, the sculpture seems to breach its form or contained boundaries, especially when you’re working with elements like steel or aluminum which appear as sculpturally fixed.

JS

Totally, it can betray the flatness or closed nature of an object. In a show where sounds are cued to bounce from work to work, this material conversation is initiated, lending character to different objects, turning them on. Those activated pieces take on interchangeable roles and begin to perform in an illusionistic or theatrical way. One example is with the wall-hung air sampling boxes in which there is a speaker that plays the recording of a fan. The speakers are small bluetooth devices that have little capacity for resonance. They really vibrate and overcompensate to produce a larger sound. It creates an effect, in vibrating against the object that contains them, implying an active hidden room behind the sculpture. That piece feels like it is moving or breathing, giving it some character that refers back to the process of sampling the air around it.

KRMM

When you view the work, the sound doesn’t arrive in the space until you’ve hit a certain proximity to the sculptures. I feel like there is this element of surprise or a way of thinking about the object as already ahead of

itself in relation to time, space and the viewer's body.

JS

Yeah, I think so, it can be really playful in that way. I think the approach is a key part of those pieces. There's a theatricality to that period of not yet knowing. I'm interested in creating works that feel as if they are located in a semifunctional space. Bits of activity can be added to and removed from them. Often there is the feeling that a work might surprise and perform some kind of action, but in the end it won't. The sound pieces take responsibility for that surprise and work well next to an object that feels like it has this capacity to perform in a fictional way.

KRMM

How do you arrive at the processes by which you find yourself encoding systems of information into a certain storage media or kinds of imagery?

JS

A dominant interest for me is pulling material information to have this large chain of works that never feels complete or resolved. They are always in this unstable space. They start to build their network containing feedback loops between themselves. A lot of these interests come from systems that I am observing. One way of pulling information from a space recently has been through the construction of a text-based narrative. I've begun to apply crowdsourced models in the work. I will create a writing prompt by laying out ideas and objects I've been making, like different materials from sampling, vinegar or wheat or cumin maybe, along with documentation and recordings. Then I will feed this prompt to a crowdsourced freelancer service (fiverr, odesk). I'll find a writer that specializes in maybe a dystopian fan fiction or comedic style, and have them create a scene based on this prompt. From there it will get passed along to any number of writers or editors from different genres and contexts. You get back a narrative that has been pulled out of the work and cycled through all these sites. It's both a biased and funneled representation of an exhibition, as well as an averaged portrait of the type of content these fractured services produce. It's a way of pushing information through a human sieve. I have no hand in writing the text but I'm playing at directing it.

KRMM

I like that term, a human sieve. It seems like an important assertion of language.

JS

Yeah, it's taking an idea and putting it through a series of contraptions or networks and then observing what objects could fall out of that process. I like to think of a show as an unsettled group of objects between two events. It's what I was thinking a lot about with the air sampling works: sculptures that contain samplers would record the volatile compounds floating around in the air of a space for the duration of the exhibition. Then,

that sampler would go off to a lab and provide me with a data set. I would analyze that as a list of potential material decisions. Those works are always pointing to their future iterations.

KRMM

kind of abstraction can allow an object to lose its ground in its own environment. Previously you've mentioned the idea of polyvalence or the prioritization of multiplicity, over singular or individuated forms and references. How do you think through abstraction and does it have a certain relationship to potentiality?

JS

I am most in-terested in an object that can leave its context as an artwork and cy-cle through many different functional and fantasy settings. Maybe it does this in its image form. To me, that's an object that has a lot of potential to perform a kind of polyvalence. It's the idea of wanting one's entertainment experience to contain many different genres. I have a real tendency to load one object with many connections and to fill something up to the brim. It's like, why edit when you can have everything? I think this idea of abstraction would be the rubbing off or the result of pushing content through any number of systems. Outsourced works feel as if they zoom out and are ab-stracted and then reclarify themselves. Something interesting hap-pens when you try to focus back in. To me, that is where mediation takes place; in the retuning of a blurred idea. It's what happens in the game of telephone. The final statement could have a lot of clar-ity but it is a process of abstraction which has led it to change from its original source. I'm interested in making work that oscillates between areas of temporary abstraction towards clarity. Something adaptable.

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