

**SculptureCenter**  
**44-19 Purves Street**  
**Long Island City, New York 11101**  
**t 718.361.1750**  
**f 718.786.9336**  
**info@sculpture-center.org**  
**www.sculpture-center.org**

## Knight's Move

By Fionn Meade

As the one piece on the board that moves either forward or backward but always laterally in the same gesture, the knight's move is a tactical one, relying upon stealth, surprise, and sidelong views. And yet it's also a gambit that demands ingenuity and a swift response. It's both Buster Keaton dodging into an alleyway as the pursuit rushes by, and the capacity to think two or three moves ahead. In New York, a city constantly reinventing the present, the knight's move evokes an embrace of the episodic and ever shifting, a willingness to articulate, envision, and stage what comes next. French philosopher Michel de Certeau considered New York to be a place of synecdoche and sudden alteration, prone to mobility, variation, and spatial permutation rather than panoptic, voyeuristic, or scopic views of the action.<sup>1</sup> Having entered affirmatively into the fray, the knight's move exists in a similar register of the present and impending even as it is subject to errancy, reversal, and waiting to be called upon. It is a gesture that acknowledges convention and code but in such a way as to engage indeterminacy and thereby step into the mix of revelations, dead ends, and experiential leaps that characterize art making.

This survey of new sculpture in New York embodies an informed yet playful and questioning view of the contemporary. Has Modernism and its various aftermaths approached the status of an inventory to be studied, borrowed from, and traded upon in ways that move beyond the anxiety of influence and endgame maneuvers? How can strategies of estrangement, appropriation, and abstraction exist alongside direct engagements with materiality, figuration, and storytelling? Can the makeshift, readymade, and precarious exist in dialogue with the meticulous, obsessive, and finely crafted? Does political agency require a process of collaborative rehearsal? And how has the status of production challenged the presumed roles of performer and observer, director and spectator? These questions and other related inquiries arise through the bringing together of artists who have prominently contributed to the dialogue of New York's recent past as well as those at the very beginning of their careers.

Taken from a remarkable book by the Russian theorist Viktor Shklovsky, published in 1923, the title *Knigh't's Move* recalls a separate proposal put forth by Shklovsky shortly after the Russian revolution, namely that a dynamic central to art's efficacy is its ability to "impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known," a defamiliarizing effect that helps "make forms difficult, in order to increase the length of

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92

perception.”<sup>2</sup> Alex Hubbard’s recent video, *Screens for Recalling the Blackout*, 2009, enacts such a delay, bringing perceptual duration squarely into the frame of materiality and self-reflexive scenarios. In the video a circular tracking shot is positioned outward to inspect a large interior space—akin to a production set—and prefab construction materials parceled, stacked, and leaned against the walls. Repeatedly on screen, the artist manipulates an abundance of props into view, staying just ahead of the camera. Adopting the conceit of a time-lapse, the video’s well-chosen cuts keep the viewer focused on a perpetual aftermath, never quite arriving at a definitive moment before the sequence shifts and materials are shuffled; walls slide into view, cinder blocks stack up only to tumble down, and glossy tile finishes and faux panels pass before the camera, a carousel of rough-hewn building materials and consumer-grade décor paraded before the viewer like so many scenic backdrops. And yet the intimated confrontation between the camera and the production never occurs, prompting a few crucial questions: Is the studio artist relegated to nothing beyond their references? Has the intention and immediacy of the performative gesture been exhausted? Are we left to build with readymade materials that appear increasingly discarded and expired even before having been used? Of course the work itself rehearses these questions through a restive form of renewal and potentiality. Rather than declaim against the dispersed status of art today, it performs and undoes its references and positions in order to put the question of agency back in motion. It makes a supposition, building parameters of critique and response into the support of the work.<sup>3</sup> Here, Hubbard re-inscribes and exploits the gap between gesture and effect.

