

ARTPULSE

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Theodor Adorno, Art Criticism and the Digital Commons

Liz Deschenes

Lily Cox-Richard

Taylor Davis

Julie Heffernan

Rosa Barba's Metaphors

Marni Kotak:
Performing Motherhood

Dialogues:
Franklin Sirmans

Rashid Johnson

in Conversation with Oliver Kielmayer



LOOK HERE GO THERE

An Interview with Taylor Davis

In the essay for Taylor Davis' recent exhibition at the Aldrich Museum, "If you steal a horse and let it go, he'll take you back to the barn you stole him from," Exhibitions Director Richard Klein says the following about her work: "The artist's persistent engagement with the issue of orientation utilizes form, space, subject, identity, place, material, and language to make art that consistently—and often vexingly—calls what is known into question."

Davis has also exhibited her work at the Tang Museum, Dodge Gallery, Office Baroque Gallery, Worcester Art Museum, White Columns, Samsøen Projects, Exit Art, Triple Candie, Incident Report, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston and was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial in 2004.

Based in Boston where she has been a professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design since 1999 and co-chair of sculpture at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College since 2003, Davis was also a visiting faculty member at the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University in the fall of 2008. She has long sought to fuse her many talents in sculpture, painting and teaching with her love of poetry and literature.

BY VANESSA PLATACIS

Vanessa Platacis - Your recent exhibition at the Aldrich Museum consisted of several groups of objects including: text cylinders, built forms, collages and shaped canvases. You have used the phrase 'equitable exchange' to describe the 'relationships created between the forms within a form and the relationship between the viewer and the object.' Would you elaborate on these relationships and why this exchange interests you?

Taylor Davis - I had a studio visit earlier in the year with Nancy Shaver, to show her what I was working on and to talk about an exhibition we were curating together. Nancy was and is my teacher (and now a colleague as well at Bard's Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts.) She is a tough critic and a great supporter. She notifies me if she's letting me get away with something, which means I'm not getting away with anything. We were talking about my *Farmtek* collages, many images of switches and fittings, mole-traps and floodlights glued flat to intricately gridded surfaces. Nancy said, "There's no one way in and no one way out. There's no one meaning. And this is a good thing." Visual democracy. An equitable exchange between images on a collage or parts of a built form is a way to demonstrate interdependent non-hierarchical relationships; each part and every perspective necessary and equal. This is very important to me, no *one* (subject or position) dominating. It's also an act between a viewer and an artist in which both are present and respected.

V.P. - In Donald Davidson's "Rational Animals," he writes "attitudes can be attributed, and so attitudinal content determined, only on the basis of a triangular structure that requires interaction between at least two creatures as well as interaction between each creature and a set of common objects in the world."¹ In other words, the contents of our own thoughts, and the recognition of the words of others and the objects and events to which they refer, depend on our sharing with others a pattern of interaction with the world.

T.D. - I can answer with a mental image of me holding an object out to the viewer while I'm saying, "This isn't my subject." One reads a sentence in order to glean content, or—more to a point—be told something by someone. But most sentences do something other than deliver an agreed upon meaning. "Because I couldn't trust my underling Itachi, I'm going

to hide the money I planned to bury here elsewhere." The syntax and content of this sentence are nutzoo. Even now, when I read it on my computer screen, I experience an erratic back and forth, a mental stop and start that ends with elsewhere. I'm a slow reader. I have to turn things around in my head. Not trusting ones' underling is a problem I'm lucky not to have. Maybe new content is made when I spend more time with a text; the sentence becoming thing. And then I make it a thing by painting it as a four-color line so another creature can share my attitude.

V.P. - Heidegger's emphasis on the temporality and incompleteness of all meaning comes to mind while attempting to read the text cylinders. Are you appropriating text from the past to suggest the direction of the future?

