Pause: An Exhibition of Relationships Between the Body, Place and Sculpture

Melissa M. Hopson

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life in the Herron School of Art and Design Indiana University

June 2014

Pause
By
Melissa M. Hopson
Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University
Pause: An Exhibition of Relationships Between The Body, Place and Sculpture
By
Melissa M. Hopson
Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University

[Signature]
Eric Nordgulen
Associate Professor
Advisor

[Signature]
Greg Hull
Associate Professor
Committee Member

[Signature]
William Potter
Associate Professor
Committee Member

Accepted: June 2014

[Signature]
Professor Valerie Eickmeier
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

11/09/15
Date
Introduction

Presenting sculpture in public spaces allows for the material world to maintain constant interactions with live audiences. This relationship keeps the body in motion as it moves through space in and around architecture and through landscapes stopping to rest or to engage with the environment. For instance, one of my early peculiar encounters with drawing was leaving my bedroom one morning and discovering a pencil-sketched portrait of my father taped to the closet door in the hallway. This letter sized image kept me from moving on to the dining room as I stopped to inspect its content. The fact that it was a drawing and not a sculpture is insignificant, nevertheless the presentation of the portrait conveniently placed at eye level left me feeling stunned and amused. Furthermore, engagement with art, for me, has always been closely tied to investigation and discovery while coming closer to material and the information that lies within and around it.

My thesis exhibition titled, *Pause*, represents various possibilities of form and surface, as well as a general overview of how the outcomes of sculptural practice are not only
favorable to realizing concepts, but more importantly to the pursuit of the freedom of artistic expression and access to the greater public. More specifically, the presentation of the work in new spaces and to new audiences reconceptualizes the meaning and purpose of sculpture allowing for reflection and exchange to occur between the work, the artist and the viewer.

The title of the exhibition, Pause, indicates a period during which action temporarily ceases; an interval between activity. Additionally, Pause is a German noun pronounced /ˈpaʊzə/ and has slightly different connotations in German than in English. For example, in addition to being motionless it means to have a break or intermission. This crossover between languages is one example of how studying in Germany for years expanded my artistic practice through repeated exposure to European culture, architecture and especially the philosophies and products of modernism. Having viewed and lived amongst the grotesque architectural surfaces and history greatly influenced my conceptual and technical approaches to material, while analysis of twentieth century sculpture influenced my choice of subject matter. Now, having completed a graduate degree at Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, I have a greater understanding of American influences and approaches to contemporary art and art history that mutually impact my ideas and practice.
This thesis exhibition is for me a survey of my recent developments in my artistic practice highlighting visual nuances between forms, contexts and processes that reflect my experience, knowledge and research as a sculptor.

**Body**

Sculpture unquestionably relates to the body, and when approaching objects on any scale the mind begins drawing the connections between the familiar and unfamiliar information it is processing. This activation of prior knowledge relates to schema that “refers to an individual’s knowledge about a topic, text or experience” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013, p. 17). Schemata help us understand the world around us as we process new information and knowledge drawing upon our previous experiences and understanding. Similarly, Gestalt theory maintains that the human mind has self-organizing tendencies that are capable of understanding various parts as a whole. Furthermore, schemata and Gestalt principles are evidence that seeing and the perception of what we see not only relates to our past knowledge and understanding of the world, but also relates back to figures, shapes and even frames this experience in the environment we face as well.

Within the practice of art there is numerous amounts of aesthetic possibilities, yet within them processes are yielded to display results and outcomes of production that relate to the artist’s intentions and methods. In reflection upon my experience overtime the work transforms from its original inception usually into something new relying on the process of creating to resolve certain qualities ultimately transforming even my personal vision. For instance, casting an object can change the original by adding new surface, color, weight and material. This is one way of affecting a form and getting fresh perspective or distance to the quality of the work through changing what is understood into something that is suddenly new
or different. The sculptor Giacometti describes how his thin almost invisible figures seem to become fatter as he reduces them (Sylvester, 2003). This comment proves that the sculpture changes of course during his materialization and these changing occurrences create a conceptual distance the artist and the material.

