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Knights Tour: Digital Materialism in the Work of Michael Shroads

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Michael James Shroads

December 2014

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# Pronk



Michael Shroads. *Bend* (installation view) ABS 3-D print. 2014 (i)

*Seventeenth century Dutch realism is – ironically given its utter celebration of the bourgeois form of life – the leading edge of the critique of rationalized modernity.*  
J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*. 1

*Pronk*, the Dutch word for splendor, has entered my art vocabulary as-of-late with the recent discovery of the seventeenth century Dutch painter Willem Van Aelst (1627-1683). The exhibition *Elegance and Refinement: The Still-Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst* at the National Gallery of Art, presented a paradoxical portrait of

a painter, “who as far as we know, never painted a landscape, portrait or history scene.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike contemporaries Johannes Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch, and countless other Dutch realist painters, Van Aelst never attempted, or nothing has survived, of genre paintings outside of the *vanitas*. He was the still life painter’s still life painter, so-to-speak; technically erudite beyond measure, like Cezanne and Morandi centuries later, and so stubbornly focused upon the medium that his technique elliptically undermines the work’s sign and signifier status in spite of, or because of its almost infinite *describability*. One’s mind never rests on any status for the symbolism in the paintings for too long because there is always another object temptation, and another signifying drift, like the mirroring of contrapuntal phrases in Baroque chamber music creating dynamic motion which registers technically and emotively, as the works *form*.



Willem VanAelst. *Still Life with Flowers*. Oil on Canvas.1665 (ii)

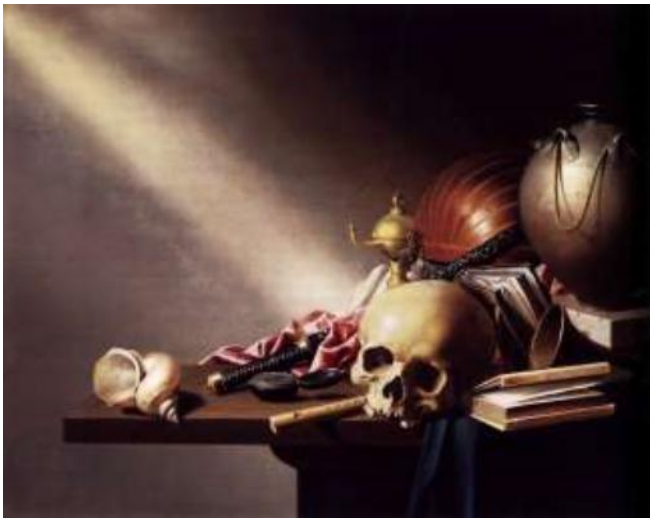




Willem VanAelst. *Still Life with a Mouse*. Oil on Canvas. 1674 (iii)

The typical *vanitas* symbols (vermin, insects, dead animals, over-ripe and rotting fruit) abound in Van Aelst's work as do representations of decadent *pronk* decoration (flowers, foods, chiffon fabrics, elaborate glass and polished metal vessels) but with a degree of compression and visual saturation often bordering on agitating. The objects themselves, whether they be *memento mori*, budding flowers, or simply decorative and more abstract elements such as the reflective surfaces of glass and silver, all seamlessly co-mingle and even compete in a manner so highly polished and visually compressed as to render any symbolic persuasion impossible. In Van Aelst's *shallowest* but greatest works, any

allegory of death and impermanence is treated with such play and so little gravitas, by contrast to lesser contemporaries such as Harmen Steenwijck and Pieter Claesz, as to render these themes merely habitual rather than tragic or sacred.



Harmen Steenwijck. *An Allegory of the Vanitas of Human Life*. Oil on Panel. 1640. (iv)

