

Artificial Sculpture: Notes

Michael Rees

Artist's Statement

Artificial Sculpture

Michael Rees, with Chris Burnett

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Artificial Sculpture: Artist's Statement

At this time, it is almost impossible not to be interested in everything. Genetic engineering grows human ears on the backs of mice. The heads of two chimpanzees are transposed. We're building guitars at molecular levels (nano technology). Artificial intelligence creates an ecology of the survival of the aesthetically fittest. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari speak metaphorically of rhizomes, while PC's are organized in hierarchical trees. Hypertext has supplanted older, rigid classification systems encouraging links that recombine information in ever more idiosyncratic ways. Media space is out of control, an absurd image machine. The world and its structures must be vincreasingly maintained against these idiosyncrasies.

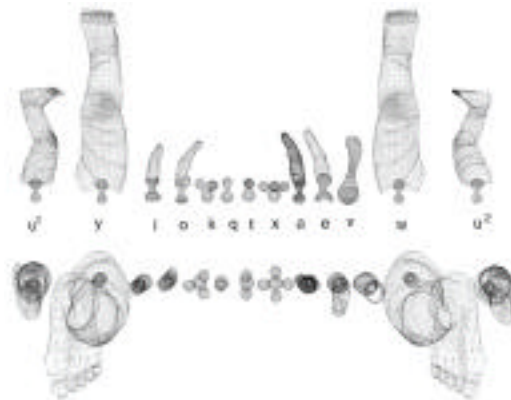
So many of these innovations were first set down as works of whimsy and imagination. In *Gulliver's Travels*, 17th century satirist Jonathan Swift, described an automatic text generation machine run by academics. Today it's a computer. Renaissance architect Leone Battista Alberti used a 'miracle box' to demonstrate the wonders of perspective. Now, that box has become a computer. In the 60s and 70s, 'multimedia' was a term used to describe an installation that might include a pile of bricks, some sand in the corner, a television monitor with fuzz or images of repetitive acts performed by an artist. Today multimedia has been co-opted by the computer industry as the central focus of its cutting-edge commercial endeavors.

The tools of imagination have accelerated at the speed of light. I am looking at a computer screen brought to me by light. I print this text using lasers in a spectrum considered light. Many of my sculptures are generated with lasers that harden photopolymer fulfilling the real meaning of photography — to write with light. As we get nearer and nearer to the speed of light, things are looking very strange indeed. We've been preparing for this environment, but no one saw it coming so fast. Yet in the history of mankind it is a blip. It is hardly a nanosecond in geological time.

There is a generative quality to sculpture and computer work at this moment that is fascinating — Pygmalion on a rampage. To that end, I have begun to focus on the comparative problems of Artificial Intelligence against the backdrop of my work from 1992-95. Although more clumsy than my new work, these early sculptures had an instinct of Artificial Intelligence about them and were loosely based on the problems of creating organisms that were simple 'input/output' devices. These input/output systems consisted of fingers cast from my hand and arranged

around long PVC pipes. Just as they referenced zoological study and classification they also looked toward intuitive systems like palmistry or phrenology, systems that may or may not be false. They used realistic objects as signifiers for language systems, quite the opposite of abstractions and yet extremely abstract. They referred to Hindu sculpture and their mudras, yet combined with fingers cast so delicately a palmist could read their lines. They looked as if they were grabbing and letting go, grabbing and letting go. Something more was waiting inside the work. I wasn't ready for it in 1992. Now, it's ready for me.

Artificial Sculpture combines various objects and media. There is an installation with hand assembled sculptures created from CAD (Computer Aided Design) and 3D printing (Rapid Prototyping). There is an animation of the CAD designs and the early conceptual drawings for the project. There is also a piece of software called a *Sculptural User Interface*[®] which synthesizes language, image and object in an environment that can generate all three. (This interface was developed in collaboration with Kansas City artist Chris Burnett.)



Michael Rees, *Study for Artificial Sculpture*, CAD rendering, 1999.

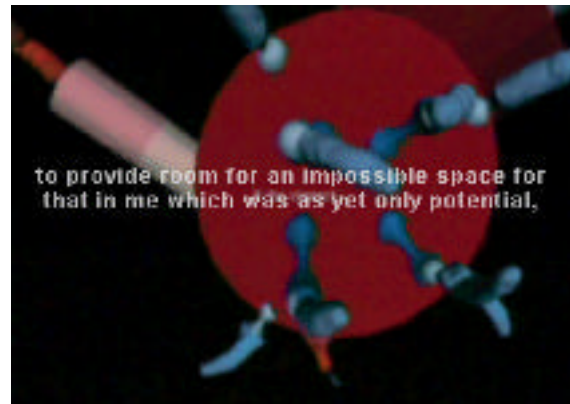
All of the work in the exhibition emanates from CAD. *Artificial Sculpture* is a kind of “thinker toy.” It is modular (fingers, legs, handles, connectors and bodies) and can be seen as a language that grows exponentially. The modules were created in CAD and output in 3D printing. They were then silicon molded and multiple parts were manufactured from the molds. The final objects were assembled manually into the elements of a larger sculptural installation. They follow a strict branching structure that sprouts fingers on their ends. As such, they are hierarchical structures that combine a global language (the assembly of the Y-branches from PVC pipe) and a colloquial language (the legs, fingers, handles, etc.).

