

Mike Metz

CUE 2012/13

CURATED BY
JOSEPH MASHECK

Mike Metz referrals

DECEMBER 8, 2012 - JANUARY 26, 2013

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CUE Art Foundation is a dynamic visual arts center dedicated to creating essential career and educational opportunities for emerging artists of all ages.

Through exhibitions, studio residencies, arts education, and public programs, CUE provides artists and audiences with sustaining and meaningful experiences and resources.

Mike Metz lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He has exhibited in the United States and internationally. Installations include Snared-trapped and concealed, T-space, Rhinebeck, NY, 2011; Venice Wall, (What is intellect?) at the 52nd Venice Biennale, curated by Gavin Wade, Venice, Italy, 2007; City Art: New York's Percent for Art Program, The Center for Architecture, New York, NY, 2005; Strike, curated by Gavin Wade, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, London, England, 2002; In the Midst of Things, curated by Gavin Wade, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, England, 1999; Letter S Road: Re-marks on Site, Art Omi, Columbia County, NY, 1992; Bunker / Beacon, The Kitchen, New York, NY, 1974; Trying to hit the mark, 112 Greene Street Gallery, New York, NY, 1971; Blueprint for Performance/ Extended but Camouflaged, Albright Knox Museum, Buffalo, NY, 1971.

referrals

For most of my life I have been creating language-based volumetric forms that have multiple interpretations, in order to let the mind move from one possibility to another and back again, unable to confirm one view as more correct than another, ending with any recognition as misdirection, overflowing with referents or referrals.

Typically, these objects are made of two or more parts where each part—both alone or when combined—form the verbal visual connections that allow significance. These objects use various materials including bronze, aluminum, copper, steel, sheet metal, cement, styrofoam, soap and vinyl. The banners use canvas, paper, or vinyl.

I seem though to need to start with a drawing which approximates an obliquely recognizable object where the affinities between that object and its names form the details of a potential story or discourse. This is done by way of needing to nail the names to the object—attempting to make the name and object real. In some cases this tale is actually inscribed over the objects surface with the path-like text, forming the shape of the object. In addition, the returning and reworking of an inscribed drawing as a way to spend ones days is finally what is central to the making.

Joseph Masheck, art historian, and critic, has published twelve books, most recently *The Carpet Paradigm: Integral Flatness from Decorative to Fine Art* (New York: Edgewise, 2010), *Le Paradigme du tapis*, trans. Jacques Souillou, ed. Marc Dachy (Geneva: Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, 2011), and *Texts on (Texts on) Art* (New York: The Brooklyn Rail, 2011). A new work on Adolf Loos is in production at I. B. Tauris (London). A former Guggenheim Fellow, Centenary Fellow of Edinburgh College of Art (University of Edinburgh), and recent Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University, Masheck was the first American to receive a grant from the Malevich Society. He has served as editor-in-chief of *Artforum* (1977-80), a columnist at the *Boston Review* (1985-87), a contributing editor of *Art in America* (1987-2012), on the advisory board of *Annals of Scholarship* (since 1998), a consulting editor of the *Brooklyn Rail* (since 2004), on the advisory board of *Art in Translation* (Berg Publishers, Oxford, on-line; since 2009), and as of 2012, an editorial consultant of the reviving *New Observations*.

Mike Metz and I probably belong to the only generation that, confronted by the famous exemplar of imagic ambiguity, can answer the question of what one is looking at by saying, "The duck-rabbit illusion." Before us, people were too unsteady with images to be more than fascinated or flustered by something's one moment seeming to represent a duck and the next a rabbit; today, I have to wonder if most kids could even discuss actual ducks and rabbits. While Metz has a diverse artistic practice, making objects with ambivalent or multivalent conceptual identities is typical of his work, and telling. It is easy enough to call him linguistic and class him as conceptual; but what will it mean to say so?

In 'Mike Metz as a Brand of Sculpture' (Arts Magazine, January 1991) I entertained the notion that his work does not consist of a merely representational play of concretized nouns (e. g., 'duck,' 'rabbit'), like three-dimensional puns, but that extending over the play of nominal or noun-like object identities comprised an artistic identity not marked logotypically, like mere churned-out products, but more like a styled brand. I shall draw an art-historical parallel, after making an unfashionable point: that art, qua art, is not communication. Why complicate matters just when it would be so easy to reintroduce Mike as a computer hotshot who studied and taught graphic design, which everybody seems happy to consider communication? Because something important is at stake: the answer to Nelson Goodman's question, in *Languages of Art* (1968), of what artistic "symbolization" is really up to if not communication, namely: "cognition in and for itself."

