

David Schafer

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

Talking sculptures are a staple of amusement parks, trade fairs, and museums of science, industry, and history, and are sometimes even found in churches. In art, however, they remain exceptional for the simple reason that sculpture's effect has generally been understood to hinge on arrested potential; thus, a work's force of expression is perhaps best measured against the pressure of its withholding. To furnish such a structure with a sound track could be seen as self-defeating, at least from the perspective of medium specificity—that critical tenet of modernism, a period that remains a central point of contention here—yet David Schafer has been carrying off this problematic conflation for the past two decades. This exhibition, which included works dating back to 2001, amounted to a mini-retrospective of the artist's experiments with sound-equipped built forms, and its title, "Models of Disorder," was telling. A model is a propositional structure that suggests the future possibility of something rather than a fully realized thing in itself. Moreover, a model should ideally demonstrate how this potential thing would work rather than not work. Schafer has quite a different plan, and it is one that we can trace back to the 1980s, his formative period, and to the then-inescapable theoretical framework of deconstruction. This was a time when the only imaginable way forward, for most involved, was via a critical dismantling of the rubrics of the recent past—that is to say, those of modernism.

First, the structures as such: In their materiality, mode of construction, and overall style, Schafer's works insistently recall those of sculptor Anthony Caro. Schafer's works mimic the attempts of Caro and other high modernists to wring free-form, open-ended expressivity from rigid industrial materials, but in a manner that leaves them pointedly wanting, their assumed aspirations to formal autonomy consistently compromised by way of lingering resemblance to a range of more utilitarian



David Schafer, *What Should a Painter Do?* (detail), 2011, dyed poplar, inkjet print, playback and speaker system, CD, looped three-channel audio. Installation view.

structures: shipping crates, forts, kiosks, bandstands, etc. In the end, they are neither wholly composed nor uncomposed, but poised somewhere in between in order to raise questions regarding composition. What does it mean to assume full creative ownership of one's materials, tools, and techniques in the name of integral expression? Is this still possible? Was it ever?

This is where the sound tracks come in. Via small speakers often attached to their armatures, Schafer's sculptures channel the voices and thoughts of such notable modernist figures as the painter Barnett Newman and the architect Marcel Breuer, as well as those of seminal poststructural theorist Jacques Derrida, astronaut (and pop-culture icon) Buzz Aldrin, and the songwriting duo Zager and Evans, authors of the 1969 pop hit "In the Year 2525." All these disembodied

voices argue positions that, from a contemporary perspective, seem acutely embattled. Schafer has mentioned his abiding interest in the topic of "male hysteria," and his talking sculptures comprise a symptomatic cast of characters, yet they cannot be reduced to mere parodies. Accompanying wall-hung graphic collages and posters with transcribed texts keyed us into their worldviews, but the sound tracks themselves were often electronically spliced and distorted beyond comprehension. Noise is something that this artist, who divides his practice between highly determined studio construction and experimental knob-twiddling, takes seriously. At Diane Rosenstein, these objects, previously exhibited only singly in group shows, collectively produced a cacophonous swell of sound, which had a curious effect, now subtractive, now additive.

The self-contained stasis of sculptural form is undone by noise that "bleeds out," as if the works were inadvertently undermining their integrity in a formalist version of a Freudian slip. Schafer is an artist who is clearly ambivalent about his own job description, and in this sense the show also amounted to a kind of warts-and-all self-portrait. This too could easily have devolved into caricature, but it didn't. To compose a problematic, at once distantly theoretical and deeply felt, is his gambit.

—Jan Tumlir