The *Sculptural User Interface*[®] sequences projected onto the gallery wall were the basis for the installation's sculptures. They suggest ways that they might move, defy gravity and inhabit space, and refer viewers to the early conceptual drawings that suggest the scope of the work.

The *Sculptural User Interface*[®] software (available to viewers on the installation's computer) is

a combined program that employs all of the objects seen in the installation. Users can interact with the program graphically by typing letters or words onto a keyboard to generate sculptures. It's a kind of social sculpture generated out of a Frankenstein software apparatus. Eventually users will be able to acquire the program and generate their own custom images. They also will be able to replace the existing 3D library with their own library of images or combine elements of both.

The physical sculptures in the installation and the software sculptures floating in projected space are two sides of the same coin. They share some similarities, but are also drastically different. The physical sculpture modules, although momentarily frozen in this installation, can



Detail from *Artificial Sculpture*. On the left, the physical manifestation of the *Fifth Element*. On the right, a similar image from the *Sculptural User Interface*®.

and will grow into complex objects in the same way that the software grows sculptures. The physical sculptures, however, have weight, texture, gravity and a physical presence. The software has none of this. The software is unconstrained by these elements and facilitates a kind of infinite growth of form based upon language. Strangely each approach to sculpture, the physical and the virtual, informs the other. Stranger still, each can become the other. It's a kind of hall of mirrors, but one in which the viewer never stands between the mirrors, except by implication.

The work is developed out of a sense of 'what if'? The installation is a laboratory of sorts, out of which the issues of sculpture — in this age of the fluid interaction of information — are developed, examined, and partially classified. Despite the fact that every aspect of the show is realized in new media, it has grown out of my interest in physical sculpture.

For better or for worse, all this has an intellectual component that is investigative. I sometimes yearn for the time when just making something cool was enough. Today, I can't help but scan the horizon of our digital landscape to attempt to locate myself within it. It resembles the past and redefines it. It is a direct outgrowth of ideas that began in the 15th century, if not before. Yet today, there is a reality to the issues of representation as expressed in the computer which

are an order of magnitude more complex than the theoretical issues surrounding representation and pictorial veracity. Artists are very clear on the fact that a photograph is silver emulsion on paper, not a person. In short, we know we are ‘lying’ when we represent something. I suspect that a large percentage of the population looks at a photograph of their mother and says, “Here is my mother.”¹ It is our unusual pictorial sensibility that renders it a person. I wonder if the generation of thinkers who have created Artificial Intelligence or artificial life are equally clear. This seems to be an important point, to me, a critical overlay to an overwhelmingly seductive space. I am sure that “tangled hierarchies” such as this (“All Cretins are liars, I’m a Cretin”) are not lost on these thinkers. Yet many are tenacious in their defense of their real.

The intellectual component of my work leads me around by the nose. Each time I wish to make a claim or stake a territory with my work, that territory becomes ambiguous. The more I try to engage that ambiguity the more I realize that I cannot desolve it in language. It is equally clear that one cannot reach beyond the net of language or perception. In contrast to this, the universe is modulated by perception. (That is to say, that as we describe it, it is a cultural phenomena, one bound by our perceptions with all of the biological, social, historical, and other qualities that constitute culture.) Finally, I’m aware that regardless of the media used, one has a persistent feeling that one is in possession of something ‘real’ yielded from the ritual of creating art or intelligence. For better or worse, this impossible space, this weird tension, this intellectually unresolvable dilemma gets me up in the morning, sometimes to disprove it, sometimes to savor it.

Endnote

1. As an aside, I wonder if this isn’t the attraction of abstraction. Abstraction can be true in a way that representational work is not and yet it is so utterly clear that the human mind has created abstraction as an elaborate kind of representation. (Even if it is an investigation of the structures behind the structure.) Unfortunately, its veracity has been equally compromised.

Michael Rees (www.michaelrees.com)

Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

- 1989 MFA Sculpture, **Yale University**, New Haven, CN.
- 1984 Kunstakademie, **Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst** grant, Dusseldorf, Germany.
- 1982 BFA Sculpture, **Kansas City Art Institute**, Kansas City, MO.
- 1978 **Vassar College**, Poughkeepsie, NY. Attended two years.