The further one investigates the work the more uncertain the viewer becomes whether the still life's objects are even stable symbols at all; take for instance the allegorically tacit composition of *Fruit Still Life with Mouse*. 1674, a small painting consisting of a frankly lewd bushel of fruit including two titillating rose kissed peaches. Wrapped in stem and foliage like a shawl, this cornucopia partially obscures an earthy and plump mouse staring greedily up at the bounty. Above this display of carnality tenuously rests a ghostly iridescent moth so luminescent it appears to practically illuminate the ripened fruit in the darkened scene. This tableau's almost lascivious symbolism implicates the viewer in more

than mere reception, we practically consume the painting's verisimilitude and banal Christian allegory in one bite, blushing like the objects of desire before us. This droll trivializing of the prerequisite Christian allegory common to the *vanitas* genre, is symptomatic, as J.M. Bernstein points out, of rising secularism in Northern Renaissance painting, "both de Hooch and Vermeer are well beyond Holbein's melancholic pronouncement; for them loss of Christian transcendence is no longer felt as a loss. For them transcendence has already become this-worldly, the world's beauty." 3 Literalizing desire in one deft stroke of anthropomorphic kitsch, Van Aelst posits the viewer as that spurious little mouse, life and death figured in permanent antinomy. The possibility of transcendence as represented by the white moth, a blind and intransigent Christian ideal, finds only momentary stasis on the fruit, unable to derive any further satisfaction or sacrament from it as does the mouse, or ourselves. *Fruit Still Life with Mouse* is an embarrassment of consumption because of its metaphorical *and* literal splendor -that is an exceeding wealth of both. The brown rodent, a pestilent *memento mori*, gazes at the fruit from under the dashing curved profile of a leaf uncannily similar to a period Dutch felt hat, the kind made iconic by Rembrandt's portraits of the business elite of seventeenth century Netherlands. It's tantalizingly suggestive but equally coincidental, foregrounding the viewer's own subjective credulity or perhaps cognitive bias. This implication in *deadpan* consumption (literal and metaphorical) from Van Aelst accomplishes what, centuries later, Jeff Koons could only hope for but never quite achieved with his

first European guild produced works, *The Banality Series*, which featured porcelain sculpture crafted by Italian artisans.



Jeff Koons. Ushering in Banality. polychrome wood. 1988. (v)

This ushering in of Willem Van Aelst's own banality in the post-Koons era, *Elegance and Refinement* opened in 2012, may seem like jaded postmodern revisionism at first. However, the social history of the Netherlands in Van Aelst's time points to a society not unlike our own in crucial ways. During the artist's youth, the Netherlands experienced an unprecedented economic boom and subsequent crash commonly referred to as Tulip Mania, or *tulipmanie*, which economists cite as one of modern capitalism's first economic bubbles. This newly introduced national flower brought to Europe from the Ottoman Empire in 1554 and cultivated in the Netherlands in 1593, became not only a luxurious symbol of beauty, and national prosperity but was, for a time, so valuable as a commodity that it functioned as a form of currency.

The *Dutch Golden Age*, roughly from the founding of the infamous Dutch East India Company in 1602 to the end of the century, was an era of unprecedented economic growth in northern Europe. Many of the regions business elite invested extraordinary trade profits into lands for the cultivation of this new symbol of prosperity. At the time of Van Aelst's early apprenticeships in the 1630's certain bulbs would cost from 3,000 to 4,150 guilders, remarkable considering a skilled craftsman (among them *vanitas* painters) would earn around 300 guilders a year.



Brueghel the Younger. Satire of Tulip Mania. 1640. (vi)

For Van Aelst and Dutch society, exotic flora, and other *pronk* which could be purchased from them, were not only symbols of exuberant beauty, frailty, and

human mortality; they stood in for *exchange in excess* and commodification itself, a hypostasization of the rapid liquidation and fungibility of medieval European life in a new burgeoning society based on speculation and global trade at exponential levels. This theatre of modern capitalism, nevertheless, took place against a background of civilization's perennial problem; plague outbreaks (our little mouse again) had erupted in trading centers such as Haarlem in parallel with the rise of *Tulipmanie*, spurring on the short term risks and ultimately precipitating the crash in 1637. *Pronk* was a 17<sup>th</sup> century emblem of the term Austrian economist Thorstein Veblen, in the Victorian era, coined: *conspicuous consumption*. It is a symbol of a social practice citizens are routinely encouraged to participate in by politicians in times of peril and uncertainty to this day.

By contrast, the more accomplished works of the Dutch master Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), expand beyond the tabletop composition and explore *hearth and home* representations of bourgeois life in the city of Haarlem. In J. M. Bernstein's essay, *Wax, Brick, and Bread –Apotheoses of Matter and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy and Painting: Descartes and Pieter de Hooch.*, the similarity we find with Willem Van Aelst is what Bernstein describes throughout as a hermeneutics of order,

De Hooch can paint the world because  
the world depicted is the constant crossing  
of nature as matter and order, and culture as  
matter and order. DeHooch's painterly

materialism continually works to dissolve any permanent boundary between nature and culture, between subjective lives and the material conditions of those lives, without ever denying the difference between them.

