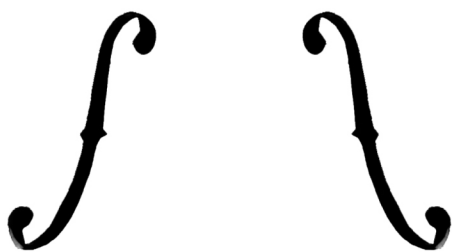


Parallax

Duncan MacDonald & Arnold McBay



February 7 > March 22, 2015

One of the greatest pleasures of working in an art gallery is working with the artists that are part of our community. We attend their shows, we admire their work, we say that we too would like to show their work, but somehow the years just slip by without the perfect opportunity materializing. *Parallax* is that perfect opportunity. This is the exhibition that developed out of those many years' worth of casual conversations that flow effortlessly over our lives.

Both Arnold McBay & Duncan MacDonald have shown at GPAG prior to this exhibition. MacDonald installed his *White Picket Sound Fence* in our sculpture garden in 2008, where it intrigued visitors for a full year. McBay has had numerous pieces in our bi-annual juried exhibitions over the years, and also donated works to our fund-raisers and to the collection. Both artists currently teach at Brock University, which is where the genesis of this exhibition occurred during a casual conversation between McBay and myself regarding how his recent work and artistic thought process seemed to be developing in a manner that was very compatible with that of his colleague, MacDonald. Was MacDonald also present at that opening? Truth be told, I cannot remember, but I do know that the idea was initiated, the two artists started to discuss ideas, and half a decade later we have an intriguing show in the gallery. *Parallax* is a visual conversation, a discussion between two highly articulate beings. Each artist has a unique statement to make, but there are many points of comparison and interaction, and a very satisfying sense of spending time in the company of friends who each respects and appreciates the other's contributions.

I would like to thank both of the artists for all of the hard work that went into *Parallax*. This exhibition was not at all about the gallery curator doing a couple of studio visits, selecting a fixed number of pieces and placing them in the gallery. It was a far more complex and time consuming process in which the gallery curator said "well, what would you like to do with the space?" and left them to figure it out. It involves a leap of faith on the gallery's part and infinitely more work for the artists, but the results are dynamic, exciting and well worth the extra effort. I can only say thank-you to the artists for so brilliantly surpassing expectations and delivering *Parallax*. I would also like thank all of the colleagues, collaborators, assistants, gallery staff members and volunteers who participated in this process and ensured that, in the end, it would look easy. It wasn't, but illusion is a marvellous thing. Thanks as well to the Town of Grimsby, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, and GPAG members, volunteers and sponsors. Solid support from many sources is needed to run a gallery and it is all appreciated.

Rhona Wenger
Director/Curator
Grimsby Public Art Gallery

The Material Cycle:

One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason.

Robert Smithson, *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*

The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion.

Heraclitus, *Fragment 124*

In viewing the final compelling moments of Duncan MacDonald's *Piano Burn*, as the skeletal remains of a piano collapse forward and fade to ash, one can't help but contemplate Robert Smithson's notions surrounding entropy and geologic time: materials are culled from the earth, made precious, and then destroyed, ultimately becoming part of the earth again; and the cycle repeats itself. As a result of the contemporary conditions in which we live, it is hard to imagine that anything remains untouched by entropy. These questions surrounding materiality are dealt with collaboratively in *Parallax*, an exhibition surveying a collection of ongoing interests, experiments, and discussions between Niagara-based artists Duncan MacDonald and Arnold McBay. The origin of sound resonates through its own absence in MacDonald's work, and through the mediums of video, sculpture, and installation: poetics, colonial history, and the perpetual cycle of destruction are recorded. Through a lexicon of visual signs that explore our attachment to objects, marks, and gestures, fragments of found knowledge resurface as tangible forms in McBay's series of complex installations. A cycle is felt in the presence of these works, through the artist's individual explorations of time and materiality.

In his essay *Entropy and the New Monuments*, Robert Smithson details what he saw as the emergent trend amongst his contemporaries: to produce works that radically engage with our world in new ways through the creation of instant monuments—monuments for or against entropy. "Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of



Fig. 1

being made of natural materials such as marble, granite or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages but rather against the ages.”¹ This is a fitting reference when considering the flux of artificial and organic materials present throughout Arnold McBay’s *Forest of Signs*. In this documentation of found objects, poetry remains embedded in the surface of personal archives, and traces of language, history, and personal archeology are preserved and deconstructed. Curiously located within the installation is a Ziploc sandwich bag containing sand that was collected by McBay during a trip to Paris in 2007. In this context, the utilitarian function of the plastic bag, an object typically imagined as disposable or temporary, is challenged in its presentation as a vessel containing personal geographies. These synthetic and man-made elements collide within an instant monument.