The most objective-sculptural pieces, along, ironically, with the more discursively textual rather than rebus-like works, show that Metz knows that puns aren't poetry. Having two or more 'things' cancel one another by coexistence in material extent and space makes at once for abstraction and linguistic concreteness (something similar happens where texts snap in and out of black-on-white and white-on-black). One such piece, the big Rabbit / Candle-flame / Spoon, 1992, of sheet copper, has sufficient formal identity to resemble a certain lost wooden Construction from 1920 by Aleksander Rodchenko, with paired bars that, in rising, broadened, then narrowed and crossed. To it Rodchenko attached letters to serve as a caption-title in a Dziga Vertov newsreel of 1922 – which wasn't just doing communications either: it made for more cognitive play, in Goodman's sense, than the newsreel required as documentary communication. For another Vertov newsreel title Rodchenko used noodly white-against-black letters, askew, quite like Metz's similarly bent-pipe lettering; for example: Double Portrait (for Dorothy Day), II.

Only lately have I seen even Metz's longtime play with object-shapes adumbrated in Rodchenko's early modernist compositional "atoms," in his word, with nicknames of sorts, such as "scissors" for an 'X'-form or "accordion" for a zigzag. More than the Minimalists in their general relation to Russian constructivism, the linguistic Metz can also be seen to share the heft and bolted stiffness of Rodchenko, with the art-historical connection in turn underwriting "cognition in and for itself."

(Bibl.: Alexandr Nikolaevitch Lavrentiev, 'The Fracture of Graphics and Words,' trans. John E. Bowlit, in *From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties* [Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1981].)

Mike Metz



from the series End
Products and, Container
Narrative, 1979
Cement, plywood and metal
lathe; dimensions variable

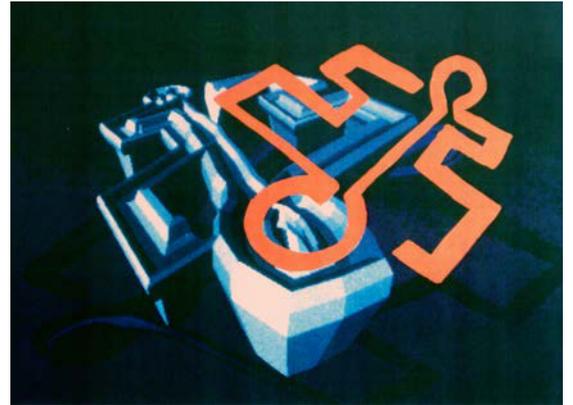
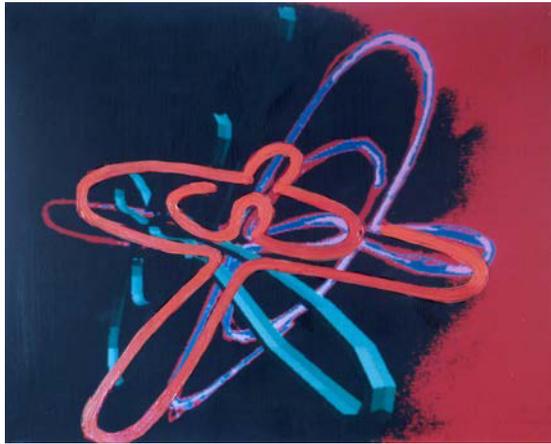


owl / bow, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"

gun / boat, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"

wishbone / glider, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"

helmet / mask, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"



family / flower, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"

sliced peppers / skull, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"

shovel / mask, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"

paschimottan asana / horse
head, 1987
Paint on digitally altered
photograph; 16" x 20"



rabbit / candle flame / spoon
1992
Polychromed copper
126" x 28" x 34"