The constant reversibility, continuity, or exchange between nature and culture, or matter and form if you wish, entails that order and its absence are everywhere; hence there is no holding nature and disorder or matter or woman at bay, fending them off, transcending them or excluding them. Hence, the orderliness of de Hoochian realism can be paratactic, the accumulation of many small things, each with its own weight and gravity in relation to those contiguous with it, rather than hypotactic (order from the vantage point of an ideal). 4

*Parataxis* is evident in the minimal signification, and accumulated lengths, of de Hooch, Vermeer, and Van Aelst's titles themselves: such as *Woman with a Basket in a Garden*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and *Fruit Still Life with a Mouse* respectively. Other striking examples include Judith Leyster's *A Boy and a Girl with a Cat and an Eel*, and Jan Davidsz de Heem's. *Garland of Flowers and Fruit with the Portrait of Prince William III of Orange*. This literalism and nursery rhyme musicality of titles wasn't simply a Dutch idiosyncrasy (compare with Steenwiyk's, *An Allegory of the Vanitas of Human Life*) it is index of an aesthetic

rationalité replete within the genre, its themes, and its modalities; one echoed some centuries later in work such as Richard Artschwager's *Table with Pink Tablecloth* -and even later still in the work of Artschwager's aesthetic heirs Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons. For as Bernstein paradoxically but unequivocally states, "Minimalism anticipates Dutch realism". 5 *Parataxis* is Dutch art's very achievement, its highest form.



Richard Artschwager. *Table with Pink Tablecloth*. formica wood. 1964. (vii)



In *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* by Svetlana Alpers, the historian outlines the cultural background behind this manner of representation,

The Dutch present their pictures as describing a world seen rather than as imitations of significant human actions. Already established pictorial and craft traditions, broadly reinforced by new experimental science and technology, confirmed pictures as the way to a new and certain knowledge of the world. A number of the characteristics of the images seem to depend on this: the frequent absence of a positioned viewer, as if the world came first; a play with great contrasts of scale; the absence of a prior frame; a formidable sense of the picture as a surface (like a mirror or a map, but not a window); on which words along with objects can be replicated or inscribed; an insistence on the craft of representation. It is, finally, hard to trace stylistic development, as we are trained to call it, in the work of Dutch artists. 6

Alpers goes on to establish the difference between the Italian model of painting as one that is historical/hypotactic and the Dutch as one that is essentially a non-progressive tradition and a highly self-conscious one,

In Holland, the visual culture was central to the life of the society.

One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness. If the theatre was the arena in which the England of Elizabeth most fully represented itself to itself, images played that role for the Dutch. 7

Of particular interest in these quotations are *qualities of surface*, 'on which words along with objects can be replicated or inscribed', as well as the self-conscious nature of a *visual culture* described by such a surface, to which we will return later.

The Italian ideal on-the-other-hand, is exemplary of a teleological model and narrative of history *leading* to Modernity and its post- or meta- derivatives in which we now find ourselves. It is history as endgame or grand narrative, a sublimated religious theocracy which finds its way into Romanticism, Marxism, and Modernism. This progress of- to borrow the Hegelian term- *objectivation of*

*spirit* in the history of art, J.M Bernstein finds synonymous with the Cartesian abstraction/sublimation of sensorial particularity by mathematical, that is, instrumental reason. Echoing Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Bernstein writes,

It is not too much of a stretch to see the abstraction from particularity and sensory given-ness as the abstractive device of modern forms of social reproduction: the subsuming of the use values of particular goods beneath the exchange value of monetary worth, or the domination of intersubjective practices by norms of instrumental reason that yield the rationalization and bureaucratization of our dominant institutions. Somehow, the advance of the modern world, its enlightenment, is the advance of the qualitative by the quantitative. This of course is both a utopia and a nightmare. 8

This admittedly ironic chimera of Dutch Art; that it, in spite of self-conscious *pronk*, conspicuous materialism, and apparent opposition to any grand narrative or representation of concepts, embodies the "other" of Baroque art history and the enlightenment while technically and scientifically appearing to be their apotheosis is nothing less than heretical. For many historians the implication that

the utter commodification, sensuous particularity, technical clarity, and lexical parataxis of Dutch art somehow impossibly realizes art's resistance to both reification and instrumental reason, may seem hard to swallow



