Untouchable

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fictional reality
Untitled Williamsburg 03, 2018–19
Lenox paper, archival Dupont Tyvek, string / archival pigment print
2.5 x 4 x 3" / 15.25 x 22"
Figuratively, the knots are touches, insofar as they were produced by the artist’s dexterous entwining of short lengths of string. By metonymic exchange, Mead transfers a particular quality of her activity (manipulation or handling by looping and tying) to what becomes an independent feature of the sculpture proper (its structural capacity to gather and kind itself together as a shape). The transposition of qualities from the actual or real to the virtual or fictional can move both ways, causing the exchange to swing back. As autonomous components of the work of art, the knots are untouched.

Michael Schreyach

Elisabeth Mead’s sculpture, Untitled Williamsburg 03 (FIG 01), is made from a single sheet of white paper, not quite folded but rolled or wrapped into a deceptive simple form and held in equilibrium by two pieces of house string tied at critical junctions. The tensile strength of the sutures prevents the flexible construction from unfurling to reveal what must be its irregular planar shape, yet does so without unnecessary force. The tensile strength of the sutures prevents the flexible construction from unfurling to reveal what must be its irregular planar shape, yet does so without unnecessary force. The knots simply draw the form together, connecting remote areas of the paper and securing the overlap of its obverse and reverse sides with a stitch. The sculpture touches itself.

Figuratively, the knots are touches, insofar as they were produced by the artist’s dexterous entwining of short lengths of string. By metonymic exchange, Mead transfers a particular quality of her activity (manipulation or handling by looping and tying) to what becomes an independent feature of the sculpture proper (its structural capacity to gather and kind itself together as a shape). The transposition of qualities from the actual or real to the virtual or fictional can move both ways, causing the exchange to swing back. As autonomous components of the work of art, the knots are untouchable.

The organic physiognomy of Mead’s shapes yields to them a sense of biological growth—and thus a kind of anonymous volition—that deepens the emergent theme. Their tubular and conical forms are molded by overlapping segments of paper, like petals, that create the impression of florets. And in a manner analogous to the natural phototropicism of plants, the sculptures seem to orient themselves toward some as yet unidentified energy source. Motivated by a force neither quite internal nor external, the string appendages stretch from the sculptures into their ambient environments. The strings seem to stretch in an effort to consummate touch. In so doing, Mead’s forms become quasi-entities, moody personages, diminutive agents, particular instances of the underlying general power of projection constitutive of living things.
Figuratively, the knots are touches, insofar as they were produced by the artist’s dexterous entwining of short lengths of string. By metonymic exchange, Mead transfers a particular quality of her activity (manipulation or handling by looping and tying) to what becomes an independent feature of the sculpture proper (its structural capacity to gather and bind itself together as a shape). The transposition of qualities between the actual or real and the virtual or fictional can move both ways, causing the exchange to swing back. As autonomous components of the work of art, the knots are untouched. The organic physiognomy of Mead’s shapes yields to them a sense of biological growth—and thus a kind of anonymous volition—that deepens the emergent theme. Their tubular and conical forms are molded by overlapping segments of paper, like petals, that create the impression of florets. And in a manner analogous to the natural phototropicism of plants, the sculptures seem to orient themselves toward some as yet unidentified energy source. Motivated by a force neither quite internal nor external, the string appendages stretch from the sculptures into their ambivalent environments. The feelers seem to reach out from their husks in an effort to consummate touch. In so doing, Mead’s forms become quasi-entities, moody personages, diminutive agents, particular instances of the underlying general power of projection constitutive of living things.