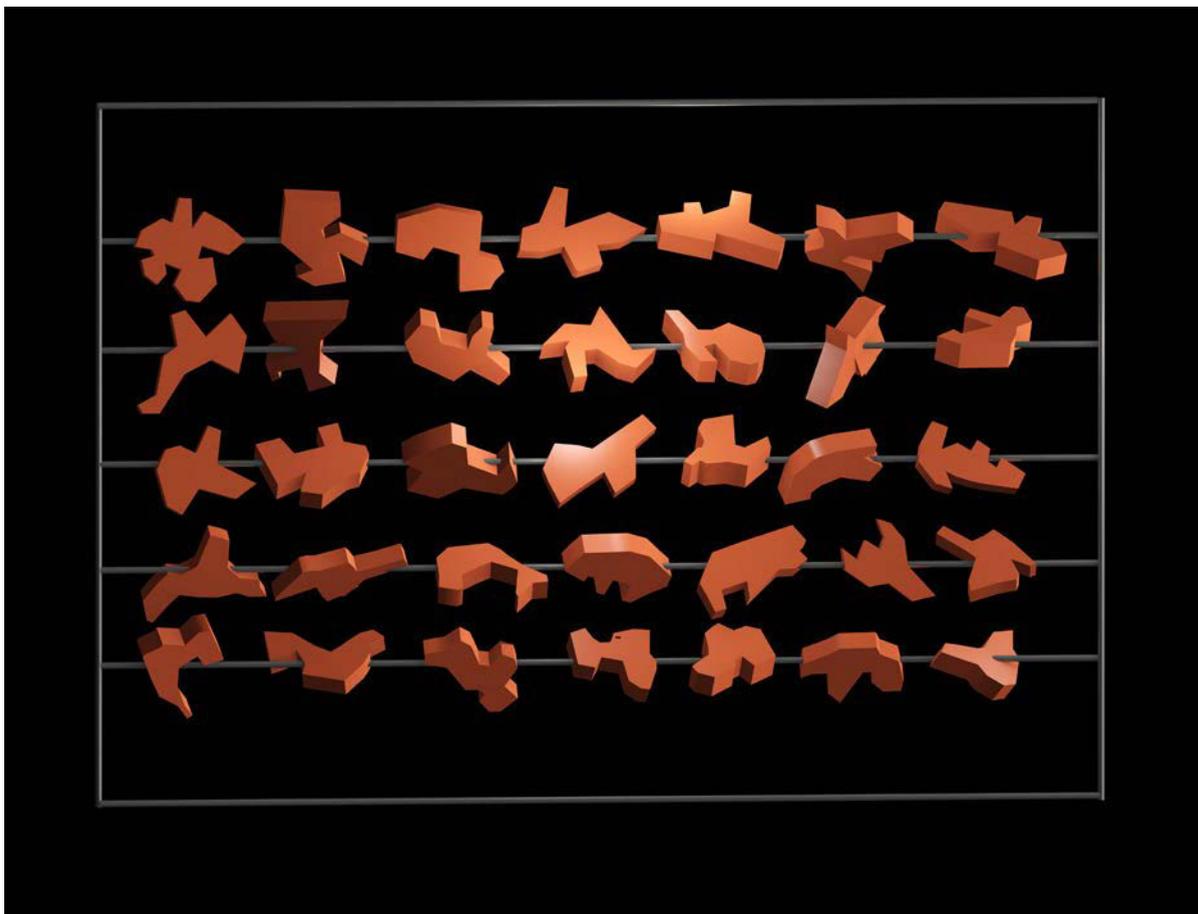


cannon / fire hose nozzle / trumpet
1992-96
Cast aluminum and steel; 33.5" x 15"