Haim Steinbach. *Supremely Black*. readymades, formica, wood. 1986. (viii)

## Technical Supports

*There are many reasons for the peculiarity of the knight's move, of which the first is the convention of art...The second reason is that the knight is not free: it moves on the diagonal because the direct road is forbidden it. –Victor Shklovsky. Knights Move,. 9*

The notion mentioned earlier in this essay, from Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, of Dutch painting having, “a formidable sense of the picture as a surface (like a mirror or a map, but not a window), on which words along with objects can be replicated or inscribed”, is no doubt indicative for contemporary readers of a kind of surface we know all too

well but know next to nothing about. The computer screen is indeed *not* a virtual window, as Anne Friedberg hyperopically bungles in *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. The interface of your operating software is rendered as a 'desktop' across all platforms for a reason, it is a surface for the 'accumulation of many small things'. The screen, regardless of what device (laptop, phone, tablet) or what you think you are using it for (work, recreation), has more in common with your kitchen table at home (a sight for work, pleasure, sustenance, and socializing) than with film, architecture, television, automobiles, or stereos. At base it is a surrogate for a common planar *object*, a table on which to arrange important things or gather around, it is simulated tautology of such an object. By arranging data for the user in a *visually* interactive surface, the computer entered the world of consumer goods with *object* simulation and doubling built in. As *new media* users, we just simply forgot what we were looking at as digital technology eventually colonized all previous media and absorbed it within its functions, or vice-versa from the point of view of the programmer.

To undo this grievous academic hyperopia (farsightedness), I want to first make a diagonal path back to the analog via Rosalind Krauss's *Under Blue Cup*, which opens up the possibility for a kind of medium specificity in a post-media art world by marrying philosopher Stanley Cavell's theory of *automatism* with literary theorist Victor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, translated as defamiliarization or estrangement. What Krauss has crafted, what she calls art's *technical support*, is very different from the traditional sense of *medium*, " technical

supports are generally borrowed from available mass-cultural forms, like animated films, automobiles, investigative journalism, or movies”.<sup>10</sup> This is different from the exhausted Greenbergian notion of medium specificity as well in that, “Greenberg’s specificity is empirically tied to a physical substance (canvas and support). The specificity onto which I want *Under Blue Cup* to open is focused, rather on the rules of the guilds.”.<sup>11</sup> The ‘rules of the guilds’ which Krauss finds compelling are precisely the means by which Svetlana Alpers defended Dutch painting against the theocratic methodology of art history in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, “much Dutch art is independent and at a distance from language...Few Dutch artists defined their work theoretically until the 1670’s. They practiced a craft, mastery of which required a minimum of textual interference.”.<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, the most “traditionally” capable artist under scrutiny in *Under Blue Cup* is the artist Ed Ruscha, who, while being technically masterful in painting, is also by the indirect nature of his output the most slippery figure to historically canonize, yet he seems so much of an *analog* sensibility. What exactly is the historical achievement of Ruscha’s work say in contrast to Joseph Kosuth or Andy Warhol for that matter? And what does it mean to be outside of the historical and teleological path from Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism by virtue of being in LA and making work across all media based on the symbiotic relationship between the automobile and advertising without it categorically being Pop? He is none of those things but the similarities between his output and the aesthetic

logic of Dutch genre painting are numerous and compelling; coming from a guild background in Los Angeles commercial painting, the simple parataxis of his projects like *TwentySix Gasoline Stations*, the tongue-in-cheek proverbial twists of his later work, and importantly the elliptically slippery signification and technical precision of his brilliant *Liquid* paintings. Ruscha's work, though often included, has always evaded the historical definitions of Pop Art, Conceptualism, and Minimalism (in contrast with other guild trained artist like James Rosenquist and even Warhol who are categorically Pop). His work was never a direct path.



