

SCULPTING HISTORY

A Formal Analysis of Michael
Stevenson's *The Fountain of
Prosperity* (2006)
by Anna Parlane

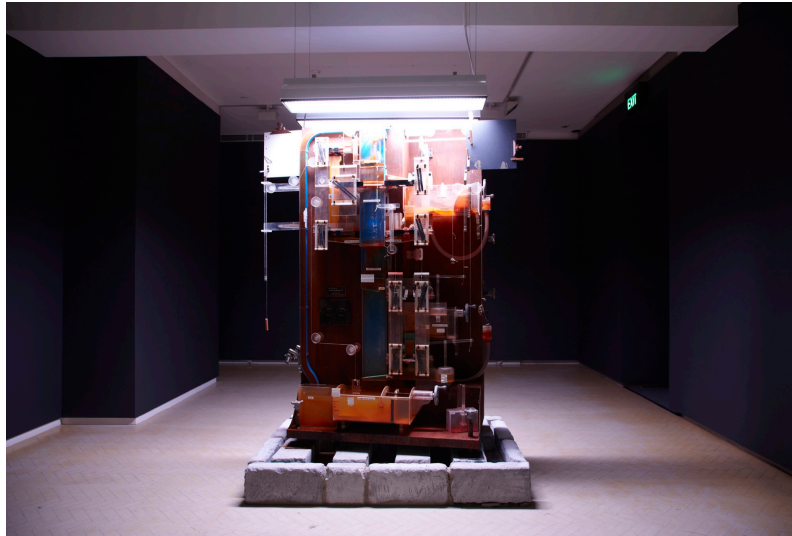
Conceptual art's "administrative aesthetic" was initially and erroneously regarded by at least some of its proponents as a neutral vehicle for conveying information.¹ Joseph Kosuth described his *One and Three Chairs* (1965) in the following terms: "I liked that the work itself was something other than simply what you saw ... It meant you could have an art work which was that idea of an art work, and its formal components weren't important ... the forms were only a device in the service of the idea."² Lucy Lippard and John Chandler famously declared in 1968 that conceptual artists were "dematerialising" art, warning that the art object was at risk of "becoming wholly obsolete."³ Taking cues from Marcel Duchamp's readymade, conceptual artists reconceived the creative act as requiring a minimum of manual labour. A banal, stripped-back aesthetic style seemed to allow viewers to skip straight to the idea that artists declared the primary aspect of the artwork without being overly concerned by the manner of its delivery. The claim of art's alleged "dematerialisation" received pushback—Art & Language acidly speculated that such progressive dematerialisation would finally result in "thought forms and telepathy"⁴—but some residue of this idea that an artwork's form and aesthetics can be overlooked or considered unimportant still circulates in the way we perceive contemporary art.

Contemporary research-based practice, for example, is typically understood as content-driven.⁵ In its use of found material, this mode of practice builds on conceptual art, institutional critique and appropriation art strategies. Like them, it is situated within the expansive genealogy of the readymade. Unlike conceptual artists, the generation of artists who developed research-based practices through the late 1990s and early 2000s can be distinguished by their marked historical consciousness.⁶ Their works replicate, restage and recontextualise found historical material and, too frequently, are understood as prompts for a history lesson rather than artworks in their own right. Neglecting the formal and aesthetic decision-making that has shaped the work, commentators assume that the historical figures or events it refers to are the primary concern.

Through an analysis of Michael Stevenson's *The Fountain of Prosperity (Answers to Some Questions About Bananas)* (2006), this article makes a case for prioritising research-based practice's formal and aesthetic aspects. Like many of Stevenson's works from the 2000s, *Fountain* is a sculptural replica of a historical object. As in all of his projects, the origin story of this object—which involves revolutionary political upheavals in Guatemala in the mid-twentieth century—is compelling. The work was recently on show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in *Chosen Memories: Contemporary Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift and Beyond* (2023).⁷ On the strength of its engagement with the recent history of Guatemala and irrespective of the artist's nationality, Stevenson's sculpture was acquired by Venezuelan collector Patricia Phelps de Cisneros in 2011, entering a collection dedicated to supporting and promoting the work of Latin American artists. Having entered MoMA's collection as part of a major gift from Cisneros in 2017, Stevenson's sculpture now seems firmly entrenched in its curious "Latin American" classification.⁸ It's easy to understand why responses to Stevenson's projects invariably centre on the histories that inform his works. Audiences have been engrossed by narratives that are cinematic in scope and rich in comic irony, feature multifaceted characters, and draw in the full dramatic sweep of high-level international politics and economic relations. It is significant, therefore, that in 2011, Stevenson chose to present *The Fountain of Prosperity* in his survey show at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) without the supplementary textual and archival material that had provided it with historical context in

previous exhibitions (and which has been reintroduced in the MoMA exhibition). Shorn of this didactic material in 2011, the sculpture's aesthetic dimensions were foregrounded. Using the MCA installation of *The Fountain of Prosperity* as a case study, I aim to reverse the dominant tendency in interpreting Stevenson's practice by reading the artwork as, first and foremost, a sculpture. By prioritising form, I also explore a fundamental but under-acknowledged element in the artistic practice of restaging historical material.