Every sculpture has a core and a surface whether it is an empty ceramic shell, a solid stone or even a naked armature. Grotesque surfaces and shapes of material have visually intriguing purposes. Some can be related to man made architecture while others to excavated dwellings. The artist Franz West describes some of his sculptural influences drawn from architraves of Viennese architecture (ibid). West also compared many of his amorphous sculptures to organs and the human body hence the title from his well-known series of Passtuecke (fitting parts). Moreover, even though his work was satirical and at times anti-aesthetic his sculptures do not lack a visual spirit and artistic conviction. The curator Franklyn Sirmans attempts to address a forgotten, or as he describes “lost”, spirituality within contemporary art rooted in the Americas (NeoHooDoo, 2009, p.12). Art historians Richard D. Hecht and Linda Ekstrom posit, “Contemporary art can also be an act of religious creativity” (NeoHooDoo, p. 12). Furthermore, artists like Giacometti and West are examples of sculptors who not only practice through studio based processes and creating unique forms, but also relied heavily on rough, grotesque surfaces to realize their subject matter. These surfaces cause a viewer to think in the terms of the maker to understand the form and the process. Finally, these superficial features reflect the artist’s presence and interaction with their work revealing their intention and their direction.
Modeling material, like drawing is a reflective and engaging way to study and appreciate material and movement. As mentioned above, I am interested in how processes like casting recreate an object turning it into a caricature of its original self. In *Meet me on the Patio Image Series* 2014, I created a miniature version of a previously fabricated installation titled, *Meet me on the Patio* 2012. This work presents three black and white photographs of a sculpture documented in three separate contexts, and in different stages of development. Two of the images are in my studio and the third is in my front yard decorated in lights. The miniature version hangs next to the photographs and becomes a materialized adaptation of the images.

When the form rematerializes in another way it reaffirms its existence as a memento of the original. The miniature version is in fact representing the original; light and transportable like a souvenir, a document, and an artifact. Creating new forms is a development that succeeds in merging conceptual frameworks with material and place allowing time for the work to manifest itself and become its own narrative.

**Place**

As form connects visual relationships and meaning between people and material, interaction between the audience and the sculpture occurs within a space. Not only does the type of material and the way it is constructed draw attention to certain traits of a sculpture but
also stimulates the environment through the associations it brings forth. In the installation, 

*Teepees* 2014, steel armatures are bent, welded and wrapped with dyed and resin soaked burlap that builds a skin around the armature creating volume, and contrarily to that gesture becomes an empty vessel. The title indicates how the sculptures become a metaphorical place to house a body, a North American dwelling. Moreover, adding layers of adhesive to stabilized fabric that would otherwise unravel gives the ephemeral materials permanent qualities. Permanence is one of the most unique qualities of sculpture because it allows the undertaking and process of an artwork to become perpetual. The artist Robert Smithson understood this irreversible power that material actions have as he displayed in his writing and works relating to entropy. This material transformation is similar to the concept of luminality, or standing between thresholds, that is consider as an act in a period of time that results in some kind of permanent change. Although my work appears whimsical and unpolished it is created from strong lasting materials that come together to form installations, situations and places.
Appropriating and building installations from various objects allows for me to use a variety of formal concepts to communicate ideas of absence, presence, mass and volume. Thusly, I have also been interested in human relationships to objects and the affinities and connections to understand lifeless materials. For example, the work *Parallel Play* presents two similar shapes; one is an empty structure and the other a volumetric form. The opposing qualities of each form complement each other, and describe the fundamental aspects of function and form of sculpture creating a tension of aesthetic relationships, such as between the skin and the bones of a body, or the interior and exterior separation. This dichotomy questions the superficial qualities of form and how the material disguises and reveals elements and lays conditions upon it. The lines as well as the paper are of mutual significance in a drawing, both filling space yet both play different roles in understanding the subject matter.

