Antonia Hirsch in conversation with Mitch Speed

M: Let's start with your process, specifically with this new work, *Faraday*, wherein a photographic image of copper mesh has been printed on textile that's hung in a way reminiscent of a curtain. And then there is a smaller sculpture titled *The Evolutionists*, that consists of a several cardiac pacemakers cast in black glass. Am I right in thinking that failure was an important factor in the making of these pieces?

A: Yes. It's a long process to make these glass works. It takes several weeks. With *The Evolutionists* there was a problem with the kiln—we couldn't achieve the necessary temperature. I thought that I had gotten it to work, but later, when I divested the objects from their moulds, it turned out that the glass hadn't fully flowed into the forms.

M: So they ended up as these more amoebic, liquidy shapes—which I really like, because actual, functioning pacemakers have to be precise, yet *The Evolutionists* seem to be melting.

A: Although, as the title says, I see this more as an evolution than a devolving or entropic process—as "melting" would suggest. Regarding failure: with the pacemakers, I was concerned that I only liked the work because of the time and energy that I had invested in it. With *Faraday*, I encountered a similar procedural problem. By intention, I was working with a flawed snapshot of copper mesh. So the challenge, in general, is that I may come to like the result of an imperfection or mistake—but I then question my judgment. As my work moves away from being an execution of pre-determined ideas, where the work is essentially already finished before it is made, contingent factors like accidents, flaws, serendipity, or pleasure are entering my process in a completely new way.

M: This ability to respond to pleasure seems crucial. I mean the pleasure of accidents, in tension with more reliable processes. It seems important to hone this ability—to recognize when some sort of magic is happening, even if it runs counter to your initial design.

A: Yes, and on the other hand, sometimes it is very easy to recognize what you call "magic." For example, with *Display*: when I divested the cast iPhones after firing, carefully removing them from their brittle plaster forms, they were just… right—even though they were not perfect in the technical sense. But then, I am working within completely different aesthetic parameters than those that typically apply to this material. Glass casting is mostly practiced as craft or in the context of design, meaning that conventional standards of technical mastery are very important. This is a legitimate approach, of course, but it's not what I'm after.

M: Those sculptures of pacemakers establish continuity with your recent body of work *Negative Space*, which had a lot to do with notions of inside and outside. The pacemaker motif crystallizes this discussion—it's this thing that lives inside you and keeps you going. But you are not using the motif that directly.

A: Around 2000 I produced a work called *Pulse* that had to do with the heart, its contractions, and Universal Coordinated Time. As I was doing research for that work, I acquired a couple of pacemakers. For a long time, they just sat around. But then, recently, it occurred to me that there was a relationship between the pacemakers and the smartphones.

M: Both are life-giving. Both establish and maintain the cadences of our lives, in different ways.

A: It's not a direct equivalence, but for me there is a resonance. The smartphone is removable, of course. But it's usually carried very close to one's body, and the pacemaker, well, it's inside of you. But it's the fact that they are both technological extensions of ourselves that generate cadences, as you say—that's the connection point.

M: The other day, we were talking about Richard Sennett's book, *The Craftsman*, which argues for the cultural importance of hand-making. When I visited your studio, you showed me these new copper works, that resemble museum armatures…

A: That work is called *Copper* and parts of it look like the fittings that would hold a fragment of an archeological frieze, or something like that.

M: Exactly, and you're hand-making them, which is a departure from your usual process.

A: Well, like most of my work, these copper objects refer to something that is already in the world, but I wasn't modeling them on any specific object. It was more like I was guided by the memory of those *types* of armatures. I would say my objects make their models palpable and yet they are their own things.

M: That's interesting, because I want to come back to making things. Sennett says that it takes about 10,000 hours to master a discipline. To play the cello proficiently, for instance, you have to train your fingers to move with incredible suppleness. It follows that technique exists at the level of muscle memory. And so as the artist plays, she can forget about technique, and focus on things like structure and interpretation. But still, Sennett respects accidents—I think he refers to them as "salutary failures." In a similar way, your practice entails these long technical processes, whose ethic has to be broken when the time is right.

A: This is a tricky zone. We may agree that for artists, conventional skill is no longer an issue. But I think it's more accurate to say that our conception of skill has become more complex. The question becomes: when is a work actually a work, and when is it just an accident? In two-dimensional work, the frame is the silver bullet: you put a frame around it and there is your work. But with objects, unless you want them to be moored to a plinth, the delineation between work and non-work can appear arbitrary.

