

SEKHET-HETEPET (FIELD OF REEDS)

by

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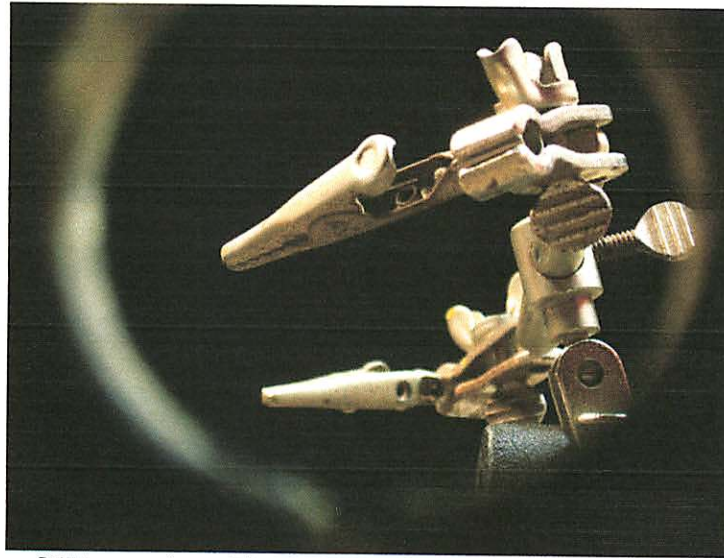
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Date

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION



Still image from *The Collector*, animated short film, 2006

The past is a lost city of gold—complete with fabulous temples, quixotic rulers, mazy streets and sacrifices.

—Diane Ackerman, *An Alchemy of Mind*

Only the inaccessible and elusive is truly alluring. And what could be more inaccessible and elusive than the past? The allure of the unattainable and its connection to the passage of time has become central to my research. Drawing from areas as diverse as natural history, architecture and the history of technology I am engaged in an intense investigation of what is possible to be revealed by the intersection of cinema, computation, music and physical space.

When I entered graduate school, I was keenly interested in the aesthetic of the mechanism and the intrinsic history of the found object. Over the last three years, a shift has taken place in the essence of the work that could be described

as a movement from illustrative to experiential. Looking back through the eyes of an art historian, a turning point is visible that coincides with the production of *The Collector*, an animated short film shot on the workbench in my studio.

The Collector was made using only found objects and began as a series of test sequences intended as an exploration of the stop-motion animation process. After several short sequences were finished, a narrative began to emerge and further scenes were created to perpetuate this. The final product operated in a surrealist fashion similar to the works of Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay. But the real value of the work lay in its effect on my studio practice. An unnameable mental shift took place that informed the sculptural work to follow and the way mechanisms were employed became based very solidly on how they advanced the ideas at play.

Through the use of sound and motion in a spatial context, the passage of time becomes a compositional element used to intimate rather than illustrate. The temporal logic of the work mimics the viewer's own existence, and as the viewer must track the work in real time, the implication of a narrative is conceded.

CHAPTER TWO: SOMETHING REMEMBERED



Remember, wood, steel, paper, electric motors, typewriters, 2006

...an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern, always a meaningful pattern though never an abiding one; a shifting harmony of subpatterns.

—Sir Charles Sherrington, *Man on His Nature*

Memories inform our actions, keep us company, and give us our noisy, ever-chattering private sense of self. Without memories, we wouldn't know who we are, how we once were or who we'd like to be in the future. We are the sum of our memories; change your memory and you change your identity. But memory isn't like a camcorder, computer, or storage bin. It's more restless, more creative, and it's not one of anything. Each memory is a plural event, an ensemble of synchronized neurons, some side by side, others relatively far apart.

I am interested in the idea of quanta and the quanta of ideas and memories. For me this investigation is connected to music (particularly electronic music and the recording process) and the way compositions can be broken down to sounds and rhythms and rebuilt from their smallest parts. Once discussing electricity I begin thinking about synaptic functions and the way thoughts are constructed from electrical impulses and how these impulses drive the body.

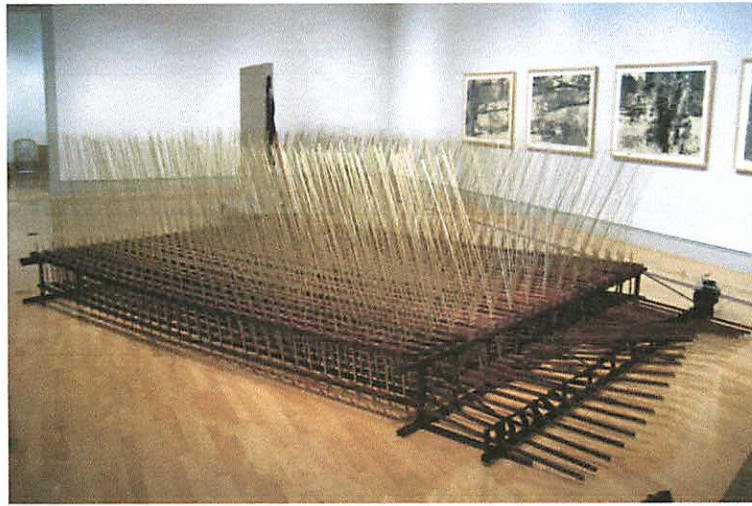
The catalyst for *Remember* was a personal memory from my youth involving a room full of typewriters and the sound associated with that experience. The model of typewriter, the Smith-Corona Coronet Automatic 12, was selected because of familial history as well as the musical instrument reference. The wooden Da Vinci-esque mechanisms built to interact with each typewriter reference one era, the typewriters another. A confusion of nostalgias is conjured with this pairing, a confusion that is tangential to the typewriters' embodiment of both the romantic and the mundane.

