



Screening Sculpture: Nate Boyce's Recent Work
by Jordan Kantor

Hybrid objects, conjoining sculpture and moving images, are at the center of San Francisco-based artist Nate Boyce's current practice. Spray-painted steel structures support screens, which play short, looped digital video. At first glance, the objects seem fairly straightforward: self-contained, minimal forms, whose shape and spaces are easily graspable. *R-1*, *R-2*, *R-3*, and *R-4* (all 2012) are typical examples of this body of work. Quickly following, however, this initial impression gives way to something significantly more complex, unraveling as the overall gestalt of the sculpture gives way to a collage of illusory volumes. Indeed, upon closer inspection, forms that at first seemed to be regular and geometric appear strange. Volumes flatten into planes. Boxes expected to have six sides, prove to have only four. Angles perceived to be regular reveal themselves to be askew. Inside and outside fold into each other. By the time one's attention moves to the flat screen monitor—on which the digital image of a shiny, irregular shape, floating and rotating in an environment of indeterminate scale plays—our sense of space is already unmoored. We have entered Boyce's formal world, where physical and rendered spaces collapse, and we are reminded how tenuous and ultimately fragile the triangulation between what our eyes see, what our bodies intuit, and what our brains think can be.

In his practice, Boyce has managed to carve out a distinctive artistic territory for himself where such questions can be productively asked, if not always answered. Generously, his work evidences searching more than pronouncement. The two most significant signposts on this quest seem to be ontology and phenomenology. That is, Boyce asks questions of what both sculpture and the digital image are and how each affects and effects the physical experience of embodied space looking at them. In so doing, this work revisits questions that fueled classic Modernist art, while updating them for the 21st century. Touching upon many of the central debates around advanced sculpture over the last century, Boyce's works seek to incorporate precedent while arguing for the continuing relevance and poignancy of these issues. For example, like Constantin Brancusi, Boyce asks where an object stops and where its support starts,



deliberately confusing the lines between sculpture and pedestal. This formal play raises important questions about the artwork and its environment, as well as the ideological interests (not to mention practical concerns) that differentiate the two. Similarly, by bringing made and found elements together—merging the hand-welded steel frames he fashions with computer screens that he purchases, for example—Boyce employs a collage aesthetic in which materials maintain their discrete identities, while simultaneously serving as integral parts of a compositional whole. (This is only one of the tactics that connects Boyce's work to that of David Smith and Anthony Caro). Still closer to current debates, these works also mischievously peck at issues at the hinge of modernist and post-modernist art. By bringing a durational, moving image into the conventionally static domain of sculpture, Boyce's work puts a parodist spin on questions of medium specificity and artistic autonomy and also self-consciously investigates how his viewers' attention is solicited and their bodies addressed.



As engaging and important as it is to revisit these historical moments—indeed such strategies seem *de rigueur* for most self-aware contemporary art practices—Boyce's work makes its strongest impression in the cross-pollination of video and sculpture, where it explores the potential tensions between spaces viewed on the screen and spaces felt in the round. Here Boyce engineers a kind of experiential hall-of-mirrors in which the image on the screen and the object before the viewer are set into a formal dance. By presenting a digital image of a volumetric shape on a flat screen, which can only be viewed from a fixed, frontal position, yet is set within a three-dimensional sculpture, Boyce's work forces us to constantly shuttle between apprehending flatness and volume, calling attention to different conventions of viewing and interacting with physical objects. In short, what he gives us is a picture of a sculpture presented within a sculpture apprehended as a picture. This restless movement between physical and depicted space—which I think comprises some of the most compelling parts of Boyce's artistic investigation at the moment—is as much a factor of his working process as of the final object he exhibits. These videos begin with a form sculpted in the "traditional" reductive technique of carving. The resulting shape is then filmed against a green screen, while rotating on a single axis. (Imagine a cut-up piece of dry floral foam set on a record player). This footage is then entered into video effects software, where hyper-digital surface texture, lighting, and colors are added and a modulated, monochromatic background space is generated. What emerges is an uncanny form, which, while born outside a computer and obviously tied to the physical world, only technically exists "within" it. By then presenting the video on the screen-sculpture he's fashioned, Boyce further underscores the physical and conceptual play unfolding in his viewer's head and body. It is the type of image—and thought—that could only be made today.

It is precisely in this kind of looped, self-referential, formal mind-twisting that Boyce's work exudes its most contemporary affect, and through which his formal investigations engender philosophical, even political, speculation. To my mind, the overall feeling evoked by Boyce's work is dystopian. For all its Modernist references, it feels more redolent of a trap, than a promise of emancipation. This impression, which, admittedly, may ultimately be personal, is primarily linked to musings set into motion by Boyce's particular material choices. Indeed, while the steel forms Boyce makes are invented, handmade, and unique, they evoke the visual lexicon of International style design, as well as its attendant history of being appropriated by American corporate culture. That is, the forms oddly recall office furniture and decor (an impression reinforced by the specific beiges and browns which dominate his palette) and hint at the way in which avant-garde design has been adapted for countless cubicles across the landscape of the American workforce. The types of screens Boyce nestles into his steel armatures only deepens this impression. Harvested from outdated personal computers—doubtlessly put to pasture when the business that owned them disposed them for upgrades—these screens are stripped of their housing and presented wholly unadorned. With a thumb drive containing the video file they play visibly protruding from their backsides, these screens evoke a kind of decapitated brainlessness. They can no longer compute, they can only display—eternally re-presenting the file they contain in an endless loop of the same. In Boyce's hands, it is as if dreams of modernism have gradually given way to the nightmares of "Blade Runner."

Only time will tell where these formal investigations will lead in Boyce's still relatively young practice, or whether such philosophical speculations will ring true in the future. What is apparent at this point, however, is that Nate Boyce has already married a strong tactical approach with a distinct formal sensibility, defined by a series of specific historical references and material choices. As with all compelling art, this sensibility adds up to more than the sum of its descriptions in language can conjure, and, even when the specific affect might be bleak, the endeavor to reach out artistically remains nothing if not hopeful.

Jordan Kantor is a San Francisco-based artist, whose work has been shown in numerous exhibitions, including, most recently, at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2012), The Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco (2011), Churner and Churner, New York (2011), and Ratio 3, San Francisco (2010). Additionally, he has written extensively on contemporary art subjects, and is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*. Kantor is currently associate professor of painting and humanities at California College of the Arts.

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