

Cooper Jacoby
PRESS

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Revalue, Reanimate, And Recirculate: Cooper
Jacoby

Interview by Thomas Duncan



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Stagnants Mathew Gallery, Berlin (2016)
Courtesy of the artist and Mathew Gallery, Berlin/New York

CONVERSATIONS

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THOMAS DUNCAN: Though your work finds form in a wide variety of ways and continues to evolve, the notion of circulation is evident throughout. More specifically, you allude to systems of circulation and their potential for disruption or blockage: from acupuncture flow charts to drainage systems to bee pollination to the postal system.

COOPER JACOBY: You could say that choke points and clogs are where systems cease to be ambient. The fatigue between input and output, or the waste that escapes its joints, can contour the exchanges, scripts, connections, and scale of apparatuses that typically recede beneath attention. To detect leaks in engine systems—such as a car's A/C system—manufacturers will inject a liquid dye into the part and then watch for this penetrant to bleed through all the hairline cracks, condense around the pinhole perforations, and pool in blocked valves. I try to approach other systems, other black boxes, in a way like this, looking for the traces of where they strain, what they leak, where they drain.

TD: Your work is dedicated to material as much as it is to concept. Do you set out to find new materials to explore, or do they come to you through your research?

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CJ: Most of my focus in materials comes laterally, in non-sequitur ways. It gets redirected by applications, bizarre sub-industries, or histories totally askew of what initially guided my interest. Deliberately or not, a lot of attention is spent tracing how materials categorized as “waste” orbit through after-markets that revalue, reanimate, and recirculate them back as inputs. In following these streams from liquidation back to exchange, a sort of narrative streak becomes intelligible. One material that I’ve incorporated and tracked like this is Fordite—it’s essentially industrial waste made ornamental and wearable. It’s the sedimentary aggregate of layers of excess paint that would encrust on auto assembly lines and equipment when parts were sprayed by hand. After this process became automated and residue-free, many of the people who saved this material (mostly sub-contracted industrial janitors) auctioned it on e-commerce sites, where it’s then shaped into jewelry. Given the rarity of this pseudo-mineral, the speculative price for a limited resource has surged. It finds its way back upstream.

TD: Upcycled.

CJ: Sure. Where an upcycling, cottage industry polishes foul slag into a collector’s item, converting shit into gold.

TD: Further to that notion of materials, do they always harbor particular significations or are they materials that just speak to you? Like the potential toxicity of lead, for example, that you employed in your solo show, *Deposit*, at High Art in Paris.

CJ: I don’t typically think in those distinctions, but hopefully these two registers—reference and materiality—remain inextricably knotted in the work rather than easily parsed. Materials can be employed as relics, dramatized as raw evidence, somehow more immediate than representation. Or they can be retailed by their technique, like a trade fair demo, where it’s all about an evaporating novelty of, “Look what we can cut, look what we can print!” Often these treatments present objects that are far less potent than their actual counterparts, desaturated by being filtered through art. In the work you mentioned, lead isn’t exemplary as much as it is contradictory. Its total impenetrability against vision, its use as a barrier to the toxic light of radiation, is set against images of total porosity, the deep machinic gaze of X-rays encased within the damaged mailboxes. Consider how its surface slowly leaches a carcinogenic oxide, yet it’s a preventive, medical cladding. In this way, lead upends the polar terms of a “benign” or “toxic” material. These categories for diagnosing the material become even murkier, given the fact that what appears to be the “animate” subject—the living tissue in the dead hardware of the mailboxes—is in fact X-rays of an autopsied mummy.

TD: You mean that the imagery that appeared in those works, of the bones, was actually an x-ray of a mummy?

CJ: Yes. So the figure becomes invested with a sort of vitality as an image, yet it is unexhumable, fully entombed. When learning that early X-ray technologies were calibrated on plundered mummy bodies, which could essentially be scorched in experiments without impunity, I began to consider how biological life could undergo a sort of reanimating phase change, from historically dead to visibly alive, from tissue to image, and the slippery idea of what’s the “living” substrate here.