Each typewriter prints a single word repeatedly onto a roll of paper that spills continuously out of the type head and down to the ground, documenting its own activity and the anomalies that occur. If taken in sequence the group produces a sentence or poem: "remember this sound came down the hall like a song." Words are small shapes in the chaos of the world and they are unwieldy and sloppy,

even at their most precise. Yet there is a presumption of concreteness with words and language in spite of the slipperiness of connotation.

Remember is quite deadpan in its playfulness, its whimsy but at the same time there is humility and complexity. The viewer is bombarded with impressions and just like in a dream the mind constructs a narrative to link these impressions. The inclusion of text in the work supports the implication of narrative, but the fact that the written words are a product of the sculpture's activity and at the same time self-referential complicates interpretation. All of these complications help achieve the goal of drawing the viewer not into a specific place, but rather into a constellation of ideas and possibilities.

CHAPTER THREE: SEKHET-HETEPET (FIELD OF REEDS)



Field of Reeds, wood, steel, plastic and electric motor, 2008

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.

—Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*

And while he does not optimistically declare this world to be the best of all possible worlds or believe it to be so bad as to be unfit to be taken as a model, he nevertheless says to himself: In its present form, it is not the only world possible! This world has looked different and in time to come it will look different again.

—Paul Klee

In the spring of 2006, I traveled to Japan for two weeks. During my time there I visited Sanjusangendo, a temple in Kyoto that houses 1001 human-scale gilt wooden sculptures of Kannon, the Japanese spirit of compassion.

One Buddhist legend presents Kannon as vowing to never rest until he has freed all sentient beings from the torturous cycle of reincarnation. Despite strenuous effort, he realized that still many unhappy beings were yet to be saved. After struggling to comprehend the needs of so many, his head split into eleven pieces. Amitabha Buddha, seeing Kannon's plight, gave him eleven heads with which to hear the cries of the suffering. Upon hearing this great multitude of cries all at once and comprehending them, Kannon attempted to reach out to all those who needed aid. He found that his two arms were not adequate and they shattered into pieces with the effort. Once more, Amitabha came to his aid and appointed him a thousand arms with which to aid the many.

The kannon figures of Sanjusangendo derive from this version of the myth and are depicted each with eleven faces and twenty pairs of arms. The iconography denotes that each saves 25 worlds and thereby 1000 arms are symbolized. *Field of Reeds* was constructed largely in response to my own experience at Sanjusangendo and the research that was initiated by that visit. The vertical elements are gold in homage to the kannon figures and also number

1001 in total. The wooden structure and mechanism were built and colored in such a way as to mimic the architecture of the temple.

But the goal is not to recreate. Like Martin Puryear, I am interested in "...the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in anyway representing them." And further, that "the ideas that give rise to a work can be quite diffuse." The exploration of thoughts and memories leads to new thoughts and memories and reveals connections between seemingly disparate topics and events. This diffusion of ideas is necessary to propagate allusions.

Further historical influence comes from the ancient Egyptian mythological belief system regarding death. In this set of myths there exists Sekhet-Hetepet (Field of Reeds). The souls of deceased individuals must overcome a number of obstacles in their journey through the underworld before finally encountering Anubis who weighs the soul of the deceased against the feather of Ma'at. Righteous individuals are allowed to join the afterlife and each is granted a plot in the Field of Reeds.

Sound and motion are employed in *Field of Reeds* to address the elusiveness, the transcendental qualities of these disparate beliefs. There is coherence to both myths, and yet no real resolution. The ominous tonal squeaking of wood against steel is in distinct counterpoint to the soothing, poetic

swaying motion of the reeds. But the same mechanism is responsible for both the motion and the sound—a tense coexistence mirroring that between life and death creation and destruction.

My childhood spent partially in the American Midwest figures into the equation as well. There is an historical romanticization of the wide-open spaces of America. A romanticization related to the way a field of grain becomes an empire or a jungle or the underworld in the imagination of a child. With discussion of these ideas of fantasy comes discussion of the separation between mind space (virtual space) and real space. I am keenly interested in that elusive edge between real space and virtual space.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION



Field of Reeds, detail

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

—Albert Einstein, “The World As I See It”

In architecture, knowing a building and experiencing it are not one and the same. One can physically not see the spire of the Empire State Building and the entrance façade from one vantage point. There is an experience to be had with the building at a distance, and another to be had at close proximity, each providing some information not to be had from the other. In this way, the comprehension of the building as a whole, by necessity, is an assemblage of the known, the unknown, and the imagined or remembered that fills the in between.

Fantasy is tethered to otherness and desire and the allure of the unknown. If the past represents that which is unattainable, then the future and what lies beyond the threshold of death is perhaps the ultimate Other. It is the flipside of the existence that we know and it captivates with unknowable presumptions of familiarity.

Both *Remember* and *Field of Reeds* bear a solidity rooted in the materials of their construction that grounds them in our reality, and yet they are also like apparitions. They are fluttering, flickering things alluding to that which we know and that which we don't know.