To embrace the economy of the gap implies that one must risk enacting a position or series of positions rather than providing direct commentary. For example, in David Brooks’s large-scale installations, arguments that pit culture against nature collapse, and a built environment that encompasses such false divides takes on new meaning within the confines of the exhibition space. Take, for example, *Naturae Vulgaris*, 2009, in which a city sidewalk was forcibly made to fit within a Lower East Side gallery, elevated via a gantry system to suspend a tree upwards toward a receding patch of skylight in the back of the space. Exposing the toxic substrate of cement that increasingly defines every corner of our urban infrastructure, Brooks’s absurd and laborious ecological inversions often deploy the footprint and display structures of parks and nature reserves—boardwalks, observation decks, concourses—to underscore what Jacques Rancière has termed the “partition of the sensible” occurring in such false oppositions as nature/culture, appearance/reality, and looking/acting.<sup>4</sup>

Also playing off perceived oppositions, Virginia Poundstone questions the conventional distance maintained between handcrafted and readymade objects in displays that likewise explore our increasingly mediated view of the natural world. Bringing the lush possibilities of outsourced photographic imagery into proximity with highly contingent ceramic abstractions, Poundstone skews the panoramic expectation of oversized pictures, making them serve as backdrops for fragmented monuments. Her recent installation, *Illiquid*, 2009, repurposed a photo of a verdant Himalayan valley, adhering it to the wall and across the floor. Severed and askew, the image ruptures conventional figure-ground expectations. Such conventions are further impaired by a kitchen-counter-like pedestal on which sits a forlorn but colorful ceramic shape held together by foam. A patchwork response to the riven, suspended image of nature is put before us, incipient but nevertheless taking shape.

Inverting time and nature takes practice and a willingness to linger over seemingly incidental encounters in order to get the feel of how a gap can be occupied and made articulate. In Uri Aran’s practice, sculptures and videos adopt the comedic atmosphere of genre forms, inflecting them with the slippage of metaphysical doubt. Often interrupting or transparently repeating sentimental gestures, Aran imbues discrete, everyday objects and material

---

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” *Theory of Prose*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1991, 7

<sup>3</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman writes: “It means producing a hypothesis—also ‘underneath’—which then becomes capable of offering not only the principal ‘subject’ of a work of art, but also its deepest principle.” Didi-Huberman, “The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, The Then, and Modernity,” Richard Francis, ed. *Negotiating Rapture* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 51

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” (2004), reprinted in *Artforum*, March, 2007, 277

with a displaced pathos. *All This Is Yours*, 2010, for example, strips down a sweatshop-sewing table to its bare frame, drilling into it and placing cookies and other odd mementos amid the wood shavings. Evoking absence through the most meager means, the impoverished tableaux is accompanied by an outmoded black-and-white television that loops the closing credits of a melodramatic Hollywood movie in which a boy and his black horse frolic on an idyllic beach. As such, Aran's corrupted and hapless approach to object making utilizes discarded materials to achieve a concentric sadness that only comes through embracing and exhausting absurdity.

The sustained wit of Esther Kläs's cumbersome sculptures stems from the impression that they've just been heaved into place after a long journey from a strange land. Set down as specimens that are exemplary for their beauty and elegance, they might trouble some viewers. Comically imbalanced, each sculpture favors a certain side or direction. Some lurch, others dump, and always they articulate their parted separateness. In *come away with me*, 2009, for instance, a rectangular volume of cement is puzzled neatly into an adjacent MDF form at a right angle; forming an L-shape, the wood half hosts a bright red form cast in plaster and resin that resembles a mishandled ziggurat or jumbled Mayan temple. Nonchalant and forlorn, the material pleasure and forthright attitude of Kläs's sculptures makes a virtue of things gone amiss.

