

A Window of Experience

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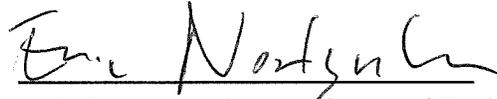
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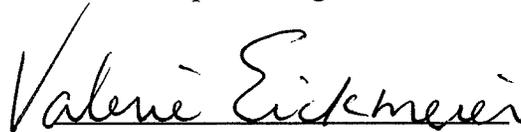


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“Thinking is practically a sculptural process.” - Joseph Beuys

## **Introduction**

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In this body of work, I play with the cultural and art historical ideas of a window. I ask the viewer to look at the window as something other than a common everyday object. I alter the form and material to challenge the viewer’s ideas and expectations. Materials such as fur, paper, and children’s blocks are unexpected, and hold individual and cultural memories and associations.

The window is a common architectural element throughout the world. It is a uniquely human construct, and is therefore something most people can relate to. The traditional window has a pane, a frame and is part of a larger structure. Being part of a wall, it typically separates the exterior and the interior, acting as a transparent or translucent barrier. In American culture, different types of windows hold different meanings. For example, a church window usually has a standard shape and stained glass, when used, evokes a feeling of spirituality or religious practice. A typical skyscraper window acts as a transparent wall, with the panes stretching from floor to ceiling.

In this body of work I defy the traditional use of the window, and ask that it be seen in an unexpected way. The window remains a symbol, but I question the meaning of this symbol, asking which side each of us are on and introducing new ideas and interpretations of this ordinary object. As humans, we give every object meaning on a sliding scale of significance. The window is an excellent example, as it can be a loaded symbol imbued with memories and historical significance or a mundane object that serves its function. This meaning can be derived from the context in which we experience the window. The context

also influences our understanding of how we expect the window to behave and how its structure is composed.

Art has seen windows in many ways that encourage us to reflect on what a window signifies. Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920) is an example of this. He instructed a carpenter to construct a set of French doors with polished black leather placed over the windows. Duchamp is using wordplay to adjust and challenge meanings. He references the Home through a typical style of windowed doors and the widows after WWI. The ceremonial black evokes thoughts of the dead soldiers and the widows that survived. He is taking a traditional cultural architectural element and altering the experience of it through material and meanings; words in this case.

Personal experience affects how we react to the piece. My experience of this piece is skewed by my emotional reference to these materials and words. The shiny black leather seems like a dark skin mirror perhaps reflecting the worst parts of an animal. The words "fresh widow" can reflect this skin's marital status or the feeling behind the doors. Collective culture and personal culture complete the meaning of the piece. The audience is given some information through precedence and history but the individual completes the work with his or her own thoughts and reflections.

## **Work**

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Traditionally, the window exists as both a transparent barrier and a passage for light. It serves as a picture frame through which one can view the world. A fundamental aspect of my choice to use architectural elements is everyday interaction. Most of us do not think about the windows that we look through. We use them only as a passage to the outside to peer out or open for air. For most of us, the most thought we give to a window is what qualities we

want in the replacement. We ask ourselves those benign questions: does this style match our décor? Should we use single pane or double pane? Can I clean this easily? Like Duchamp, I urge the viewer to think about windows differently by using unexpected materials and injections of meaning.

The work *Looking Through Windows* (Img. 1, Img. 2, Img. 3) stands as a sentinel on the corner of a four-way intersection in downtown Indianapolis. At twelve feet tall it does not dominate the city block, but plays a part in the enjoyment of the space around it. The form gradually stretches from four feet at the base to nine feet at the top. From the side (Img. 2), it resembles an ocean wave beginning to crest. The overall form is an assemblage of fifty-three full-scale windows with steel frames painted black. These windows define the surfaces of the form. Each window is different and arranged haphazardly on its surface. The style of several of the windows is drawn from nearby buildings, thus the work is a literal representation of the neighborhood.

Each frame holds a tinted acrylic pane in colors of red, orange, yellow, and pink. As the sun shines, the colored panes glow and cast an ever-changing projection of color on the ground. The multiple colors change the way a viewer sees his or her surroundings. In addition, the colors of the windows can spark a metaphor. For instance (Img. 3), the pink windows could be interpreted as the idiom ‘through rose colored lenses.’