In art historical scholarship, post-Duchamp, this problem is often reduced to an act of nomination. But that isn't quite enough for me. I actually have to build a relationship with an artwork through working with the material or image—it used to be that I built that relationship on an almost exclusively ideal, conceptual level, but that seems no longer to be the case. Anyway, my relationship to the work has to convey itself to a viewer. I feel that I can't ask a viewer to engage with something if I haven't engaged with it myself.

This will sound a bit romantic, but the artist really going *into* the material and the process of the making—that seems important to me. It's interesting to look at Michael E. Smith's work, which is very influential right now. It often seems very Duchampian, but much of it also exudes a kind of poetry that speaks of a very careful consideration that is concerned with formal and material aspects of an object and its relation to space.

M: Within my generation of artists, at least at the undergraduate level, there seemed to be this enormous tension. I'm going to risk a generalization here. But on one side were students who had committed to a very intuitive mode of making, which the students who identified with conceptualism and critique found kind of backwards. At the same time, those more materially-oriented studio artists found the "thinking" artists to be stubborn and weirdly suspicious of pleasure.

A: I went to art school in England where I went through a program that was called Critical Fine Art Practice…

M: Oh my god...

A: I liked that program because it was cross-disciplinary and the theory—which at the time I might have conflated with working with language and ideas—was supposed to be integral to the practice, and that was up my alley. Then I came to Vancouver, and there was more of that, which is probably why I felt really at home there.

But at Emily Carr University—where you studied and I taught—students often complained that they weren't learning technical skills—that it was all too conceptual. Back then I thought, "Tough, go to a different school!" But I think the conflict you've just described was a reaction against this absolute dominance of concept, where scholarly and political efficacies were foregrounded. Now I want to ask the proponents (myself included) of that "critical" kind of artmaking and art education: don't you trust the art?

For a long time, I was bound by a dogma regarding a certain kind of usefulness in art—the idea that art should intellectually advance something. It was only in Berlin, after various crises, that I started to approach things differently. Ideas and language are still important to me, but the question is: what kind of agency can they have?

M: Generally, I agree that artists should go deep into their materials, even though the idea does seem romantic. In *Display*, the iPhones are cast in black glass, which resembles obsidian. But they retain residue from the plaster-casting process, which makes them look old or calcified or something...

A: Yeah, I immediately thought of them as coming out of a burnt building, or maybe some archeological site or… I'm not quite sure myself.

M: One result of this ambiguous effect is that there's a danger of circumnavigating the smartphone's significance. *The Atlantic* ran a very widely read—and contested—piece last year called "Has the Smartphone Destroyed a Generation?"[1] It makes links between depression in teenagers due to the addictive use of the technology. Without getting all didactic or evangelical about it, this seems important—like, this might be where your work's relationship to "the real" is located...

A: Maybe. The reason I've been working with these screens and devices is that they affect our lives, our mental health, and how we relate to each other. But I'm much more interested in looking at the smartphone as an object. I want to approach the phones in terms of their materiality and objecthood, which is analogue. Normally when we think about a smartphone we mostly think about the things it can do on a software level. Occasionally, when we break its screen, or a connector port fails to operate, we remember that the object is not only a carrier of immaterial information, but that it has weight and dimension. Sometimes, it's still warm when we slip it into our pockets. It's decidedly a *thing*—above and beyond being a vehicle for technological functions.

M: Right.

A: It was in previous works, which resembled both mobile screens in sleep-mode and the eighteenth-century black mirrors that were often used in occult rituals, that I started looking at the iPhone differently. We carry an iPhone around like a talisman. And people get really nervous if they don't have it on them, but for very foggy reasons. I think it has to do with a sense of connection and the sense of reassurance that's derived from that. There's a minimal difference between carrying worry beads or checking your iPhone compulsively...

M: As a culture, we think we've gotten past these old ways of living and believing. But then somehow, these ancient habits kind of cling to us, albeit in new forms. So although it might feel uncomfortable to use an arcane term like "talisman" to describe contemporary technology, they really do operate in a similar way.