Similarly, Joanna Malinowska's work orbits a world of unlikely occurrences and resurrections. A technician of wry correspondences, Malinowska stirs up old debates through aligning the incongruent and improbable. For a recent exhibition, the artist positioned an exaggerated replica of a West African boli, a talismanic bovine figure, opposite an inkjet facsimile of Kasimir Malevich's iconic *Black Square* painting, 1915, resulting in an ironic face-off between an object and image that once oriented entire symbolic orders. Often beginning with a desire to reinterpret and communicate with the animistic past, Malinowska inevitably and profitably detours from her original intent, as with her video *Umanaqtuq*, 2007, which found the artist traveling to Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic to follow in the footsteps of anthropologist Franz Boas, who did his first field research there, only to result in a portrait of Jimmy Ekho, an Inuit folk musician and Elvis impersonator.

Unexpected convergences unfold in Tom Thayer's multifaceted practice as he engages experimental music, puppetry, animation, and collage to depict worlds turned upside down. Recent landscape animations borrow from the flicker and glitch of analog television technology to overlay and collage images of color-saturated, barren vistas that oscillate and jitter to a droning, minimal soundtrack. Reminiscent of Duchamp's mock waterfall that glistens in the backdrop of *Étant donnés*, Thayer's artifice leans toward the crude and haunting. His stop-motion animation, *Old Smelly Haircut*, 2009, follows a young boy busy drawing everything he encounters, including a wave of destruction that ultimately includes a stranger's arm reaching inside his head. Thayer's vision emerges from an Americana that is something like noise band-meets Grimm's folktale-meets Tim Burton-meets eBay purveyor-meets Jockum Nordstrom-like drawing and collage.

To build something up via one technique and transpose it into another exploits the interval between mediums as a way of destabilizing conventional ways of seeing. Erin Shirreff's new photo series, "Signature," 2010, achieves a syncopated effect precisely in its mis-registration. Analog photographs of recent sculptures are cut in half and then pieced together to create "whole" compositions. Like a single image that, once bound in the same signature of a book, is split into two, Shirreff's reconstructed images seem out of sequence, and yet intimately linked, like siblings. Shirreff's recent videos, such as *Ansel Adams, RCA Building, circa 1940*, 2009, and *Roden Crater*, 2009, likewise put still images in motion by taking hundreds of photographs of one image under subtly changing light conditions; these are then edited together into HD, and a time-lapse effect full of suggestive detail and presence results. Adopting a similar approach, *UN 2010*, 2010, takes up the iconic status of the United Nations Secretariat building as rendered and reanimated by Shirreff from across the East River in Long Island City. The portrait gains its strength from distance and remove, the emphasis being the blank regard of the structure's sheer face, rather than its obvious political import or architectural significance (it was designed by Le Corbusier and

Oscar Niemeyer). Both passive and mesmeric, incommensurability takes over in Shirreff's deliberate approach, shifting what appears to be legible and staid back into the phenomenological realm.

Tamar Halpern employs both analog and digital photography in her recent work, which includes vertiginous images gathered on nighttime walks through her Brooklyn neighborhood, as well as tabletop and floor assemblages composed of fragmentary materials, layered surfaces, and gathered ephemera. Updating accumulation strategies, flatbed composition techniques, and postering effects that extend back to figures as diverse as Robert Rauschenberg, Barry Le Va, and Jacques Villeglé, the overlay of Halpern's imagery collapses the incidental views of urban drift with the accretion of studio detritus. The resulting images are digitally layered and often printed out in strips that are then roughly sutured into composites, which Halpern then works over with ink, paint, and solvent. Beholden to neither painting nor photography, the images' indexical impression recedes even as the optical illusion of depth and a sculptural substrata remains, providing evidentiary background noise to the stuttering incursions of color, gesture, and materiality in Halpern's deviant pictures.

The back-and-forth nature of Nikolas Gambaroff's peripatetic studio practice is likewise always subject to revision. Provisional support structures get framed out to display a series of abstract canvases rearranged via performance and audience participation; sketchbook designs and studio residue accrete into a pattern that is photocopied and duplicated, intimating a hermetic script that is a recurrent background for new paintings; a series of fictional writings imagine the meditations of his great-grandfather in turn-of-the-century Vienna, providing a parallel activity to his painting installation for the Layr Wuestenhagen gallery in Vienna today. In other words, the overly prescribed setting for so-called serious painting is plundered and ventriloquized through an ongoing series of self-induced crises of representation that nevertheless betray Gambaroff's desire and ability to provoke, perform, and continue the gestural efficacy of painting.