Both color and scale immediately impact the audience. The size of the piece forces the viewer to look up, making these ordinary windows evoke a monumental feeling. The gesture of this massive wave is an absurdity in its Midwest location. There is no ocean around to feel the immensity of a 13 ft. swell about to envelop you. A literal extrapolation of its progress could be these windows are coming to a crescendo and will crash and shatter

across the pavement. But as this work is meant to embody the individual views of this neighborhood community, another meaning could be the wave of emotion that the residents and businesses experience and share with the passersby.

There is an intentional ambiguity in the title; the viewer is active but it is unclear if he or she is looking outside or inside. This sets up a dichotomy between the point of view of the person looking out the window, vs. that of the person looking in. Both positions of viewing are voyeuristic but peering through a stranger's window is considered a cultural faux pas as an invasion of privacy. In this piece, the viewer is invited to look through the windows from both directions. The reading of this work hinges on the viewer's experiences and emotional connection to windows and this location.

*Open Window* (Img. 4, Img. 5) is composed of aluminum and fur. This window is incomplete and missing parts of the panes and frame. Where there is metal on the panes, the aluminum has been polished to an imperfect mirror finish, revealing the viewer's reflection, the wall, and fur. This mirror surface is pockmarked and undulates; this reflects a distorted image of what is in front of the work.

At the center of the window is an opening to a cavity lined with white rabbit pelts. A protrusion of fur inhabits the pane just below the cavity. The cavity and protrusion are in close proximity but are not connected. The fur penetrates the viewer's space and retreats from them. The fur cavity invites the audience down the rabbit hole and to imagine the pleasurable tactile experience as they put a hand into the opening. The hole seems to have no end.

The thin aluminum and the crack suggest that the incomplete window is fragile. The sections of frame that are incomplete are not breaks in the metal but soft curves showing the

process of metal casting. The materials' opacity and textures alter the state of the window; it ceases to be a barrier. The mirror panes offer a different metaphor, inviting the viewer to relate to him or herself in the artwork. The distorted reflection allows the viewer to play with their physical or psychological self-image as it disfigures.

The title encourages the metaphor of an open window that is to be explored. However it is not specified if the fractured form, the cavity, or the psychological meanings are what are open to exploration.

Both the mirror and the rabbit hole make reference to the novels of Lewis Carroll. These novels are about exploring imagination freely, as a child would, without cultural bias. The piece invites the viewer to do the same.

*Block Window* (Img. 6, Img. 7) is made of children's toy alphabet blocks, a found window dating from 1910, and a piece of plywood. The lead paint on the window frame is peeling, chipped and worn. The wooden cubes and plywood create a physical barrier that prevents the viewer from moving beyond the glass, and bombard the viewer with symbols. They also focus the viewer on the words and jumbled letters on the blocks. These blocks are a learning tool for a child to master language and objects in their environment. The process of stacking blocks may seem trivial but there is a sense of ritual and attention to order in creating this broken crossword puzzle made up of partial and complete words. The blocks and the worn window act together to suggest a relearning of how to interpret the symbols and images caught in a window. This orientation identifies that the exterior of this window is the space the audience occupies. The audience is then forced to confront the language of the blocks to read what is on the other side of the window.

The typical understanding of a block window is a safety window made of systematically stacked thick glass blocks. The title references the notion of these security windows but begins to translate the idea of physical protection to psychological protection. These children's blocks act as the thick protective barrier the security windows would provide. Delving deeper into the letter groupings, the spelled out words are obvious like OINTMENT and Sshssh, referencing healing and quiet. Other combinations are not as transparent. The grouping D4D indicates the word dad, but substituting the 4 for the A. Depending on the viewer's experience this could be read different ways: an incomplete dad, the leg is missing from the dad or was this dad never whole; it could also trigger a reading of an encrypted dad, one who is hard to read; it could also be an attempt to combine the dad and the number four, a metaphor of the four influences of this idea of dad. Other word play comes from the spacing: the grouping of the P <leaf picture> A Y provides another puzzle to complete. The spacing can imply the game hangman: where the word is 4 characters long with the spaces P \_ A Y filled. The leaf indicates a memory of leaves—the smell of dirt and crisp fall air, the crinkling and crunching as a child dives into the pile. This P\_AY grouping can also lend itself to a trimming of the blank space and making the word 'PAY'. It is a pay that lasts a space longer than it should, dragging it out. These words can reflect upon the possible 'pay to play,' meaning it costs to have the enjoyment of play.

