

Sensorial shifts: transforming the contours of sight and form

By Virginia Arce

Two of the foundational tools that we use in our sensorial navigation of the world are sight and touch. Each is crucial for the ability to discern visual structure and physical form. Even when sight is subtracted from this operation, physical form remains, anchoring our worldly orientation. The works in the exhibition *Form is the outline and structure of a thing present* us with three distinct strategies in transforming the contours of the structures and things they re-present: historical and media images and mass-produced objects. Kristin Morgin's sculptures devote labor and add physical hyper-fragility to recreations of mass produced objects; Deanna Erdmann's externally lit news media sourced images divorce photographs from a fixed reading; while Carly Steward's collages create new forms from physical absences within existing photographic documentation. By transforming the contours of the objects they re-create and shifting visual order, these works remove our visual groundings and play with our sensorial navigation.

In his seminal essay, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Vilem Flusser reflected on the nature of images as significant surfaces. "*Images signify – mainly – something 'out there' in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions.*"¹ What we see when we are looking at a photographic collage by Carly Steward, for example, is an inversion of the process Flusser described. In creating these collages, Steward selected images from art history books such as *Brancusi Photographer*, physically cutting out the image of specific sculptures, leaving visible only the supporting pedestal.² Looking at these collages, we are presented with aggregate layers of cut-out forms on paper, which, in turn, create new sculptural forms. The subsequent image still signifies something 'out there' in space and time, complete with the physical trace of its creation visible in the frayed paper edges seen in the photographs. However, Steward's

¹ Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (London, Reaktion Books LTD, 2000)

² Brancusi, Constantin, *Brancusi, photographer*, (New York, Agrinde Publications, 1979)

process does not make the objects we see in her collages easily discernable. This is a particularly intriguing strategy as it disrupts the quick visual-scan manner in which art historical photographs are most often viewed. Because we cannot immediately identify what the object we are looking at is, the collages gift our vision with an opportunity to solve a visual puzzle.

Similarly, Deanna Erdmann's photographic constructions of images sourced from the New York Times also shifts our visual groundings, soliciting us to engage *actively* in looking, rather than passively glossing over image and surface. Erdman sourced image content from the NYT online, strategically removing elements of the photographs in order to enhance and abstract the source material. In untitled (12.08.14) – a light box construction – we look through six layers of visual fragments on clear Plexiglas. Through these layers we see elements of urban landscapes, human forms, silhouettes of rifles raised in the air, a loudspeaker, the palate of dusk, and what appears to be a still life beneath these layers of fragments placed in an inverted orientation. Although we can distinguish fragments of images, we are denied the illusion of a singular scene. Erdman's aim is not to orient us within a world – within a *mise-en-scene* – rather it is to enhance our disorientation through the very images meant to provide some sort of semblance of familiarity. The transparently reconfigurable nature of Erdman's images absolves them from following a set visual order. As such, they are removed from the horizon that would ordinarily make them easily understood and recognized. We instead arrive at these constructions at one of many potential manifestations. In so doing, Erdmann considers the viewer's past experiences with media images, and, like Steward's collages, proposes a divergent visual and conceptual approach to unraveling them. Both practices offer distinct exercises in seeing.

As previously mentioned, touch is another primary tool with which we navigate the world. And just as the aforementioned works exercise our ocular senses by way of disruption, the works in this exhibition also exercise our palpable understanding of the everyday. Enter Kristin Morgin's sculptures, which add a hyper-tactile element to shifts in sight and transformation of surface. Morgin's works re-create objects of mass

production and consumption – playing cards, magazines, game boards – from hyper-delicate unfired clay, which is then painted and labored to identically resemble the actual referent. Unlike the objects the sculptures mimic, Morgin's work require extreme care in handling due to the brittle nature of their materiality. For instance, *Monopoly* (2007) – an unfired clay sculpture – is a hyper-detailed recreation of a full Monopoly game set, complete with money and tokens. The entire board game, moreover, has been treated to resemble the wear of time on the surface of each piece. Indeed, the illusive tactile quality of the work invites viewers to touch the pieces. And yet, the pieces would be destroyed if they were handled with anything less than total delicate care. Thinking about the process involved in making *Monopoly* – where a referent has been diligently re-created from elemental building materials – seems to counter Flusser's observation that images make the world discernible through an abstract operation which flattens space and time. The images that Morgin recreates on the surface of the *Monopoly* pieces are not necessarily significant because they represent something in time. Rather, they represent the artist's dual investment in both labor and the everyday disposable thing. Whereas Edrman and Steward's works prompt us to exercise the ways in which we quickly scan images and move on to the next, Morgin's works prompt us to reevaluate our relationship to things, no matter how seemingly commonplace they may be. We arrive at her works after they have been carefully studied, observed, and physically re-created. As viewers, we thus encounter these sculptures with a sense of curiosity as to their assemblage and transition into a space of astonishment at the degree of skill required to create them.

Form is the outline and structure of a thing brings together three distinct strategies of actively shifting and transforming the way we look at images and commonplace objects. This operation is important because it prompts us to consider how we understand visual representations of the everyday and how we see ourselves fitting into those representations. In reflecting upon the significant role images play in providing us with sensorial contours and structures of the world – functioning as compasses in navigating and locating ourselves within it - I am drawn again to Flusser's observations: "*Images are mediations between the world and human beings.... They are supposed to be maps*

but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create."³ As viewers, we arrive at these works at varying points in their manifestations. We meet them after they have been transformed by being cut, re-flattened, spliced, reorganized, and labored all in an effort to exercise our vision and reveal the screens of mediation. As such, they are tools to help us re-sharpen our sense of sight and structure. We, in turn, have been considered throughout the entire processes by which these works have been created, in an effort to transform the elements of the everyday. Through the labored and thoughtful re-working of select images, surfaces, and source materials, Erdmann, Morigin, and Steward invite us to re-evaluate our practice of looking and evaluating where we, as subjects, locate ourselves in the world of images.

³ Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (London, Reaktion Books LTD, 2000)

Bibliography:

Flusser, Vilem, Towards a Philosophy of Photography. London: Reaktion Books LTD,
2000

Brancusi, Constantin, Brancusi, photographer. New York: Agrinde Publications, 1979