TD: I find this relationship between the biological and the man-made a particularly engaging aspect of your work. Can you talk a bit about your more recent work, which is modeled on urban beehives? There’s an intriguing combination of sustainability and control in those works, one that will potentially be further explored and complicated in your upcoming solo show here in L.A.

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CJ: Those works stem from an urban beehive prototype that the company Phillips designed as part of a "microbial home," a luxury domestic ecosystem where the functions of the home are supported by appliances that run on symbiotic "natural processes." In the original beehives, bees ostensibly fly into a biomorphic glass dome, wherein the apartment inhabitants can watch and eventually harvest the honey that the colony produces. Taking the shape of the optimized honeycomb membrane, I've remolded this cavity with scrap materials that have undergone transformations or several states, akin to how pollen is imported, digested, and regurgitated into the architecture of the hive. What's harvested here is not honey but aluminum. The work composites the hive together as an exquisite corpse of this single material: bonding recycled aluminum foam, casts of hives in impure aluminum, and hexagonal heat sinks. Hopefully, the closed-loop bubble and design fantasy of the Phillips prototype gets somewhat contaminated by substituting the regurgitation of one resource with another.

TD: The systems you explore in your work are ubiquitous (the body, postal networks, doors, electricity). In essence, they offer a nonexclusive entry point into an intellectualized output—anyone seeing your work will already be aware of these systems, even if only superficially, but your work upends them, inverting or subverting them for its own purposes. Specifically, I'm thinking about the disruption of the electrical system in your past show at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and *Deposit* at High Art, as well as the flooring context in *Stagnants* at Mathew.

CJ: The world's hardware tends to obscure the many frictions that are internal to it. Exerting pressure on these interfaces is a way to raise the vein, so to say, on these sheathed, repeated processes. With both of the works you cited, the space's infrastructure is stressed into visibility by rerouting different forms of circulation within them. In the case of the lights, it's altering the input of current to the light fixtures so that the waste mercury calcified at the ends of expired fluorescent bulbs is overheated, glowing again like candles. In the case of the grating, it was approaching the exhibition as a sort of sieve over which people traverse, filtering human traffic as a passing material. Both induce a purgatorial state—either a stuttering between function and failure, or a precarious levitation where one is neither quite fully within nor outside.

TD: Moreover, you work from series to series and do not resuscitate bodies of work; you have a discrete working method, which results in a cohesive yet impermanent output. Is this because each exhibition calls for its own conditions that need not be replicated once staged? And further to that, do you feel the steel grate flooring in *Stagnants* that we were just talking about—which also appeared in your Frieze NY solo presentation—are two parts of the same output?

CJ: I wouldn't say that I periodize my work with a sharp cut or approach it through the exhibition form alone, but restlessly shed and shift parts of work before they congeal into a modular template. Maybe because much of my focus is oriented towards how certain materials are digested, I often cannibalize my own bodies of work. Both the mailbox and gutter works are structured around how a diagram of a single anatomical figure—the acupuncture meridian system—extends through infrastructures that process remote inflows and outflows. To your other question, the floor that was originally in the *Stagnants* show was first used to compress an already small, open-sided space into an image, appearing continuous with its outside since the grating extended from the window to the back. When I found out that the foundations of most art fairs are built from the same type of grated steel platforms, I wanted to double this substructure back onto itself, making the suspension of the fair redundant and nude. By total happenstance, the substrate of the works on the wall—a high-performance paper honeycomb used as a filler in vehicles—uncannily resembled the cheap honeycomb cardboard cores of the fair walls.

TD: Right, art fair walls also employ an interior hexagonal structure, like the kind you find in doors.

CJ: Exactly. So the work created a type of skinned twin of the architecture, like a second glove in a pair, pulled inside out.

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