René Magritte's *This is not a pipe* also began as a sounding board of what the representation is meant to be. However, the blocks' orientation of their letters do not give a straightforward response to the piece's namesake. In contradiction of stating the obvious, this is not a block window. Magritte continues to examine representation and perception in his two works *The Human Condition*. Both of these works depict a painting within a painting. A

canvas stands in front of a window and portrays the scene that is outside that window. The two are barely distinguishable, calling into question how our perception and personal experience can affect how we view a scene outside a window (Totallyhistory.com).

There is conceptual play in *Block Window* similarly to *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth. Kosuth did not construct the machine-manufactured chair, take the photograph of the chair or write the definition of a chair. It is his juxtaposition of these elements that trigger the understanding and question of what is a chair (“Museum of Modern Art”). Similarly, *Block Window* uses wordplay in that the blocks are the window and the letters translate the scene in the window.

In *Outlook* (Img. 8, Img. 9, Img. 10), I constructed nine windows placed in a grid on a constructed wall. Each window is approximately two feet square and two inches deep. These windows are cast paper made from the same mold. Each window has sharp edges, but the material is soft and imperfect. They hover away from the wall and reveal raw drywall underneath that contrasts with the painted wall and the window shapes. The windows look as though they were pulled directly from the white on the walls with frayed edges marking their separation from the wall. This grid of windows gives the feeling of windows on the side of a building. The use of a common window form—a sash or hinge window—allows the viewer to connect with it and to remember opening and closing windows in their home, office, etc.

Where the glass would be in *Outlook's* windows, there is opaque cotton paper; each panel has its own unique character. This inconsistent cotton paper conflicts with the traditional idea of a transparent glass window. The viewer cannot look through these windows, as they are opaque in areas and slightly translucent in others. The cotton material adds fragility and encourages the thought that this is not a barrier of physical protection.

This makes it a window in form only, but suggests that the paper itself is a window into something more: memory. The slight variations in the surface reflect how we recreate our memories and how they are inconsistent.

“Memory is imagination and it is influenced by culture.” -Walter Benjamin

Though we may look back to a single memory many times, each recollection is a variation of the memory’s accuracy. Overtime, our memories change, and they do not represent the actual experience but our personal paradigm overlaid on the experience. Therefore, memory is perception, and perception relates directly to personal experience and culture (Benjamin).

The windows’ form is stamped as if by machine but there is a shift and thus imperfections are created. The thicknesses vary, the creases change and the illusion of these being the same is confronted. The grid is consistent and predictable, but each piece is different from the next. The suggestions of change is minor and is ever changing. These windows become a collection of the memories and hint to how the little nudges of our imagination change our outlook. As you can never step in the same river twice; the memory is never the same as the experience, when it is recalled.

*Through the Window* (Img. 11, Img. 12) is a wall structure with six double hung windows floating within it. The wall is exhibited in an open field, creating a contrast between a window in a white wall and nature. This visual oddity draws the viewer to interact with the piece. From both sides, the piece initially appears to be an ordinary interior wall with a window. Upon closer examination, there are eight traditional residential double hung windows, one placed right behind the other. The windows are so similar in wear and paint that they appear to be duplicates of each other. Closer inspection of the scene beyond the window shows the effect of the imperfect panes of glass. The glass was hand made by a team of glass blowers who created a large bell jar and then cut the glass and allowed it to cool as a

flat plane (Corning Museum of Glass). The panes all have unique undulations on their surface and they vary in thickness. This imperfect surface creates a distortion of light and gives a feeling of looking through water.