FIG. 1



Michael Stevenson, *The Fountain of Prosperity (Answers to Some Questions About Bananas)*, 2006. Plexiglass, steel, brass, aluminium, rubber, cork, string, concrete, dyed water, pumps and fluorescent lamps, 245 × 157 × 111 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Gonzalo Parodi, 686.2017. Installation at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2011. Photograph: Jenni Carter

Concurrent with the development of historically-oriented art practices such as Stevenson's, there has been a "striking increase," as curator Inke Arns observes, "of artistic re-enactments, that is, performative repetitions or participatory re-stagings of historical situations and events."⁹ Discussions of the kinds of re-enactment Arns describes have developed in close alignment with performance studies. Scholars studying artistic re-stagings of past events have, therefore, typically been concerned with the tension between the "liveness" of an affective, embodied performance and the mediations effected by the photographic documentation of events.¹⁰ The temporal focus of re-enactment scholarship can also be useful for considering object-based practice. A re-enacted historical event collapses together present-ness and historical distance, creating layered and multiple-temporal experiences for participants and audiences.¹¹ Form, I contend, can operate in a way that is similarly disruptive to linear time.

Form is not a neutral or particularly reliable vehicle for transmitting ideas. To borrow a term from art historian Amy Knight Powell, it is "promiscuous." As she writes:

form has a way of detaching works of art from the people who worked them and from the time and place in which they were made, not by transcending history ... but rather by transgressing history, at least, our linear conception of it.¹²

Quoting David Summers, Knight Powell describes the museum as “a machine for formalist looking,” in which artworks are continually brought into cross-temporal relation, taking on pseudomorphic resemblances and entering into new liaisons.¹³ The highly staged environment of the museum reveals that form is open to recontextualisation and has its own elastic temporal existence. It is, as Knight Powell recognised, perpetually unable to remain faithful to its original moment. In the case of conceptual art, the artwork’s physical form and sensory experience is much more than “a device in the service of the idea,” as Kosuth posited. Similarly, when an artist with a research-based practice restages a historical form, they are not simply drawing attention to a particular historical moment or event. Kosuth notwithstanding, artists who work with found material are fully cognisant that restaging also allows existing but unrealised affordances of the object—capacities that may not have been perceived by its initial makers or users—to come to the fore.¹⁴ Material culture is the framework that provides lived experience with its real contours and specific physical expression. It is a crucial part of our epistemological infrastructure, shaping what is possible to think or know in a given historical episteme.¹⁵ However, the multiple affordances of objects also contain the potential to suggest or imply other possibilities: a given form, in a sense, could operate like a script or score containing numerous possibilities for its restaging.

MICHAEL STEVENSON’S *THE FOUNTAIN OF PROSPERITY* (2006) AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

FIG. 2



Detail of exhibition Michael Stevenson at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2011. Photograph: Jenni Carter

Reviewers commenting on Michael Stevenson’s 2011 survey show at Sydney’s MCA invariably mentioned the liberties the artist had taken with the museum’s architecture. Stevenson’s was the final exhibition held in the museum’s level one gallery spaces before their planned renovation, and he took advantage of this fact by beginning the demolition ahead of schedule. Existing circulation patterns through the galleries were disrupted as the artist blocked off doorways, removed walls to expose massive air conditioning and wiring systems, and integrated formerly back-of-house accessways and the museum’s goods lift (which also remained in use by staff throughout the exhibition) into a labyrinthine pathway for viewers to negotiate. As Sue Gardiner observed, these navigational challenges rendered the show’s intellectual challenge in three dimensions, as Stevenson invited viewers to actively make sense of his body of work:

Imagine being thrown off guard when approaching one of the interior doorways because it was literally cordoned off—layers of plastic covered the doorway and hand written signs proclaimed ‘No Entry.’ Confused, you peered through the thick plastic and could dimly see something on the other side—but how to get there? It wasn’t straight forward and here the experience of navigating the spaces became a metaphor for navigating through the geography of Stevenson’s work ... An unexpected opening in the wall nearby took you down a narrow service alley, past the obscured gallery you were trying to access and into the space behind it. Here you encountered a model of the MONIAC machine ... [which was] presented by Stevenson as a sculptural object.¹⁶

The category confusion at play in Gardiner’s description of *The Fountain of Prosperity*—which she understood as a model presented as a sculptural object rather than simply a sculpture in its own right—is telling. The work was made by Stevenson as a functional replica of an unusual object: a hydraulic analogue computer known as the “MONIAC” (Monetary National Income Automatic Computer). Originally designed and built by New Zealand economist A.W. (Bill) Phillips in 1949, the machine uses the circulation of water through a series of pumps, tanks and sluices to create a dynamic, three-dimensional representation of money circulating through a national economy. Like all of the curious, totemic objects that appear in Stevenson’s work of this period—a New Zealand-made off-road vehicle called the *Trekka* (*This is the Trekka*, 2003); the raft on which artist Ian Fairweather sailed to Indonesia (*The Gift*, 2004-06); an installation of gold-leafed bricks by artist Zadik Zadikian that was lost during the Iranian revolution (*The Smiles are Not Smiles*, 2005); a tent from the Shah of Iran’s ill-fated party at Persepolis in 1971 (*Persepolis 2530*, 2007)—*Fountain* operates as an unexpected synecdoche of a historical narrative.