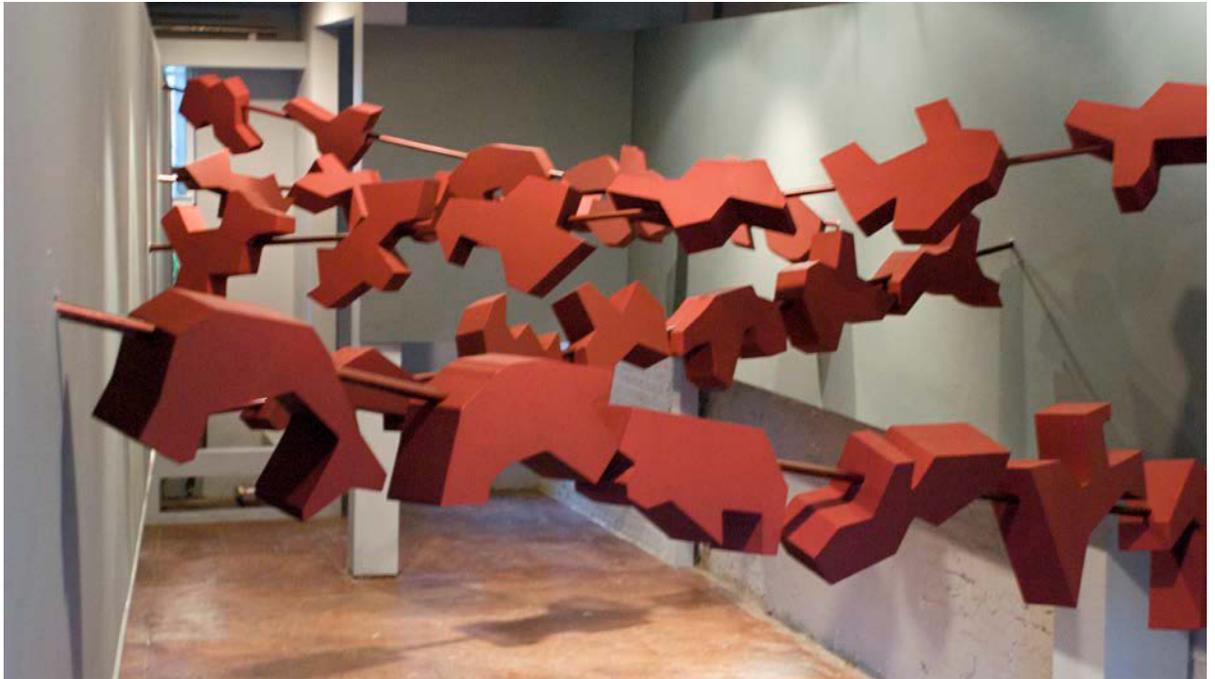
- **To wake up, to stretch, to get out of bed, to dress,** ●
- to stagger toward the window, ●
- **to be ecstatic about the garden's beauty,** ●
- to observe the quality of the light, ●
- **to distinguish the roses from the hyacinths,** ●
- to wonder if it rained in the night, ●
- **to establish contact with the mountain,** ●
- to notice its color, ●
- **to see if the clouds are moving, to stop,** ●
- to go to the kitchen, to grind some coffee, ●
- **to light the gas, to heat water, hear it boiling,** ●
- to make the coffee, ●
- **to shut off the gas,** ●
- to pour the coffee, ●
- **to decide to have some milk with it,** ●
- to bring out the bottle, ●
- **to pour the milk in the aluminum pan,** ●
- to heat it, ●
- **to be careful,** ●
- to pour, ●
- **to mix the coffee with the milk,** ●
- to feel the heat, ●
- **to bring the cup to one's mouth,** ●
- to drink, to drink again, ●
- **to face the day's chores,** ●
- to stand and go to the kitchen, ●
- **to come back and put the radio on,** ●
- to bring the volume up, ●
- **to hear that the war against Iraq has started.** ●

Strategic Question: what is intellect?, 2007
(one of 53 banners)
Matte, opaque PVC fabric banner; 60" x 44"