This distortion does not prevent the discerning of objects but creates a disjointed fracturing of the image. This cubistic fracturing changes as the viewer slightly changes position. In this installation of the piece, the frame shows a common natural landscape of trees and grass. The framing that is being performed is similar to David Nash's *Standing Frame*, where he was drawing a particular view of Chicago. Nash creates his frame from trunks and branches of trees framing his view and encourages a view of man and nature as one (Walker Art Center).

*Through the Window* is also a static frame, and a visual play is created as we look through the windows themselves. It encourages the interplay of the environment and observer and brings their assumed relationship into question. The view through the windows does not mark a one-to-one experience but a funhouse view of the world. Once again, the work is about perception and personal culture. It asks the viewer to look at these things not as objects fixed with details, but as abstract ideas, capable of transforming themselves as the view of them changes. This is about how we think about objects.

"Thinking is practically a sculptural process." -Joseph Beuys

Beuys's quote would imply that looking through a distortion is looking at these things in a different context. Part of the artist's responsibility is to thrust the viewer into a different appreciation of the whole, thus adjusting and perhaps enhancing our perception and our personal culture.

## **Aesthetic and Conceptual Influences**

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Windows have been used as symbols in art and culture since before recorded history. The first recorded account of a window metaphor is the association with Leon Battista Alberti. Focusing on Filippo Brunelleschi, Alberti gave a critical account of how to paint in a visually convincing way through virtual 2d space. Later, the window metaphor continued as a way to describe the experience of going to the theater and eventually the cinema. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, windows not only became a trademark but also a means to understand cyberspace. In present culture, the monitor is a window to a virtual world where the walls are thinner than paper (Krysmanski).

My work pursues this metaphor through material and form, as does the work of many other artists. For example, Anish Kapoor uses specific materials to capture the viewers' attention. In *Cloud Gate* (2006), a sculpture in Millennium Park in Chicago, the mirror-polished surface reflects the viewer and city but also distorts this everyday view of walking through Chicago. His piece *Svayambh* reflects his belief that red is the center of life. His use of tactile materials creates a visceral experience for the viewer. In my work, the colored windowpanes, the fur, and the cotton paper create a tactile, visceral experience. When put in a cultural context, these materials can reference cultural values and individual experiences. According to Joseph Beuys, certain substances have important associations, and through repeated use they obtain a personal symbolism (Harlan, 16).

“Beuys viewed certain materials as having important associations with his past, and through repeated use they attained a personal symbolism” (Rekow). This reflects the exploration that symbols are not only the objects but also the materials and their context in collective culture. The work *Fond III* lends itself to his personal relationship with the felt—

that it is healing to him. It produces warmth and provides protection. Beuys used materials that are “very basic to life and not associated with art (Dia Art Foundation).” Beuys’ approach strongly connects to my work in that my choice of materials directly influences the viewer’s perception of the work.

Looking at these works, they are a collection of sentences completing a paragraph about my art’s interaction with culture. I make architecture a major component in the work, to connect with the viewer’s everyday life. The everyday object becomes distorted through materials and form. The audience is now a participant in the work and its cultural signs, which become a pathway to self-reflection. My work takes on a role of potentially facilitating a modification of associations and making new cultural memory.

## Images



Image 1: Michael Kuschner, *Looking Through Windows*. 2012. Painted Steel and Acrylic sheet. Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Indianapolis, IN. West face.



Image 2: Michael Kuschnir, *Looking Through Windows*, 2012. Painted Steel and Acrylic sheet. Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Indianapolis, IN. North Face.

