

Antonia Hirsch

Absorbers

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Exhibition text by
Rachel Alliston



Forms 1, 4 and 3 (left to right) and Screen Pic 1 (background),
Antonia Hirsch, 2019. Image: Trevor Good.

Antonia Hirsch's exhibition *Absorbers* incorporates a group of new sculptures and prints that center around the packaging debris and marketing formats of digital technologies' hardware, namely the smartphones and monitors which serve as physical interface in much of our work lives, personal communications, and geographical definitions. In considering the waste-driving byproducts of what is perhaps today's most auratic object, the electronic screen, Hirsch takes up Styrofoam packaging and the printed advertisement as significant elements of the quotidian in the early twenty-first century. The resulting sculptures and wall-mounted images attend to the physical and aesthetic presence of what is often uncritically dismissed as ephemera, assigning a corporeality to both. As she draws out and underlines a dialogue between artist, material, exhibition space, and viewer, Hirsch evidences the postconceptual¹ condition of an object, its maker, and consumer as she strives to complicate the language by which a given social reality is circumscribed and assured. In the face of globalization and the de-nationalization of capitalist markets, as well as the voided entitlement of one subject to speak for a shared collective, Hirsch works in a cultural moment of hyper-individualism and hyper-consumption. In the social field as open market, she plies semiotic uncertainty towards a critique. Desire manifests intermittently in the suggestive forms of her objects and images, conjoining two of Hirsch's persistent trajectories of inquiry—negative space as delineation and metaphor, and the influence of affect and exchange on representation.² Questions around contemporary digital technologies and their effects, both physical and social, arise as Hirsch refashions art-historical concerns of both modernist sculpture and the conceptual movement.

Taking their cue from “building wrap” advertisements, Hirsch’s wall-scaled prints each feature a form modeled in wax and photographed with an iPhone. Stray dust, left evident on each image’s surface, denies any ambition to the largesse and cool pomp of advertisers. The depicted objects further reveal a malleability in the thumbprints visible on their own skin, a lingering presence of the artist’s hand. Hirsch’s wax models suggest at once the plastic shell of a mobile device and a human body’s soft folds; they also emphasize the hands-on element of the smartphone as a tool. This slip between the human body and the human tool recurs in the exhibition, most immediately in the prints’ reference to seductive ploys of the commercial marketing of electronic devices.

Installed amidst these photographs evocative of billboards are a series of sculptures—block forms based on found Styrofoam packaging. Among the original recesses in the Styrofoam, intended to guard a flatscreen monitor from impact, Hirsch has inserted cavities, some suggestive of phalluses. These alterations follow the artist’s curiosity in the carefully shaped voids of the original packaging. Purposefully designed, the packing’s gaps belong to no known code or language. To Hirsch, this lack of symbolism itself becomes a sign,³ amounting to a reversion to the pre-symbolic, accentuating a moment in which intention, desire, and form collapse. In her work, the artist similarly pursues the fracturing of codes, although these efforts are aimed to destabilize pre-established definitions of use and value.

In the physical and historical space of the gallery, Hirsch’s objects recall phenomenological approaches to cubist or minimalist sculpture. However, her works—already complicated by the artist’s addition of the quasi-organic recesses, and in combination with the neighboring prints—avoid any strictly formal understanding as they condense around the contemporary issue of decadent consumption as a means for gratification, of which users’ dependence on smartphones is arguably symptomatic. Hirsch variably speaks about the touchscreen as an intimate object, a dumb object, and a talisman. In the latter case, she considers “magic” in reference to the screen as one example of an object reaching beyond its use value. She looks to how the hardware of the screen gives rise to something beyond the material, and by acquiring a transcendent quality, becomes a commodity. This extends clearly to the form of her sculptures as well as to the objects photographed and featured in her prints. These wax models offer an overt correlation with the tradition of *ex voto* objects,⁴ encouraging a comparison between two instances of magical faith in objects.

Hirsch has acknowledged an expectation that an artist perform a sort of magic by lifting something out of its commonness into something that is to some degree transcendent, even if that transcendence is achieved in irony.⁵ In working with

her materials, the artist cannot remove herself from the conditions in which those materials are produced and consumed. Hirsch purposefully articulates no comment, statement, or judgment; however, critique remains the basis of her practice. In looking to the screen as an auratic object, she considers the means by which the electronic screen has been invested with such might over its human users. Her question is not one of the gallery space transforming the use value of an object, but instead one of objects—art or otherwise—accessing transcendence in whatever physical or social context.