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Elizabeth Mead’s sculpture, Untitled Williamsburg 03 (FIG 01), is made from a single sheet of white paper, not quite folded but rolled or wrapped into a deceptively simple form and held in equilibrium by two pieces of house string tied at critical junctions. The tensile strength of the sutures prevents the flexible construction from unfurling to reveal what must be its irregular planar shape, yet does so without unnecessary force. The knots simply draw the form together, connecting remote areas of the paper and securing the overlap of its obverse and reverse sides with a stitch. The sculpture touches itself. Figuratively, the knots are touches, insofar as they were produced by the artist’s dexterous entwining of short lengths of string. By metonymic exchange, Mead transfers a particular quality of her activity (manipulation or handling by looping and tying) to what becomes an independent feature of the sculpture proper (its structural capacity to gather and bind itself together as a shape). The transposition of qualities between the actual or real and the virtual or fictional can move both ways, causing the exchange to swing back. As autonomous components of the work of art, the knots are untouchable. The organic physiognomy of Mead’s shapes yields to them a sense of biological growth—and thus a kind of anonymous volition—that deepens the emergent theme. Their tubular and conical forms are molded by overlapping segments of paper, like petals, that create the impression of florets. And in a manner analogous to the natural phototropicism of plants, the sculptures seem to orient themselves toward some as yet unidentified energy source. Motivated by a force neither quite internal nor external, the string appendages stretch from the sculptures into their ambivalent environments. The feelers seem to reach out from their husks in an effort to consummate touch. In so doing, Mead’s forms become quasi-entities, moody personages, diminutive agents, particular instances of the underlying general power of projection constitutive of living things.
In the preceding paragraphs, I have purposely allowed the terms of my discussion to drift associationistically, the metaphorical territory onto which we ascribe the concept of aura is licensed in part by the artist’s state of mind. As Mead writes: “I purposely allowed the terms of my description to drift associatively. Indeed, the very bodily gesture of the paper object as an embodiment of organic life. The warmth of the light absorbing into the paper surface—shining here, glowing there—heightens our awareness of it as a skin-like texture and animates the tucking and stretching of other abstract qualities such as how, by comparison. The juxtaposition of image and object calls for their comparison, sensitizing us to perceive differences that she has created and controlled by extending to the “actual” object qualities, which leaves Lilliputian ridges around the holes into the paper with a sharp awl instead of punching them out, and thus, provokes our heightened inspection. Each piece has an animated countenance. Thus Mead’s description figures the literal volume of the object the capacity to breathe, and to its constituent parts the ability to gesture and signal. Each piece is animated, felt proximity to our station diminishes when shifted into a photograph, their physical and cognitive connotations of that image of the sculpture in the photograph appears enlarged relative to the actual object set upon its cantilever platform. Moreover, the size of the print nearness of the image—helps us get into the relation of Mead’s paper envelopes extend to the “actual” object qualities, including texture, structure, and dimension. To the extent that her paper sculptures to the object-portraits of other artists,” Benjamin asked. His famous answer: “A strange web of entwined (FIG 01). Observe that the image of the sculpture in the photograph appears enlarged relative to the actual object set upon its cantilever platform. 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In the preceding paragraphs, I have purposefully allowed the terms of my dis- cussion to drift associative hybridity, the metaphorical territory onto which concepts of aura are licensed in part by the artist's state of matter. Of files. Mounted in silver frames. In the circle, Mead's forms are inspired. Do not hallucinate.