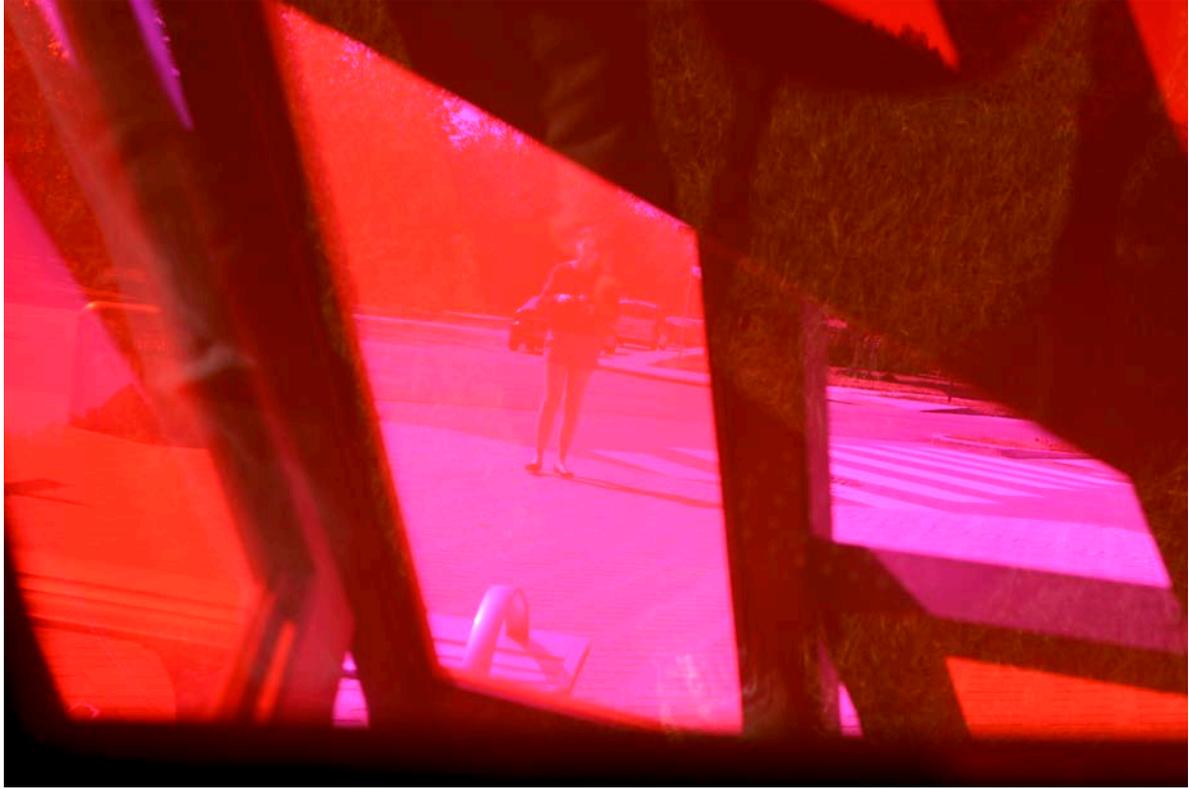


Image 3: Michael Kuschnir, *Looking Through Windows*, 2012. Painted Steel and Acrylic sheet. Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Indianapolis, IN. Detail looking through one of the windows.



Image 4: Michael Kuschnir, *Open Window*, 2012. Aluminum and Fur.  
Dimensions: 2 ft x 3 ft x 6 in.



Image 5: Michael Kuschnir, *Open Window*, 2012. Aluminum and Fur. Detail of Fur Cavity and Protrusion.



Image 6: Michael Kuschnir, *Block Window*, 2012. 1920's Lead Painted Window, Children's Toy Blocks, Plywood. Dim: 2 ft x 2.5 ft x 2 in.



Image 7: Michael Kuschnir, *Block Window*, 2012. 1920's Lead Painted Window, Children's Toy Blocks, Plywood.



Image 8: Michael Kuschnir, *Outlook*, 2012. Cotton Paper, Drywall, and Paint.  
Dimensions : Variable



Image 9: Michael Kuschnir, *Outlook*, 2012. Cotton Paper, Drywall, and Paint.  
Dimensions : Variable. Detail



Image 10: Michael Kuschnir, *Outlook*, 2012. Cotton Paper, Drywall, and Paint.  
Dimensions : Variable. Detail.



Image 11: Michael Kuschnir, *Through the Windows*, 2012. Found Objects, Drywall, Wood. Dimensions : 8 ft x 8 ft x 3 ft



Image 12: Michael Kuschnir, *Through the Windows*, 2012. Found Objects, Drywall, Wood. Dimensions : 8 ft x 8 ft x 3 ft.

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