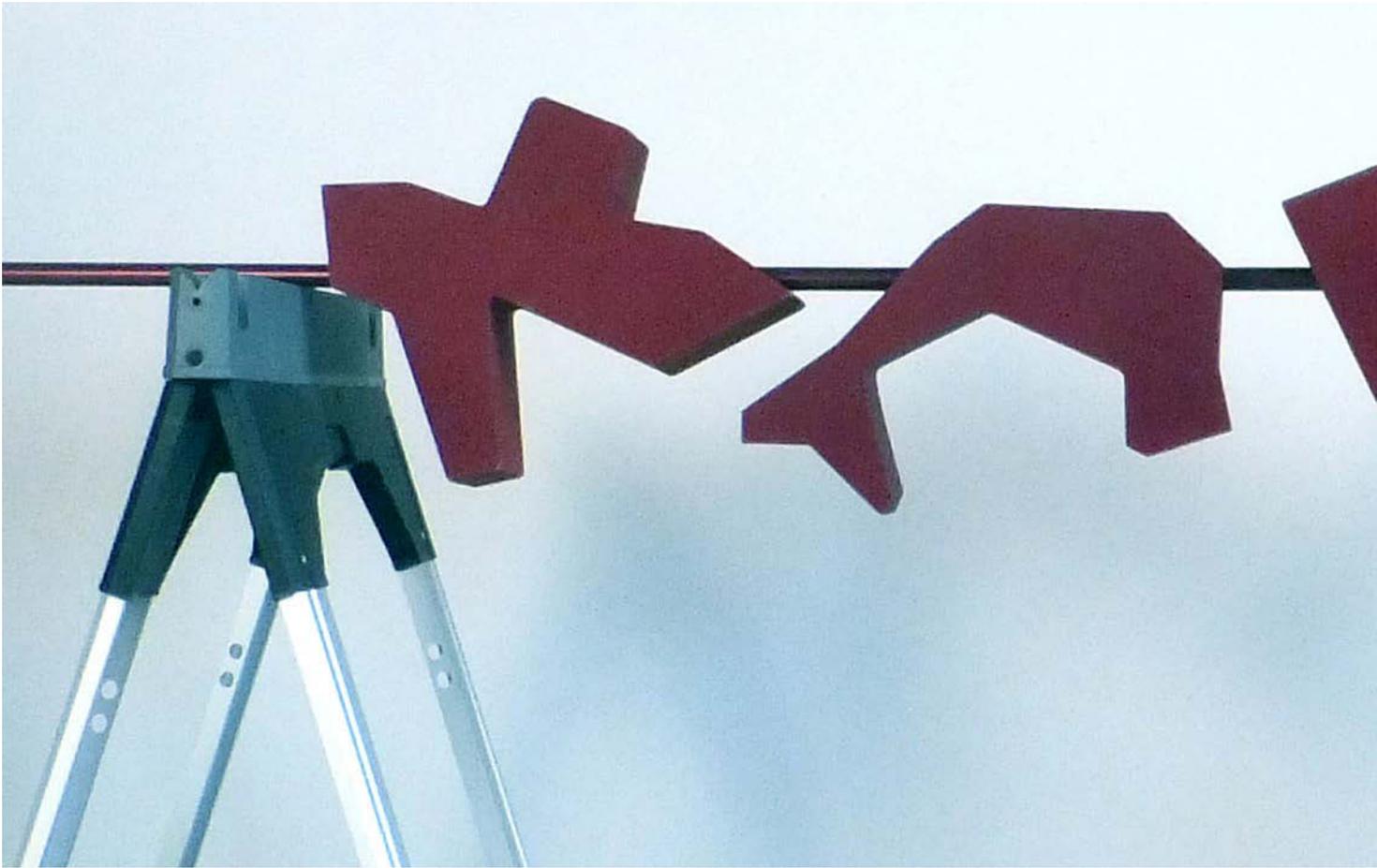
text from TO BE IN A TIME OF WAR from In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country by Etel Adnan, City Lights Books, San Francisco. Copyright 2005, Etel Adnan.

