

FIELD STATIC

**DEVIN KING &
CAROLINE PICARD**

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You have entered the Co-Prosperity Sphere: a large corner-space on a neighborhood block in Bridgeport, five miles from the Loop's chain shops. The inside of this space feels old. It is massive — 2,500 square feet. A tin ceiling stands fourteen feet above you, not for stylistic preference — though it suits current vintage tastes — but due to an oversight; the previous owner of 40 years did nothing to maintain the building, using it instead as a hoarder's storeroom. Before his time, when Bridgeport was prosperous and you could see cattle moseying to their death outside of the window, this space was a department store. The owner was the wealthiest man in town, and is said to have had the first car in the neighborhood, driving it across the street to the church on Sundays, throwing pennies out of his windows at children in the street. Since then the space — and the neighborhood — have been through a decline normal to working class neighborhoods in American cities. Hoarders bought the space in the 80s. Ed Marszewski moved in a few years ago and cleaned it up.

The wooden floor of the Co-Prosperity Sphere creaks when you walk on it. Light shines through a host of upper windows, reflecting off the wood like an old gymnasium. The new white walls and spartan emptiness assign the space to contemporary art exhibitions. This particular landscape is comprised of material — pillars, windows, floors, and doorways turn into wood, screws, pipes, bricks, plaster, glass and tin. The composition of this space exists on multiple levels. As concrete, discrete materials they fuse into one structure. More abstractly, these materials exist as indicators of past and present; each object tells a story through its own unique, associative system of influence. Sometimes the story is responsive — the sound of your footsteps or the water that runs through overhead pipes. Other times the story is inaccessible but conjured — the imagined

sound of mooing cows or copper pennies against cement, indicating a different American economy. Or, the story is simply material — the unfinished areas of this space, the space beneath the stairs on the far white wall: if you peer around its edge, you can see the building's insides.

What begins to emerge is an ecology that blurs the lines between life forms and inanimate material bodies. In *Field Static* we first wanted to create an opportunity in which relations between objects might be highlighted such that the field created via the installation of artwork would accent one's material engagement. Each object within the Co-Prosperity Sphere would become focal point and periphery alike, suggesting both solitary histories and the peculiar synthesis of matter common to all things. *Field Static* rejects or, at least, torques art's historically anthropocentric position — the poem is written by a human, the portrait is painted of a human — in favor of a more egalitarian engagement with objects.

Through this, we don't mean to treat other species or categories of objects as citizens of another nation. Instead, we are trying to expand an established hierarchy where humans patronize other objects. How might a gallery show include the presence of bubble gum splotches, twigs, fan blades, icebergs — easily marginalized masses — in order to engender new political spheres? We hope to discover new ways of integrating experience and materiality so that less priority is placed on the human's role amongst objects. This project is far-seeing: sentience in technology, impasses in distinguishing between "non-living" computer viruses and "living" biological viruses, and our current ecological condition all suggest the possibility that, to borrow the theorist Timothy Morton's word, the *mesh*¹ we inhabit is much larger and stranger than we may have thought. This mesh is also able to exist, quite comfortably, without us. So how do we look at the relations between objects?

We became interested in curating a show around objects through familiarity with the work of Graham Harman, a philosopher and theorist based in Cairo, Egypt. Harman, along with Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and a few other thinkers, is one of the proponents of object-oriented ontology — a metaphysics that, loosely defined, rejects a human centered worldview in philosophy in favor of something more democratic. Instead of privileging the human subject's relation to the world, object-oriented ontology hopes to democratize the field of metaphysics through a general inquiry about objects, specifically the ways in which objects interact with each other and the world. Object-oriented ontology is a metaphysics that asks not only how humans engage with the world, but also how forks, bee pollen, James Cameron's depth diving submarine, and Sancho Panza's donkey relate to each other and the world. Harman's work is less about deprivileging the human than opening up the nature of the field — examining the infinitely complex assortment of materials operating within a given frame of reference. As Harman writes, his "point is not that all objects are equally real, but that they are equally objects."¹ In order to think *the world*, we must think about the world and the many objects that make it up, not only our relation to it. It is exciting and truly weird work.