T.D. - I think temporality and incompleteness of meaning make the texts present tense. All the texts articulate sentiment and situations that are contemporary. Simultaneous reading and walking emphasize this. I think about linearity and meaning, about the multi-colored spiraled sentence and its message. Johanna Drucker writes, "The visual line. Not a nice poetic line, carefully controlled and closed. Instead a haphazard line, random line, fulfilling itself by the brute force of its physical reality."² The content of the sentence I choose is true; what's stated is what happened happens and is happening.

V.P. - In contrast to the physical engagement required by the text cylinders, the work deep collective lore invites the viewer to sit alongside the work and provides a place for the mind to rest.

T.D. - Painted in copper leather-paint on a double bend of black suede, the text of *deep collective lore* is from a long and baffling sentence from Hellmut Wilhelm's *Eight Lectures on the I CHING*: "[...] not the secondary upsurge of too long backed-up waters that often overtakes peoples after an exhausting period of logical and analytical thought then washes up turbid elements from the individual psyche in addition to the deep collective lore."

When I was installing the room of cylinders at the Aldrich, it became clear to Richard Klein and myself that there had to be a form in the room that contrasted the vertical walking/reading experience of the cylinders. *deep collective lore*—draped across a Corbusier-style upholstered bench



Taylor Davis, *If you steal a horse*, 2014, Wacky wood and oil paint, 47 1/2" x 29" x 27." All images are courtesy of the artist.

in a corner of the gallery—is a dark horizontal read, a single perspective of lustrous words partially visible in the folds of the suede. It has weight and stillness that allow a moment of rest. Plus “exhausting period of logical and analytical thought” is funny when read in relation to the sometimes laborious “viewing” of the cylinders.

V.P. - Movement, repetition, growth and other such involuntary processes of life create a congruence between text and wood grain, solidifying their shared status as living history. The lines that compose your shaped canvases and form your sculpture are often sourced from naturally occurring patterns, such as wood grain. By relating the directional growth patterns of wood grain to the patterns in linguistics, there is a subtle, yet intrinsic similarity between subject and material.

T.D. - I've always used wood for its structural and visual qualities. With relatively few tools, I mill rough lumber into parts that have specific dimensions and very active visual information. When I'm cutting a quantity of boards in anticipation of a form, the visual qualities of the grain—undulating lines, shifting color, simple and complex patterns—help with my decisions concerning proportion and size. Sometimes the grain is what makes me build a piece. In *WHITE PINE*, a group of sculptures named for their material, I was given a load of lumber that came from a huge old white pine tree that died standing up. It was full of knots, intricately patterned with contrasting golds and grays of the tree's heartwood and sapwood, and riddled with dark holes from the invasive brown spruce long-horned beetle. I used the visual information to design enclosed volumes of horizontal boards, joined edges in, with the undulating line of the tree's outer extremity touching down on the floor. The forms have as many views as sides and each perspective offers a different physical and graphic experience. In terms of relating the growth patterns of the grain to visual patterns of letters and words, I think about the differences and similarities between reading and looking, whether intent looking is reading without words. And this makes me think about the cylinders, where the grain of the wood is 1) an active ground that holds the painted word/figure, and 2) the outer skin of a material that wraps around itself to delineate a volume separate from the viewer's body.

V.P. - What is the relationship between the wood grain and orientation in the Tboxes?

T.D. - Peter Frampton uses an effects unit called a talk box³. Think about his 1975 hit *Show Me the Way*. Before he sings, “I wonder how you're feeling. There's ringing in my ears [...]” you hear his guitar and then you hear, “wah, wah-wah-wah-wah waaah.” The amplified frequencies of his guitar are directed into the talk box's speaker, up through a plastic tube, into his mouth, and back out into his microphone, producing a sound that is both and neither voice and guitar. The effect of one on the other makes it impossible to hear the singular qualities of either instrument. My first talk box, *TBOX no.1* (2012) is a response to a friend's comment, “It's too bad you can't get other people to see wood grain the way you do.” It's a built form, a small double-stacked construction of birch plywood. Open at the top, it has multiple shelves that define the interior space, much like the aperture of a camera. The exterior and interior surfaces and shelves are marked all over with *trompe l'oeil* renderings of blue painter's tape. The shapes, torn strips and arrows, “point out” the soft shifting pattern of the wood grain. *TBOX no.1* over-emphasizes, loudly directing the viewer to simultaneously LOOK here and GO there (no one said equal is “nice”). It performs a rowdy dialogue; an anti-dialectical prattling that celebrates it's own invented self.