A: When I started researching relics, placebos, and lucky charms—all objects that seem to be imbued with a power beyond their materiality—I became interested in the stories that are told about these objects. Sometimes it's the stories that suffuse the objects with a kind of magic.

M: I wonder if humans are still capable of investing objects with stories, given the tremendous leaps we're making in terms of technological advances.

A: Do you mean because technology is assumed to be rational? I don't think it is and stories definitely seem to still be around.

I was recently contacted by somebody I dated as a teenager. He wanted to send me something that turned out to be a totally banged-up tin can. I had apparently given it to him when we were going out. I could still see the residue of a painted picture on the lid—a bit of whitish blue. This friend, this former lover, said there had been a sailboat painted on the tin, but now it was mostly worn off. He had carried this thing around with him for 30 years, using it as a wallet until he could no longer avoid carrying a debit or credit card—which didn't fit. Later, we talked about how the tin gained its importance for him because he had carried it with him all those years. It became a carrier of accumulated memories, that perhaps coalesced as a kind of, if fragmentary, life story. But I think the fact that it had been given to him was also important, because it meant that the object was connected to an exterior, another person, a witness of sorts.

The same is probably true of iPhones. They are intrinsically connected to an exterior. Both the tin and the phone call the presence of other people to mind, so you feel that you are not alone when you handle them. You are connected to those imagined people through the object; you frame your experience like an Instagram shot, thereby also giving your experience meaning.

Something similar happens when you spend an evening with a new lover who you are not sure you'll see again. When the evening is over, the empty bottle of wine stays behind, and you kind of want to keep it, as a way of holding on to the time you spent with that person.

M: You've invested the bottle with aura.

A: Yes. The only problem is, after a while the object turns back into just an empty bottle.

M: The aura dissipates.

A: Exactly. These processes are incredibly interesting to me, because they reflect what art objects do, at their core.

M: In the introduction to your book *Negative Space*, you write about the naming of asteroids. *433 Eros*—also the protagonist of one of your works— is an asteroid whose geographic features have been named after lovers from history and mythology, such as Casanova, Psyche, Lolita, and so on. You argue that this naming practice divulges a desire on the part of science to not only *know* things, but to relate to them, sensually or affectively.

A: If you think of libido as a creative force—as psychoanalysis does—it is a drive that gives you impetus to move towards your elusive desire: probably a complex, dynamic, and volatile thing. That force is extremely relevant to art making.

M: Reading about this desire for relation, I thought about your work involving economy and affect. For Marx, value doesn't exist unless commodities are in motion—i.e. become part of economic relations and transactions, for example in trade or the division of labour, in which desire is often a crucial factor. In mimicking these super-commodities—the iPhones—you seem to be draining the objects of their commodity value in one sense, because they don't function; in another, you're giving them a kind of equally mysterious value, or power.

This second value might not be the ability to connect with 2,000 people at any given moment. Instead, it might be the ability to catalyze other social phenomena—this conversation, for instance.

A: Well, I would disagree with the idea that a true commodity's value is purely function-based. The commodity's is a different kind of value and it is magic, I think. There is this famous, beautiful Marx quote about the dancing table.[2] It's all about that mysterious, magical value.

But it's great you're bringing this up, because with regard to art objects: like any commodity, when it circulates, it accrues value. Some people in the art world are really suspicious of art objects for that very reason—because it is felt that art objects that are clearly also commodities are compromised in some way. I'm increasingly unhappy with this attitude. What is the problem with something being compromised? That's when it gets interesting!

M: For sure. This puritan attitude puts an incredible and unfair burden on artworks to be sort of immaculate and innocent. On the one hand there's this very moralistic attitude, which emerges from academic quarters, that fetishizes a purely discursive relationship to art. But this attitude also implies a faith in art objects to repel the compromises of capitalism.

I think this paradox is crucial to contemporary art. But it can also be debilitating for artists who aren't able or willing to reconcile a conception of art objects as being at once suspect and held up as bastions of resistance.

A: Maybe it's just difficult to accept this tension: the object relates to a desire, but often it won't satisfy this desire. If desire was a vessel with a hole in it, then the object may be the peg to plug the hole, but it won't fill the vessel. And yet this odd failure or tension is exactly what accounts for the object's attraction.

This is actually what making work is about, I think. It's about following or creating this weird tension or failure. And this is what's so scary about coming to the studio. You go, "Here I am, trying to make something out of nothing and it may just remain nothing."