Both sublimity and decay are captured in MacDonald’s video of a piano burning in a ubiquitous landscape. The Earth collects the remains of what it once produced in this documentation of the entropic cycle: a cycle that appears limitless through an endless projected loop. Delicate orchestras of flames resonate throughout the gallery, suggesting a precarious future for McBay’s relics of the past. The fragility of these materials, which include wax, glass, wood, metals, found text, and fragments of the earth are embodied in *Piano Burn*, in the destruction of something that was once precious. The forgotten piano is made visible, as a document of its destruction is also a form of preservation. *Piano Tusk* attempts to revert the materials that were destroyed in *Piano Burn* back to their original existence, while synchronously hinting at the simulation of its production. This self-reflexive process recalls the same conceptual strategies explored in *Aluminum Drop*, a sculpture that was created by the sound of its own making. Experiencing *Aluminum Drop* on the gallery floor recalls the initial action of the artist dropping the aluminum rod and recording this sound.

Glass is a material that is simultaneously something and nothing. McBay attempts to pause this instance of entropy by physically rendering the material remains of memory into a series of impossible cameras. These glass box sculptures, which utilize found antique glass plate positives and negatives form temporal narratives with a series of contained spaces. In presenting the reversed positives that were used in the manufacture of the glass box sculptures, *Prescencia* is a self-reflexive response to the still and silent glass boxes. Recalling the duality of parallax, these animations of found photographs conflate endless possibilities. Glass is a fitting conceptual framework for preserving these temporary images, through its ability to retain the world around it and project a distorted reality. Incised directly into the wall of the gallery, MacDonald’s *F-Holes* act as a counterpoint to McBay’s glass box sculptures, by retaining sound from its surrounding environment and projecting it back into the viewer’s direction. Functioning as a temporary instrument, the *F-Holes* will exist for the duration of the exhibition, and will then be destroyed.

Embodying sensory experience, *Parallax* offers many moments of discovery. The cycle is felt. Time is in itself materiality.

The cycle is repeated, ultimately becoming part of the Earth, destroyed and then made precious: materials are culled from the earth.

Emma German

1. Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, in Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings (University of California Press, 1996), 11.

As Seen From Two Different Points

*Because art is made of the same material as social exchanges, it has a special place in the collective production process.*¹

1. *Parallax*

Relational orbits enact changes in perspective. Hence the title: *Parallax*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as follows:

parallax, *n.*

Difference or change in the apparent position or direction of an object as seen from two different points; (*Astron.*) such a difference or change in the position of a celestial object as seen from different points on the earth's surface or from opposite points in the earth's orbit around the sun. Also: (half of) the angular amount of such a difference or change; (*Astron.*) the angle subtended at a celestial object by the radius of the earth's orbit, giving a measure of its distance from the earth; any of various similar measures of distance calculated by methods incorporating the motion of the sun relative to the local region of the galaxy, the proper motion of the observed body, the motions of a cluster of bodies having similar distances and speeds, etc.

The term has a parallel astronomical, or cosmic, significance that is worthy of consideration. It describes shifts in perspective relating to a celestial object as seen from different positions on the earth; differences in perspective that are made evident when measured according to a common locus. These various definitions speak to the way that a shared exhibition might unfold. Two (or more) different artists enter into dialogic relation, and their relationship is based on their individual subject positions—they each maintain and import an individuated perspective. Each is autonomous. Of utmost interest is how these positions, when brought into mutual orbit, enact collaborative shifts in the outcome of the exhibition. The event of the exhibition is the result of the bringing together of autonomous perspectives: parallax.

*The standard definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply “subjective,” due to the fact that the same object which exists “out there” is seen from two different stances, or points of view.*²

2. How can sensory phenomena be experienced anew?

Our understanding of sensory information is perpetually being revised. New data is continuously emerging, suggesting that an uncritical adoption of a standardized view of the senses promotes a conception of sensory reception that privileges a 'normative', anthropocentric worldview. By challenging and reconceiving the way that sensory information is received and classified, MacDonald and McBay trouble such hierarchical knowledge systems and propose new ways of conceiving our surroundings, promoting an evolution in perspective that favours undecidability and synaesthesia.

MacDonald represents sound as material object, as several disparate objects that each have distinct personalities and offer unique reformulations of sensory phenomena and knowledge—that each breathe new life into lived experience and reanimates aspects of life's withdrawn elements, as space (both negative and positive/present and absent), as flickering images (video), as embodied experience (rest). A musical instrument (piano) is incinerated and ardently reassembled (tusk).

McBay assembles objects in such a way as to enable us to reconsider the nuance of each 'thing'; foregrounding the 'thingness' of inanimate objects, he creates constellations that draw out difference while calling attention to the quiet relationships of inanimate entities. Concrete poems and their brethren are celebrated and reimagined in smooth rhizomatic interrelation. Photographic conventions are inverted as mechanically produced images become containers, vessels for the preservation of silent, still moments in the past.