The tacking motion of Gambaroff's serial asides recalls another of Michel de Certeau's assertions regarding mobility and spatial authority that the act of telling makes possible: "The story's first function is to authorize, or more exactly, to found... It even has distributive power and performative force (it does what it says) when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the founding of space through tactical maneuvering opens up room for interpretation, as in the work of Matt Sheridan Smith, which amounts to a perpetual disappearing act. Adopted from a game played by characters in Argentine writer Julio Cortázar's novel *Hopscotch* (published in English in 1966), Smith's newest text pieces—either stenciled directly onto the wall or displayed as unfolded notes—bring together the lexical definitions of rare or often technical words that either look alike or sound alike, wedding their articulations through a hypothetical conjunction and letting the words themselves recede. The poetic hybrids that result overturn the rhetorical procedures of Conceptual art often evoked in Sheridan Smith's work. Instead of Joseph Kosuth's contention that "a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art," we are left with: "A fit of fever or shaking chills, accompanied by malaise, pains in the bones, etc; chill, isn't that an army on march, a throng, a crowd?" Having more in common with John Ashbery's melancholic, loosely system-generated self-portraits than the administrative gloss of dematerialized practices of the past, Sheridan Smith's texts rely on rhetorical devices that repeatedly make his references, which often include himself, disappear.

Spatial relations determined through the act of telling are related to the built-in resistance within story forms that remain unruly and restless. To cite de Certeau once more, such stories are characterized by a propensity for reinscribing limits. "If the delinquent exists only by displacing itself, if its specific mark is to live not on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces...then the story is delinquent."<sup>6</sup> Alexandre Singh's

---

<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 123

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

ongoing series “Assembly Instructions” is composed of associative, rhizomatic displays of just such a sensibility. Photocopied and framed collages are literally connected by graphite dots that spin off into a dizzying array of references and tangents from a given topic. Singh’s often-whimsical alternative histories and suggestions for the future hijack the forms of diagrammatic flowcharts of corporate research and development strategies. The impact of artworks that were never made by Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein is explored, the mnemonic devices used by Ikea in their warehouse displays are speculated on, and the tangential logic of dreams and mental illness is traced. Reiterated in performative lectures illustrated by overhead transparencies from an ever-expanding archive of collaged imagery, Singh’s storytelling devices are prodigious, spawning large-scale installations, a novel, and a forthcoming play.

A delinquent sensibility is marked by the undoing and displacement of codes. Insisting upon a singular relationship to its own time, it inhabits and seeks out interstitial spaces in order to maintain a distinctive distance from predominant views and consensus. Not unlike recurring fashion trends, a delinquent style is always capable of returning to the past in order to keep the present off balance and open. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben has recently proposed, perhaps the contemporary is inextricably bound with the untimely, “that relationship with time that adheres to it through disjunction and an anachronism.”<sup>7</sup> Stepping beyond the relativistic anxiety of market influences, art-historical continuity, and the pursuit of critical mantles, the sensibility that is delinquent and untimely challenges that which is merely novel as being the defining characteristic of the contemporary. Agamben goes one step further in proposing “only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary.”<sup>8</sup>

Many of Sara VanDerBeek’s photographs feature discrete sculptural set-ups that deftly reference not only archaic effigies, but also appropriated imagery and Modern design. VanDerBeek culls from an archive of found imagery, discarded ephemera, and pre-fabricated materials to assemble objects and affix pictures onto small-scale sculptural armatures, often juxtaposing vintage magazine and book cut-outs with material finishes that recall, in turn, Minimalist sculpture, Constructivist theater platforms, Tatlinesque wall reliefs, and totemic styles from around the world. The final images endure as temporary monuments to a self-styled iconography that crosses cultural references and historical eras. In a new sequence of photographs, *All Goes Onward and Outward*, 2010, VanDerBeek takes a family photograph documenting the impression of a solar eclipse on cardboard as inspiration. Casting a series of plaster reliefs incised with geometric shapes in response to the image, VanDerBeek captures the rotation of the sun through the varying apertures of the forms, effectively creating the simultaneity of a constellation in motion alongside the indexical record of a sundial.