Harman's theories work out in many different directions. One of the most interesting, for our purposes, is the idea that though an object exists as a bundle of relations amongst itself and with other objects, these relations never eliminate the full spectrum of possibility residing within an object. The Co-Prosperity Sphere is a node within Bridgeport, within Chicago, both rife with their own complex network of encounters. You are distinctly aware of these very real relations, and together they build up the space's identity. At the same

time, the Co-Prosperity Sphere could also, possibly, enter into a number of different relations that we might not have any understanding of: it could be used by a sect to summon demons, it could be eaten slowly by Larry Coryell to improve his jazz guitar, it could slowly erode a statue of itself in slate. These are humorous examples, but they reveal how objects can exist more fully outside of whatever relations they may exist in currently — whether they enter into those relations or not. Even if we were able to list every theoretical relation this space could enter into, it would still have other relations beyond our list. The number and variations of its relations is infinite but in every instance, whether micro or macro, the objects within that field can never be reduced to their relations. They are not simply indicators of signification, but exist within a network. Consequently, objects — as metaphysical bundles of all the possibilities of their relations with themselves and other objects — are ultimately withdrawn from each other and themselves. Objects are always at a remove from their relations.

Harman more fully explains this idea through the image of a sleeping zebra in *Circus Philosophicus*, a series of alternately humorous and petrifying myths he wrote to explain the basic tenets of his ideas:

For first, [the zebra] rises beyond its own pieces, generated by them but not reducible to them. And second, it is indifferent to the various negotiations into which it might enter with other objects, though some of those might affect it: as when the zebra interacts with grasses for its meals, and predator cats for its doom. While the zebra is cut off from its pieces in the sense of being partly immune to changes among them, it cannot survive their total disappearance. But by contrast, it might survive the disappearance of all its outward relations. And this is what I mean by sleep, if we can imagine a truly deep and dreamless sleep... Sleep should not be compared with death and its genuine destruction of the zebra-entity: sleep entails that the thing

still exists, but simply without relation to anything else... Sleep perhaps has a metaphysical function no less than a physical one: as a kind of suspended animation in which entities are withdrawn from the world. And perhaps this happens more than we think.²

Like the zebra, the Co-Prosperity Sphere could be ripped in half by a giant and sacrificed to Goran, Lord of the Impetus, or it could play a game of Go with the bar down the street, and yet, through all of these changes, it still exists, partly, as a space for the community to gather in. As Harman writes, objects are “partly immune to changes among [its pieces].”² Were we to remove all of the space’s outward relations — you, inside the space, reading this book about it, me writing this essay a month prior, thinking about the space, the printer printing these words about the space, the ink coming out of long tubes, the humidity wrinkling the pages, the recycling bin holding the book about the space, the recycler pulping the book — the space might still exist, withdrawn from these outward relations, in something like sleep. While it is impossible to gain access to the withdrawn aspects of an object, it is our belief that the best art, at least, allows us a place to exist in a type of still-sleep with an object. We’ve curated the artists in this show in the belief that their work engages with objects as bundles of relations in the field of the world, and yet, through their work, the artists show these objects as still, withdrawn, sleeping entities.

Still, the artists in *Field Static* engage the world of objects in different ways. The show should not be seen as a grouping of artworks that fulfill any one approach to objects. While our curatorial impulse was inspired by Harman’s philosophy, we nevertheless present works that address objects in a variety of ways.

Of course, all exhibits exercise this interest; historically, art is the making and honoring of objects.

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However, the peculiar and various approaches these artists take to field and object-making seem particularly compelling, especially when their work could be assembled under the umbrella created by the Co-Prosperity Sphere. We are not looking to project human metaphor onto the state of these artworks — although those poetic nuances are probably an inevitable facet of an aesthetic experience — but rather to invite your imagination to consider the sleeping potential of these things in their thingness, their associative and personal autonomy in the world, each with its own discrete and, by now, non-contingent identity. A strangeness emerges — similar to the eyes of a fox, the unripe stem of a green banana, or Achilles' shield — all familiar and unknown, a potency common to all things that nevertheless remains out of reach.