3. How can language be experienced anew?

The artists share a linguistic concern. The structures inherent to language systems (sign/signifier/signified; sign/object/interpretant), like the architecture of sensorial experience, are examined, inverted, and reimagined. The relationship between the materiality and the conceptual elements of singular or collective objects is intentionally shifted in order to call attention to complex histories—stories: epistemological (pertaining to knowledge) and ontological (pertaining to Being), social, cultural, and political—that are often in-built but overlooked in the 'things' that surround us. MacDonald and McBay foreground the quiet intricacies of matter, of cultural commodities and remnants alike, and highlight how, when re-examined and reoriented, value and beauty can be restored in either.

MacDonald dissects objects and their respective narratives to reveal aspects of each that are often obscured by everyday experience, often influenced by the alienating forces of modernity, to produce visual conceits. With an eye for visual alternatives to conventional linguistic means, he transforms the mundane, revealing new ways of experiencing music, sound, and their material trappings, that re-enchant and transform according to semiotic interpretations of our surroundings. Occasional glimpses of Pop sensibilities tempered with the ingenuity of concept art, apparent in ironic twists such as *Quarter Rest* (2015) and *F-Holes* (2015), draw attention to the materiality of the Gallery space itself.

McBay, on the other hand, asserts his lexical interests from a perspective steeped in seriality. His works consist of curated groupings, of collected curiosities displayed in such a way as to engage the viewer in the act of thoughtful looking, albeit with a ludic inflection that reflects that of his counterpart. *Forest of Signs* (2015) seems to demand meditative consideration, and such attention is rewarded as the subtle, delicate mechanisms become unconcealed, as if revealing hidden depths. The aesthetics of language are brought to the fore in a different way in *Parallax* (2015), a tribute to visual poetry. This optically engaging love letter to Concrete draws out the paradoxes of interpretation by placing the borrowed works under Fresnel lenses, playing with the spatiality of the linear compositions while also troubling the boundaries of authorship.



Fig. 2

4. Harmony vs. dissonance.

*This would be the Wittgensteinian effect at which there is an intention and an act, and the success of the work is measured by the extent that the expectation created by the piece is fulfilled by the act as it acts in accord with the intention.*³

The artists gesture to common sensibilities but retain their autonomy. If the title cards were removed, most viewers could effortlessly group the works according to creator; works share distinctive traits, but these aesthetic differences never suggest dissonance. MacDonald's shrewd (ir)rationalism and tendency for the haptic, McBay's eye for the collective/collectivities and his list aesthetic—both artists refute the impulse to merge; instead, they produce a harmonious collaborative narrative steeped in both an impulse to deterritorialize and a fierce mutual interest in the confluence of the material and the conceptual. As variously singularities or assemblages, the works brought together in the charged space of *Parallax* are chimerical and evocative, the result of the dialogic convergence of two different points of view, of individuated but sympathetic perspectives.

Julia Polyck-O'Neill

1. Nicholas Bourriaud, "Space-time exchange factors", in *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: les presses du réel, 1998; 2002), trans. Simon Pleasance et al, 41.

2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 2006), 17.

3. Vanessa Place, "Ventouses", in *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), 64-5.

Figure 1. Arnold McBay. detail of *Presencia*, 2015.

Figure 2. Duncan MacDonald. *Quarter Rest*. 2015.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF WORKS

Duncan MacDonald

Aluminum Drop. 2010. 6061, aluminum.

Piano Tusk. 2015. Reclaimed ivory, industrial felt.

F-Holes. 2015. Excised drywall and plywood.

Piano Burn. 2012. HD video, stereo sound, 50 minutes.

Quarter Rest. 2015. Industrial felt, wood.

Slumber. 2015. Performance by Duncan sleeping on *Quarter Rest* intermittently throughout the duration of the exhibition, ongoing.

Arnold McBay

Forest of Signs. 2015. Found objects & mixed media.

Presencia. 2015. Single channel video, 37 minutes.

Silence Does Not Exist. 2014. Found glass plate negatives & positives, glass and stained glass came.

Parallax. 2015. Found enlarger elements, found objects and manipulated examples of visual poetry (printed on vellum & used with permission) by the following poets:

Gary Barwin

Inverting the Deer. 2011

Excerpt from *Bone Sapling*, a series in dialogue with Amanda Earl. 2014

Gregory Betts

He. 2006

Love, She Said to Me. 2004

derek beaulieu

Helvetica. 2014

Excerpt from *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. 2007

bpNichol

Allegory #30. circa 1970

Excerpt from *Pataphysical Hardware Store*. 1985

Francesca Capone

Excerpt from *Oblique Archive VII: Louis Zukofsky*. 2014

Judith Copithorne

The Letter O. 2006

Excerpt from *Horizon*. 1992

Kristen Mueller

Excerpt from *Partially Removing the Remove of Literature*. 2014

Design: A. McBay

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