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**A Call and Response for the Digital Age:  
Thinking about 3: *Nichola Kinch, James Maurelle, and Tamara Suber***  
An Essay by Matt Singer



Nichola Kinch, *Horse and Pony Show* 2015 Birch, metal, plastic, PVC 24 x 48"

Three, nor 3, does not a backlash make. But it is statement in matter that matters. Unbeknownst to one another, and in ways as varied as they are alluring, Nichola Kinch, James Maurelle, and Tamara Suber are talking back to life in the Digital Age. Not that they are rejecting Today- and Tomorrow-Land. Again, the backlash does not begin here. Kinch, Maurelle, and Suber hold the present in appreciative—if watchful and contemplative—embrace. It's okay if this revolution is televised...and digitized, tweeted, instagrammed, and tumblr'd. But in her or his own distinct way, each of the 3 artists has responded to the modern technologies that have thoroughly transformed seemingly every moment of our waking lives—and perhaps even our “sub” and “un” conscious spells—by (re)calling human existence before the advent of the microchip. Indeed, with the exception of Kinch's zoetrope *Horse and Pony Show* (2015), even the electric-light and combustion-engine would be anomalies in the world of 3.

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The visitor to 3 will not encounter the seamless sheen of contemporary, technologically enhanced twenty-first-century life, stuff, and settings. This is not an environment that conjures computer-aided design, mass production, and robotic labor. In 3 we do not behold flawless glass, pressed and coated metal, extruded plastic or “Space Age polymers.” Instead, we see objects that evoke a sense of the handmade and one of a kind. Maurelle and Suber’s works—made from jute, wood, and salvaged copper (Maurelle), salt, and even hair (Suber) appear timeworn and improvised, albeit painstakingly so. They beckon the hand to touch. The magical, meaningful fun, games, and commentary of Kinch’s Horse and Pony Show—a 19-century animation device that includes elements created through the decidedly 21-century technologies of 3D printing—are veiled behind a curtain of crimson velvet, that most tactile textile.

Nichola Kinch’s zoetrope, while undeniably intentional and precise in its construction, is a means for achieving animation—putting images in motion—that has been outmoded many, many times since it was first patented in 1866 (the history of the zoetrope extends back 5,000 years to a bowl made in present day Iran and decorated with sequential drawings of a jumping and grazing goat). While the medium of Kinch’s *Horse and Pony Show* is out of date, its message is of the moment. Kinch’s zoetrope shows a figure forever morphing back and forth between a donkey and elephant. These, of course, are the symbols of the two political parties that dominate America’s binary and—many would argue—outdated and dysfunctional political system. Also current in American thought is a growing belief that our two parties are so long-established, entrenched, and beholden to the military-industrial complex that they, ultimately, are all but indistinguishable. Kinch’s one-and-the-same donkey and elephant are the products of light shed on the animal symbols at the heart of that discussion.

“Horse and Pony Show” is a term used to describe a hackneyed, halfhearted, stale entertainment—a circus in reduced circumstances. Shown at the height of a particularly contentious and momentous presidential campaign, Kinch’s “Show” seems to question both the authenticity and viability of the process. Is what we see some thing of material substance? Or is it an ephemeral projected image? Does importance lie with ideas and actions? Or with reductive symbols around which we do nothing more than rally and devote unthinking loyalty? Is this reality, a circus, or both? Does the curtain shielding the voting booth offer us privacy as we perform our civic duty or is it the means to frame and structure a pointless act of “performing” democracy?

James Maurelle describes his sculpture *ouidaheja* (pronounced WEE-deh-HAY-yeh) as a “counting device and telecommunication transporter.” Indeed, vertically and horizontally oriented abacus-like elements dominate the top half of Maurelle’s contribution to 3. This is, or appears to be, a machine for mathematical problem-solving so pre-modern in appearance, yet fascinating, that it transcends time.