In reproducing something by hand that is produced with greater precision and efficiency industrially, by creating representations of both the Styrofoam packaging and the iPhone shell, Hirsch offers a performance of the way in which she is compromised by digital technologies via their hardware. She takes the packaging that is to become garbage, part of a larger ecological dilemma likely to impact the planet long beyond human presence, and makes high art for contemporary consumption and critique. In so doing, Hirsch wrestles with the tragedy and irony inherent in her materials and methods, subjecting herself to that irony.

In fabricating imperfect representations of smartphones and their paraphernalia, Hirsch's less tangible work in the studio reaches for metaphysical investment. The artist has spoken on the importance of thinking through and thinking while making, finding an opportunity for reflection in repetitive mechanical processes. In this work, neither contemplation nor production is privileged; both are instead mutually enabled. Much like her process with material in the studio, in installing an exhibition Hirsch endeavors to negotiate the space of the gallery, leaving it and her work for viewers to encounter for themselves. In this progression from found object to studio, gallery and viewer, she runs a recurrent circuit between materiality, perception, comprehension, and possession.

In the specific case of *Absorbers*, the artist has installed black rubber flooring throughout the exhibition space to absorb the footfall of the viewer. One of her *Forms* stands atop a low-lying plinth made of insulation panels of a type normally used in building construction. Throughout her show, the transmission, reception, and buffering of information resonate on the levels of idea, material, and process.⁶ Hirsch shifts between metaphor and the literal, or industrial production and the handmade, as she underscores her own material decisions. This remains true of Hirsch's *Forms* as, visually akin to modernist sculpture, they offer a concrete representation of the space surrounding a missing object. In this, *Forms 1-8* strike a generative counterpoint to Hirsch's previous editorial work, where she has pursued negative space as means to propose an analytic mode. Negative space in that context enables faceted meanings and parallel readings, providing an interstitial

space in which fixed definition is refused. Hirsch's use of the term, in her own expanded form, holds closely to phenomenology in the philosophical tradition in as much as it indicates the study of subjective human consciousness through which work mediates human understanding and experience. In making artworks and publications, Hirsch finds a similar opportunity.

Speaking on the tension of exchange and reflection in the editorial process, Hirsch has explained the importance of a collective editing of cultural objects—particularly by “conversations in the margins”—towards a progressive mining of meaning. She has further acknowledged her interest in offering such exchanges a material presence.⁷ This concern has migrated into her studio work, manifesting in the exchange between assertion and reflection in an exhibition space, where Hirsch again operates as initiator and editor, at once instigating a conversation and rendering the dialogic explicit.

There is a paradoxical element in Hirsch's critical engagement with a viewer and her intent to retrieve the pre-symbolic through an artwork. She strives towards a system that both permits communication and structures experience according to desire. Not surprisingly then, in the parallel between her work with materials in manual practice and the dialogue she facilitates between work and viewer, communication is unpredictable. For Hirsch, there is an importance in this factor of chance in the artistic process, which begins with the ambiguity between an art object and a non-artwork—for example the smartphone, its advertisement, or its packaging. The negotiation between the artist and her material is a further instance, and the gallery space itself yet another. As Hirsch has described it, there is attached to the accidental an important element of uncertainty. Art objects, even in referencing everyday tools, or perhaps especially then, are separate from what is taken to be known. To render the fact that they are possible, Hirsch recognizes as the real political potential of art; by way of her work, she points to the possibility that things could be different. Accordingly, all of her objects—forms, prints, smartphones, advertisements, and storefront gallery—reside on a cusp between the transformative and the mundane. In this respect, Hirsch works in the advanced foreground of conceptual art, taken as a distinct historical moment with Duchamp as its benchmark. While the conceptual movement looked to delimit where the gallery could exert its power and make an object an art object, Hirsch queries the autonomy of the artist in a social space where objects are given, recognizing their physical presence as emblematic of extant ideological power structures.

