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3D PRINTED SCULPTURE FOR THE POSTHUMAN AGE

ASHLEY ZELINSKIE

This catalogue coincides with the exhibition, “Ashley Zelinskie / Return to Tomorrow: 3D Printed Sculpture for the Posthuman Age,” which has been organized by The Art Gallery at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. The exhibition was on view from March 11 - April 14, 2015.

The Art Gallery of Kingsborough Community College,
City University of New York
Brian E. Hack, Gallery Director
John Descarfino, Art Department Chair

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Catalogue Design by Brian E. Hack

Cover Image: *One and One Chair*, 2014, 3D printed nylon, 3' x 1' x 1.5'.
Inside covers: Hexahedron, Laser cut aluminum, 5' x 5' x 5'.

All images courtesy of Ashley Zelinskie.

Acknowledgments

The Art Gallery at Kingsborough Community College thanks for following for their invaluable assistance during the creation and installation of this exhibition: Ashley Zelinskie; Atelier 4; Chiara Brown; Fred Worden Trucking; Daniel Panzer; Cathy Galeano; Diana Naccarato; Rachel Perez; Nancy Rouse; Vanessa Ogle; Thomas Brzozowski; The Buildings and Grounds Department; Caterina Y. Pierre; and John Descarfino.

The artist dedicates this exhibition to the memory of Leonard Nimoy.

ASHLEY ZELINSKIE

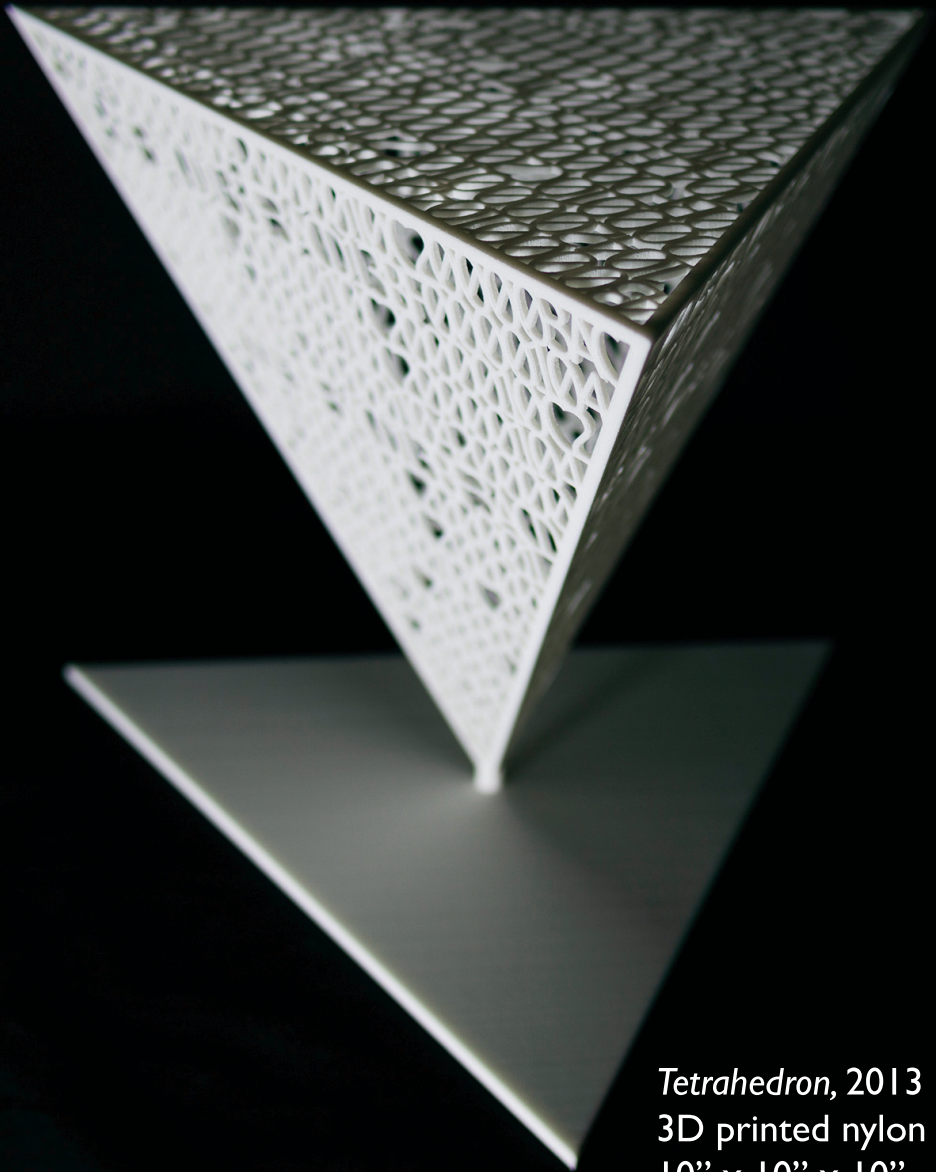
RETURN TO TOMORROW

3D PRINTED SCULPTURE FOR THE POSTHUMAN AGE

MARCH 11 - APRIL 14, 2015



THE ART GALLERY AT KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
2001 ORIENTAL BOULEVARD
BROOKLYN, NY 11235



Tetrahedron, 2013
3D printed nylon
10" x 10" x 10"

Art for the Singularity: The 3D Printed Sculpture of Ashley Zelinskie

Brian E. Hack, Ph.D.