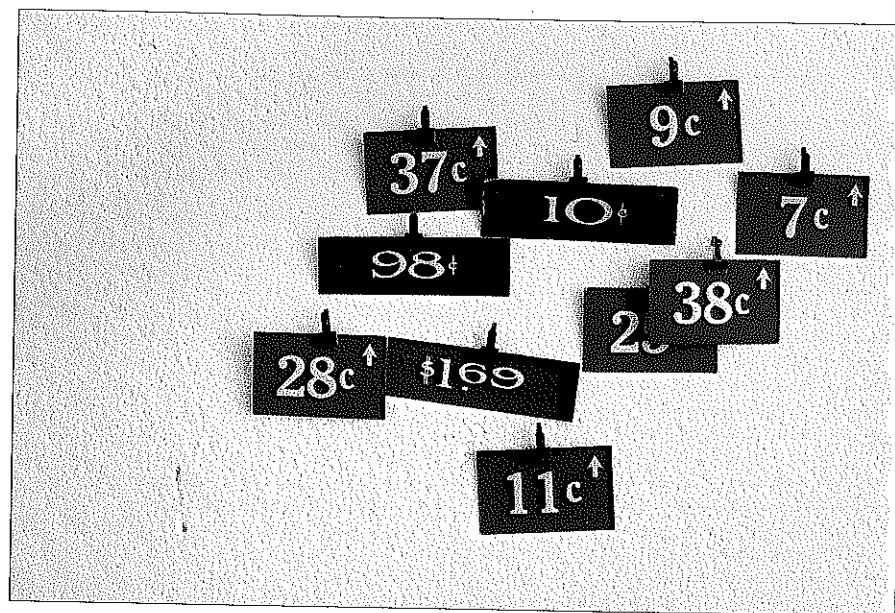
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Rebecca Mir's work is simple and understated. She often works with paper, small collections of objects, and her own body arranged quietly. This humility in equipment is connected to Mir's infatuation with punk culture that shifts into an engagement with the landscape. She has also written love letters to the ocean. Perhaps the best way to think about her work is as an amalgamation of bygone Romanticisms — nature, the lover, the explorer, the punk rocker — that add up to rediscover the sincerity currently lacking in all of these labels. For this show, we were most interested in Mir's engagement with nature. We gave her the storefront windows to fill up and she gave us hanging sheets of paper with flat black prints of icebergs on them. These are the most frightening objects in the world, slowly leading us towards underwater cities. Mir's prints garble our response; we instead encroach upon the ice.



REBECCA MIR,
Drawing With The Ocean,
(performance still), 2009.

When we met Ellen Rothenberg to talk about this show, she shared pictures of older pieces she had made and used during performances: clocks on a pair of shoes, or a wooden shovel with words engraved on its mouth. They were tempting to curate into *Field Static* for their embodiment of an inaccessible past-use, an original context no less significant than their present status as formal, sculptural works. But then Rothenberg showed us a more recent piece she had exhibited in Berlin. In her installation, *Constellations*, Rothenberg establishes a literal field via small blue signs printed with arrows and red vintage price tag cards. She assembles these on a wall or in a room; the proportions of the work vary depending on the site. In every version, these small indicators create an enigmatic field or map. The price cards elicit a time when two cents might have been a useful sum — think



