A Moment of Our Time: The Sculpture of Micah Lexier

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The work of New York City-based artist Micah Lexier is usually considered to be of a conceptual bent, and as with the work of others who are mining the same vein, system and order are at the very heart of all things aesthetic. Lexier has taken particular interest in probing the issue of time and the various ways and means we’ve employed to measure and demarcate its passage. Indeed, he has constructed pieces that can (and eventually will) span a human life—like A work of art in the form of a quantity of coins equal to the number of months of the statistical life expectancy of a child born January 6, 1995 (1995), a work in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario comprising 906 comparatively numbered coins one of which is publicly transferred by a volunteer from a document box (in which the coins are pre-arranged in orderly rows) to a second identical box (in which, however, the increased disorder mandated by the time-linked principle of entropy is made abundantly manifest) on the sixth day of each month. The piece will be completed on July 6, 2070.

Most artists working conceptually of course opt to transform idea in some artefactual form. Much of Micah Lexier’s work is manifestly sculptural in its execution and effect, and because the element of time is absolutely central in it, the cosmological worldview devised by the late German mathematician Hermann Minkowski affords a useful context within which to consider it.

In the early twentieth century, Minkowski devised a means whereby an object’s location in both space and time could be simultaneously plotted in diagrammatic form. It was his realization that space and time—which had been thought to be independent of one another—were, in fact, one entity: a four-dimensional continuum. The point of intersection of the lines of space and time denotes zero, that point we now call “The Big Bang,” that singularity from which spacetime, and so our entire observable universe, was born. Extending up and away from this zero point, angles on opposite sides of the vertical time line represent the speed of light. They’re the most important part of the diagram, for the spacetime of everyday life—the place where things can happen within the universe of which we are a part—ends up diagrammatically represented as the space within those two lines. The shape of that space resembles a cone, for the two lines which form the sides—which denote the aforementioned speed of light—represent the absolute limits of our possible experience of the universe. All that is, has been and will be, exists within a cone of light. It is the shape, however banal we might think it to be, of spacetime.

Over the course of the winter of 2001-02, this cone of early twentieth-century Minkowski spacetime found an early twenty-first-century aesthetic equivalent in a sculptural work Lexier undertook for the Toronto Sculpture Garden (TSG). In its final form, after fifteen weeks of construction and halfway through its exhibition existence, the piece was a long, low rectangular wall of bricks and mortar that diagonally sliced across the TSG’s small lawn. The End and The Beginning, however, comprised fourteen previous sculptural incarnations before terminating in the simple geometry of the wall. Each week, brick mason Noël Puyne, following Lexier’s specific instructions, added precisely 120 new bricks to the work. At the end of week 1, the piece comprised 1/2 courses of brick that only just protruded above the grass. By week 3, verticality was introduced, as a stubby chimney-like shape arose from otherwise horizontal courses of bricks, and through the following weeks more complex shapes occurred that were, in the end, absorbed into the plain geometry of a brick and mortar artefact.

Notes
1. Avis de l’exposition Chambre d’amis (1988) qui reste la plus célèbre aujourd’hui, et dont le principe s’est largement répandu par la suite. Il s’agissait alors, pour les artistes participants, de présenter leurs créations dans des espaces privés appartenant à des familles gantées qui s’étaient prêtées au jeu. Dans le salon, dans le bureau, on découvrait des œuvres spécifiques, réalisées par les témoins de l’époque : Dan Graham, Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman, Daniel Buren, Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner et bien d’autres.
2. Jan Hoet est présentement associé à une nouvelle aventure puisqu’il dirige un musée flamant neuf en Allemagne, concu par Frank Gehry : le MAITA à Herford.
3. Certaines sculptures évoquent d’ailleurs loin sèrement le GMC (Gemeentes) de la période surrealistes (en pense, par exemple, au Palais à quatre heures du matin) qu’il réalise en 1952 et qui est conservé au Museum of Modern Art de New York.)
twice as a kind of visual and aging parents) is repeated to the so-called "Sandwich Generation familial fulcrum on which both the competing demands of children and physical things giving space-time a very particular shape. In many works from a series of individual pieces collectively entitled A Minute of My Time, Lexier wrought sculptural spacetime from the two-dimensional domain of pen and ink doodles, each of which he drew in an interval that precisely spanned one minute of time of a specific date (all duly noted in the title of each work). The drawings were transformed into large objects of waterjet-cut steel that were then mounted on the side of walls or building exteriors—like A Minute of My Time (September 29, 1999 15:04-15:05), which hangs on the side of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario—or were worked out as smaller, entirely free-standing gallery-exhibited objects, like the bent steel piece A Minute of My Time December 10, 1998 22:22-22:22. (It’s worth noting that many of the works in the series were never intended to be anything other than drawings on paper—something of the equivalent, if you will, to Minkowski’s two-dimensional spacetime diagrams—and that a number were even created on paper that had been prepared beforehand with grid lines drawn in perspective so as to suggest three-dimensionality.) With his One of These Things series, Lexier furthered this enquiry into the sculptural possibilities of the two-dimensional by objectifying actualising signs—in this instance, two of the formal elements of written language. With enamelled waterjet-cut aluminium, he materialized linguistic punctuation: the comma in One of These Things/Commas (2003), and script braces in One of These Things/Braces (2003). In each work, the child’s game in which one object amongst a group is to be identified as in some way different contextualizes Lexier’s sculptural manifestations of figures that are abstract symbols—pure typographic shapes—never originally intended to be manipulated as dimensional objects (although, interestingly, until only recently they have themselves been the product of objects—fonts of lead, for example—that are themselves artefactual). For One of These Things/Commas, Lexier articulated the typographic symbol as a series of blunt, squared-off objects, all hard angles and devoid of the graceful flowing curves we tend to associate with most visually appealing typefaces, which he has grouped together on the wall in abutting blocks so that only the typographic tails protrude at varied angles. It may begin with typography, but Lexier’s transposition of symbol into artefact iterates its almost sculptural origins while actualising and substantiating what is really little more than an insubstantial mark—a highly stylised, albeit semantically meaningful, doodle, if you will—on paper.