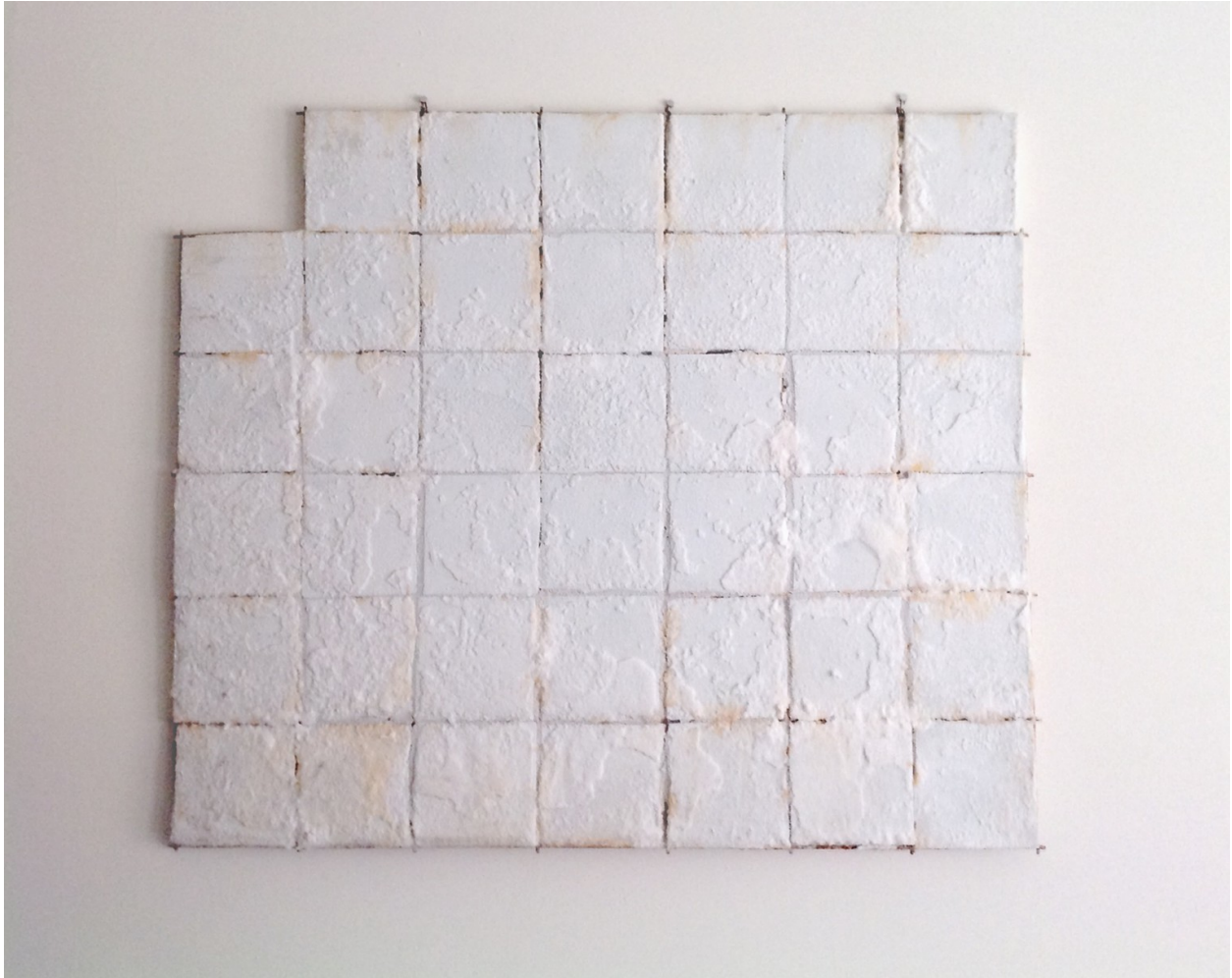
Reading of Maurelle’s interest in “divine mathematics”—and, by ready association, divination—I wondered, even assumed, that “ouidaheja” was a variant spelling “ouija,” the “talking board” that came to wide public attention in the 1890s as a medium for the living to ask questions—and receive answers—from the dead. I was wrong. James explained that “Ouida” was a variant spelling of Judah and that Ouida—“Juda” or “Juida” in French and “Ajudá” in Portuguese—a port city in the Benin Republic on the West African Coast, was once a primary center for slave-trading. The millennia of mysteries and speculations concerning the fate of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel have connected this “City of Judah” with both the ancient and unknowable biblical past and the more recent history of a people displaced—West Africans brought to the Americas as slaves. Some believe the slaves were, themselves, members of the Lost Tribes. Maurelle speaks of “people who disappeared but whose objects remain.” Inclined to philosophy, spirituality, and mysticism, Maurelle felt a “oneness,” a sense of connection in spirit and history, when he learned what’s known and what’s possible in the story of Ouida.

Maurelle apprenticed with his father to become the third generation of his family trained in the trade of plumbing. He is a fifth-generation woodworker. Copper plumbing parts are part of *ouidaheja*’s composition, as is an expanse of wood blocks and chips of widely varying widths and shape assembled into a whole with breathtaking precision. Maurelle is, as well, a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute (BFA, 2013); the University of Pennsylvania (MFA, 2015, with a Certificate in Time Based and Interactive Media, 2014), and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2015). He writes of the “correlation shaped between labor and creativity that has formed the basis of the work ethic at the heart of my practice.” He states that his aim is to navigate a society that has created firm distinctions and separation between the hands-on work of tradespeople and the hands-on work of artists and—as someone with feet planted in both—find a “path back to ‘workmanlike’ images that I consider essential, and to remake them anew, as art.”