...
Like her other paper sculptures, Untitled Williamsburg (FIG 04) was fabricated using heavy-weight cotton rag paper backed with a thin sheet of Dupont Archival Tyvek using a pH-neutral and acid-free glue. A piece of Tyvek resembles a smooth, translucent sheet of paper, but it is actually a synthetic material made of high-density polyethylene fibers (it is in substance plastic). The durable fabric is difficult to tear but easily cut with scissors, and one of its advantages for Mead is its capacity to amplify the surface tension of the paper and render its curves more taut. The material thus endows supple counterforce to adjacent planes, creating the impression that Mead’s overlapping surfaces are just being held in place against the elastic strain of the paper to return to its original flatness. Although relatively smooth, when sealed to the underlying paper, Tyvek nonetheless preserves the cotton rag’s fluffy texture, albeit in muffled relief. In fact, because the planes are so closely bound together, the physical differences between the obverse and reverse surfaces of the page are almost indistinguishable. Yet it is always the case that Mead uses the side faced with Tyvek for the “interior” of her forms. That is, she gathers or folds the sculptural shell so that the hollow volume of the shape (its “negative” space) is lined with the material. The decision results in an important effect having to do with relative degrees of luminous temperature. The synthetic fabric reflects light in a brighter, colder tone. The cotton, by contrast, yields a warmer quality. That warmth is caused in part by its more pronounced texture at a very close surface level, where angled rays encounter undulating cotton fibers that cast exceptionally shallow shadows across the plane. In other words, Mead’s use of the different materials enables her to control, at very precise intervals, the tonal range of light and shadow she desires the sculpture to reflect or absorb. Obviously, the chiaroscuro tactic has a decisive impact on the formal qualities of the photographs that Mead envisions. These monochromatic images not only visualize objects in delicate gradations of luminosity, but also put into play a subtle dance of reflections that bear upon our perception of the composite work as a whole (sculpture plus photograph). Indeed, Mead carefully orchestrates the overall effects of her aggregate presentation. First, the cantilever shelf upon which a sculptures sits is topped with a one-quarter-inch aluminum plate. The body of the shelf is made of plywood, with sides covered in maple veneer. The ensemble is painted in semi-gloss white enamel. Mead sands the aluminum to a satiny level of finish that yields a mid-range sheen, which permits the sculpture to be reflected—but not mirrored—in the surface, while at the same time allowing the plate to concentrate and deflect ambient light onto the walls. To be sure, the artist considers the local reflections of light from both the platform and the paper sculpture onto adjacent surfaces in the gallery to be a component of the work (a point to which I will return momentarily). The surface supporting the sculptures in the photographs is also semi-reflective metal. Immediately behind the sculptural element of the compositeUntitled Williamsburg (FIG 05), Mead’s spotlighting casts on the gallery wall a shaded channel bounded by bright vertical striations, charged like tiny lightning strikes. They result from light deflected off the object’s posterior surfaces. While Mead considers such inci- dents to be integral to her piece, it would be wrong to insist that these particular reflections are essential. In other locations, different conditions of installation and illumination will pro- duce altered effects in the presentation of the whole. Given the unlikelihood of replicating in every possible physical setting the exact proportions of light and shade, we are encouraged to conclude that in any location, it must the general phenomenon of “reflection” that remains significant for our interpretation of the sculpture. But it is equally important to insist that accepting the variability of display conditions does not make the work’s meaning contingent on external factors (least of all, on our “experience” of different environments). Far from it: Mead’s reflections serve to delimit autonomous virtual domains in which the unique temporality of each sculpture unfolds.”
Like her other paper sculptures, Untitled Williamsburg 02 (FIG 04) featured using heavy-weight cotton rag paper backed with a thin sheet of DuPont Archival Tyvek using a ph-neutral and acid-free glue. A piece of Tyvek resembles a smooth, translucent sheet of paper, but it is actually a synthetic material made of high-density polyethylene fibers (it is in substance plastic). The durable fabric is difficult to tear but easily cut with scissors, and one of its advantages for Mead is its capacity to amplify the surface tension of the paper and render its curves more taut. The material thus endows supple counterforce to adjacent planes, creating the impression that Mead’s overlapping surfaces are just being held in place against the elastic strain of the paper to return to its original flatness.

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Immediately behind the sculptural element of the composite Untitled Williamsburg 02 (FIG 05), Mead’s spotlighting casts on the gallery wall a shaded channel bracketed on either side by bright vertical striations, charged like tiny lightning strikes. They result from light deflected off the object’s posterior surfaces. While Mead considers such incidents to be integral to her piece, it would be wrong to insist that these particular reflections and shadows are essential. In other locations, different conditions of installation and illumination will produce altered effects in the presentation of the whole. Given the unlikelihood of replicating in every possible physical setting the same optical conditions and shade, we are encouraged to conclude that in any location, it must the general phenomenon of “reflection” that remains significant for our interpretation of the work. But it is equally important to insist that accepting the variability of display conditions does not make the work’s meaning contingent on external factors (least of all, on our “experience” of different environments). Far from it: Mead’s reflections serve to delimit autonomous virtual domains in which the unique temporality of each sculpture unfolds.\(^8\)
At the start of this essay I drew attention to the strings in Untitled Williamsburg 03 in their metaphorical capacity to touch or feel into their environments. On its cantilever platform, the paper shell extends a lead off the front ledge. (See detail, FIG 06). The twine reaches into space, casting a slender shadow, like a drawn line, across the face of the shelf. Yet encountering no resistance and meeting no other body, the projective gesture—to attribute to the strand a degree of volition—remains an unconsummated touch. Now locate the string's twin in the photograph, where the cord extends from the sculpture's husk. (See detail, FIG 07). Inches away, the end of the tie meets a semi-reflective surface. At that point of contact, we are witness to the meeting touch of the string, its cloudy reflection, and its undulating shadow. Within the space of the photograph, in other words, Mead shows us the realization of the paper sculpture's heretofore unfulfilled gesture. That the placement of strings in the photograph matches so closely with the positions of the strings in the sculpture implies that Mead meant us to compare them. The drama of separation and connection implied by Untitled Williamsburg 03 sustains a speculative hypothesis: insofar as the ensemble itself is Mead's gesture of communicating with her viewers (of touching us), it analogizes the act of interpretation itself, in which the coincidence of an artist's intent and a viewer's grasp is never guaranteed, but which proceeds asymptotically toward a consummation of meaning and understanding.