Hirsch's approach is based on the premise that a current reality relies fundamentally on previously agreed-upon fictions, based on a concurrence between institutionally empowered partners. By removing markers from familiar objects, she acknowledges

the enabling fiction of an object and its determining system. She weakens accustomed semantic structures, and by doing so, accesses the unlikely cultural power of an artist through critique. Hers is an attempt to manipulate and cause to falter the way in which information is disseminated as she awaits an altered perceptual understanding. Everyday experiences, such as the use of a smartphone or the reading of an advertisement, engage structures that—no matter their scale or force—are human-made. In her broader practice, Hirsch investigates the interests that drive hegemonic production; in looking to electronic hardware, she is invested in the ideological, the economic, and the political power behind the institution of digital space and its armatures. Rather than look to information as it is disseminated online, or social media as it is used for self-presentation and self-marketing,⁸ her objects bestow abstraction to the screen. Echoing the gaps and empty glyphs of Styrofoam packaging, Hirsch navigates the exhibition as pre-determined language gives way to a more interpretive communication. By negotiating objects on a sensual level, she works both to identify the mechanisms that invest objects with cultural value, and to manipulate those mechanisms herself.

- ¹ Peter Osborne has written on the postconceptual as both a historical frame—following modernism in the midst of postwar globalisation, and following de-nationalized economies of the postmodern—and as a moment of cultural production well after conceptual art, in which aesthetics, inclusive of contemporary art, and politics are brought nearer together though remaining distinct. See Peter Osborne, “Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics: Avant-Garde, Modern, Contemporary,” in *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays*. London: Verso, 2018.
- ² Some of what is explored in the works exhibited at Decad and related works the artist has shown previously has been articulated by Hirsch in her critical publications *Negative Space: Orbiting Inner and Outer Experience* (SFU Galleries, 2015) and *Intangible Economies* (Fillip, 2012).
- ³ There is a relevance here to Hirsch’s 2012 film work and its accompanying publication, both sharing the title *Komma* (After Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*). Both works look to the comma as, simultaneously, a mark of punctuation and a physical truncation. Hirsch has expressed her interest in the lack of commas in Trumbo’s novel and the general lack of attention to the corresponding authorial intent. Critical response to this exclusion has generally offered attribution to stream-of-consciousness, which Hirsch does not find compelling. She ascribes this lack instead to the rubric of negative space.
- ⁴ *Ex voto* objects are also often rendered in wax. In Catholic contexts, a penitent will pray to a particular saint for cure or remedy of a physical ailment and may present a miniature representation of the body part in question, a leg for example, leaving this on an altar or shrine.
- ⁵ The artist in an interview with the author, March 2019.
- ⁶ In addition to large-scale advertisements, the wall-covering prints at Decad follow a 2018 textile print by Hirsch entitled *Faraday* which draws on the Faraday cage. In exhibition, Hirsch installed the textile—hung as if a curtain—over a large gallery window, conflating the function of a curtain to block view or light, and the function of a Faraday cage to block radiation or frequency. The work was exhibited in 2018 at Republic Gallery in Vancouver as part of Hirsch’s solo exhibition *Dialog II*.
- ⁷ Hirsch has described the process of making the book *Intangible Economies* in particular as one that entailed an ongoing conversation between an author and up to three editors, a process in which clarifications and elaborations led to a substantial enrichment of text. She has described this participation in dialogue as informing her approach to making artworks in the studio, as well as installing an exhibition. Antonia Hirsch in an interview with the author, March 2019.
- ⁸ Considerations of social networks as affective networks in *Intangible Economies* hold a tangential point of contact with the work in *Absorbers* in the forms of social media, the internet’s effect on social communications, and the subsequent relevance of social media and the net to affective interhuman relations. Intimacy in particular has been altered as one is constantly in contact and personal information is shared. Hirsch has spoken, again in an interview in March 2019, of the resonance of the neoliberalization of relationships with regard to her current body of work. Citing Karl Polanyi and Eva Illouz, Hirsch describes a society as open market, less bound to social networks or structures of class, nation, and culture. Instead, an individual’s value is determined by personal assets, resulting in the increased isolation of social members. In the competition for personal relationships, there is a relevance to advertisement that promotes individualism and self-marketing. While this is a longer-term cultural development, it is one now accelerated by social media. Though the artist allows for this in discussion of her work, it is not explicitly thematized.