

TEXTURE AND TRANSFERENCE:
VIRTUAL EXCHANGE IN THE PAINTINGS OF ISRAEL LUND
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In the introduction to her 2006 book *The Virtual Window*, media theorist Anne Friedberg considers the term “virtual” and how its entanglement with novel developments in so-called “virtual reality” has narrowed its use and interpretation. She invokes the term to address a form of visuality that expands beyond “electronically mediated or digitally produced images and experiences.”¹ Indeed, she writes, divorcing the term from its electronic and digital connotations allows it to “more accurately operate as a marker of an ontological, not media-specific, property.”² This application of virtuality is useful in approaching Israel Lund’s art practice, which is certainly media-engaged, and responsive to the mediated shifts in ways of seeing Friedberg tracks, but in a slippery way that evades reading it within a single medium-specific framework.

The more time one spends with this work, the less intuitive it feels to lean on narratives of process; let’s start anyway with the origin story for Lund’s non-referential screenprinted canvases, bearing in mind that in the case of his practice, the ontology of virtuality ultimately undermines the ontology of process. The style in which he works began with a non-image—a silkscreen produced from a blank 8½ x 11-inch sheet of paper—which created an open rectangle for Lund to push paint through, as well as a framing device for the subsequent marks. He then photocopied the result, turning that image into another silkscreen and initiating a reiterative method whereby he produced new canvases by photocopying the old work or, more recently, by generating PDF files of it with an iPhone. This method is perhaps ascetic, following strict parameters of both process and dimension; most of his works conform to the dimensions of 8½ x 11 inches (such economical tendencies nod to Lund’s roots in hardcore punk and zine-making). His initial experiments were rendered in black and white, but Lund also uses cyan, magenta, and yellow ink, a nod to CMYK print-

ing, a method commonly used to reproduce photographs in print, in which these colors overlap to create a spectrum. Rather than aligning to create an image, the colors in Lund’s work—applied in their pure form in unnatural, sometimes outright distasteful combinations—are pulled apart from their representative application into overlapping, impressionistic swaths, composed of those tiny dots that result from being pushed through a screen.

Lund employs processes and media that carry information: a PDF file, a screenprint, a photograph of an installation. These could be understood to bolster the process narrative, in which Lund’s mark-making comes to represent a game of telephone (if we equate image and information). Is what we’re looking at the abstract, yet informative mark of the means of its own production, a view into some technological interior? (These sorts of questions, posed less abstractly, translate to: Will it help us better understand the world? Is it useful?) A consideration of Lund’s canvases within the context of Friedberg’s conception of “the virtual” troubles this. Friedberg writes:

...the term “virtual” serves to distinguish between any representation of appearance (whether optically, technologically, or artisanally produced) that appears “functionally or effectively but not formally” of the same materiality as what it represents. Virtual images have a materiality and reality but of a different kind, a second-order materiality, liminally immaterial. The terms “original” and “copy” will not apply here, because the virtuality of the image does not imply direct mimesis, but a transfer—more like metaphor—from one plane of meaning and appearance to another.³

What emerges from these works is not a degraded reproduction of the initial (non-) image—a form of mimesis—but rather, its radical reinterpretation, maybe even its rebirth.

The canvas itself is less an endpoint than several (or maybe infinite?) portals or nodes through which these images are

transferred. In his exhibition at the Power Station in 2015, Lund showed seven untitled paintings, all 88 x 68 inches, eight times the size of a sheet of paper. The works are further divided into four sections, a neat visual reminder of their modularity; the subdividing crease that separates the quadrants also creates a sudden line at which Lund's more impressionistic gestures meet, producing a satisfying tension. The paintings' orientation depends on the space in which they happen to be installed. Some here are horizontal, others vertical, and in future installations the works can be hung in any orientation a curator or collector might see fit. Each work certainly contains a unique collection of movement unto itself, with a textural depth that, from the right vantage point, seems to nod to abstract painters' tendency to apply paint in a dimensional fashion. The layers of CMYK combine in spots into rich, muddy pools and fold-like patterns throughout, giving the appearance of a distressed textile. But it's also difficult to talk about these paintings in isolation, not just because they all share the same non-name, but also because they don't necessarily ask to be viewed as stories or ideas distinct from one another.

