Jacoba Urist

Threading Space

Essay for Monograph

Grids and Threads, Jovis, 2018

In the emblematic 1913 work, *3 Standard Stoppages*, Marcel Duchamp rethinks one of the most fundamental aspects of physical reality: the distance between points on a line. Duchamp dropped three individual strings one meter long, from a height of one meter onto a set of horizontal planes. He then glued each piece of string to the canvas below in the shape of their fall, creating a curved tool of reference. If a thread, he said in the project's instruction notes for replication, "twisting as it pleases," retains the length of a meter, a new image of the unit exists. Both literal and ironic, the *Standard Stoppages* undermines our rational assumptions of measurement and the world's sense of scale becomes a kind of riddle: what exactly is an interval of space— if anything significant?

Of course, Duchamp is probably known best for the tenet: It is my deed of making a selection that makes a work, a work of art. Surely, the Duchampian meter is an abstraction about dimension— as well perhaps, as the most readymade of readymades. The artwork, after all, is really only the smallest strand of fiber, hundreds upon thousands of which occupy a person's everyday existence without much of our thought or emotional energy. Blankets, sweaters, even the most ornate of textiles, often make up the singular, quotidienne moments of human existence. And thus, contemporary artists— particularly in the face of modern atrocities— have adopted fabric to evoke the universality of suffering. Piles of garments, whether the delicate snowsuits in Ai Weiwei's *Laundromat* to the bright saris in Patricia Cronin's *Shrine for Girls*, conjure a sense of collective responsibility and personhood. And yet, the *Standard Stoppages* are a deliberate, aesthetic reflection—beautiful, yes, in their concept as Duchamp would say— but also in their ordinariness and humility,

slivers of filament on canvas, grand in a sense of pure visual simplicity.

So too is Bastienne Schmidt's most recent series of conceptual photography and geometric figures— captivating in their concept and their aesthetic integrity. Here, in her new monograph, Schmidt constructs a deceptively simple tableau of thread and string landscapes, as well as a collection of systematic meditations on the power of white space and delicate boundaries. Taken as a whole, she is asking us to reflect on the arbitrariness of typology: how do artists and architects bifurcate three-dimensional planes? Or as Schmidt once posed the question to me: how do we confirm spaces?

Recently, William Eggleston reflected on the speed of his medium. A photograph is made so quickly, he said, like in a one hundredth of a second. Today, it is nearly impossible to view an image without a sense of that split-second motion, where the artist has taken decisive and irreversible action. Unlike a painter, there is no stepping back for the photographer to possibly add looser, fuller brush strokes. More than any other art form, we bear witness to *the* flicker of creativity and insight. Even so, as curator Charlotte Cotton describes in her book, the photograph as contemporary art challenges the particular notion of the artist foraging daily life, in search of that precise moment when a great visual appears in her frame. Instead, for the conceptual photographer, the language is the intent, manifest in each handcrafted effect and composition. As Schmidt put it once: the medium *is* the thought.

In the first part of her book, Schmidt shows the world in both exaggerated and reduced perspective, building her installations from scraps of recycled fabric, twigs, and colored string, against the blank canvas of snow— as though there is no true sense of scale. She has captured the *idea* of space, rather than any of its tangible conditions. In this context, there seems to be an inner dialogue with American artist Fred Sandback. Although, because Schmidt's thread installations are photographic, there is an additional layer of process, and her original artwork endures only a half- hour or so. Her images consider a reality that purposely ceases to exist, conflating the "real" and the manufactured world. But both artists, remarkably, delineate boundaries through a porous approach. A minimalist sculptor, Sandback worked with elastic cord and vaguely fuzzy acrylic yarn to

pose his own riddle in a sense: the illusion of volume without mass. Sandback tightly secured thin lines of materials to the floors and walls of galleries, defining— and redefining— three-dimensional form in large indoor spaces. His work feels at once ephemeral and structural, almost as if the work of a magician who has managed to reinvent the depth of our physical universe. Interiors are elusive, Sandback explained, you can't ever see an interior.

Still, Schmidt's art is deeply rooted in the legacy of raw materiality and everyday life. There is an underlying pragmatism to each photograph. One can't engage her work without references to Arte Povera, the group of mid-century Italian artists known for their use of found objects and "poor man's" materials, such as rope, rags, paper, and soil. In *Grids And Threads*, for instance, strings are left undone, frayed to achieve a sense of authenticity and transformation. For those associated with Arte Povera, fabric is also indispensable, but has a different role than it does for artists like Ai Weiwei and Patricia Cronin. At base, there is a visceral, pre-industrial quality to Schmidt's installations. Like a painting or a sculpture, the maker's hand is evident in each and every photograph.

The second part of Schmidt's project— a set of mixed media works on Arches paper— focuses exclusively on a set of punched-out, 8 x 8 square grids, achieving a woven sculptural result. These are not only quiet, monochromatic reflections on paper, rooted in the transcendent traditions of Agnes Martin, Lucio Fontana, and Robert Ryman, but also variations on minimalism and shape that become their own kind of spirituality. And it would be a mistake to approach the two halves of *Grids And Threads* separately: both reflect the delicate interplay of perimeter and restriction. In this world of saturated ownership, Schmidt has said, we stake a property, it is ours. While demarcations can certainly be momentous— consider the various ways people mark and honor the dead— they are fraught with problematic implications. In this way, Schmidt's string constellations become reminders of the world's fragility, of the national and private borders we maintain, both as physical realities (see her previous work *Home Stills*, about life's domesticity) and as social constructs.

Schmidt has described how the physicality of white and the permeability of paper allows shadows to "fall into the pieces." As such, her grids directly engage with Fontana's legacy of spatial

concepts. His works— collectively known as ‘cuts’— blur our sense of a second and third dimension, creating an illusion of depth. For his 1950’s and 60’s masterpieces, the artist punctured surfaces of canvas, slashing deliberate diagonal incisions with a sharp blade. I have constructed, he has said, not destroyed. But if Fontana obscures the distinction between painting and object, light and shadow, *Grids And Threads* presents a kind of fourth dimensionality, carrying his use of perforation into the realm of photography.

Ultimately, Schmidt is asking her viewers three monumental questions: How do we keep space? How do we divide space? And how do our partitions separate and unite us? As *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*, Ai Weiwei’s most ambitious public project to date, illustrates borders have particular resonance at this historic juncture. His interventions— such as placing a gilded cage within the Washington Square Arch— pondered the political and social impulses we have to divide ourselves from one other. At the beginning of her career, Schmidt says, she was much more interested in social documentary. But there is this ongoing dialogue now— a shared language, if you will— between her painting and her photography, areas Schmidt masters equally. White, Robert Ryman said in an interview, has a tendency to make things visible; you can see more of a nuance. And it is through this similar attention to color— and her bird’s-eye perspective— that at last, as with Duchamp’s meter, once again we see the universe for what it truly is: an exquisite, ironic riddle that can not be solved.

Bio: Jacoba Urist is an art writer in lower Manhattan. A long-standing contributing journalist for *The Atlantic*, Jacoba also writes about art for *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian Magazine* and *Cultured*.