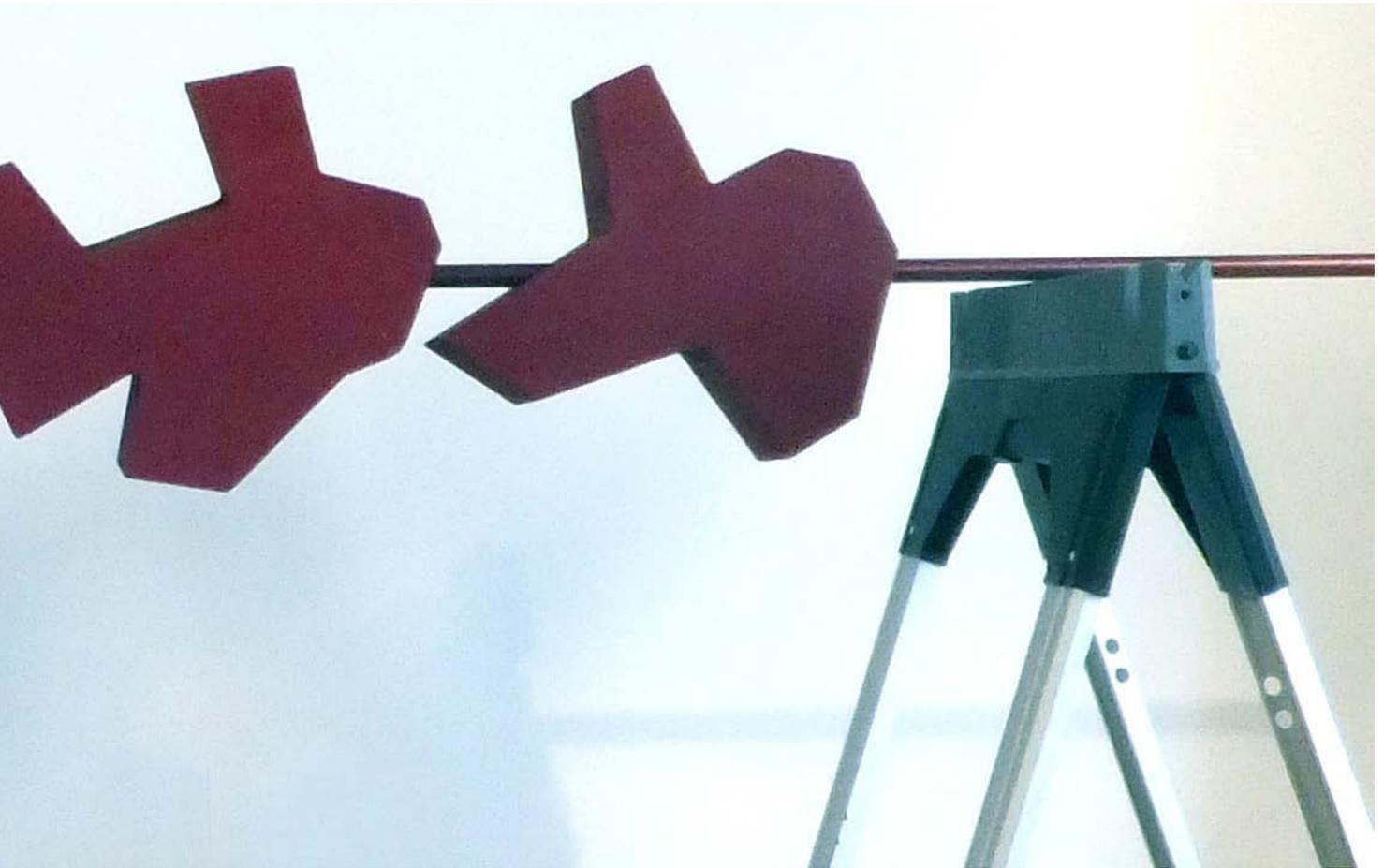


semiotic abacus II, 2008
Matte, opaque PVC fabric
banner; 56" x 78"