FIG. 3



Detail of exhibition Michael Stevenson at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2011. Photograph: Jenni Carter

Stevenson's interest in geopolitical and economic histories was apparent to commentators on his work from the mid-1990s and remained central to interpretations of his practice through the 2000s.¹⁷ His projects from this period do, undoubtedly, demonstrate his ongoing interest in the operations of hegemonic political and economic forces and their unpredictable effects. However, the priority placed on the works' historical referents risks rendering the sculptures as little more than vehicles for transmitting historical content. As reviewer Constance Wyndham wrote in response to a 2007 exhibition of *The Fountain of Prosperity*: "Stevenson's conceptual show is less about the machine itself than about its story."¹⁸ When an artwork is understood as something that has been found rather than made, the authorship of its formal and aesthetic aspects is effectively displaced onto the circumstances of its historical origin. The artist is no longer considered responsible for what the sculpture looks like. Instead, it is perceived as a direct referent to (and stand-in for) its historical moment of origin, like a museum artefact, or as Gardiner understood *Fountain*, a model of one. For his MCA survey exhibition, however, Stevenson went to some lengths to set up an encounter with his sculpture that was not mediated by historical narrative. As he explained to an interviewer from the *Daily Telegraph*, "my idea was to unleash the sculptural properties latent in this machine."¹⁹

At the MCA *The Fountain of Prosperity* was installed, with considerable theatricality, in the centre of an otherwise empty, darkened room. At over two metres in height the work has a looming, figural presence. Its front surface is a visceral mass of interconnected acrylic tanks and hoses, which also visually echoed the exposed innards of the MCA's air conditioning ducts and wiring systems. The sculpture, however, was presented in a state of disrepair. Rusty and decrepit, its acrylic tanks stained, it gave the impression of having been abandoned or left to run down. The only light in the room was emitted by the work itself: two fluorescent tubes mounted directly above the machine bathed its upper sections in a harsh, cold light, while the bottom two-thirds were obscured in gloom. By peering at the small, printed labels on various of the machine's components—"INCOME AFTER TAXATION," "SURPLUS BALANCES," "DOMESTIC EXPENDITURE"—viewers could deduce that the work had some relationship to the field of economics, but further illumination was not provided. Glowing weirdly in the darkness of the gallery like some arcane vending machine, *Fountain's* elaborate complexity and sheer strangeness confounded rather than invited comprehension.

FIG. 4



Michael Stevenson, *The Fountain of Prosperity (Answers to Some Questions About Bananas)*, 2006. Plexiglass, steel, brass, aluminium, rubber, cork, string, concrete, dyed water, pumps and fluorescent lamps, 245 × 157 × 111 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Gonzalo Parodi, 686.2017. Installation at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2011. Photograph: Jenni Carter

More than an analogy for navigating Stevenson's body of work, his architectural interventions at the MCA also created highly specific viewing conditions. By confusing what was "on display" with what was "behind the

scenes”, Stevenson put viewers on the back foot, encouraging an active mode of exploration. He has described how he aims to elicit a feeling of epistemological dislocation: “a visitor walks into a space, and sees something, and goes: ‘what the fuck is that?’ And that’s enough for me.”²⁰ At the MCA, viewers could not stroll through a display of sculptures presented in a series of smoothly navigable and evenly-lit galleries, pausing to read informative wall labels. Rather, the exhibition resembled an orienteering challenge in which the only interpretive assistance was provided by brief, cryptic wall labels written by the artist himself. Opening new pathways through and between the existing gallery spaces, Stevenson thus orchestrated a sense of discovery and disorientation in the approach to the work, an exploratory movement “behind the scenes,” which culminated in the obscurity of the sculpture itself.

Facing *The Fountain of Prosperity*, viewers were presented with a mechanical apparatus of unclear purpose. The machine clearly, however, was purposeful. Its obvious functionality pointed to a discourse or body of knowledge within which it could be presumed to make sense, but which was not described or conveyed to viewers. *Fountain’s* bodily proportions also served to anthropomorphise its apparent capacity for autonomous activity: Stevenson described it as “preoccupied.”²¹ Arcane and impassive, it did not register as an artwork oriented towards a viewer so much as the entrance of a foreign body of knowledge into the art gallery space. The machine was an interruption in the viewer’s capacity to understand—a question mark, or a black box.

ANSWERS TO SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT BANANAS

The machine model for *The Fountain of Prosperity*, unlike the sculpture, was oriented towards clarity and pedagogical display. Economist Bill Phillips designed and built his prototype machine while studying at the London School of Economics, in an effort to understand the “flow” diagrams commonly used to illustrate Keynesian economic theory. Using hydraulic technology to fabricate the diagrams as a dynamic three-dimensional model, Phillips used the water flow to illustrate money circulation through a national economy. With nine adjustable sluices that regulate the relationship between factors such as the interest rate and investment, the computer can display the consequences of particular economic events.²² While it briefly represented cutting-edge computing technology, Phillips regarded his machine primarily as a pedagogical model as its physicality made it useful for conducting classroom demonstrations. Augmenting the machine’s already macabre appearance, he used to dye the water red to make its calculations more visible to his students. University of Melbourne econometrician Ross Williams, who studied under Phillips at the London School of Economics, recalls that a deft touch was required to keep the machine’s tanks from overflowing. Recklessness would result in inadvertently modelling an economic catastrophe:

If you let the thing rip, if you stimulated the economy too much, then the water would overflow everywhere. The trick was ... to try and control it. In other words, if inflation was getting out of control, then somehow you had to operate on interest rates, or government fiscal policy ... you had to alter the relationships elsewhere in order to dampen down the economy.²³

While the MONIAC enjoyed a period of popularity in the 1950s, with most of the approximately fifteen machines constructed sold to universities as teaching tools, it quickly fell into obscurity after its analogue system was surpassed by developments in electronic computing.²⁴

As Stevenson discovered, however, one machine was not purchased by a university but by the Central Bank of Guatemala during a significant period in the country's political history. Purchased in 1952, the machine became an unlikely witness to the decade known as the "ten years of spring." From 1944 to 1954, Guatemala experienced one of its few periods of representative government in the twentieth century. A popular uprising in 1944 against authoritarian dictator Jorge Ubico precipitated a period of democratic elections, with Juan José Arévalo elected in 1945, and Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in 1951. The socialist Arévalo and Arbenz administrations invested in the infrastructure necessary for Guatemala's domestic economic growth. The Central Bank, for example, was established in the first year of Arévalo's government in 1945, and the MONIAC was purchased by its founding president, Dr Manuel Noriega Morales.

A new building was planned for the financial institution under Arbenz's government. At its inauguration in 1966, the seventeen-story Bank of Guatemala was the tallest building in the republic. This mighty structure was designed by members of the generation who came of age during the 1944 revolution, and it expressed the revolutionaries' nationalist and modernist aspirations.²⁵ The Bank stands in Guatemala City's Centro Cívico, a municipal centre planned by the Arbenz administration and built between the 1950s and 1970s. As historian Michael D. Kirkpatrick has argued, Centro Cívico's modernist architecture and plazas, concrete promenades and water features were intended to signal Guatemala's participation in international trends in architectural design and urban planning. The Bank's architects Jorge Montes and Raúl Minondo worked with artists Dagoberto Vásquez and Roberto González Goyri to produce a brutalist architectural design which was also an example of cultural *indigenismo*. Vásquez and Goyri's monumental sculptural reliefs on the Bank's eastern and western facades incorporated Mayan design elements into a modernist sculptural idiom. Emerging out of a series of reflecting pools, the Bank's local take on international modernism was staged "as a monument to national progress and as evidence that the country was a part of the modern world."²⁶

In addition to constructing the institutions of a modern nation-state, the Arbenz government also devoted particular attention to reforming Guatemala's archaic labour and agrarian systems. At that time, the legislation pertaining to labour and land ownership primarily benefited a small landowning elite and a few foreign corporations that utterly dominated the Guatemalan economy. The Boston-based United Fruit Company was easily the most substantial of these enterprises. For some decades, the largest landowner and employer in Guatemala, known locally as *el pulpo* (the octopus), it had been running an immensely profitable banana export business in Central America since 1885. United Fruit ran a vertically integrated business: in addition to large tracts of arable land, the company owned much of Guatemala's import and export infrastructure. For example, United Fruit owned Guatemala's telephone and telegraph facilities, administered Puerto Barrios, the country's only Atlantic port, and owned most of Guatemala's railways through its subsidiary, the International Railways of Central America.²⁷ Arbenz's reforms directly challenged this profitable stranglehold. United Fruit's directors, their lobbyists and policymakers in Cold War Washington interpreted the Guatemalan government's attempt to regain economic control of their country as a communist uprising. In June 1954 a CIA-orchestrated *coup d'état* deposed President Arbenz in favour of a military dictator, triggering a civil war that would continue for the next thirty-six years. At some point during this time

of upheaval, the Central Bank's new MONIAC—which had been damaged on arrival and may never have been used—was lost.²⁸

Stevenson's 2007 exhibition *Answers to Some Questions About Bananas* at London's Vilma Gold included archival material that relayed aspects of this narrative. The exhibition featured *The Fountain of Prosperity* alongside a 1952 article from *Fortune* magazine describing Phillips's invention of the MONIAC; an artist's book titled *C/o the Central Bank of Guatemala* in which Stevenson narrated his efforts to track down the lost Guatemalan MONIAC and published texts by the Central Bank's chief librarian Elvidio Aldana and curator Rosina Cazali; a Warholian stack of empty banana boxes and *The Living Circle*, a 1956 promotional film produced by United Fruit.²⁹ In this short film, made to promote "the living circle of trade" between North and Central America on US television, the narrator authoritatively intoned: "The good earth of the tropics and the eager markets of the north are an unbeatable combination."³⁰ An animated diagram showed agricultural products circulating into the United States while paper currency flowed southward into Central America. The circulations of the economic alliance visualised by the film echoed the circulatory interdependence of the economic relationships displayed in the MONIAC. Stevenson's sardonic title for his sculpture—*The Fountain of Prosperity*—also acquired renewed meaning in the context of the film's promotional doublespeak. While the Central Bank may have optimistically viewed the MONIAC as a tool to tap such a fountain, Guatemala ultimately served as a wellspring of wealth for parasitic North American corporations like United Fruit.