V.P. - In Fingers and Thumbs a sensual dialogue with Josef Albers' Structural Constellations comes to mind.

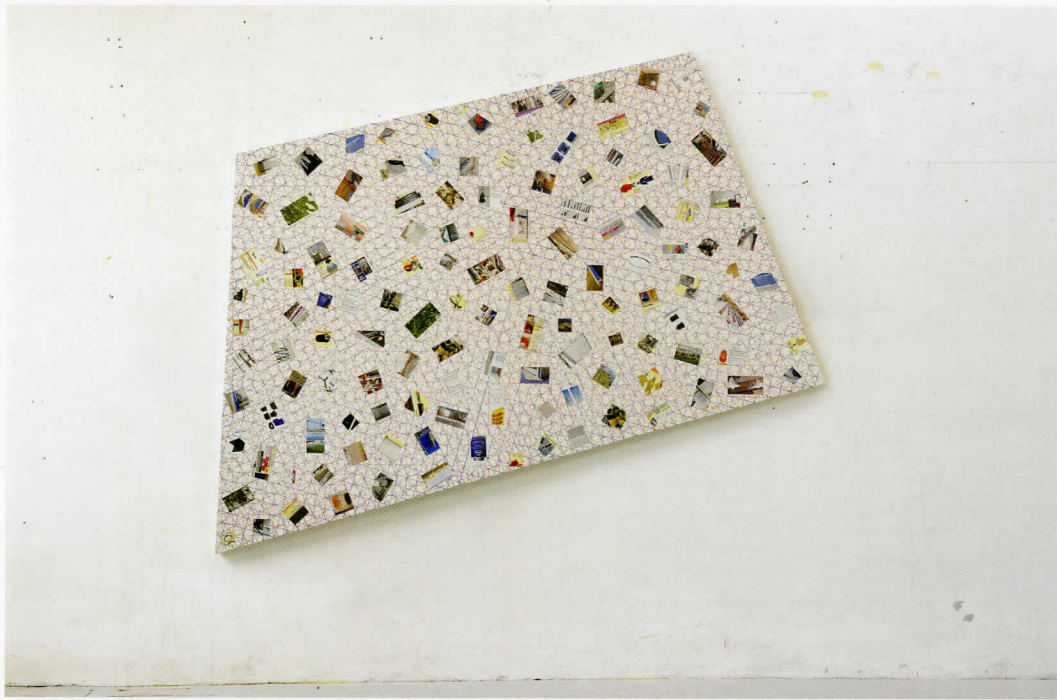
T.D. - Geometry is a system and a set of forms that allow me to most efficiently isolate and divide space. Straight edges (rounded or sharp) and flat slides let me connect parts, and define a volume, in not so simple ways. *Fingers and Thumbs* are cubes that extend and hold in equal measure. They have six identical sides made of six boards that I mill from a rough lumber. Each board is cut, joined, planed, and routed into same-sized parts, one or two of which slides out, simultaneously creating pointers and holes. I think they're sexy, the rounded bead-edging of every board swelling into its neighbor with cut end profile that looks like a Carroll Dunham doodle. I can't keep the forms together in my mind. They push up off the floor and out



Taylor Davis, *WHITE PINE 3*, 2010, (extended diamond), white pine, 17" x 43" x 43."



Taylor Davis, *Fingers and Thumbs #3*, 2014, Cherry wood, 39" x 39" x 39."