Edward Ruscha. *Rancho*. oil on canvas. 1968 (ix)

Rosalind Krauss's treatment of digital or *new media*, in *Under Blue Cup* is relatively suspicious, she doesn't directly address the actual liquidation of analog media around the mid 2000's, but presages its inevitability (though too late at the time of its publication) via considerations of media's dominant theorists Friedrich Kittler and Marshall McLuhan. The liquidation and forgetting of *medium* via

*media* both hot and cold- to use McLuhan's terminology- is a pact forged for Krauss by "false friends". That is, two terms that are similar and bound to each other but not strictly synonymous, and slightly parasitic,

Kittler's cancellation turns on the numerical streams into which all information –visual, auditory, oral – will be quantified. Once this digitization happens, any medium can be translated into any other. A total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium. 13

Instead of realizing the potential inherent in the base materialism of this new 'digital base', a glaring oversight for the co-author and curator of *Informe: A User's Guide*, *Under Blue Cup* is instead a rather nostalgic swan song for 'knights' of the *analog* medium beginning with Ruscha and ending with Christian Marclay (analog absurdist)– closer to Krauss's own solid-state generation. For all this nostalgia, Krauss's *technical supports*, the creation of new mediums based on devices and their rules regardless of the artworks physical substance (Ruscha works across many different media but with his own consistent devices), applies more to the *new media* of today and offers the potential for more radical results than compared to post-war *transmission* technologies (television, video, print ad, automobile).



For *new media* theorists, the 'rules of the guild' are programming (hacking is simply reverse programming for illegal purposes) pure-and- simple as Kittler famously stated,

I can't imagine that students today would learn only to read and write using the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. They should at least know some arithmetic, the integral function, the sine function -- everything about signs and functions. They should also know at least two software languages. Then they'll be able to say something about what 'culture' is at the moment. 14

Lev Manovich, however, is more forgiving than Kittler claiming, "In a classical modernist move, Kittler argued that we need to focus on the 'essence' of the computer- it's mathematical and logical foundations.". 15 Manovich's own theory of *new media* borders on what Svetlana Alpers –borrowing from Michael Baxandall- terms *visual culture*. For Manovich, the visual media of software is *digital culture* both visual *and* logical, for better or worse. Manovich is a second generation *new media* theorist who acknowledges rightly that the role of GUI (graphical user interface), adopted rapidly by the "user" community with the introduction of the personal computer is as much a part of *new media* as its programmed underpinnings. *Medium* and *media* are however "false friends"

within the pact of *new media* itself in the sense that *new media* is visually eclipsing its medium, with *new medium* standing for command line programming (JAVA, HTML, BASIC, etc), and *new media* being it's rendered interface we commonly call software (Quicktime, Firefox, Windows, Photoshop, etc).

The contemporary trend particularly in the past fifteen years or more of *new media* saturation, the visual interface of software on devices like the touchscreen and cellular phone, have transformed the way we perceive not only the makeup and role of computers (originally a large calculator then a virtual desktop) but also our perception of ourselves, as Krauss points out, "Both McLuhan and Kittler follow Walter Benjamin's assertion that the system of aesthetic production of any given age will control 'the manner in which human sense perception is organized'.<sup>16</sup> Manovich, some years later, reinforces this with his discovery of the role of cognitive psychology in the development of GUI at PARC in the late 1970's,

Alan Kay (lead software engineer on the project) was strongly influenced by the theory of the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner. Bruner developed his theory by redefining the ideas of Jean Piaget who postulated that children go through a number of distinctive intellectual stages as they develop: a kinesthetic stage, a visual stage, and a symbolic stage. But

while Piaget thought that each stage only exists for a particular period during a child's development only to be completely replaced by a new stage, Bruner suggested that separate mentalities that correspond to these stages continue to exist as the child grows. That is mentalities do not replace each other but are added. Bruner gave slightly different names to these different mentalities: enactive, iconic, and symbolic. While each mentality has developed at different stages of human evolution, they continue to co-exist in an adult. 17

Kay made use of Bruner's theory at PARC to develop a computer interface which until then had, in most cases, only been a command line using the symbolic abstract language of the computational medium (code). For developing a broader interface, "Kay's interpretation of this theory was that a user interface should appeal to all these three mentalities. In contrast to a command-line interface, which is not accessible for children and forces the adult to use only symbolic mentality, the new interface should also make use of emotive and iconic mentalities." 18 Kay and the researchers at PARC created an interface with essentially, "a formidable sense of the picture as a surface (like a mirror or a

map, but not a window) on which words along with objects can be replicated or inscribed”, and which today by virtue of the *technical support* of coding, presents the user with software which mathematically *describes* all previous forms of media (including painting and sculpture) and real-time communication infinitely.