None of this informative supplementary material was provided to viewers at the MCA who, far from being provided with "answers to some questions about bananas," were unaware that the question even involved bananas to begin with. However, what remained of this story in Stevenson's MCA installation was the idea of an interruption in certainty, or the epistemological disorientation that occurs when a foreign body of knowledge enters an existing system or an object becomes something other than what it was. The MONIAC was a British economic model that was imported into Central America, and it represented the progressive aspirations of Guatemala's revolutionary regime. Stevenson imagined the machine's arrival in the country via United Fruit-owned infrastructure:

While the Moniac bore the hopes of economic independence, its hypothetical path to arrive at its destination suggests what it was up against. If it came to Guatemala by sea, it would have been paid cargo on the United Fruit shipping line, the Great White Fleet. It would then have been off-loaded at their facility at Puerto Barrios, the only port on the Atlantic, where it would have incurred further fees. It would then have been hauled—for a price—along the United Fruit railroad network to Guatemala City. Haemorrhaging from these costs, the "fountain of prosperity" would have arrived at the Central Bank damaged (also perhaps courtesy of United Fruit), drained of funds, already in debt, and soon to be in physical danger.³¹

In Stevenson's account, the MONIAC was a literal, physical interruption. It entered the circulatory systems of United Fruit's infrastructure like a foreign agent crossing enemy lines, dramatising the conflict between Guatemala's revolutionary government and United Fruit's entrenched power. The clash of these two economic realities was central to Stevenson's interest in the story. During the upheaval of a regime change, normal modes of operation are suspended, and the status quo is interrupted. While buildings, roads, objects and infrastructure remain physically the same, they take on new meanings. In Stevenson's mind, at least, Phillips's teaching tool became an agent of change in Guatemala, while the country's ports and railways became obstacles for its government to overcome.

At the MCA, *The Fountain of Prosperity* was stripped of its historical specificity, but the encounter with the work that Stevenson so elaborately staged created a similar kind of epistemological dislocation for viewers. The work was cryptic and difficult to categorise, it was in some ways presented as a sculpture but was also self-evidently an economic tool or device of mysterious purpose. It interrupted the normal operation of the gallery space in a way that echoed Stevenson's imagined story of the machine's arrival in Guatemala.

AGAINST THE ARTIST AS HISTORIAN

The conflict between the Guatemalan government's aspiration to manage and regulate their national economy and United Fruit's transnational corporate power was central to Stevenson's thinking when he made *The Fountain of Prosperity*, but this focus does not represent a scrupulously balanced account of the history. In fact, historians are divided over the extent to which the United States government acted in defence of United Fruit's corporate interests when the CIA backed the 1954 *coup d'état* in Guatemala, but Stevenson's project does not include a literature review acknowledging the range of perspectives that exist on the topic.³² This should not come as a surprise: Stevenson is not a historian; he is an artist, and his use of this historical material was motivated less by the professional expectations of historical scholarship than by concerns central to professional art practice. He selected a history and an object that had the potential to be sculpted into a particular form.

Art historian Mark Godfrey coined the phrase "the artist as historian" in a 2007 article which foregrounded the political and pedagogical value of the work of artist Matthew Buckingham.³³ As Godfrey explained, Buckingham uses historical research in his practice to produce "a politicized reinterpretation of the present." He observed that Buckingham's strategy of fragmenting historical narratives across disjunctive images and texts encourages viewers to take a more active interpretive role when navigating his works and the histories they relate. In this way, Godfrey contends, Buckingham foregrounds the construction of historical knowledge and nudges viewers towards critical historiographic awareness.

It now seems compulsory—ironically enough—for research-based artists to foreground a revisionist or counterhegemonic stance, performing what Andrew Weiner calls "archival activism."³⁴ Dieter Roelstraete used an archaeological metaphor to claim that the "critical impetus" of research-based art is its ability to unearth and redeem the historically overlooked or marginalised.³⁵ In a 2015 polemic, Claire Bishop excoriated artist Danh Vo for his alleged "(pseudo)historicity."³⁶ What Vo's work was lacking, in her opinion, was the mobilisation of history as a "subversive or transgressive force" capable of intervening in present-day political discourse.³⁷ In a recent article, Bishop doubled down, inveighing against research-based art that merely aggregates rather than synthesising information. In a passage that

perfectly encapsulates the frustration of a tertiary educator in the age of Google, she wrote:

Searching is the preliminary stage of looking for something via a search engine, “Googling.” Research proper involves analysis, evaluation, and a new way of approaching a problem. Search involves the adaptation of one’s ideas to the language of “search terms”—preexisting concepts most likely to throw up results—whereas research (both online and offline) involves asking fresh questions and elaborating new terminologies yet to be recognized by the algorithm.³⁸

Bishop is clearly seeking an informed argument both in her students’ research papers and in the works of the artists she engages. Godfrey, similarly, foregrounds the aspects of Buckingham’s work that are consistent with the pedagogical goals of an academic historian, who aims to produce a historiographically informed subject capable of deploying critical historical methodologies. The idea of the “artist as historian” has perhaps licensed historians and academics to assess the work of artists according to their own professional priorities: as the work of a historian primarily, and an artist only secondarily.