SELECTED SOLO INSTALLATIONS AND EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 *Artificial Sculpture*, **Forum For Contemporary Art**, St. Louis, MO.
Mel Watkin, Curator. Funded by **the National Endowment for the Arts**.
- 1998 *From Ear to Ear*, **Central Fine Arts**, Inc., New York, NY.
The Ecstatic Body, **Grand Arts**, Kansas City, MO.
Michael Rees, **Gallerie Simone Stern**, New Orleans, LA.
- 1997 *Digital Psyche*, **The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design**,
Kansas City, MO. Dana Self, Curator.
- 1995 *Homo Noeticus*, **Basilico Fine Arts**, New York, NY.
- 1993 *Michael Rees*, **Basilico Fine Arts**, New York, NY.
- 1991 *Michael Rees*, **303 Gallery**, New York, NY.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *N0Ise*, a series of exhibitions about information and transformation. Kettle's Yard, the Whipple Museum of the History of Science, The Cambridge University Museum of archaeology and Anthropology. Adam Lowe and Simon Shaffer, curators.
Charlotte Street Fund 1999, **H&R Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute**, Raechelle Smith, Curator.
- 1999 *Digital Hybrids*, **the McDonough Museum of Art**, Youngstown, OH.
InterSculpt, **The City Hall of the 6th Arrondissement**, Paris, France.
Simultaneous exhibitions in Manchester, England, Tempe, Arizona, Cincinnati, Ohio, Hong Kong. Mind Into Matter, The Computer Museum, Boston, MA.
- 1998 *Pop Surrealism*, **The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art**, Connecticut
Richard Klein, Dominique Nahsas, Ingrid Schaffner, Curators.
(re)Mediation: The Digital in Contemporary American Printmaking, **University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum**. Margaret A. Miller, Jade Dellinger, Curators

- The Spatial Qualities of the Digital Print: from Printmaking to Sculpture*
Calcografica Nacional, Madrid, Spain. Adam Lowe, Curator.
- New Surrealism*, **Pamela Achincloss Gallery**, New York, NY.
- 1997 *Dead Fit Beauty*, **Hunter College Gallery of Art**, New York, NY. Peter Dudek, curator.
- A Natural Selction*, **Central Fine Arts**, New York, NY. Dominique Nahas, Curator.
- 1996 *Perspective Kansas City*, **Johnson County Community College Gallery of Art**, Kansas City, MO. Dan Camerson, Curator.
- A Vital Matrix*, exhibition and edition, **Domesitc Settings, Los Angeles**, CA. Jane Hart, Curator.
- Imaginary Anatomy*, **Pasinger Fabrik**, Munich, Germany.
- 1995 *The 1995 Whitney Biennial* , **The Whitney Museum of AmericanArt**, New York, NY. Klaus Kertess, Curator.
- Summer Fling*, **Basilico Fine Art**, New York, NY.
- Group Exhibition*, **Schmidt Contemporary Art**, St. Louis, MO.
- Brave New World*, **Christopher Grimes Gallery**, Santa Monica, CA.
- 1994 *The Figure as Fiction*, **The Cincinnati Art Center**, Cincinnati, OH.
- Drawing on Sculpture*, **Cohen Gallery**, New York, NY.
- 1993 *Ghost Limb*, **Basilico Fine Arts**, New York, NY.
- Displace*, **Cohen Gallery**, New York, NY.
- The Elusive Object: Recent Sculpture from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art*, **The Whitney Museum of American Art** at Champion, Stanford, CT.
- 1992 *Group exhibition*, **Tony Schafrazi Gallery**, New York, NY. Jonathon Seliger, curator.
- Group Show*, **Rubenstein Diacono Gallery**, New York, NY. Jonathon Seliger, curator.
- 1991 *Four Site*, **Spaces**, Cleveland , OH.
- Breathing Room*, **Amy Lipton Gallery**, New York, NY.
- 1988 *Hudson River Open*, **Hudson River Museum**, Yonkers, NY.
- Three Sculptors*, **Madison Gallery**, Madison, CT.
- 1987 *Action Rees/Geismar*, 285 West Broadway, New York, NY.
- Breathing*, **2B The Gas Station**, New York, NY.
- Combustive Nights*, **2B The Gas Station**, New York, NY.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1999 Daniel, Jeff. "Without a Heavy Hand, Exhibit Reflects Impending Millenium," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, December 12, 1999.
- 1998 Colman, David. "Art and Architecture," *Elle Decor*, December/January, 1998.
- Murphy, Jay. "Michael Rees:ProtoPsyches," *World Art*, Fall, 1998.
- Thorson, Alice. "Michael Rees," *Art in America*, October, 1998.
- Fifield, George. "Printing in 3D: Digital Sculpture," *Sculpture*, May/June, 1998.