As I've pointed out, Mead considers the projection of light onto the walls of the gallery a vital component of her presentation, and that sensibility finds a precedent in her own body of work. In Algae 02 (2009, FIGS 08 and 09), the artist arranged geometrically shaped plates of shiny copper in varying configurations on the gallery floor. When lit either by natural or artificial sources, the burnished surfaces deflect the rays onto the walls in patches of colored light, ever changing in profile as the ambient illumination in the gallery shifts. As reflections, these “dematerialized” images are nonetheless literally dependent on their material copper base. (They are also figuratively tethered to that base, as if by an invisible string or line. Is it too much to see the lefthand planes of light as kites sailing in the breeze?) But as viewers circumambulate the space of Mead’s installation, their changing angles of approach intermittently cause the actual plates to disappear from view, to “dematerialize” in turn, momentarily camouflaged by their resemblance to the wood floorboards. Unseen, only the plate’s index of light, its virtual reflection, remains “real.” The chiasmic exchange—the transfer of qualities between “virtual” and “actual” and back again—draws a line of current from Algae 02’s to Mead’s recent work.
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Mead explores the relationship between the copper plate installations and her current work. She employs her technique of drawing with light to create a seemingly instantaneous image—"to transform duration into a seemingly instanta-

eous temporal experience." This is a nod to early photography, where Benjamin, employed to characterize the concept of the "actual" object, rendered its partic-

arial presence of such drawings." Mead explains the general process of making light-sensitive elements in her work: "The way reflection figures the other kind, attun-

ducation becomes explicit in the form of early photography. As Whitman observes, the image is "measured" and absorbed by time. And for Ben-

jamin, the 'actual' object, rendering its partic-

ular reality Mead creates ultimately

somehow reserves for drawing. In the picture of Untitled Williamsburg 10 (Fig. 10), no proper sketch of the sculpture's appear-

ance seems a necessary starting point. The artist's chosen metaphors for mem-

ories from Mead's work often call for terms typi-

of her objects and images, descriptions that

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in the artist's work, the filament flashes in and out of

air, but also associates reflection with psy-

ological introspection, with remem-

boring reason to reflect on the correspon-

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Mead explores the relationship between the copper plate installations and her current uses of sanded and polished aluminum for the surfaces of her composite works—with the latter being an attempt to recast the image into a seemingly instantaneous image, to transfigure transient phenomena as a perpetual temporal experience—to transform the “actual” object, rendering its particularity all the more evident. The keyword “aura” names the quality of a subject permeated and absorbed by time. For Benjamin, aura is a sense of proximity and distance. Time is the unceasing opposition of the past and the present, the timeless and the temporal. Aura, like a simple knot, ties together the fictional and the real. Aura means the untouchable palpable. Aurélie, like a simple knot, ties together the model and the image, the enduring and the monitory, the distant and the close, the fictional and the real, Aura means the unceasing opposition of the past and the present.

I suspect that for Mead (as for Benjamin) the Daguerreotype’s synthesis of temporal limitatio...

Mead patiently produces such effects, because she chooses to photograph her sculptures in their final form, sometimes wait for the precise moment when the play of natural light on the paper’s edges will appear as object’s context. Hence in her maze, this is to invert our usual understanding of context as an acausal graphic mark on a surface. But the technique also prompts us to recall an original theorization of photography as an art of drawing lines on light. Although she does not produce them by hand, the frames of the photographs are all made of white finished wood. The pointed inclusion of “reflection” suggests that she considers the reflective light an essential component of the work, not simply presentational accessories.6 Although she does not produce them by hand, the frames of the photographs are all made of white finished wood. 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