Will Pergl: Haggerty Writing Projects on Milwaukee Artists

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Will Pergl is a multidisciplinary artist based in Milwaukee. Working with an affinity for minimalism and process, Pergl’s studio practice involves the critical use of sculpture, drawing, installation and video. His award-winning work has been shown in more than twenty solo exhibitions and has been included in more than thirty group exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe. Pergl holds a master’s degree from Cornell University and a bachelor’s degree from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He is currently an associate professor in the Fine Art Department at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.

The manner in which we produce and, in turn, are shaped by our products is a source of fascination for Pergl. He is particularly interested in technology’s role in this interchange between our mental architecture and our physical world. According to the artist, “Our daily visual experiences offered by screen media, our interconnections through electronic devices and our time spent conceptually within digital interfaces are all persistent conventions to which we adapt our perceptions and expectations.”

Pergl’s current studio practice combines digital media and physical form to explore gaps in sensation and comprehension in a technologically driven society. This body of work varies in material from a figurative sculpture digitally carved in marble to a handmade wooden transmission tower copied from a digital photocollage. Content ranges from a minimalist video exploring the embodiment of an amputee to work concerning the most boring day in the 20th century. These combined gestures take on a conceptual, rather than emotive, reading as the work seeks to epitomize a kind of traveling through fragmented perspectives.

Will Pergl’s installation for Current Tendencies II explores the disconnect between the digital realm and the physical realm. From his hand-carved wooden cell phone tower, constructed from digital imagery, to his digitally carved marble sculpture of a reattached finger, Pergl explores the role of technology in the construction of art, juxtaposing the handmade with the computer-mediated. He explores a variety of cultural products that are transmitted through some form of media, interrogates the role of interpretation in the construction of art, and assesses the digital context for the things that we see and use.

While each piece offers insightful commentary on the role of technology in contemporary society, the collection as a whole provides a nuanced understanding of the conceptual components of a fragmented, mediated environment. For example, following a computer analysis of more than 300 million facts, April 11, 1954, has been heralded as the most boring day of the twentieth century. Pergl’s work, emphasizing a day that was determined by a computer to be devoid of any major news events or the birth or death of anyone famous, illustrates the contradictions inherent in a day that is now notable for being boring.

Pergl’s representation of April 11, 1954, also reminds me of two competing understandings of the concept of communication. In his book, Communication as Culture, James W. Carey suggests that most people consider communication to be the transmission of news and information, over a distance, in order to share ideas and knowledge and to control geographic space and people. The transmission view of communication is the prevailing understanding of communication; it privileges science and embraces new communication technologies uncritically, believing that the additional speed of transmission will improve the communication process.

There is, however, an alternative conceptualization of communication which is known as the ritual view. From this perspective, messages are shared among people to create, shape and maintain a common culture. The ritual view of communication brings people together to construct a belief system that shares ideas, values, perspectives and information and serves to create and reaffirm a specific view of society at a particular time and place. Pergl’s emphasis on the physicality of real materials that have been affected by the digital resonates with the ritual view of communication. His installation not only emphasizes how we journey through fragmented experiences, but it also helps us to question our own perceptions of a socially constructed reality.

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