- Nahas, Dominique. "Above & Beyond Surreal," *Review*, January 15, 1998.
- Jones, Bill. "I think therefore it is: Interview with Michael Rees," *Artbyte*, March, 1998.
- Nahas, Dominique. "Michael Rees," *New Art Examiner*, April, 1998.
- Lawson, Jonathon. "Art Versus Technology," *Prototyping Technology International*, January/March, 1998.
- Smith-Moritz, Geoff. "Sculpture via Freeform Fabrication," *Rapid Prototyping Report*, May, 1998.
- Mickett, Carol, *Arts Radio*, **KKFI**, Kansas City, Mo., 30-minute interview, May, 1998.
- 1997 Thorson, Alice. "They're Allive," *The Kansas City Star*, Sunday, December 14, 1997.
- Marcoci, Roxana, Diana Murphy, Eve Sinaiko, eds., *New Art*, Henry Abrams, Inc., 1997.
- Landi, Ann. "Material Developments," *Art News*, November, 1997.
- Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review: Dead Fit Beauty," *New York Times*, Friday, Feb 28, 1997.
- Nahas, Dominique. "Review; Dead Fit Beauty," *Review*, February, 1997.
- Jones, Bill. "Prospectus for Hands on Paper," *Hands On Paper*, Fall, 1997.
- Moritz-Smith, Geoff. "Digital Art of Michael Rees," *Rapid Prototyping Report*, February, 1997.
- 1996 Lord, Roberta. "The Architecture of Dreams," *New Times*, Kansas City, Mo., June, 1996.
- Hart, Jane. *A Vital Matrix*, catalogue for the exhibition, Domestic Settings, Los Angeles, Calif., 1996.
- 1995 Kertiss, Klaus. *1995 Biennial Exhibition*, catalogue of the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1995.
- 1994 Salz, Jerry. "Michael Rees at Basilico Fine Arts," *Art in America*, March, 1995.
- 1993 Weil, Benjamin. "Displace," *Art in America*, New York, N.Y., 1993.
- 1991 Smith, Roberta. "Michael Rees," *New York Times*, Friday, June 21, 1991.
- Denson, G Roger. "Spotlight: Michael Rees," *Flash Art*, October/November, 1991.
- Ritchie, Matthew. "Review: Michael Rees," *Flash Art*, January, 1991.
- Dechter, Joshua. "Michael Rees," *Arts Magazine*, October, 1991.
- Meyers, Terry R. "Michael Rees," *Tema Celeste*, Fall, 1991.

PUBLICATIONS AND LECTURES BY THE ARTIST

- 1999 Rees, Michael. "Words Around Objects," paper given to the French Senate Palais Du Luxembourg, Paris, France. October 8, 1999.

- 1998 Rees, Michael. "Teachart: Notes on Arts Education: Reading the Tea Leaves," *New Observations*, Spring, 1998.
- Rees, Michael. Chair of the Online conference "Rapid Prototyping and Art" and co-chair of the Conference "Color in Rapid Prototyping", hosted by the MCB University Press at <http://www.mcb.co.uk/services/conferen/jun98/forp/>. Proceedings published in the *Rapid Prototyping Journal*, 1998.
- Rees, Michael. "Shape Displacement Shading", *Prototyping Technology International*, Issue 3, March 1998.
- Rees, Michael. "Rage Against the Machine," *Prototyping Technology International*, Annual Edition, 1998.
- Rees, Michael. "Color: Completing Rapid Prototyping as a Mature Communications Media," *Prototyping Technology International*, Issue 4, May 1998.
- Rees, Michael. "Color," *Artbyte*, August-September 1998, Vol. 1, No. 3.
- Rees, Michael. "Rapid Prototyping and Art," conference proceedings of Rapid Prototyping Conference hosted by the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, Dearborn, Mich., May 1998
- Rees Michael. "Facets and Fingerprints: Contemplating the Computer and Sculpture," Paper given at The International Sculpture Conference, Chicago, Illin., May 1998.
- 1997 Rees, Michael. "Rapid Prototyping: Realizing Convolutd Form and Nesting in Sculpture," *Protopazione and Produzione Rapida*, February, 1997
- Rees, Michael "Concept Modelers," *Prototyping Technology International*, Issue 1, Summer, 1997.
- Rees, Michael, "That's a Print: Various uses of 3D Printing in the Film Industry," *Prototyping Technology International*, Issue 2, October, 1997.
- 1993 Rees, Michael. "Yale Sculpture," *Flash Art*, May/June, 1993.

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 1999 The Charlotte Street Fund, Kansas City, MO.
- 1992 Research and Development Grant, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH
- 1991 Research and Development Grant, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH
- 1989 Schickle Collingswood Award, Yale University, New Haven, CT
- 1983/4 Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), Dusseldorf, Germany

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.
- Edelman Foundation, Lauzanne, Switzerland.