Some of the information that's circulating among these canvases comes from a PDF generated from an iPhone photo of some Daniel Buren stripes Lund encountered in a gallery. Lund is ambivalent towards Buren; the evenly-spaced stripes, which appear as assertive, heavily applied positive elements in some of the compositions and as ghostly receding bars in others, function as neither an homage nor a narrative presence. Returning to Friedberg's text, I would argue that, considering Lund's recurring treatment of what might traditionally be considered source material, his application of these stripes could be considered "virtual." Friedberg points towards a virtual exchange as a metaphorical transfer, but in the case of these Buren-inflected works, I might describe this instead as a metaphorical *digestion*: breaking down an image and the information it contains into something distilled, functional.

The Buren stripes also interact with the space in a compelling way. Documentation is a problem in Lund's practice, but in

a sense, it is also an integral part of it. Michael Sanchez's well-circulated essay "Art and Transmission," from the Summer 2013 issue of Artforum, points out that as social media and online aggregators take the place of traditional media outlets in the art world, visibility has supplanted legitimacy as the end goal of an artwork's circulation. Artworks, by his description, seem to pose for their own installation shots. By treating his works as virtual images within the exhibition documentation, Lund, perhaps responding to demands by the media and market, seeks to short-circuit the conditions of the work's visibility.

The Power Station is filled with vertical columns that complicate certain views of the wall-mounted works. Hence, the installation photographs from the show offer frustrating views of the paintings, which are directly bisected by the beams that run from floor to ceiling. The lead image on the Power Station's website shows five partially-obscured canvases along a wall, their surfaces taking on the inky, painterly appearance of a saturated Helen Frankenthaler canvas in a way that's wholly misleading. Such images, composed with sleek confidence, wear on their surfaces the conditions of their impossibility as carriers of factual or mimetic information. Furthermore, the installation images actually depict more than one arrangement of the works, paintings having been flipped from vertical to horizontal and back again, further destabilizing the images. There's a framelessness to what Lund generates, despite our perception that it is contained within canvas on stretcher bars. This introduction of narrative instability also undercuts the presumed site-specificity of the installation, the work existing in an odd tension with the unique environs of the Power Station. This builds on Lund's 2013 exhibition at 11 Rivington; installation images of that show depict four paintings hung against the gallery's floor-to-ceiling front window, picking up sunlight from outside, which implies that the appearance and legibility of their surfaces is beholden to the changing light. However, these paintings, like those at the Power Station, were arranged (and rearranged) for documentation. Lund is often described as ceding control in making his works—"alleviated [of] the burden of orig-

inality”⁵—but he also undermines the ability of static factors like site, medium, or process, to replace the originality of his hand as the central generative impulse, attempting instead to posit a kind of voicelessness.

One could view this practice as a series of exchanges or conversations between images, their passageways, and their containers, in which, through the introduction of virtuality, information is treated as texture. I earlier suggested that his virtual deployment of images (and his rendering-virtual of images he produces) acts as a sort of digestion, a transformation of information into something functional within the work. However, in this pictorial realm, to be functional isn’t to explicate. Rather, it is to perform a dissolution of the mechanisms by which information is generally received. Lund is fond of the term noise, which here stands in well for texture, inscribing the work with a dissident musicality. He’s also fond of a 2008 essay by theorist Nicholas Bullen, of the grindcore band Napalm Death, which describes the unstable, culturally-coded relationship between voice and language, and the urgent efforts by what he defines as the “Grindcore voice” (which Bullen himself helped produce) to undermine such linguistic structures. Invoking Wittgenstein, Bullen makes note of:

a paradoxical use by the Grindcore voice of the very thing which it seeks to erase—that is, language. It continued to utilize language (and the voice itself) as a scaffold: while the status of the voice as carrier of meaning within a hierarchy was rejected, the gesture itself remained incomplete. Even the impetus towards silence remains within the scope of language, for silence forms an element in a dialogue and is thus a form of speech, of language.⁶

The economies of image and language are parallel participants in meaning-making, and if Lund also seeks to reveal or revel in some fundamental instability in the image-based meaning-making project, he runs up against a similar paradox (what exactly is a non-image, anyway?). But—invoking its abstract musicality as a

point of communion with the voice Bullen describes—there’s also a real sensory pleasure in his textural treatment of information, and with that, a sense of possibility.

1. Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2006), 7.
2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. *Ibid.*, 11.
4. Michael Sanchez, “2011: Art and Transmission,” *Artforum*, summer 2013, <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201306&id=41241>
5. Press release: “Israel Lund” (11 Rivington Gallery, June 2013.)
6. Nicholas Bullen, “Resisting Language (The Silenced Voice),” 2006, <http://www.sinisterdexter.org/MEDIA/PDF/WBPR08.pdf>