FIG. 5



Michael Stevenson, *The Fountain of Prosperity (Answers to Some Questions About Bananas)*, 2006. Plexiglass, steel, brass, aluminium, rubber, cork, string, concrete, dyed water, pumps and fluorescent lamps, 245 × 157 × 111 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Gonzalo Parodi, 686.2017. Installation at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2011. Photograph: Jenni Carter

This is not to say that much research-based work isn’t motivated by political urgency; it is. In Australia, this mode of practice has a strong association with First Nations critiques of colonial institutions. Artists like Fiona Foley and Brook Andrew, building on the legacy of Gordon Bennett, use archival and historical material to draw attention to histories of colonial violence, highlighting or symbolically reversing acts of erasure, dispossession and disenfranchisement. Similarly, white Australian artists like Tom Nicholson

and Nicholas Mangan address histories of colonial and ecological devastation. Artists do, of course, seek to cast light on historical injustices, revise dominant narratives to accommodate previously marginalised perspectives, and demonstrate how apparently authoritative histories are in fact riven by subjectivity, failures of memory and the obfuscations of the media in which they are inscribed. The politics of representation is thus rightly understood to be an important concern of much research-based practice. What is less frequently recognised is that restaging historical material is not simple repetition: it involves a formal process of abstraction, which often results in artworks that have a cryptic, untimely physical presence. While they might be motivated by political outrage and share activist goals, such artworks do not operate in the modality of activism.³⁹ Fiona Foley's practice, for example, is fiercely political, and she has described her motivation as pedagogical:

many white Australians really don't want to own their own history. For me, what I like to do is work with this material and put it out in the public arena and say, 'Look at this. How are you engaging with this aspect of our history?' ... I see my role really as an educator.⁴⁰

However, this claim is somewhat contradicted by the works themselves. As with Stevenson's *Fountain*, there is a looseness in the relation between form and content in Foley's works which indicates that there is more to them than the historical-political narratives they refer to. It isn't evident, simply by looking at the stylised vulvic form of Foley's *Black Velvet II* (2002), that the work is about racist histories of sexual violence in Australia. Viewers must rely on supplementary information like didactic wall texts for the historic and political specificity that Bishop and Roelstraete would regard as the measure of the work's value. Clearly, however, *Black Velvet II* also deploys affective, formal and aesthetic strategies to articulate a complex set of sensory and psychological associations. The floor-based field of chillies and coal that comprises the work conveys an intense, almost shamanic charge and triggers a complicated bodily response. This material and affective complexity is at odds with the imperative for directness and clarity in both activism and pedagogy.

When the forms of research-based artworks are understood to be simply and directly derived from (and explained through reference to) their historical content, the works are too easily understood as prompts for a history lesson, rather than artworks with significant formal and aesthetic properties. This is a risk even when the relationship between the form of the artwork and its historical content is tightly linked, as in Nicholas Mangan's digital video and installation *Progress in Action* (2013). As Helen Hughes has astutely observed, the circular relationship between form and content constructed in *Progress in Action* forms an "apparatus [that] is ecological in its scope."⁴¹ The work derives from Mangan's research into a conflict between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and mining corporation Rio Tinto. Cut off from mainland supplies during their long-term protest over the expropriation of Indigenous land for a copper mine, the BRA resourcefully developed a coconut oil-based biofuel to run their diesel vehicles. Mangan restaged this action, producing his own coconut biofuel to power a diesel generator which in turn powered the projector playing the archival footage in his video work.

The form of *Progress in Action* was thus explicitly linked to its historical content, and the biofuel generator, in turn, condensed this history into a tangible form. Powering the projector, it served to (literally) bring into focus the ways in which power in the Bougainville struggle was derived from natural resources and material transformations. The risk of this neat circular relation between form and content is, again, its suggestion that the work's form is a simple quotation of archival material uncovered by the artist, and the associated assumption that the work's historical source material can therefore be regarded as a satisfactory explanation of the form it takes.⁴² Hughes is correct that a structure in which material transformations are linked to economic and political formations is recurrent in Mangan's work, and that this form echoes that of the extractive and mining industries that are the principal target of his political critique. My suggestion—for Mangan's work as for Stevenson's, as I elaborate below—is that a reversal of priority is also worth exploring. Rather than seeing the recurrent formal structure of Mangan's works as something derived from the example of the mining industry, to what extent does his interest in the mining industry stem from its resemblance to the form his practice continually explores? To what extent might an interest in the properties or capacities of particular formal structures actually be motivating the historical research performed by these artists?

As Aileen Burns, Johan Lundh and Tara McDowell have acknowledged, contemporary artists increasingly operate as professional polymaths: deploying methods and practices from other fields, they perform a kind of “occupational drag.”⁴³ In addition to the figure of the “artist as historian,” Burns *et al.* identify numerous fields in which artists have established alliances—both short and long-term—in order to more effectively realise their goals. In this, however, they implicitly acknowledge that artistic methods, practices and motivations are not subsumed into or necessarily identical with the priorities of these other disciplines. Rather than regarding an artwork's form as a derivation of its source material, something that has been *found* not *made*, we should recognise that artists with research-based practices in fact perform a series of formal and aesthetic operations on their historical material. Artists with research-based practices use the readymade's methodology of decontextualisation to leverage the crackle between the different affordances of an object, manipulating form's temporal elasticity to aesthetic ends. In this, they retroactively draw out a sculptural sensibility from twentieth-century art's most apparently anti-art gesture. When such works are understood as didactic, or as neutral vehicles for historical and political content, the extent to which artists sculpt their historical material is obscured.

