

a/systemic: intersections, dislocations, and subversions

a/systemic presents a selection of artwork that explores the boundaries of systems both within and outside of formal art making. Although we generally think of systems as a means to structure information, impose order, or define frameworks, the exhibition complicates this static idea by investigating instances of slippage. Formally and conceptually, it challenges established meanings, subverts expectations, and dissolves the barriers between disparate systems. In opening up spaces within otherwise closed networks, the included works echo the constantly shifting realities of contemporary life.

Entering the gallery, visitors immediately encounter #126, a sculpture by Sandra Erbacher that appears to be a chess set on a steel stand topped by house plants. A closer look reveals the game's traditional checkerboard patterning has been rearranged—shuffled into a disorder that undermines its functionality. #126 embodies the overarching themes of the exhibition: using the structure of the grid—a form Rosalind Krauss imbued with art historical significance in the late 1970s—Erbacher's sculpture suggests an ordered system, but presents it as a framework to both embrace and resist, and perhaps even to rethink. Offering us a system that has been interrupted and rendered wholly inoperable, #126 exhibits a certain postmodern sensibility—a surrender to the devolution of order into chaos. However, rather than a cynical acquiescence to dysfunction and entropy, this work could be understood as an effort towards redefinition and open-endedness. Although this chessboard cannot be used as intended, it has been repurposed, its function reimagined as a domestic end table or a plant stand. Simultaneously functional and dysfunctional, systemic and asystemic, this piece resists the limitations of clear-cut classifications. Taken together, all of the works included in the exhibition express a similar temperament—breaking away from defined structures, they situate themselves along more flexible, porous boundaries.

In line with this stance, artworks by Helen Hawley, Sandra Erbacher, Angela Richardson, and Joshua Duncan address language as a system for exchange. In both its written and verbal forms, language is based on rules and conventions that enable communication and facilitate human understanding. Each of the four artists questions the capacity for language to communicate aurally, textually, and visually by prying open its rigid structure. Hawley's installation, for example, presents several lines of vinyl text adhered to the wall. Using this prose to direct our movements, orient us within the gallery space, and visualize objects through the act of naming them, she playfully suggests how language is more than just a mode of transmission. With cast-ceramic bricks stacked vertically into a column-like form, Erbacher's other sculpture calls to mind the abandoned Tower of Babel. But, if Erbacher alludes to ruptures in communication resulting from the multiplicity of tongues, Richardson's performance-based piece invites intimacy and connectedness through personal storytelling. Transcribing the private narratives of both strangers and friends, she turns their stories into looping, calligraphic works of art. Although working in the digital realm, Duncan also distorts language as an act of creation. Manipulating the digital scripts of appropriated video footage, he undermines the visual and narrative content but concurrently presents a disorienting moving image that addresses the pop culture phenomenon of Internet memes. Collectively, these artists activate language as a system full of potentialities and multivalent messages by presenting enigmatic texts, illegible scripts and warped imagery, and by blurring the line between public and private exchanges. In other words, as articulated by Helen Hawley, they reveal how language can be stretched to “amplify possible meaning rather than resolve ambiguity.”

Maps and diagrams exist as graphical systems for visualizing and making sense of spatial information. They can accurately pinpoint locations, represent built structures, illustrate environmental and political boundaries, and depict geographical traits. Artists Paul Lorenz, Conner Green, Chris Maddox, and Suzanne Torres appropriate or reference methods for describing natural and built environments, but employ these strategies to create imaginary places, improvisational schematics, and abstracted landscapes. Lorenz combines a quiet, minimalist aesthetic with the digital tools of cartographic modeling to render maps of non-existent places. His laser-cut contour lines on aluminum detail fictional topographic elevations, and offer a sense of place without representing reality. Similarly subverting diagrammatic processes, Green uses a Diazo machine, an outmoded method for reproducing architectural drawings, to create delicate geometric abstractions. Green sends his hand-creased paper through the machine, and the resulting images evince the ghostly trace of the artist's actions. Working intuitively, Maddox deploys a frenzy of hyper-detailed lines to suggest aerial views of city centers bubbling over with urban growth. While Maddox's prints flatten and abstract the built landscape, Torres's sculpture embodies the dimensionality of the natural environment. Standing 21 feet in length, her imposing rebar structure offers a large-scale model of gently sloping expanses of the earth's surface. Using the techniques and principles of mapping to complicate and obscure rather than elucidate, these artists present new possibilities for describing place and experiencing space. Their acts of topographical and architectural transformation redirect and heighten expectations about the surrounding environment.

Michael Arnsteen, Natasha Hovey, Kimberly Benson, Jessica Ruiz, and Jordan Adams examine moments of unexpected convergence, combining various processes into cohesive artistic expressions. Their works, which reference diverse systems that range from gestural abstraction and ecology to microscopic biology and architecture, can be seen as assertions of hybridity. Interrogating intersections among formal approaches and ideas, these artists ultimately challenge finite realms.

In large-scale lithographs that vibrate with energy, Arnsteen pays homage to the devastating effects of the 2013 Colorado floods that submerged entire communities. Though destructive, natural disasters also unite people through a shared determination to rebuild. Alluding to this cycle of destruction and regrowth, Arnsteen's work speaks to the struggle between nature and civilization, with neither force managing to ultimately overtake the other. Hovey, on the other hand, looks to internal, biological processes for artistic inspiration. Translating the microscopic world of human physiology into simplified architectural installations, she draws connections between two ostensibly disparate systems. Benson also addresses the anatomical, but eschews simplicity with her maximalist approach to abstract painting. Using the materiality of paint to express the physicality of the body, Benson's canvases explode with color and form: Technicolor stripes of paint disrupt visceral zones that evoke decomposing flesh and exposed organs. Biomorphic and geometric, her work presents a simultaneous push and pull of repulsion and attraction. Ruiz uses the language of painted abstraction, as well, but mobilizes it to stretch the legibility of representational image-making. In vacillating between familiar content and unrecognizable worlds, her paintings obscure realism with the dense patterning of simple shapes or broad gestural swipes, while hinting at jungle flora and fauna. The landscapes in Adams's paintings are haunting and unsettling, the saturated surfaces soaked in hazy layers of atmospheric paint. In conceiving of his work as portals to other worlds, Adams blurs the line separating life from that which comes after; his paintings serve as entrances to the unknown.

Other artists expand the paradigm of sculptural form to question the relationship between convention and innovation. Colgate Searle, Jeannine Shinoda, and Gabe Strader-Brown craft

artworks that resemble commonplace items—a boat, a tent, and an urban tree grate, respectively. Given the meticulous attention to detail evidenced in their work, these artists clearly possess technical mastery over their chosen materials and processes. However, they intentionally subvert their objects' conventional utility: a boat with a skeletal frame but no hull a tent enclosing space but offering little protection from the elements, and a grate that is decorative but too delicate to withstand city foot-traffic. By fracturing or undermining the functionality of familiar objects, Searle, Shinoda, and Strader-Brown transform assumptions about the everyday and expand possibilities for alternative ways to imagine and experience our contemporary world.

Through myriad approaches to system disruption, the artists represented in this exhibition demonstrate the constantly shifting status of objects and ideas in the twenty-first century. They propose that ambiguity is an opportunity to channel hybridity and create new understandings of reality. At the same time, their work honors the sensual nature of the art object and exhibits a love for the process of making. In showcasing formally sophisticated works of art that also stimulate conceptual thought, *a/systemic* reflects the dynamic nature of contemporary art and the innovations being pursued by emerging artists.

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