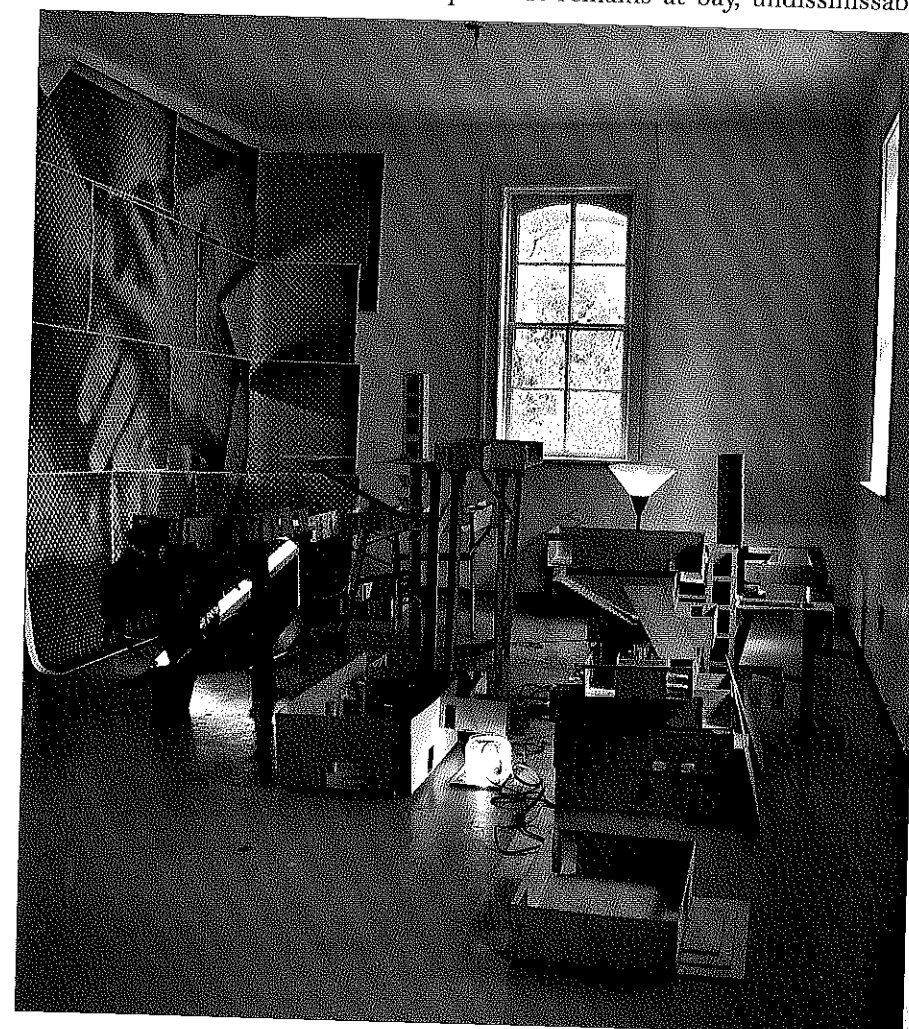
of those children in dirty boots on Morgan Street. Relative to our current economy, the sums are so small as to be powerless and dismissable. The oblique arrows, meanwhile, propel the eye to wander among these many numerical islands. The precision of placement combined with the interplay of materials and time: the slick, contemporary instructional arrows, against the foxed, nostalgic price tags are fixed to the clean white wall by antique metal clips. A tension emerges flike a magnetic field as the viewer is absorbed in the act of looking.

In *Diagram* (2010), Christian Kuras and Duncan MacKenzie installed a multi-leveled series of roofless rectangular rooms; the entire system looked like a complex model of a building site. Balsa wood rooms connected by ramps on cinder blocks, coffee cans, and side tables. Cords lay around the floor of the installation, a bare fluorescent light tube, a lamp, a plant. In one instance an antique sign, "Girls Toilet" was legible. This assemblage

ELLEN ROTHENBERG,
Constellations (detail),
Schalter, Berlin, 2010
(see also book cover).
Photo courtesy of
Ryan Weber.

conspired to portray some kind of institution — a university or a corporation — the 'rooms' clearly exist in a network, even if their function within that network is unclear. In an effort to grasp the purpose of this material system, you might lean in to read the pencil marks, left behind by the artists in the process of making. These do not unlock the piece. It remains at bay, undismissable

CHRISTIAN KURAS &
DUNCAN MACKENZIE,
Diagram, (installation)
Poor Farm,
Wisconsin, 2012.