TWO TYPES OF FOUNTAINS

When Bill Phillips made the MONIAC, his pedagogical goals led him to emphasise the aesthetic display of the model to such an extent that he effectively also made a sculpture, and of course it was the machine's curious appearance that attracted Stevenson's attention in the first place. *The Fountain of Prosperity* realises this latent affordance of the machine by simply re-contextualising it: on a plinth, in an art gallery. Presented using the display conventions of modernist sculpture, viewers are invited to read the work as a figure in space.

The concrete block base on which Stevenson's *Fountain* stands—notably, not a feature of the original MONIAC's design—serves both a practical and an aesthetic function. It hides a drip tray intended to limit the machine's potential to cause a flood. The concrete block base also resembles urban kerbstones, evoking the aesthetic style of civic centres such as Guatemala City's modernist Centro Cívico, and the many other urban plazas

internationally in which public sculptures might be installed. Interestingly, the use of concrete blocks as a base for mid-century modernist sculpture extended beyond the setting of the civic square and into the gallery. A trend of exhibition design in the 1950s saw sculptures installed in galleries on plinths made from stacked concrete blocks.⁴⁴ *The Fountain of Prosperity* adopts this trend to re-contextualise Phillips's machine, quite literally situating it as a piece of modernist sculpture.

Like the modernist architecture, concrete-rimmed reflecting pools and commissioned sculptural reliefs of the Central Bank, the Guatemalan MONIAC was an accessory and symbol of the country's modern nationalism and its aspirations to achieve economic self-determination. In this sense, Stevenson's reconceptualisation of the MONIAC as a modernist sculptural water feature realises the extent to which Phillips's machine was already part of the revolutionary scheme that also produced the Centro Cívico. Riffing off 1950s modernism's stylised figurative forms, Stevenson's *Fountain* shows that the MONIAC always contained the potential to be a cyborg abstraction. Its hydraulic innards represent the body as a sophisticated autonomous machine whose operations are governed by its complex interior functions and the immutable laws of fluid dynamics. Reincarnated as *The Fountain of Prosperity*, it is a historical example of computing technology that was once thought capable of assisting Guatemala's economic growth and a modernist sculptural fountain representing the nation-state as a body.

However, as Stevenson's Duchampian title flags, to the extent that the MONIAC can be regarded as inadvertent modernist sculpture, this latent affordance has been revealed using a methodology borrowed from another readymade, *Fountain* (1917). Duchamp insisted that the selection of his readymades did not rely on aesthetic judgement. His choices, he explained, were "never dictated by esthetic delectation ... [but] a reaction of visual indifference."⁴⁵ The point was not to lodge a claim for the aesthetic significance of everyday things, but to deploy the institutional framework of art as a mechanism for exploring an object's affordances. The act of recontextualisation was intended to change the function and meaning of the object—to create "a new thought for that object"⁴⁶—and of course also had the effect of drawing attention to the art-institutional context which facilitated this change. However, as Alexander Nagel relates, when Duchamp was asked in 1961 what kind of reaction he aimed to elicit from viewers with his readymades, "far from administering a dose of early institutional critique, his answer emphasizes an effect of release, a productive opening of the associative imagination." Duchamp replied:

Well, very simple. The main point is disorientation for the spectator, as it was for myself when I did it. And then surprise comes in as an element. Connotation: meaning according to the observer's imagination—he can go into any field or any form of imagination he wants. And associations of ideas.⁴⁷

The mode of viewing that Duchamp describes is strikingly similar to the effect Stevenson created in his labyrinthine exhibition at the MCA. Both aimed to disorient viewers as a way to achieve a reaction of surprise. While *The Fountain of Prosperity* was made by Stevenson and is therefore a found form rather than a found object, its recontextualisation as sculpture produces a sensation of defamiliarisation akin to that of a readymade.⁴⁸ Arturo Schwarz, Duchamp's gallerist in the 1960s and the author of his

catalogue raisonné, has argued that displacement and defamiliarisation are central to the readymades. By physically rotating, renaming or re-situating familiar objects in unfamiliar places, Duchamp dislocated them from their original context. For example, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) is presented upside down and screwed to a kitchen stool, *Fountain* is similarly inverted, *Bottlerack* (1914) was installed hanging from the ceiling, *Trébuchet* (1917) is a coat rack intended for the wall but nailed to the floor. In some cases re-titling also served to dislocate objects from their logical contexts, as in *Pharmacy* (1914) and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915). As Schwarz explains, this idea was literary in origin. With the readymades Duchamp mapped his existing preoccupation with puns onto three-dimensional objects. A pun, as Duchamp explained in 1962, identifies a coincidental resemblance that can draw a word out of its familiar context and form a unexpected new relationship:

If you introduce a familiar word into an alien atmosphere, you have something comparable to distortion in painting, something surprising and new ... [one discovers] unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words ... Sometimes four or five different levels of meaning come through.⁴⁹

The pun in Stevenson's title acknowledges his readymade methodology of selection and displacement, and it also creates "a new thought" for the MONIAC by poetically linking it to civic-minded modernist sculpture of the 1950s. As with the readymade, *The Fountain of Prosperity's* deliberate category confusion between something that has been found and something that has been made underpins its generative defamiliarisation: like Duchamp's *Trébuchet*, it is an object for viewers to "stumble over." Both *Fountains*—Duchamp's and Stevenson's—were dislocated from their original contexts in an act of restaging that allowed these forms to articulate different associations. However, Stevenson's selection was not determined, as Duchamp's was, by "visual indifference" or the familiar banality of the object. Duchamp's readymades were all common everyday things that were contemporaneous with the artist, and his process of selection and dislocation rendered them surreal. In contrast, for Stevenson, the MONIAC's bizarre appearance and historical associations were key to its attraction.