With each and every click and swipe we surrender ourselves to the seductive siren's call of cybernated reality. The external world blurs and darkens and, like a vignette in a D.W. Griffith film, we become myopically focused onto the glowing little screen pulsing in our palm. Should we look up from our smartphones in a public setting, we likely would notice that many others are equally engaged in a digitally-mediated experience.

In such moments we may be struck with the realization that many of us are now tethered to a reality that *isn't*. While it may serve as our library, jukebox, movie theater, social hall, and shopping mall, the Internet is nevertheless an intangible illusion, arguably the greatest ever devised to monitor,

market to, and manipulate the masses—all with our tacit if occasionally begrudging approval.

What does this neo-reality mean for our understanding of human life, of our perceived role within Nature? How will it redefine and redesign human psychology, sociology, and philosophy? Are we beginning to define ourselves not in terms of our biology, or of our relation to the world around us and to the universe, but in terms of our digital persona? Has the *selfie* subverted *the self*?

The term *technoself* has been proposed to describe the modern individual transformed by digital technology.¹ It is important to consider what may be lost in this transition to the *technoself*, in particular the act of self-reflection. Even now the notion of being alone with one's thoughts seems a quaint, anachronistic pastime of the analog age. Yet for most of our existence on earth it has been solitary self-reflection that has spawned

art, literature, philosophy, and most of our cultural and intellectual achievements. Romanticism and expressionism, for example were predicated on the inner, solipsistic experience of, and response to, human existence.

The loss of our inner world parallels an equally lamentable loss of privacy. Once cherished as a crucial part of one's autonomy and sense of self, privacy has undergone a dramatic and startling shift in the past two decades. In an era overflowing with online overshare, where nothing is seemingly too personal or too intimate to reveal to the world, we have unwittingly—perhaps even willingly—forefeited our private selves, a fact all too well understood and capitalized on by governments and corporations.

It is for these and other reasons that many feel we are

Many of us are now tethered to a reality that *isn't*.

at the brink of—if we haven't already entered—the posthuman era. For those of us from the age of typewriters, record players, and rotary phones, these changes in human thought and behavior raise some

disquieting questions: Will we ultimately lose our humanity? Will reliance on a digital world bring about the abandonment and eventual

destruction of the physical one? Or is the move to a digital reality to be warmly, if somewhat bemusedly and with a certain amount of trepidation, welcomed with open arms and an even more open mind?

We may not have a choice in the matter. In his prophetic study *The Singularity is Near* (2005), digital pioneer and futurist author Ray Kurzweil explored the concept of *The Singularity*, the inevitable moment when the rapid advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence will

surpass human comprehension; only through adapting our minds and bodies can we hope to make sense of it all. In this posthuman, or *transhuman*, era, our current state of being is a liability to be discarded. As Kurzweil noted:

*The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality. If you wonder what will remain unequivocally human in such a world, it's simply this quality: ours is the species that inherently seeks to extend its physical and mental reach beyond current limitations.*²

For artist Ashley Zelinskie, the future Kurzweil describes is the inevitable denouement of humanity, whose biological survival is by no means secure. Rather she asserts that computers will be the legacy of human influence; therefore the preservation of human civilization in digital

form is likely the sole means by which we will be remembered. “If the Earth need be handed over to machines,” she writes, “we must prepare them not only to be accurate and efficient, but also cultured. Robots need magic.”³

Her sculptural forms, which she refers to as “art for the Singularity,” are designed to bridge the language gap between humans and computers.⁴ Formed from the digital code that defines them (hexadecimal code rather than binary, which soon proved to be prohibitively long for the purpose), her work is designed to be “read” and understood by the computers of the future. More than an artistic conceit, this gesture redefines the concept of abstraction—for what is abstract to the human mind is not to the computer mind, and vice-versa. Zelinskie addresses these issues through what she has termed *Reverse Abstraction*, where “abstraction becomes material, the meanings for

humans and computers are unified, and the duality is resolved.”⁵

Thankfully for we humans plodding along here in the dying days of analog civilization, Zelinskie’s work offers much to consider artistically and philosophically.

the assertions on art and reality made by the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth (b.1945). Kosuth’s iconic *One and Three Chairs* (1965), consisting of an actual chair, a dictionary definition of the word *chair*, and an actual-size photograph of the chair, examined the tenuous

“The future I envision is one where humanity evolves with and into its invention.”