MARK BOOTH, *God Is Represented By The Sea*, (performance still) Devening Projects + Editions, 2012. Photo by John W. Sisson

because of its sprawl and, even, the care toward detail. In *Field Static*, Kuras and MacKenzie work with letters, transforming a textual message in a game of anagrams. They began with one phrase originally mailed as an off-the-cuff collage from UK-based Kuras to Chicago-based MacKenzie. MacKenzie and Kuras reorganized the letters of the phrase into stacks, paintings, and phrases that may or may not be legible to the viewer. While connected to their original context, each new combination creates a new meaning contained in the original. The text is distant, distinct, and equitable to its physical counterpart.

Last winter, Mark Booth composed a durational performance at Devening Projects during his solo exhibition *God Is Represented By The Sea*. For one performance during that exhibition, the improvisational bellows and electronics duet, Coppice (Noé Cuéllar and Joseph Kramer) played music with Booth for roughly four hours. During that time, twelve individuals were asked to

read Booth's score: a stream of ever shifting phrases in a loop. The last word of one phrase became the first word of the following. "God is represented by the sea" became "The Sea is represented by an irregular shape" and so on until we arrived at last to "An owl is represented by God," at which time the readers would begin again. The words became blocks, algebraic variables that could be swapped in and out of one another. Booth's piece evokes an intuited, physical structure in language; he seeks to find an equivocation, a way to codify experience through metaphor. Here, he has installed a sound installation with flags entitled: *I IMAGINE YOU SLEEPING SIDE BY SIDE AND WHILE YOU ARE SLEEPING YOUR SOULS RISE TOGETHER LIKE A FLAG ON A POLE FLUTTERING SOUNDLESSLY IN A WINDLESS WIND AND THE FLAG OF YOUR LOVE IS SHAPED LIKE [...]*

Objects are often manufactured by human beings; it is sometimes difficult to imagine their autonomy. We know rocks come from mountains and meteors, so they observe an obvious independence from the human sphere. But what about old tires or tennis balls? In what way can those objects boast a non-contingent being when their original purpose is tied to human activities? How can such an object fulfill its potential if its potential is reliant upon human use? Heather Mekkelson articulates one possible answer. Over the past several years, she has made a practice of fabricating distress. Mekkelson begins with new objects — phonebooks, traffic cones, caution tape, fans, or blinds — everyday, banal objects. Through a variety of processes she imposes the visible signs of deterioration and stress on each object and, placed in an exhibit, these objects evoke a traumatic narrative, as ready-mades discovered by accident in the wake of disaster. The distress of the objects suggests their secret lives or past, an encounter made more interesting given

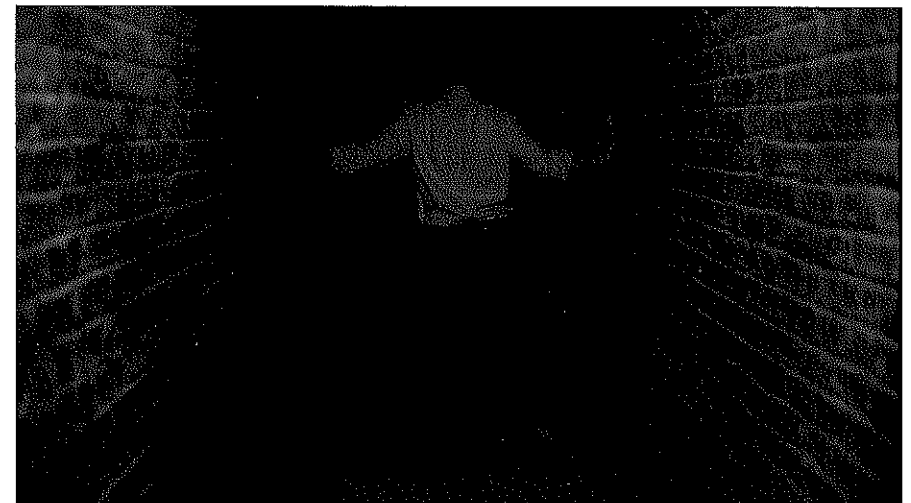


HEATHER MEKKELSON,
Debris Field Ellipsis,
(mixed media) Dominican
University O'Connor Art
Gallery, Illinois, 2009.