Practically every form, arrangement and move a sculpture makes can change the approach and interaction with a viewer. The curator and critic Maria Lind posits “Today I
imagine curating as a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions. This is a curatorial approach that owes much to site-specific practices, and even more to context-sensitive work and various traditions of institutional critique—each encouraging you to think from the artwork, with it, but also away from it and against it. In this sense, “the curatorial” resembles what an editor should do, only with a broader set of materials and relationships” (p. 63). This definition of the curatorial describes an approach that really challenges how artists utilize their exhibition practice and emphasizes the responsibility of creating intentional relationships between the work and the space. In this regard, my exhibition would be better suited in a space of its own focused on the connection between each work and the space, rather than on the grouping of several series of forms. To reinforce the importance of these connections, the artist Gino De Dominicis regarded art as the highest expression of language asserting that. “Drawing, painting, and sculpture are not traditional but original forms of expression and therefore belong to the future.” (Flash Art, 2008, p. 34). Furthermore, the language of sculpture cannot be fully understood in a space that is
shared confusing the aesthetic activity and experience shifting from declarative to interrogative as it comes into dialog with the other works (strangers) in the space performing unintended visual relationships. In regards to performance and sculpture, the critic Carter Ratcliff describes James Lee Byars’s as “...a sculptor who either “performed” his objects or allowed the materials and objects to perform like actors in a play.” (Life, Love, and Death, 2004, p. 33). Like Byars, I subscribe to the notion that objects function as stand-ins for the body, knowledge, and memory and in doing so command attention in the context of which they are present (Life, Love and Death, 2004). Finally, as West believed: it is not so much how the art looks but what the artists does with the artwork that matters. The opportunity to look beyond the surface awards the space, the sculpture and the body.

**Conclusion**

Contextualizing sculpture into new environments contradicts the will of static material creating dynamic and new situations and interactions with it. Presentation strives to be a new vision of the artwork, which is complete for me when it is shared. In whatever respect, studio and everyday activities come together. I am reminded of growing up on the Oklahoma countryside and having the freedom of roaming through forests and fields throughout the neighborhood with my childhood friend Heather. Together we discovered abandoned houses and empty spaces filling them with our belongings deeming these places our own.
abandoned houses were adorned with our belongings. This reveals that even as a child I was searching for new places to occupy and transform. James Lee Byars also recontextualized his sculptures by temporarily exhibiting them in public spaces without permission or announcement inviting his friends at the last minute to view exhibitions he installed with specific time constraints. Whether guests arrived or not he observed and noted passersby whether it be a dog or a person incidentally happening to pass through. By inserting his sculpture he transforms the place temporarily, only to remove it again abandoning the place and leaving the experience as a memory shared by those who were lucky enough to notice the sculpture presence, and later its absence. This action obviously rejects the gallery and exhibition space as more than a place to display and purchase visual commodity, and in doing so elevates the conceptual and social impact on artistic practice and function.

*Pause* addresses the conceptual and technical processes of sculpture, the ephemeral context of space, as well as the body’s desire to travel within it. Often it is not only the sculpture the place that remains permanent. The aim of this exhibition was to display a survey of possible ways and directions I approach sculpture. Though there were drawbacks of the presentations due to the presence of other work in the gallery, viewing each series of works as autonomous still allowed for viewers to experience variation of form and process.
Attention should be made to the titles of the work include *Teepees, Barn, Meet Me on the Patio Images Series* and *Tables, Sausage* symbolize that these installation are also metaphorically places of recess where sculptures remain motionless at ease or at rest inviting audiences to do the same. *Pause* was a chance for me to create a picture plane and metaphorical landscape created from material experiments that were constructed over time and through various processes. The world is best understood through accumulative experiences that remain in our memory and inspire inquiry. My wish as an artist to not only to mediate physical experiences of sculpture but also to question and challenge the possible directions in which to grow and develop ideas that reflect new thoughts and research of sculpture and presentation. This exhibition was a way for me to depart my graduate studies with thought resonating about the multiple positions and approaches that sculpture proceeds for me further down a path of self discovery.
References