In turn, Allyson Vieira investigates the vestiges of antiquity through re-animating worn styles and patinas into visceral, figurative confrontations. A recent pairing of bas-relief mantelpieces, *Old (Not Without Variation)* and *New (Not Completely Novel)*, both 2010, portray a roiling gathering of hands turned away but pressing through the impression of a scrim toward the viewer, a knuckled and fingered topography of the corporeal present in dialogue with the ancient past. Modeling these works after the Metopes of the Parthenon in Athens—marble panels that once covered the entire structure as a Doric frieze depicting the cosmology of the Greek gods and the epic wars of mortals—Vieira draws inspiration from copies of the canonized panels, now relocated to the British Museum. The sculptures’ weathered look was simulated by mixing plaster with concrete, and thereby foregoes fidelity to the authentic, instead mutating past mythologies into upright, voiced objects.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that in our era of exponential digital and social avatars, an interest in effigy and figuration would reassert itself. One of art’s oldest guises does not preclude, however, an engagement with abstraction, eros, and persona. For example, a recent series of painting and sculpture configurations by Carter

---

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary,” *What Is an Apparatus?*, Stanford University Press, 2009, 41

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

begins with an appropriation of black-and-white photographs of Modernist interiors. Displaced from their illustrative origins, the photographs are transformed, their stricken surfaces laden with a bevy of abstract marks, moody backdrops for statuesque likenesses. The images of empty offices, living rooms, and dining rooms from the 1950s and '60s highlight sleek décor while opening up a neutralized absence that the artist subsequently pocks, blobs, and checks with brushstrokes—evoking Lichtenstein, Abstract Expressionism, and offhand doodles. Occasionally, the coarse outline of hollow profiles float into view along with hunched figurative forms. A signature feature in Carter's work for a number of years, the obsessive repetition of empty heads often includes patches of human hair or collaged views into alternative landscapes, a constant reminder of the vicissitudes of selfhood and introspection. A new large-scale painting features a marked-up interior connoting both wealth and fickle taste as a figurative bust competes with ornate lighting fixtures, assorted bibelots, floral wallpaper, a wraparound staircase, and a set of plush leather couches in the background. The contradictory mise-en-scène allows for the dramatic entrance of an obsidian black bust. With eerie grey shoulders and bulging eyes, the figure rests on a black pedestal-like table and carpet in front of the painting, its refulgent finish giving it an otherworldly appearance.

In contrast, Cassie Raihl's sculptures simultaneously hide and reveal their raw materiality not unlike a loosely tied hospital gown, effaced and uniform from one view, embodied and exposed from another. Her basic structural materials are mostly insignificant, domestic, and slight—prefab boxes, wine glasses, towels, cardboard, and pillows—bound together with knotted fabric, suspenders, and bungee chord. And yet they perform a delicate balancing act as the lightness and disposability of Raihl's chosen objects is offset by plaster dips, tar spills, and bronze coatings. Re-inscribed with an anxious energy that contradicts their seemingly offhand nature, they appear to greet you with memory and behavioral traits. Reminiscent of a quotidian action made emphatic through repetition—opening an envelope, drying a dish, putting a kettle on—Raihl's sculptures rotate and pivot even in their stillness.