that Mekkelson's objects never endured such trials at all. Their life was spent in her studio. In more recent work, Mekkelson has created a telling-point on the object that allows the viewer to see the artifice of distress. At one critical point of perspective the viewer can see both the artifice of distress and the object's unadulterated newness — like on a stage set when you see at once the façade of a town and the plywood backing on which the town is painted. That point reveals a moment of interior instability; it is as though the object is telling you it is lying. The object is laughing at you, or winking, confessing its own ruse.

Although we first knew Justin Cabrillos as a sound poet, we've been lucky to see him as he's developed into a somatic phenom. We've included his video *Dance for a Narrow Passageway* — a work that shows Cabrillos improvising a dance in a passageway. Before composing the piece, Cabrillos spent time observing movements in passageways, both his own and others: buses, subways, airports, even passageways in dramatic movies. He is embodying the influence that space and non-human

JUSTIN CABRILLOS,
*Dance for a Narrow
Passageway*, (still from
a video) 2012.



bodies have on human choreography. The one rule of the improvisation: move like somebody would move in a passageway. When talking to us about the piece, Cabrillos emphasized his interest in the absence of other objects as he came into movement — the passageway encourages nothing but the supposed emptiness of transition. It also has a history: many bodies, winds, and drips have left their associative trace: that past is something Cabrillos is responding to as well, embodying it. Like a corporeal version of John Cage's famous anechoic chamber experience — where the composer learned that the world was never truly silent — Cabrillos' video indicates that one is always connected to other bodies.

Is it possible to imagine the inner life of objects? It seems we are not quite permitted to apprehend the idea. We cannot imagine what such a sleeping interiority would be like, especially when discounting the tools humans dream with — thought and words and pictures. Instead we must describe the possibility of an object's interior space by activating a sense of its absurdity. In a kind of negative proof on his website, Stephen Lapthisophon shows a looped video of a potato, alone on a shelf. In the background we hear jazz music. Because of an automatic desire to anthropomorphize the potato, we imagine the potato — otherwise absolutely still and solitary in the frame — *listening*. The scene becomes comical. And yet it describes something about the constant, albeit invisible, movement of a potato: it is constantly deteriorating, or growing, or leaking, or emitting vibrations. Conceiving of its ability to hear and listen is a way to access, through metaphor, the potato's experience of itself. For *Field Static*, Lapthisophon shows *The Taxonomy of Root Vegetables*, a long, crude shelf stacked with many different still growing, still rotting, root vegetables. The piece, to us, builds off Lapthisophon's humorous depiction of a morose tuber. Instead of an attempt and appraisal of