GIVING AESTHETIC FORM TO HISTORY

The archival material that Stevenson included in exhibitions like *Answers to Some Questions About Bananas* sketched a historical narrative about Guatemala's economic exploitation by foreign interests and the implicit involvement of these same foreign interests in ousting the country's democratically elected government. Phillips's hydraulic computer stood as a totem of a regulated national economy and became an unlikely witness to these events. It is easy, given this information, for viewers to understand Stevenson's work primarily as a protest against the horrific history of the United States's interventions in Latin America and the unreasonable power wielded by corporations operating in the global economy. The work undoubtedly condemns such practices of contemporary neo-colonialism. However, as I've argued, focusing exclusively on the work's political content positions the sculpture itself as little more than a prompt for a history lesson or a model of a museum artefact.

Stevenson's interest in the Guatemalan MONIAC was aesthetic, at least as much as it was political and historical. With the MONIAC, he selected a form with transformative potential. The machine could be—and in some sense always had been—other than what it was: not just a hydraulic curiosity in the histories of computing and economics education, it was a modernist sculptural fountain embodying the idea of a nation-state but also standing in for an intellectual climate in which the nation-state *could* be imagined as a body. Similarly, Stevenson selected a history that had the potential to be sculpted into the form that interested him. While historians are divided over the extent of United Fruit's involvement in the 1954 *coup*, Stevenson's abstracted version of the story emphasises the conflict between the company and the Guatemalan government. An economic model bound to the nation-state was juxtaposed with a model characterised by the apparently limitless exercise of transnational corporate power. Through his historical research, Stevenson identified a narrative structure in which one epistemological system or model of reality landed abruptly in another.

As a dynamic, three-dimensional rendition of the Keynesian "flow" diagrams used in economics textbooks, the MONIAC is a physical manifestation of a pre-neoliberal relic, a regulated national economy. The machine takes the form of a discrete body within which a healthy distribution of wealth can be managed by a skillful operator. As a training model for learning how to regulate the flow of money within an economy—and for learning, in particular, how to avoid overflowing the machine and causing a flood—the MONIAC may have held a symbolic appeal to the Bank of Guatemala's inaugural President, Dr Morales, given the extent to which the Guatemalan economy was haemorrhaging wealth to the United States. The Guatemalan MONIAC was an agent of change but also ultimately a symbolic victim of the *coup* and its brutal aftermath. Resurrected as *The Fountain of Prosperity*, the machine stands in disrepair, bearing the marks of its encounter with the violent machinations of transnational corporate capitalism.

Stevenson's stripped-back installation of *Fountain* at the MCA refocused attention on the aspect of the work that I regard as central to his motivation: the experience of dislocation that I have described as an "interruption." A dramatic regime change such as a revolution or a *coup*, it could be said, stages the Duchampian gesture of creating a "new thought" for an existing object on a societal scale. Particularly in his works of the 2000s, Stevenson returned repeatedly to the subject of revolution, and also to histories tracking the emergence of neoliberalism as the economic dispensation of our time. His interest in the story of Guatemala's "ten years of spring" centres, once again, on the clash between two quite different economic realities as one model interrupted another. This incursion of an alternative economic model into an existing system was literalised—rendered in three dimensions—by the MONIAC's arrival in Guatemala. It was also re-staged by Stevenson in the MCA, when he presented his machine as an incomprehensible interruption in the normal operation of the gallery space. By staging an encounter not mediated by historical narrative, Stevenson encouraged viewers to engage with the work as a sculpture, delaying or denying their ability to turn to its historical sources to explain its form. Instead, confronted by the sheer peculiarity of the arcane object looming out of the darkness, viewers were provided with an aesthetic experience of epistemological dislocation.

The Fountain of Prosperity adopts a Duchampian methodology, as did conceptual artists when they sought to loosen the association between art practice and the studio production of unique, skilfully crafted objects. However, contemporary research-based art, like Duchamp's proto-conceptual readymades and conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s, obviously takes a physical form which has particular aesthetic properties. The myth of conceptual art's "dematerialisation" has remained surprisingly resilient. It

continues to impact the way we understand conceptual art and the reception of related contemporary practices that extend beyond the studio and the bounds of a conventional art object. However, even in these cases, artists still bring artistic sensibility and tools to their practice. Research-based practice is typically grounded in historical research but is also (as Hal Foster observed with surprise in 2004) “recalcitrantly material” in an age when even archival research is increasingly conducted using digital technologies.⁵⁰ This insistent materiality, I contend, results from the fact that the promiscuity and temporal elasticity of form—the capacity of an object to be dislocated from its original moment and become a score for its own restaging—is central to this mode of practice. Exploiting the capacity of an object to *become something else* is, at root, analogous to the approach that a sculptor takes to raw material. When we recognise that artists like Stevenson use history as artistic material, we also need to acknowledge (and remember) that their interests are formal and aesthetic, at least as much as they are historiographic or political.

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