

# *Slipped Gears*

**Nick Hornby**

**Joon Oluchi Lee**

**Kristin Lucas**

**Rosa Menkman**

**MSHR (Brenna Murphy and Birch Cooper)**

**Jaakko Pallasvuo**

**Katie Torn**

**Matias Viegner**

Curated by Roddy Schrock

Usdan Gallery, Bennington, Vermont

*Slipped Gears*

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**BENNINGTON COLLEGE**

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## *Slipped Gears* / Roddy Schrock

While airplanes of today have never been able to fly more perfectly directly, from takeoff to touchdown, runways have become damaged due to wheels landing repeatedly at exactly the same spot. Micro-precision is thought to lead to a better tomorrow. Countless activities are monitored at hyper-granular levels in order to squeeze out the most potent data, which is in turn used to make machines less brutalist and more balletic and predictive. We have apps that measure every step and heartbeat; stock market trades are recorded in milliseconds. But, at the end of the day, the euphemistically labeled cloud, storing so much of this information, is formed from acres of gigantic metal, glass, and plastic warehouses, absorbing megatons of environmentally unsound energy to keep machines cool. The intensity of the race for immediate precision in all things is leaving scratches and scars IRL. The seemingly seamless perfection of data-driven everything sometimes has unseen liabilities – the worn-down spots on runways are the scars being created in our collective digital psyche.

~~Slipped Gears~~ pokes around this current transitional period in which technology begins to commonly reside in and around us, as systems and frameworks of machinic perfection are overlaid onto the messy and dense tangles of people, feelings and objects that make up life. The notion of leaving bodies behind, transferring consciousness to a cybernetically-enhanced “matrix” as naively imagined a decade ago, never came true. Rather, the inverse has occurred, we can nearly feel the internet in our bones.

The artists in this exhibition are creating challenging responses to this moment of tectonic cultural transition. A transition in which we have given tacit acceptance to constant data-analysis, by one's peers and by corporate interests, of nearly all physical activities; we have accepted a surveillance state at a scale once thought impossible; we assume massive debt while giving up on minimal home-ownership; we have gained the pleasures of instantaneous access with the price of a constant forgetfulness. Collectively, these artists are searching not only for the aesthetic but also the poetic truth in thorny social and political questions of this time.

There is a preponderance of the usage of the word "disruption" as a potential means to recalibrate systems through technologically-enhanced radical efficiency, both in the marketplace and in governance. This notion carries with it an ahistoricism and unawareness of very real, large, and entrenched power structures – it seems to have the political and ideological dimensions sucked out of it. Late 20th century notions of "intervention" and its historical belief in high-level structural understanding are being replaced by ground-up micro-actions, working under the guise of disruption, that are assumed to collectively result in change. This move to a disruptive practice, as opposed to large-scale intervention, is still underway and in the end may be a more effective means for quantifiable change, but the tally of what is being lost in this approach has not been tabulated. A net gain in efficient action doesn't equate to an increase in happiness.

Much of Matias Viegner's recent work sees drones as poetic vehicles for thinking about shared senses of identity. Diminishing expectations of personal information ownership collide with pervasive mythology about individual agency, leaving a cultural malaise in its wake. When one views the reflective obsidian disc in Viegner's Black Mirror, one's own face is shown back, with peripheral video of a drone engaged in an improvised interaction with humans. This sets up a visual equation that might conjure mythologies about ancient Aztecs whose rulers held mirrors to their subjects, enforcing control by redirecting the gaze in a recursive manner.

Drones in particular, among the many emerging quasi-robotic forms, may be enacting most acutely the choreography of the power relationships found in the online world, replicating the shaky gaze and intersecting lines of sight, surveillance and perspective. The internet's DNA, it seems, is replicating itself from the inside out into physicalized manifestations with some of its worst biases, like a tendency to self-surveil, playing out in mechanical form.

The work of Nick Hornby reminds us that with all of the peculiarity of this current moment, it is in fact nothing more than the product of multiple aggregated pasts – the present is a singular rendering of former imaginations of the future. Hornby's sculptural practice combines the most contemporary technologies with clear references to notions of beauty from previous centuries, effectively collapsing the before and the after. It challenges notions of temporal hierarchy and calls into question ideas of authorship and labor, acknowledging even the code implemented in the work's production as the product of multivalent creativity on the part of countless and unnamed engineers.

In this state of tectonic and electric shift, one form of shelter may be to adopt a naive perspective, to imagine that one is somewhere else: some place more readily understandable, like Finland or the year 1994. Neither requires us to be as constantly surprised at how unstable everything feels here, in the present. Joon Oluchi Lee's *A Time Before Hashtags* puts into sharp relief the differences in how one finds love post-internet. It speaks of a time, maybe the mid-90's, when people had to craft identity, and thereby relationships, through endless page-by-page fashion magazine perusal and hours of thrift-shop haunting. Now the process is internalized and digitally dispersed, people can become their own hashtag, in a sense, through strategic online personal brand cultivation. Thereby, likely physical connection and dismissive disinterest are both communicated nearly telepathically by the app-of-the-hour, apps like Twitter, Grindr, or Tinder.

Jaakko Pallasvuo, a Helsinki-based artist, traverses the contours of our online world, teasing out the absurd and the ridiculous, exposing a glaring lack of cohesion. In *Commencement Speech*, 2014, printed with tongue firmly in cheek by [cafePress.com](http://cafePress.com) on shower curtains, the bluntness of opinion about skyrocketing educational costs in the text is offset by the slipperiness of the work's materiality. The online chat transcript seems to blurb out from behind the narcotic glow of a laptop streaming 90's sitcoms. The piece surfs the chaos and implies a kind of art-trolling, refusing to be rendered down to an actual statement on anything.