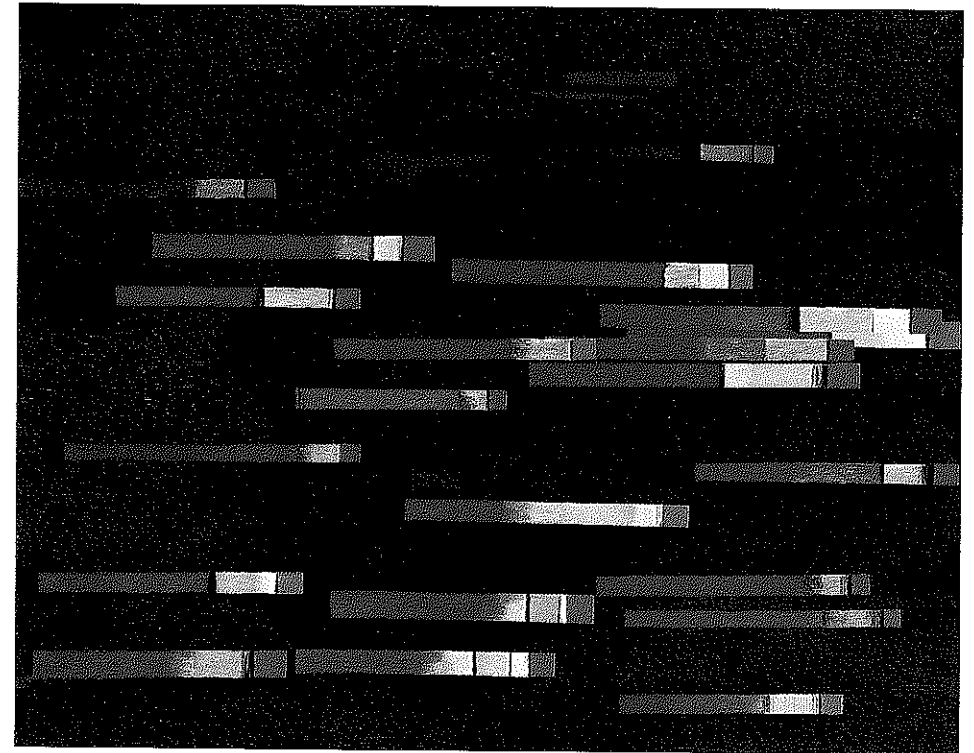
STEPHEN
LAPTHISOPHON,
*Taxonomy of Root
Vegetables*, (still from a
video) 2012.

projected experience, *Taxonomy* suggests unfamiliar, mutating ecologies and locates the fruitlessness of our contrived negotiations as we seek to categorize and map our world.

The inaccessibility of individual objects can be compared to the inaccessibility of our environment — as our awareness of very small objects builds up, we bump against the infinite array of inner lives, and the very large mesh that consists of animals, insects, bacteria, rocks, ashes, oxygen. Slowly, we bump up against the sky, the world of planetary bodies: the sun, the planets, the stars, light. Carrie Gundersdorf observes, paints, collages and draws solar phenomenon on two-dimensional picture planes that reference modernist painting. In one collage, Gundersdorf collects a variety of different images of Jupiter. She assembles these images in a grid on one sheet

of dark paper. One sees the many sides of Jupiter at once but we are no closer to apprehending this planet. This is not simply the result of scale or medium; Gundersdorf is very literally transcribing astral photographs. And yet Gundersdorf's work shows how astral photographs are manipulated by space and technology. The picture of Jupiter has traveled through eons of space, been reflected on a variety of mirrors and then digitally enhanced with various colors and contrast in an effort to indicate data. Those manipulated images represent the source material that comprises our collective experience of Outer Space. In this show, we have included *Spectral Trails with Absorption Lines*, a drawing that depicts the spectrum of light. Here too one is called to consider not only the camera's apparatus, but also the receptive reed of the body: the stereoscopic vision of two eyes — what is then intuitively and unconsciously synthesized into one cohesive whole. Add to this the limited capacity of our oracular perception: We can only see a very narrow portion of the spectrum. Given our minimal sensitivity to light, how could we possibly see all objects? What objects are we missing?

Hopefully these works, along with this book, will lure you into an experience of *Field Static* in which you begin to account, through perception, for the discrete fields asserted within discrete works; and then the field described by the works together; and then the field described by the entire show in the context of the space, a space in which we are immersed. It is an uncanny and perhaps anxious position, as we grow ever more aware of the inexhaustible relations between non-human things.



CARRIE
GUNDERSDORF.
*Spectral Trails with
Absorption Lines*, (colored
pencil and water color on
paper, 39 x 50") 2011.

End Notes

1. Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
2. Graham Harman. *The Quadruple Object* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), p. 5
3. Graham Harman. *Circus Philosophicus* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010) p. 72-3
4. Harman writes, objects are "partly immune to changes among [its pieces]." *Circus Philosophicus* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010) p. 72.