James Maurelle *Ouidaheja* 2015 wood, copper, adhesive, jute 52 x 41 x 10"

What of the “heja” in “ouidaheja”? It has no specific meaning. Thinking like a sculptor who assembles together rather than carves away, Maurelle liked the ways the letters and their sounds joined into a newly constructed whole. When said aloud, “heja” — “hey, yeah” — is a call and response. Maurelle sees and wants a sense of call and response in his work, a back-and-forth achieved through touch, observation, and meditation that encourage humility and reconsideration of the standards of beauty. *Ouidaheja* is freestanding. It lives in space, interacts with space, changes space. Its parts are movable. It calls for human engagement. Maurelle says “I would be into watching a child interact with the work like a toy, or to see an adult regress into child-like play.”



Tamara Suber Title unknown 2014

For Tamara Suber, there is no distinction between art and life. The primary material of her sculpture—whether flat grids composed of blocks or figurative shapes—is salt, an elemental and essential part of human and animal consumption. Wood and metal support these saline creations, but only for so long. “Salt ruins things,” Suber reminds us. “It corrodes what it touches, it decays, it eventually disappears.”

Taken-for-granted salt first became central to Suber’s attention when she began to work with horses and, later, with sheep. For six-and-one-half years, she’s raised sheep at a farm in Villanova. The grounds sprout salt-licks—blocks of salt suspended from bent metal rods planted deep in the soil and further tethered with cylinders of concrete.

She is accustomed to presenting her sculpture—which often includes sheep’s hair—outside, where exposure to the elements ensures that the sculptures are forever changing and will soon be lost. Her sculpture will be more stable in the enclosed space that is *NAPOLEON*, but even a controlled environment cannot preserve it. Suber likes that. She welcomes change and evolution. She wants her work to “get people to think about history, time, endurance, things we take for granted—including art itself.” Salt conjures for Suber the relationships between land, animals, and humans. It reminds her of her African American forebears moving west, of their work with animals and the land. “It becomes about history and family and legacy.”



Tamara Suber *salt-licks*

And it is about the present. She writes about Farm-Dreams.com, which—tellingly—exists both in real space and time and online:

The goal of Farm-Dreams.com is to help like-minded souls connect with others who are interested in more independent, self-sufficient and sustainable living ... We believe the diverse topics of survival, homesteading/farming and preparedness are all connected. With your help, we will build a community that will weave those topics together so that will may all learn, becoming inspired and take action to make our lives more fulfilling and more independent.

Despite this back-to-nature sentiment and intent, Suber is not at odds with modern technologies. “Digital is bringing us closer together,” she observes. “We are stretching. How do I get to this person? How do I get to this thing?” How do I get to this activity?” At the same time, she remarks on one shared response to things digital: “People are really excited about touching and working with materials. Not just artists. Everyone.”

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This give and take between the present and past, the digital and the material, was not the intended theme of 3. Kinch, Maurelle, and Suber had only limited knowledge of one another's work and each did not know what the others were exhibiting. They were chosen to exhibit together because they are the latest to join NAPOLEON's impressive roster of member-artists. But they share commonalities in demographics and experience. They are Millennials—the generation of the moment, one that has been scrutinized, analyzed, critiqued, lampooned, lauded, and recognized as the first cohort of “digital natives” for whom having a computer in your pocket or bag is a fact of life rather than a cause for wonder. Millennials (those ages 19–35 in 2016) number 74.9 million Americans, a larger population groundswell than that of the Baby Boomers (ages 52–70 in 2016; the parents of most Millennials), 74.9 million members of the U.S. population. Millennials are an enormous and distinct generation. How the Digital Age has shaped them—and how they will shape the Digital Age and times beyond in the U.S. and worldwide—remains to be seen.

Artists are those who have a particular talent for translating thought and personal vision into visual and material matter made, typically, as personal expression and a way to engage others. Less discussed, perhaps, is the idea of the artist as someone with particularly acute cultural antennae, a person who in what she or he produces and lives functions as a member of society's advance guard. It would be asking and assuming a bit much to designate Nichola Kinch, James Maurelle, and Tamara Suber as visual-art oracles of their generation. But each is consciously engaged with local and global life in these days and in the future. Their art is part and parcel with their experience of existence at a time of the greatest societal change since the Industrial Revolution. Their art, viewed individually or as an unintended but viable collective vision, expresses a melding of past and present. It makes material a commitment to lived rather than mediated experience. And it emphasizes senses and matters beyond the ocular and conceptual. It is as much about the verities of touch, taste, smell as the mysterious possibility of spirit, the infinite, the essential, the ultimate, and the absolute. It is the work of the three young artists, first and foremost. But in that, it is both call and response for the Digital Age.

About the Author:

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