19 As for its larger effect on society and Benjamin’s assertion that contemporary media controls our increasingly self-conscious perception, one merely needs to sign on to any social media site to be convinced, and it’s not at issue here. What is at issue is the nature of the *hyperopia*, the *aporial* amnesia escalated by digital liquefaction, which nevertheless fills our hypotactic rearview with a seemingly infinite constellation of possible histories. This massive reorganization and re-presentation of the computational medium in the 1970’s gave us the interface of the perception of ourselves we have today, including the introduction for the first time of an object, only recently surpassed by the touch screen, called a *mouse* (it’s third and final appearance in this essay).

## Drawing

Though I have abandoned pen and pencil altogether for my works *Sine/Noise/Filter* and *Sine/Noise/Filter/Feedback* Drawings, paper is nevertheless present in the form of silver coated digital print paper and I insist on their status as Drawing, by way of the technical support of the *medium* of

computer code (Processing, a derivative of the JAVA language). Drawing in this case is not defined by physical action or reduction to pen and paper, and though entirely abstract, this series of drawings rely on the technical support of coding as,

an invocation of the rules of a medium  
Cavell calls automatism, the way the  
rules for marrying the voices of a fugue  
or moving through the tonality of the develop-  
ment section of a sonata are alone in  
allowing for the spontaneity of improvisation  
which keeps classical Western music,  
as well as its jazz, alive. 20

The two series *Sine/Noise/Filter Drawings* and *Sine/Noise/Filter/Feedback Drawings* are in fact rendered from one basic algorithm (a script of code) which merely undergoes a series of mirroring, reversals, and recursive reorganizations with each run of the software written performing the tasks resulting in a score to be rendered on paper. Not only do the rules of the score change syntactically, the mathematical content - the actual numerical values being performed by these rules, are randomized to generate spontaneous complexity resulting in similar classes of works but with no identical results. It's at base a very simple code that when played generates astounding complexity and uncanny visual biomorphic patterns.



Michael Shroads. *Sine/Noise/Filter/Feedback*. digital print. 2014 (x)

This interest in algorithm obviously has analogies with musical composition techniques refined in serial music by the likes of Boulez, and the process of the drawing is in every way complimentary with the circuit structuring of analog electronic synthesizers and signal processors. Processing is in fact widely used to create virtual analog synthesizer software.

However, when we accept that computation has no native format or media; for instance MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) has existed for as long as GUI computer screens, then there is no *proprietary* output for this *technical support*, despite most people's conception that digital art is predominantly time and interaction based such as video and net art. This is a grievously theocratic misunderstanding on the part of historians and critics, for the medium of programming traditional media (painting, sculpture) has been in use long before its application in video and installation. Therefore, programming

as an *automatism* is as relevant today as a technical support for the traditional media of drawing, painting, and sculpture as it is for durational and interactive media; and it in fact has a longer history with traditional media than it does to photography and video, which were only absorbed into new media in the 1990's.

In keeping with the ethic of the Open Source movement and as a nod to the originators of programmed visual art, Francois Morellet and Sol Le Witt, the basic scores for the *Sine/ Noise/Filter Drawings* are reproducible and will be available to the public through the internet. By virtue of their chimerical base they are as individual and particular as a fingerprint or a performer's interpretation of a musical score, while remaining universal as a mathematical liquidation.



Michael Shroads. *Sine/Noise/Filter Drawings* (1 & 2). 2013. (xi)

# Sculpture

*Aesthetic form is the objective organization within each artwork of what appears as bindingly eloquent...form is what is anti-barbaric in art; through form art participates in the civilization that it criticizes by its very existence.* Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. 21

Contrary to what one may expect from an artist claiming computer code as an *automatism* in the service of art-making, math and equation are not the summation of art or even form, as Adorno states, “In art equal is not equal”.<sup>22</sup> The technological ‘rules of the guilds’ are indeed the very modes of the culture industry Adorno rails against: television, automobile, popular culture, and kitsch. Their value in *Under Blue Cup* is not art itself but the culture industry’s *praxis* defamiliarized as *genius* in the work of art and vice versa; in Schklovsky’s literary chess game the ‘knight’s move’ is merely a *rule* forgotten then re-emerged as form. *Automatism*, relevant today as *new medium* or code, is the invisible tapestry and *gesamtkunstwerk* of the visible culture industry in the Information Age - *new media*. The *automatism* of code is the industry’s very mechanics – instrumental reason- happening without our awareness most of the time. Echoing Krauss and Cavell’s criticism of Greenberg and Kittler’s essentialism, Adorno saw in his own time the mathematical foundations of serial music as being fraught with the danger of aesthetic paralysis,