Ashley Zelinskie

Her series *Platonic Solids* serves as a primer of sorts for a future digital mind; as the building blocks of art since classical antiquity, these forms establish a digital framework for an artificial intelligence to process and evaluate other art it may encounter. Their outward simplicity paradoxically reflects a return to art’s beginnings and a transition to its uncertain future.

In *One and One Chair* (2014, cover image), she challenges

relationship between objects, language and the reproduced image. Ultimately, he seems to say, our understanding of the object/word/sign *chair*, and by extension reality itself, is by no means firmly established. Zelinskie’s 3D printed version subverts that premise, as her chair, singular and unchanging (in Kosuth’s work, the curator chooses, photographs, and installs the chair), is meant to be understood by a digital mind free of such nuanced and

perhaps illogical human concerns as *reality*. An early prototype of the chair, also on view in this exhibition, reflects the rapid advances in 3D printing between the two versions. Strangely, this *Frankenchair* suggests a primordial stage in the development of the idea; viewed as a pair, one beautifully flawed and the other flawlessly beautiful, one could find no greater symbol for the dichotomy between humans and computers.

With *Brillo Box* (2014) the artist appropriates the well-known sculpture by Andy Warhol (1928-1987). Warhol's wooden, painted versions of cardboard, printed supermarket boxes blurred the distinctions between (mundane, commercially-driven American) life and fine art when they were first exhibited in 1964. For art critic Arthur Danto (1924-2013), Warhol's *Brillo Box* was in essence the endgame of art, the final move for mimetic illusionism.⁶

**“This work is
not for us. It is
for the future.
And robots.”**

Ashley Zelinskie

Zelinskie's small, 3D printed version, however, sets up the board for an entirely new sort of player. Would an artificial intelligence deem it a case of scouring pads, or a copy of an artwork?

In other works such as *Mona Lisa* (2012), Zelinskie restructures the familiar for our digital descendants. Its abstraction allows us to consider the abstraction of all images, of all visual language. How to convey Leonardo's subtle *sfumato* or her enigmatic smile to an artificial intelligence? The work attempts to preserve this cultural icon—perhaps the best-known painting in the world—in a format that may

in the end better insure its immortality.

What is perhaps most appealing about Ashley Zelinskie's work is that it does not simply use 3D printing technology as another tool to create traditional forms, such as the human figure; while the irony of depicting the human form in a medium that will ultimately render humans redundant is no doubt tempting for some, such an

approach limits the potential for 3D printing to be of and for its time. Instead, Zelinskie unites form and content in a manner that speaks to the future of the medium and to that of humankind.

Seemingly free from human intervention, the process, actually a complex one, is largely hidden beneath the veneer of automated production. There within lies the art of her science and the science of her art.

¹See: Rocci Luppincini, *Technoself: Identity in a Technological Society* (Hershey (PA): IGI Global, 2012), passim.

²Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Viking, 2005), 9.

³Ashley Zelinskie, quoted in Chris Campbell, "This Work Is Not for Us. It Is for the Future. And Robots," *Invigorate*, October 28, 2013, <http://www.invigorate.com/2013/10/28/this-work-is-not-for-us-it-is-for-the-future-and-robots/>.

⁴Ashley Zelinskie, "Reverse Abstraction," *MAKE*, September 17, 2013, <http://makezine.com/magazine/reverse-abstraction/>.

⁵Zelinskie, "Reverse Abstraction."

⁶See: Arthur Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), in particular Chapter 2, "The Art World Revisited: Comedies of Similarity."

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

FrankenChair, 2013

3D printed PLA and ABS

3' x 1' x 1.5'

One and One Chair, 2014

3D printed nylon

3' x 1' x 1.5'

Hexahedron, 2013

Laser cut aluminum

5' x 5' x 5'

Space Triangle, 2014

3D printed PLA

7" x 7" x 7"

Singularity, 2014

3D printed nylon

9"x9"x5.5"

Brillo Box, 2014

Full-Color 3D printed nylon

Mona Lisa, 2012

Laser-cut canvas

30.3 x 20.9"

Lesson 2, 2014

Video, 2:28 minutes

5 Platonic Solids:

Tetrahedron, 2013

3D printed nylon

10" x 10" x 10"

Hexahedron, 2013

3D printed nylon

7" x 7" x 7"

Octahedron, 2014

3D printed nylon

7" x 7" x 10"

Dodecahedron, 2015

3D printed nylon

10" x 10" x 10"

Icosahedron, 2015

3D printed nylon

10" x 10" x 10"



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