Earlier on, back in the last decade of the twentieth century, Lexier’s aestheticization of spacetime was made sculpturally manifest in another series in which, again, stacking was a primary structural element; his Book Sculptures. Using life-size photographs of individuals, Lexier mounted them on the spines of a series of custom-made “books” (actually, wooden objects lacking things like pages that are book-like in external appearance only) he then arranged on shelves—like Book Sculptures: Brothers (Bunk Bed) (1993), a piece in which each book individually comprised a slice of the total figure represented on the book spines. Photography may be an element absolutely vital to this body of work, but its manifestation is entirely within a sculptural context. Lexier’s Book Sculptures are encounters with the artefactual, with physical things giving spacetime a very particular shape. In many works from a series of individual pieces collectively entitled A Minute of My Time, Lexier wrought sculptural spacetime from the two-dimensional domain of pen and ink doodles, each of which he drew in an interval that precisely spanned one minute of time of a specific date (all duly noted in the title of each work). The drawings were transformed into large objects of waterjet-cut steel that were then mounted on the side of walls or building exteriors—like A Minute of My Time (September 29, 1999 15:04-15:05), which hangs on the side of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario—or were worked out as smaller, entirely free-standing gallery-exhibited objects, like the bent steel piece A Minute of My Time December 10, 1998 22:22-22:22. (It’s worth noting that many of the works in the series were never intended to be anything other than drawings on paper—something of the equivalent, if you will, to Minkowski’s two-dimensional spacetime diagrams—and that a number were even created on paper that had been prepared beforehand with grid lines drawn in perspective so as to suggest three-dimensionality.) With his One of These Things series, Lexier furthered this enquiry into the sculptural possibilities of the two-dimensional by objectifying actualising signs—in this instance, two of the formal elements of written language. With enamelled waterjet-cut aluminium, he materialized linguistic punctuation: the comma in One of These Things/Commas (2003), and script braces in One of These Things/Braces (2003). In each work, the child’s game in which one object amongst a group is to be identified as in some way different contextualizes Lexier’s sculptural manifestations of figures that are abstract symbols—pure typographic shapes—never originally intended to be manipulated as dimensional objects (although, interestingly, until only recently they have themselves been the product of objects—fonts of lead, for example—that are themselves artefactual). For One of These Things/Commas, Lexier articulated the typographic symbol as a series of blunt, squared-off objects, all hard angles and devoid of the graceful flowing curves we tend to associate with most visually appealing typefaces, which he has grouped together on the wall in abutting blocks so that only the typographic tails protrude at varied angles. It may begin with typography, but Lexier’s transposition of symbol into artefact iterates its almost sculptural origins while actualising and substantiating what is really little more than an insubstantial mark—a highly stylised, albeit semantically meaningful, doodle, if you will—on paper.

In the winter of 2003, Lexier returned to his hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba to update one of his best known works and so make it a unique piece in its own right. As it was first conceived and executed, A Portrait of David (1994) comprised 75 full-body portraits of males named David that Lexier had located in Winnipeg and had individually photographed in black and white and in identical poses. "We are looking for all sizes and shapes of David between the ages of 1 and 75," read the original advertisement when the work was being created. Each David photographed (after random selection from those...
who responded to the call) corresponded to a year in what Lexier determined to be his life expectancy based on statistical information in the Canadian Global Almanac: For David: Then & Now, exhibited in the summer of 2005, Lexier had successfully managed to re-photograph 48 of the original 75 males and exhibited the before and after images side by side.

Though photography is at the heart of A Portrait of David and David: Then & Now, the installational aspect of the exhibitions-life-size images, arranged in chronological order, mounted on masonite panels that in turn were part of freestanding walls independent of the fixed gallery walls—exerted a strong sculptural pull on the exhibition space and our experience of it. As with Albert Einstein's conception of gravity as localized deformations of the fabric of spacetime, Lexier's work too deforms the experiential quality of a gallery environment, courtesy the localized phenomena of time-based figurative imagery deployed with spatially subversive ends in mind.

Spacetime, it turns out, has many possible shapes, and in his work, Micah Lexier substantiates but a few.

Let us therefore marvel. —

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SOLITUDE AS FORM

Is it possible, I often wonder, to live otherwise? To take up as one’s work the question, “How might one live?” To construct a different image of life from that which is simply given and hence domestic? A related question would be, “What are the models, measures and economies that constitute a remarkable life and work of resistance?”

One of the most exemplary artistic practices that engages these questions is forged by the French/Israeli artist Absalon. Originally from Israel, Absalon lived and worked in Paris for a few years before he died at the age of 28 in 1993. Throughout his short career, the artist explored the elemental possibilities of living on his own terms as the source of his work. In the few years after arriving in Paris in 1986, he enrolled in art school, from where he was subsequently dismissed, and then quickly rose to international fame before his untimely death. In this brief interval he created an impressive body of work that poignantly wagered his individuality against standardized life.

Almost from the beginning, Absalon’s earliest works are either architectural models or models of utilitarian objects whose function has yet to be determined. These objects are modest in scale. Later, when financial support became available, the small objects were realized on a larger scale, thus engaging the body differently. Towards the end of his life, the forms were developed into fully functional and liveable habitats.

EARLY WORK—BECOMING BODY
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Almon’s body and his constructions are thus pledged to each other in a state of perpetual becoming.