There is absolutely no reducing the concept of form to Mathematical relations. Such relations - whether explicitly invoked as Principles during the Renaissance or latently coupled with mystical ideas, as occasionally in Bach – play a role as *technical procedures*, yet they are not form itself but rather its *vehicle*, the means by which the newly liberated subject preforms otherwise chaotic and un-differentiated material...  
Mathematization as a method for the immanent objectivation of form is chimerical. 23

While my drawings are at base technical procedures, or *technical supports* organizing a chaos of value (literal and metaphorical) their objective *form* is nominally, Drawing; and only as *estrangements* of Drawing, do they make their 'move'. Their estrangement from drawing's historical substance and attendant essential qualities, liquidated via technical support, critiques and reworks the foundations of the art form giving it a new and unfamiliar surrogate presence.

For my chimerical sculpture the same process of alienation is at work or re-work, for none of my project was created *ex nihilo*. From planks of wood, surfboards, guitars, and existing 3d model files all of my (re)works including Sine/Noise/Filter Drawings are estrangements of existing objects *and* the *technical supports* of their making: *Liquifier (short board)* is a sculptural

fabrication of a software filter 'Liquify'; *Boolean\_Buddha.obj* is a boolean operation in Maya Software; and *Bend* is a 180 degree bend operation in Maya as well. All my objects, surrogates of my own juvenile *pronk* are married with one minimal operation objectified. *Contraband (Ibanez)* takes on the operation of referent itself in a re-working of Lynda Benglis's famous floor pours and is a pour itself. It is an homage or pointing and negation at the same time. I've literalized the idea of form in Adorno's terms, "Form is the seal of social labor, fundamentally different from the empirical process of making... Form converges with critique. It is that through which artworks prove self-critical...By its critical implication, form annihilates practices and works from the past. Form repudiates the view that artworks are immediately given." 24



.Michael Shroads. *Contraband (Ibanez)*. readymade, urethane. 2014. (xii)

The skeleton key to this work and its theory is perhaps my most recent work *Boolean\_Buddha.obj*, itself titled by its file name. While being just a small sculpture of a doubled Buddha, it is pregnant with Adorno's theory of form: the work is a digital facsimile of classic Buddha *pronk* - which I collect- and was 3d printed using the technical supports of software and a 3d printer. The file *Boolean\_Buddha.obj* is itself the base, and the form of the work is its free availability to the 'user' to download and transform as they wish, thereby performing the piece like a musical score. There is no copyright and *Boolean\_Buddha.obj* can be printed in whatever new form or dimensions they wish.



Michael Shroads. *Boolean\_Buddha.obj*. ABS 3-D print. 2014. (xiii)

# Conclusion

*“The pattern has been revised. The knight is the most important piece on the board”.* Rosalind Krauss. *Under Blue Cup*. 25

The diffuse, heterogeneous, and ubiquitous visuality of the digital culture industry in the contemporary moment makes approaching the art of the digital difficult, if not heretical, for the critic, historian, and artist brave enough to venture into institutionally untested waters. Recent significant contributions have been made such as Margit Rosen’s monumental cataloging of *Bit International* the first digital art journal founded in the mid 1960’s, and *White Heat Cold Logic: British Computer Art 1960-1980*, but digital art remains for historians the ‘elephant in the room’. Ironically, this historical *hyperopia*, the ability to see clearly even the most obscure moments of the past but not the immediate, is itself the product of an influx of information. The current practice of institutions, galleries, and artists beating-the-bushes for any possible marginal artist of the 1960’s and 1970’s “left behind”, owes its provenance to digital culture, in particular a milieu with an ever expanding practice of digital archiving coupled with a distaste for established narratives.