Taylor Davis, *Untitled (FarmTek #3)*, 2014, Copic marker and collage on sized canvas, 49" x 77" x 1.5."

into space in equal measure; a still form that looks as if it's continually positioning itself. Albers' *Structural Constellations!*

V.P. - In Albers's opening of his treatise *On Painting* he echoed the Platonian Academy in stating, "It would please me if the painter were as learned as possible in all the liberal arts, but first of all I desire that he know geometry."⁴ The shaped canvases start with six superimposed grids of different colors drawn with markers, appears to challenge geometry as a methodology of perfection and logic and play with our intuitive understanding of physical space and orientation.

T.D. - In *Cardinal Grid No.1* the geometry of the six colored grids is used to make a complicated ground of disarray and order. Ground and figure both, the lines randomly synchronize to create interference patterns of chevrons and mandalas; on a shaped canvas that acts as its own figure on the ground of the wall. I painted sixteen *trompe l'oeil* tape shapes of black, grey, red and yellow so the piece wasn't about geometry, to give the coalescing patterns something to talk to. I wanted the color to float and penetrate the grid/ground, like little fish in, on, and behind a net.

V.P. - You move seamlessly between painting and sculpture. What motivated the choice to work in two dimensions and the painting language?

T.D. - I graduated from SMFA (School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) as a painter. I spent a few years in the ceramics department but in my third year I began working with a member of the painting department, Miroslav Antić. He was an excellent teacher but couldn't change my limited understanding of painting space. I thought there was a painted subject and a painted background that held it (no visual democracy!) I sidestepped this problem when I started carving wood reliefs and the grain of the cherry and mahogany I was using acted as a material and visual ground. Eventually I started carving in the round, and then making built forms. In terms of the work I'm doing now, I use paint and I make stretched canvases but I'm not a painter. I'm not splitting hairs, I'm just thinking about artists who know how to paint and I'm not one of them. I think my two-dimensional work is a combination of drawing and construction: building image with flat parts. What motivates me to work two-dimensionally? I want to work with weight differently, to make

forms that hang or float on a wall. I want the visual relationship I get when I'm face to face. In terms of watercolor and paper collages, I want to subdivide space with color and line and democratically populate it with many things, plants, and animals.

V.P. - How does your role as an educator inform your studio practice and vice versa?

T.D. - Yes! Teaching is a very important part of my studio work and my life. In terms of my relationship to my students, an important role model is Nancy Shaver. In her first summer (and my last summer as a student), the sculpture disciple went to Storm King. There was a small show of David Smith's work in the museum. Nancy said, "I hate this work!!" paused then asked, "What do you think?" Terrifying! Nancy was fierce. I steeled myself and told her I loved it. She said, "Show me." So I walked her through the exhibition, talking about what I saw in Smith's work. After I was finished she said, "I've changed my mind." Nancy doesn't play the expert. Art and life win out. Sometimes I know more than my students, sometimes they know more. I need the exchange. Also, teaching grounds my studio work with the discipline of engaged looking and critique. I require from myself the same rigor and permission that I require from my students.

V.P. - What's next on the horizon?

T.D. - I presently have work in "I was a double" curated by Ian Berry and David Lang for the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs. I like the show for many reasons, one of which is the juxtaposition of my funny difficult double-cylinder *Da, can ye no tell me* with Kay Rosen's expansive stunner, *Wonderful!*

Next? Me, myself, and I in the studio working many things at the same time. ■

NOTES

1. Donald Davidson, "Rational Animals", *Dialectica* 36: 318-27; 1982a, reprinted in Davidson 2001c.
2. Johanna Drucker, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E LINES", *The Visual Line*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
3. "You can also hear mind blowing Sly Stone using a similar device, the vocoder, on his 1965 hit *Sex Machine*."
4. Leon Battista Alberti, "On Painting", trans. by John R. Spencer, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1966, 90 (*Della Pittura*, 1435).