

BLOUINARTINFO

“Image Objects” Brings the Digital Outdoors

By Scott Indrisek

July 8, 2015



Amanda Ross-Ho's "The Character and the Shape of Illuminated Things (Facial Recognition)," 2015. (Liz Ligon, Public Art Fund)

“Image Objects,” on view through November 20, brings digital culture to City Hall Park in New York. Organized by Public Art Fund and curated by Andrea Hickey — who also put together the sprawling group show “Objects Food Rooms,” currently on view at Tanya Bonakdar — the exhibition riffs on the complex interplay between two- and three-dimensions, between the computer-generated and the supposedly “real.” The artists on view, including Jon Rafman, Amanda Ross-Ho, and Lothar Hempel, all probe these unique tensions, often mixing cutting-edge technologies with old-fashioned materials. (Rafman, for instance, uses computer modeling software to create forms that are then hewn from marble.) In a conversation via email, I spoke with Hickey about how our obsession with sharing images of art on social media platforms is changing creative culture.

I didn’t notice the term “post-Internet art” cropping up in any of the explanatory text surrounding this exhibition, but I was curious as to your thoughts on what that term even means. Like “postmodern,” it seems as if everyone has their own definition.

Like many people, I have problems with the term “post-Internet art,” particularly in the context of an exhibition presented in the public realm. When Marisa Olson coined the term during a 2006 panel discussion, it was never intended to act as a catch-all phrase for so many divergent interpretations of work influenced by, and responding to, the contemporary digital landscape. This landscape is so ubiquitous to our everyday experience that any work produced today could be termed “post-Internet” by the very fact that contemporary visual culture is always in dialogue with digital public (and private) space. And on a pragmatic level, the word is simply confusing. Unless you are invested in the art discourse around the term, it reads as “after-the-Internet,” which does little to explain the nuances of the ideas behind the word, or its attempt to articulate a contemporary moment.

When I was conceiving this show, I was interested in working with artists who were engaged in an intentional dialogue with the digital landscape, particularly in terms of how their work might provide a participatory conversation for viewers in the public realm. We all have an experience of how our lives are presented, and transformed, online, and these works invite that kind of interaction, providing a different kind of nuance to the viewer’s encounter with sculpture in public space.

That said, there are artists in the show who have been part of an ongoing conversation about “post-Internet art,” as well as artists whose work has been on the periphery or outside of this group: Amanda Ross-Ho, Alice Channer, Hank Willis Thomas, and Lothar Hempel, to be specific. In bringing this group of artists together, I was interested in exploring how these ideas move beyond a specific niche group of artists whose work has a strong connection to art presented online, mining online sources, etc. For me, “post-Internet” is as much about our everyday experience of public space, both in real life, and online, as it is about art production. Artists who have a deep relationship with visual culture and photography are incredibly relevant to this conversation.

Certain sculptures here, like Amanda Ross-Ho’s, are directly interacting with the notion of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. (And of course all the labels for this show include the appropriate #imageobjects hashtag and @PublicArtFund twitter info for online sharing.) Do you think that the public’s increasing tendency to treat artworks as little more than photo-ops is a disheartening development? Does it prevent a certain type of careful looking — or does it simply encourage a new type of looking, one that it would be silly to rail against? How are artists like Ross-Ho reacting to these developments and challenging or commenting on them?

The public’s increasing tendency to document art in public space was very much on my mind when conceiving of this show. I think it is really important to look carefully at how and why people choose to document and disseminate images of their surroundings, including artworks, rather than simply dismissing them as “photo-ops.” When I started at Public Art Fund four years ago, we were just beginning to look at how the public

interacted with artworks via social media and more recently, we've come to see that it has a tremendous influence on how people engage with art in the public realm. I'm not sure that it encourages "a different type of looking," but I do think these images are evidence of an interest in framing a work of art with one's own subjective camera lens. Each viewer that documents an artwork online and shares it is having a very personal relationship with a work of art: they select the frame of what they want people to see, they might include themselves in the image, they choose filters. They transform these public works in an incredibly creative way. Artists working in the public realm are increasingly aware of this kind of engagement with their work. The addition of the neon square in Amanda Ross-Ho's tableau (which was produced in a different iteration, sans neon, for the entrance to the MCA Chicago) is a direct response to how the public documented her earlier work in public space, specifically how social media software brings a conversation about facial recognition to the otherwise mute documentation image.

Works in "Image Objects" by Jon Rafman and Timur Si-Qin riff on recognizable sculptural traditions — from Rafman's warped "classical" forms in marble to Si-Qin's version of the "monument." How do you think contemporary artists in general are adapting age-old sculptural techniques into the 21st century?

Like painting, sculpture always has to contend with its classical and art historical traditions. I think this is particularly true in a site like City Hall Park. The Victorian park design invites a relationship to outdoor sculpture traditions like the statue, the monument, and the bust, and artists naturally respond to this history in new ways. In terms of technique, it is very interesting to see how many artists are utilizing new technologies like 3-D scanning, 3-D printing, and CNC routers to create new objects that might not have been possible previously. You can see this in the exhibition, and in the work of many other artists making sculpture today. The idea of an artist creating forms by hand with raw materials is almost more unique than those who are using high-tech fabrication tools. Both methods provide very interesting approaches to object making, but new technologies lend themselves to different realms of possibility that push these classical forms to new lengths.

There's a certain layering going on with all of the work here: It's pulling from the Internet, then rendering things in three-dimensions, while also reflecting on how these 3-D objects will appear in photographic documentation. Someone like Artie Vierkant is doing this very explicitly. This may be a dumb question, but given that back-and-forth between digital and "IRL," could someone just as easily experience "Image Objects" from the comfort of their own desktop computer?

It's not a dumb question at all. In fact, it was absolutely something I was thinking about when I started working on this show. It's a given that we live in a time when we easily experience art online (we might also call it the Contemporary Art Daily way of seeing an exhibition). The great thing about presenting art in public space is that viewers encounter the work unexpectedly — they're having lunch in the park, or walking through it, and the nature of the viewer's interest in this space shifts how images of the work are shared

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

online. It's my thinking that these works will appear differently IRL than they will online, simply because they were created with the notion that they would have a kind of second life as an image. The artists were very conscious of the transformation of the work from object to image, and I'm curious to see how this second life will become a part of the work, and the exhibition, throughout its duration.

“Image Objects” is on view at City Hall Park in New York through November 20. Explore how the public has been documenting the show online via the #imageobjects hashtag on Instagram.