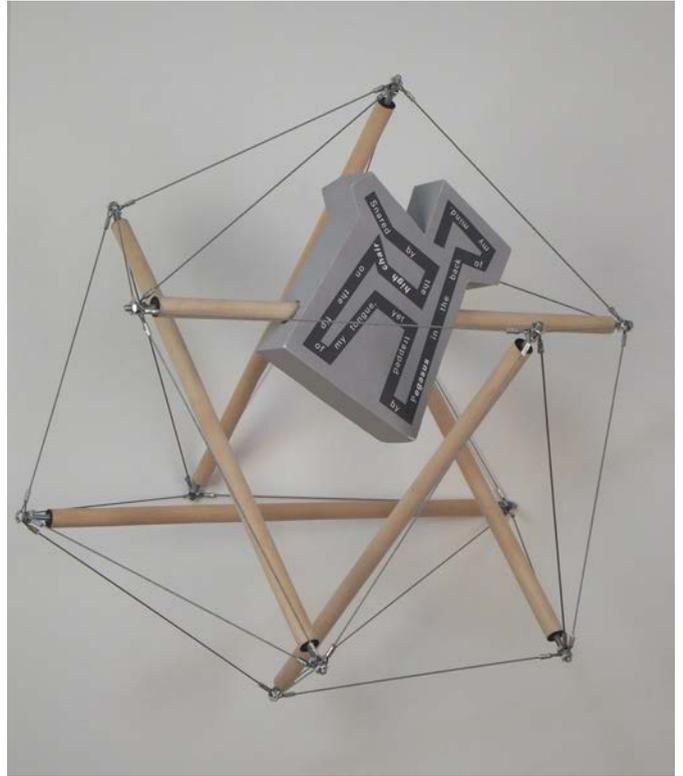
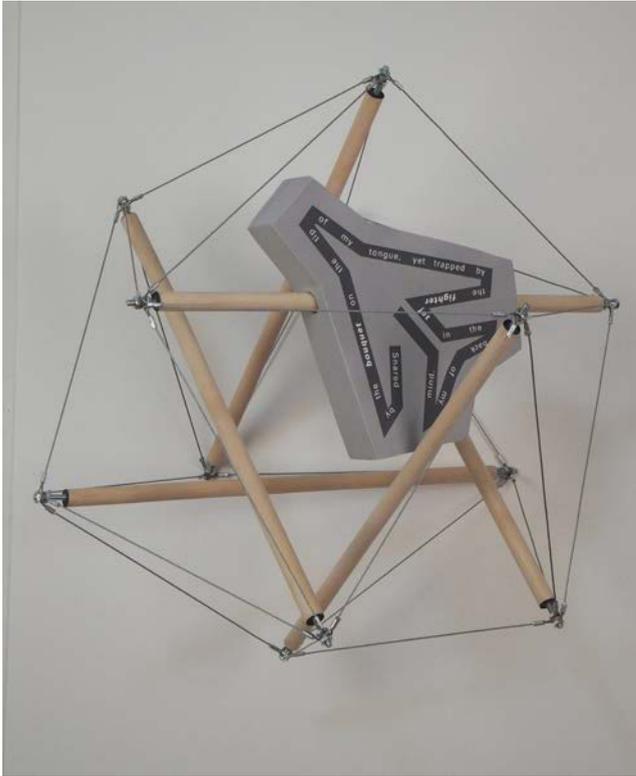
hang fire installation
Gestarc Gallery, Brooklyn,
NY, 2008
High-density foam and steel
Dimensions variable





from hang fire installation
2008
High-density foam and steel
Dimensions variable





snared-trapped, bouquet /
fighter jet, 2011
Steel cable, wooden strut,
building foam
24" x 24" x 24"

snared-trapped, high chair /
Pegasus, 2011
Steel cable, wooden strut,
building foam
24" x 24" x 24"



UBU ROI / easy chair II, 2012
Galvanized steel and rubber
60" x 48" x 24"



UBU ROI / easy chairs, 2012
Matte, opaque PVC fabric
banner; 72" x 144"



snow lions / easy chairs, 2012
Galvanized steel and rubber
each 30" x 24" x 12"
Photograph courtesy of Barney Kulok

A guy goes to a psychiatrist. 'Doc, I keep having these two dreams. First, I'm a teepee; then I'm a wigwam; then I'm a teepee; then I'm a wigwam; then I'm a teepee; then I'm a wigwam. It's driving me crazy. What's wrong with me?' The doctor replied: 'You gotta relax. You're two tents.'

Marcel Duchamp explained that in the throes of creation "the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions." Once the artist is done, it is the spectator who brings it in "contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." That is, the viewer completes the work of art, makes it whole and becomes, along with the artist, responsible for its success. Duchamp's words reverberated through a generation of conceptual artists, coming of age in the late '60s and '70s, whose work investigated how the viewer's interaction with the art object could alter its meaning and context.

Mike Metz is one of those artists. In 1979 he produced "end products," which, according to the art historian and critic Joseph Masheck, are best understood as a series of "visual analogues." Each work offers "a single thingly shape that can

stand for several things precisely as a shape.” The sculptures, crudely constructed of cement, plywood, and metal lath, are made of angular shapes fused into ambiguous forms. The titles—such as rocking horse/watering can/helmet or barge/truck/cash register—hint at what the shapes might represent. However, the terms in each triumvirate vie against each other, outwitting the viewer’s attempts at simple decipherment. These “visual-verbal puzzles,” as Metz explained, “emphasize the mechanisms of meaning in everyday life,” whereby language allows them to elude definitive form.