The positioning of Modernism as an inventory evades the causality of historical and aesthetic discourses closed upon their own axioms. While not skirting the very real sociopolitical failures of Modernism—perhaps felt most acutely in terms of architecture and urban planning—the notion of an inventory refuses the fatal pronouncements of endgame discourses for a dialectic of seeing that assumes a relationship with past strategies that is active and ongoing rather than resolved. In Mika Tajima's *The Extras*, 2010, this return includes an extraction, revision, and troubling of her own past work. Consisting of a rack structure that immediately recalls the backroom storage areas customary to commercial galleries, Tajima's freestanding framework exposes the notion of surfeit inventory, housing excerpted fragments from past installations, including silkscreened mirror panels, double-sided partition paintings, Plexiglas works, and small-scale sculptures that extend Tajima's ongoing engagement with the exhausted-yet-ever-present geometric patterns of Modernist abstraction in contemporary architecture and interior design motifs. Also enunciating Tajima's inverted commentary on artistic production is a flatscreen monitor playing her recent video *Today Is Not A Dress Rehearsal*, 2009, a collaborative project with artist and filmmaker Charles Atlas that was presented within a soundstage-like set constructed by Tajima in the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The video captures Atlas's edit of three days of performances and lectures programmed by Tajima—including an address by philosopher Judith Butler—that further prod and prompt questions regarding where the endpoint of artistic production lies.

Daniel Lefcourt's newest series, "Active Surplus," 2010, extends and redirects his inquiry into perceptual abstraction, visual redaction, and modes of display that hover between painting and sculpture. Having employed tools, materials, and production techniques common to the sign-making industry for a number of years—including MDF wood, computer-controlled routers, and pen-plotters—Lefcourt continues his reductive process with works that further the impression of empty signage, blank texts, and censored graphic information, allowing the display apparatus to preside while the implication of content recedes. Laid bare and dominant across the

wall, the metal support holds a sampling of parceled materials that read inevitably left to right, though muted and separated as if hanging in a warehouse awaiting application. The narrow margin for permutation and serial abstraction that has been Lefcourt's signature style opens up to new possibilities through a more emphatic embrace of negation.

For Ohad Meromi the idea of the stage operates as a platform to revisit many of Modernism's central narratives. Utopian and positivist visions of the future, stylistic raids on so-called primitive and folk traditions, and the didactic rehearsal of collaboration, community, and myth, are re-inhabited in order to question their continued influence and status as precedent. For example, stepping inside a model and advocating for an imagined future, a central tenet of Modernist architecture, modular design, and political activism, functions as a kind of Trojan horse in Meromi's installations, inserting the viewer into the midst of a dilemma. With *Alone You Are Weak and Foresaken*, 2010, Meromi borrows a labor-union phrase encountered on a Kibbutz where he once lived in Israel and invites the viewer to enter into a narrow towering structure with manifold levels and a curtained booth below. Recalling Meyerhold's Constructivist set design, the work ensures that a solitary encounter ensues, querying the communal slogan through eliciting individual responses. The participant is put in the position of reassembling and recounting their experience rather than arguing for consensus.

When Viktor Shklovsky gathered together the articles and short critical pieces that made up *Knight's Move*, he did so from the vantage of his own presumed departure, a reality he imagined was forthcoming given the increasingly state-controlled political climate at that time. The "appalling variety" of the Russian avant-garde—a term Alfred Barr used to describe the work of Alexander Rodchenko and other Russian artists during a trip in 1927 just prior to his founding of the Museum of Modern Art<sup>9</sup>—would dissipate with the exile and disappearance of many of its protagonists. Astutely aware of the endgame atmosphere that increasingly presided, Shklovsky sequenced his tangents and incursions into what amounts to an epigrammatic handbook of resistance conveyed via wit and formal ingenuity. Originally published in a small theater journal appropriately called *The Life of Art*, he ends the book with the following sentences:

This is the end of the knight's move.  
*The knight turns its head and laughs.*

The exhibition "Knight's Move" celebrates both the life and afterlives of art, embracing the heterogeneous and ever-shifting nature of New York as capable of just that dynamism, variety, and affirmation necessary to articulate, as well as challenge, the contemporary.

---

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Buchloh offers an incisive discussion of Barr's efforts toward founding an avant-garde in New York based on the bourgeois model of turn-of-the-century Paris, a tactic undertaken despite his awareness and admiration for the technical and structural innovations of the Russian avant-garde. "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, Vol. 30 (Autumn, 1984), 82