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JOSH TONSFELDT

THOUGHTS ON THE UNREQUITED PROMISE OF THE PROSTHETIC SCREEN

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Josh Tonsfeldt works with situations, materials, and images common to daily life yet uncommonly combined. His sculptures, installations, photographs, interventions, and videos build upon each other, swirling and accumulating into larger constellations, both visually and conceptually. He explores our changing relationship with images, how our investment in their signification is responsive to the circumstances of changing technologies and ways of producing, mediating, and consuming images. While each work is individually distinct, Tonsfeldt often uses the durational and spatial experience of a gallery or museum site to choreograph intersections among spectators, images, materials, and architecture. When experiencing his combination of works, I think of Robert Smithson's "Non-Sites," those disparate groupings with mineral samples, descriptive texts, and photographs that in 1968 he arranged into spatial configurations. These components "pointed" to actual sites often situated within fringe landscapes. Like Tonsfeldt, Smithson relied less on specific meaning or literal interpretation and more on the strength of uncertainty and confusion to unleash the imagination of spectators, inviting them to walk around, contemplate, and piece it all together. He also utilized the sensuality of materials and surfaces, and he knew the value of precise placement to make us feel something, draw upon memories, and think about what we were seeing. Comparable to Smithson, whose artistic interests posed critical questions about art and culture, Tonsfeldt's work points to questions about contemporary life and social relations: the connection, for instance, between the analog and the digital, and specifically, our bodily entanglement with technological devices, the filters and screens through which we engage, interpret, and experience humanity.

One of those devices is the smartphone, arguably the principal technological prosthesis, metaphorically and literally expanding our cognitive reaches into the world. Tonsfeldt plays off the multilayered and problematic connections we have with the smartphone and the analogous screen as extensions of our bodies and continually accessible voyeuristic channels. His photographic images are intimate. They capture fleeting, seemingly private moments, such as a young man viewed through a storefront window receiving a tattoo, his arm extended, hand holding an iPhone; or a screen cradled in the hand, faintly illuminating a figure in a dark room. References to the screen conjure all-too-familiar images of people sitting in groups at restaurants, alone on park benches, walking on sidewalks, in crosswalks, at airports, and even while driving cars, staring down at the illuminated surfaces of a mobile device. These are the ubiquitous scenes taking place at this very moment across the globe. And why not? The smartphone prosthesis promises such ambitious connectivity and togetherness with its voyeuristic projection into the vastly remote social and physical spaces of Instagram, Facebook, Grindr, Tinder, and other forms of social media.

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While these immediate associations come to mind, the shape of the screen relates even further back in history to the shape of a photograph, or frame, or window, and its transformation across the ages from an analog medium to a digital image-making device undergirds the artist's interests. These shapes, for instance, serve as the basis for sculptural forms made of plaster onto which digital images are directly printed. Their surfaces have indentations and pitted marks, indices of architectural elements or simply detritus pressed into the mold. These imperfections and textures contrast with the typical smooth, glossy surfaces and fine papers on which we are accustomed to seeing printed images. The sculptures are sturdy, and when combined with the artist's voyeuristic, ghostlike imagery, they possess a surprising sense of monumentality and permanence. A tension develops between the informality of the images and rough solidity of the sculpture, further reinforcing the feeling of alienation (or, being "alone together") in his photographic imagery.

Works absent of photographic images still draw upon the sculptural potential of image-making materials, such as printer inks, prism films used to focus the light source of a screen, LEDs, and fluorescent lights the unseen components and physical layers of a screen responsible for fueling our visual consumption. Prism films are used in an ongoing series of framed compositions, layering the material with plastic forms, found objects, and casual snapshots. Here, the film is used against its intended function to focus and brighten an image, instead obscuring the image, reducing clarity, inviting a closer look by spectators. In other cases, the illuminating power of the LED television is harnessed more directly, hung vertically in the manner of a traditional portrait painting, its image-streaming precision stripped down to a grid of light bulbs. And in other instances, Tonsfeldt uses fully functioning televisions, drawing upon the polished surfaces that are propped, ever so gently, at forty-five degree angles to reveal the surprising semi-transparency of the screen.

His works reflect upon perception, memory, and the lives of objects. They evoke the strained and fractured undercurrent of distraction and disconnection that permeate our current moment. His images and sculptures are like archaeological remains yanked from a future where that ubiquitous screen eventually ran its course after achieving totem status at some point beyond our time. And, just as Smithson directed spectators' attention to sites beyond the gallery walls, asking questions about their relationship to the landscape, Tonsfeldt's individual works and configurations of objects and images also point our attention to urgent questions concerning the world we inhabit. That is not to say that his work is about something in particular; instead, it makes us feel something, whatever that may be in the open-ended questions it poses.

Those responses include feelings about our relationship with the mediating impact of technology. We must admit that the screen alienates us from the realities of daily life, the practice of innate human behaviors and desires that teach us how to converse, exist in solitude, and empathize with others. The future will undoubtedly reflect upon this moment as the beginning of a long and deeply fraught era of catatonic consumers who were eventually confronted and asked to choose between the unrequited promises of the prosthetic screen and the natural craving to be together through lived, embodied, unfiltered experience. While Tonsfeldt explores the many ways and layers of seeing, how our perspectives are framed in reality and virtually, his practice initiates questions about the complex relationship we have with technology and the screen, questions we have yet to fully understand.