An iconographic study of rocking horse/watering can/helmet would attempt to compare an actual rocking horse and Metz’s rocking horse. Metz prefers a constructivist approach, choosing to derive meaning through language. By placing a likeness of something before us and questioning whether it actually resembles that thing or something else, he demonstrates that the words “rocking horse” belong to a separate order of meaning distinct from the object they signified. The conflict of identifying what is seen is a visual-verbal game, one that has precedent in Duchamp’s LHOOU or Fresh Window. Metz himself, however, points to the influence of Jacques Lacan’s theory of the real and the symbolic. The analyst famously established the dichotomy between existence and meaning, where the real is defined as that which is “always in its place: it carries it glued to its heel, ignorant of what might exile it from there.” The symbolic, on the other hands, introduces “a cut in the real,” in the process of signification “it is the world of words that creates the world of things.” In this context, rocking horse/watering can/helmet is concerned with discovering the creative potential of language, where viewers are invited to think about language not as a static object, but as something in a continuous state of flux.

The retrospective format for this exhibition at CUE Art Foundation allows visitors to see the many forms of Metz’s investigation into language since “end products.” Especially remarkable is his constant experimentation with materials as varied as bronze, steel, and wood. However, the real outliers in terms of material and

process are his computer paintings from 1987. In a studio installation at the Mercer Street Gallery, he applied acrylic paint to images of abstract shapes created on a consumer grade Apple computer. The complex layering of neon blues, yellows, and reds is reminiscent of non-objective painting from early in the century. However, unlike Kandinsky or Malevich, Metz is very much invested in the work of art's ability to build on a level of association with commonplace objects. By choosing to include paint in the process, he is striking a balance between the traditional reliance on the artist's hand and the use of digitally generated images. Like "end products," the titles of the computer paintings—owl/bowl and gun/boat—do little to help in identification of subject matter but continue to indicate his interest in language, despite this shift in media.

In another digital series, Metz designed 53 PVC banners to surround a Renaissance style building on the island of San Servolo for the 2007 Venice Biennale. Each banner featured lines of translated text from Etel Adnan's essay "To be in a Time of War" in her book *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*. In the text, Adnan juxtaposes the mundane details of privileged American life that is occasionally pierced by the consciousness of war with the suffering of Iraqis. The banners were part of "Strategic Questions," a project organized by artist-curator Gavin Wade in which 40 art works were developed in response to 40 questions written by R. Buckminster Fuller. Each work in the series was related to a different publication scenario. Some were placed into magazines, journals, or other existing vehicles, while for others a new mode of distribution was created in response to a specific site and context. For Metz, responding to Fuller's "impossible" question, "What is intelligence?", became another opportunity to consider the nature of communication. In a sheer coincidence, a short distance away on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Joseph Kosuth, another conceptual artist inspired by Duchamp, lined the exterior walls of a monastery with neon words in a mix of languages. Both Kosuth and Metz raised questions about the nature of language's meaning across myriad cultures using an existing architecture and linguistic structures.

When I first visited Metz's studio in Red Hook he beamed with delight when he told me the "two tents" joke. The joke, like his work, relies on multiple meanings or associations, but it also helped me to locate the importance of play in his work. The title of this exhibition, "Referrals," is a theme that runs through Metz's nearly four-decade-long career. The objects he creates are overflowing with referents. Whether we understand them to be one thing or another, or something entirely different from what Metz referred to in the title is of no consequence. Viewers should not feel disheartened because they don't see a rocking horse or a cash register. What is important is that we recognize playfulness of decipherment. This is a game Metz plays with the viewers, so as to engage them with the work. With every new viewer, each of these works becomes something different.

—Harry Weil

Writer Harry J. Weil is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art at Stony Brook University, focusing in performance art and theory. His reviews have been published in *Art Journal*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *Art Papers*, *Afterimage* and *artUS*.

Mentor Jeff Gibson is an artist and critic who lives and works in New York. A former senior editor of Sydney/Los Angeles–based magazine *Art&Text*, Gibson moved to New York in 1998 to work for *Artforum*, where he is currently managing editor. He has shown, most recently, at *The Suburban* in Chicago and *Stephan Stoyanov Gallery* in New York. In January 2011, two of his videos were projected onto the façade of the *Everson Museum* in Syracuse, New York, as part of Syracuse University’s “Urban Video Project.” He is currently working on two artist’s books and solo shows for New York and Melbourne.

This essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist.

Please visit aicausa.org for further information on AICA USA, or cueartfoundation.org to learn how to participate in this program. Any quotes are from interviews with the author unless otherwise specified.

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