Digital Art has been unable to move forward in critical art history and theory since the 1960’s, which has instead formed an incestuous pact with ‘institutional critique’ and there it remains in the mode of Relational Aesthetics

and its native *form* -the installation. Pioneers like digital painter Manfred Mohr were totally ostracized from any discourse at the time including experimental painting and was not included in that mid-2000's resurgence either. Is resurrecting every possible example of post-minimalism, the current innocuous cool, necessary before the art world realizes it's not 1975? The *mourning* of the analog, it would seem, is even harder to shake-off than modernism was for the post-moderns, all the more-so because of the allergic distaste we have for the basis of the digital media that makes this mourning infinitely reproducible –like a fetish. *Liquifier (shortboard)* and *Contraband (Ibanez)* are practically allegories of this dilemma, and an utterly sincere achievement of art's alienation from the world—its form. The “pattern has been revised” indeed, neither physical substrate (Greenberg), shape (Fried), nor analog (Krauss), can adequately categorize *Liquifier* and *Contaband*; which by virtue of the ‘binding eloquence’ of their digitally manipulated liquidation with the ontological status of their extant objecthood annihilates the provenance of all of these former *mediums*, while pointing to their dispersal. Both works are like optical inversions for historical hyperopia (corrective lenses perhaps), now diffusing the referent, Barbara Hepworth and Brancusi in *Liquifier*, Lynda Benglis in *Contraband*, for the formal estrangement of the present world -in the present. The technical literature on chess play says it best, “the knight most illustrates the romantic aspect of chess. Symbol of an ancient institution in a society that no longer exists, and moving in a “crooked” nonlinear way. The knight –with its strange and unpredictable jumps- is

the most tricky of the pieces".<sup>26</sup> The artist's 'knight's move' is not an endgame; the knight is no bishop (theorist), nor is she the historian of the board, the rook. The artist, 'knight of the medium', is not free to end the game, only to completely reinvent playing it. *Michael Shroads. 2014.*



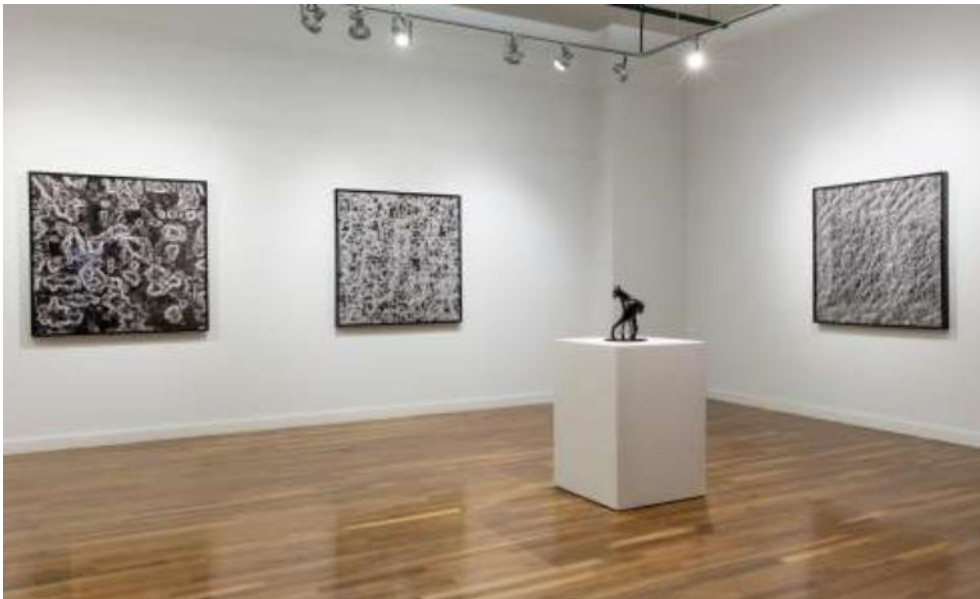
Michael Shroads. *Liquifier (shortboard)*. biopoxy, leash, fins. 2014. (xv)



Michael Shroads. *Branch*. poplar. 2012.(xvi)



Michael Shroads. *Monster*. installation view. 2014.(xvii)



Michael Shroads. *Monster*. installation view. 2014.(xviii)





Michael Shroads. *Drag*. inlay wood paneling. 2013. (xix)



Michael Shroads. *Contraband (Ibanez)*. readymade, urethane. 2014.(xiv)



Michael Shroads. *Bend*. ABS 3-D print. 2014.(xx)



Michael Shroads. *Bend*. ABS 3-D print. 2014.



Michael Shroads. *Liquifier* (shortboard). detail. 2014. (xxii)



Michael Shroads. *Monster*. installation view. 2014. (xxiii)

# Notes

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