M: Totally.

A: I think it's that tension that cannot—and probably should not—be resolved. This is the definitive thing that the object has to offer.

Yesterday, I went to see the Isa Genzken show at Galerie König here in Berlin. I'm not a huge fan of her work, but I found it really interesting. It was a typical situation for me; I go and see a show and I'm disappointed, because it's just these things, and just these pictures, and I ask: why isn't there more magic? And yet...

M: And yet you're compelled?

A: Yes! But still, there is this feeling of disappointment.

A friend once proposed that about ninety-eight percent of experience is actually unacceptable to us in terms of what we would want life to really be like. And so if art is supposed to speak in any way to lived experience, it must perhaps necessarily operate within those parameters. However, if the art is good, it will produce the "and yet…"

M: I wonder sometimes about the class dynamics that sustain this kind of art. My intuition is that a person has to have a certain amount of mental slack, which comes from having free time, in order to appreciate the slow, often frustrating, but ultimately illuminating reflection of life that's being performed in Genzken's work—or a lot of contemporary art, for that matter.

These iPhones you've made are more generous towards viewers. They're less alienating, because although they do radiate the ordinariness of consumer objects, you have also invested them with labour—the energy of work, of having *made* them.

A: Yes, and the fact that these objects are based on something familiar and everyday also contributes to the work not being alienating. It produces an immediate access point. This is why it's sometimes problematic for me to produce "original" form from scratch—I want viewers to have an encounter with themselves when they see the work. If the work emerges entirely from my interiority, I don't trust that I am able to bring viewers into this interior world—or that it is even relevant to them.

Even with Faraday, the textile work that hovers somewhere between a curtain and a Faraday cage, its resemblance to a curtain—whether it's a screen used to fend off prying eyes, or light, or radiation—calls up something very familiar. It gives you a way to approach the work. But it's a fine line, because both—complete interiority and the ubiquitously shared—can easily become flat.

M: I guess the artistry is in negotiating that fine line—going deeply into the materials, as we were discussing before—to find meaning in a specific method of production.

Which makes me want to return to *Copper*. Most viewers will be able to recognize what the work is referencing—the museum display armatures. But there still is a distance between the viewer's experience and these works, because they're abstract, in a way.

It's funny: normally, the main event in that whole situation would be the authentic object—the archaeological fragment, or whatever the armatures would be holding—but here you're not making the thing…

A: I'm making the frame, essentially.

M: You are making the frame and you're making it out of copper, which connotes energy.

A: Yes, copper is a highly conductive material. And when I'm saying I'm making a frame, I mean this not just as a frame around a potential thing, but I mean it in this conductive way: it's a threshold, an interface between what's inside and what's outside the frame. A kind of amorphous, undefined zone that is marked out as such.

M: Which makes me think about the way that power is infused into these fragments and relics by the museum.

A: One thing about *Copper* that is important to me is that it's mounted on this cheap pegboard material that calls up maybe a dollar store, or, in fact, one of those phone shops displaying all sorts of mobile devices. So the work plays these different kinds of framings off one another—the commodity "framing," and the type of "framing" that seems to instill a cultural value normally associated, for example, with museums.

M: So with a piece like this, the main event is really not the actual copper forms, it's the "nothing" that they are insinuating, like the lack of a fragment. You are kind of putting the nothing into tension. And you are using the components of the work, the pegboard material and the copper as resonant elements—tuning them relative to one another.

A: Yes, and I imagine the craftspeople who design such museum armatures—the care and focus they bring to this quite humble task. You know, when you work with people like that, who are active behind the scenes, doing the work that everything literally rests on, you realize that they never question whether the displayed object is actually valuable or "worthwhile" or not. It's not their job. They accept the object's importance as a given. Their job is to present it, to care for it.

I suppose this is something that I feel attracted to in relation to this anxiety we spoke about earlier—this moment when you come into the studio and ask: am I going to make something out of nothing, or is it going to remain just nothing? One answer to that is to accept that there is a "nothing" that needs to be attended to, and this process eventually becomes the work.

Antonia Hirsch and Mitch Speed are Canadian artists and writers based in Berlin.

1 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/

2 "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was." Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. One, Part I: Commodities and Money*, Chapter One: Commodities, Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof, 1867