New paths currently being charted by young artists are born out of pragmatic assessments of the world with a wide-eyed realism, possessing naiveté but paradoxically fused with an unflinching utilitarianism. Adventurous notions of beauty continue to push through the cracks wedged by the cultural saturation of an always-on online lifestyle. Katie Torn's *Figure on the Beach* reminds us of the aesthetic refuge provided by the artificial in a world polluted by mistakes of previous generations. Much like Pallasvuo's, her work wants to instigate discourse while simultaneously questioning the legitimacy or even possibility of meaningful conversation itself.

In Solar Helix by MSHR, a duo comprised of Brenna Murphy and Birch Cooper, a circuit is created which requires flesh-to-flesh connections to function. It is a reminder of the poeticism of bodily connections and the infinite depth of feeling that exists in the pit of the stomach, all of which cannot be replicated through code (yet). This return to the physical, to the local, delivers a social value that increases as machine-mediated relations dominate so many other parts of life.

The confusing cross-infections between personal intentions and desires with the always-on, chaotic, data-driven life creates a sticky ball of wax within which connection to ones feelings is muddled. The resultant norms in social behavior and interaction are warped in bizarre ways as one is tugged incessantly in multiple directions simultaneously. Incompleteness arises on multiple fronts and is christened "multi-tasking." Kristin Lucas sensitively explores something of this state of "constant indecision" in her work Air on the Go.

Heavy Caution, a sound piece I have inserted into this show, is one that speaks of boredom: boredom with ever-increasing precision, with data collection big and little, with hyper-capitalism's endless user-testing. I sometimes imagine airline pilots being bored, as they fly the most sophisticated technology ever conceived by humans across expansive oceans and through the most uninhabitable conditions, nearly a mile above the earth, engines functioning perfectly day after day. And yet, as the glowing "heads up" monitor display ticks off every micro-detail of change in the plane's operating system, bouncing digital hand-shakes through interstellar satellite systems back to Boeing's headquarters in Seattle, the pilot yawns and maybe even nods off for a few minutes. Essentially we are witnessing the laying to rest of one of humanity's most instinctual excitements, that of rocketing through the clouds, through systems of predictive mechanics and on-board algorithmic environmental taming.

What new definitions of machinic pleasure are being created and how many are being forgotten? How many terabytes of data are contained in a single smile? The imposition of algorithmic corrections distorts what were once uniquely human domains; an internet-of-everything mentality acts as a kind of anti-endorphine. Experiences are tempered to a point where individual eccentricity is smoothed to a statistical anomaly. These worries are not new but the visceral feeling of loss, that certain ways of being can no longer exist, is palpable. Knowing that things may be effectively better doesn't mitigate a certain nostalgia. I doubt there is a geo-locative device sophisticated enough to tell us what the collective offset is for our hearts.



**Artists** works



**Sometimes I feel like a fire hydrant looking at a pack of dogs** (Bill Clinton), Nick Hornby, 2014 , *photo by Nick Ballon*

**Nick Hornby** is a British artist based in London whose sculptures emerge from the convergence of a postmodern historical perspective and cutting-edge digital technology. Using computer software, Hornby combines silhouettes sourced from art history to create three-dimensional works that, as the viewer moves around them, seem to take the shape of different well-known sculptures of the past.

This work starts with a marble resin portrait bust by Hornby, previously exhibited at Eyebeam in 2010. Hornby then generated a group of 36 sculptures by carving that same bust from a cube of packing polystyrene enlarged to the volumetric maximum covered by the shipping budget of the exhibition. All the individual pieces are carved from a single solid, like a traditional stone carving, but now cut using a digitally controlled hotwire. Still in its original block-shape, the polystyrene is FedExed. The bust along with all its jigsaw of packing, all intact, are displayed with equal intentionality and authorship. After being exhibited, this work will be shredded and used as packing material for other works in the show.

**Joon Oluchi Lee** is the author of *Lace Sick Bag* (Publication Studio, Portland, 2013). His writing and textual performances can be found on [girlscallmurder.com](http://girlscallmurder.com) and [lipstickeater.blogspot.com](http://lipstickeater.blogspot.com). He is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Creative Writing at Rhode Island School of Design, and divides his time between Brooklyn and Providence.

A Time Before Hashtags is a prose still life of the part of yourself that assesses, decides, and crafts you as a body open to becoming the beloved of another. It is an attempt to find continuity between the historically specific arenas of romance-foraging: the brave-insecure swaggering bar culture of the 1990s and the insecure-reckless swaggering world of digital dating of today.

#beforehashtags

**White Petals**, Joon Oluchi Lee, 2013





*Dollar Store Quality Piece of Scrap*, Kristin Lucas, 2013

**Kristin Lucas** is an interdisciplinary artist who lives and works between Austin and New York. Her work investigates the uncanny overlaps of virtual and lived realities, and the physical and psychological effects of technologies on perception, behavior, and identity and has been presented internationally at museums and galleries. She has taught in several art programs including Bard College and The University of Texas.

Dollar Store Quality Piece of Scrap is a monologue about a fictional object written out of aggregate data sourced from online customer product reviews. Originally published as a pocket-size concept book and later adapted into a spoken word performance that gets mediated through an app. The app is programmed like a teleprompter, to quickly animate text across the screen, while its background color fluctuates like an unpredictable mood, mirroring the ever-shifting positions of desire, generosity, disappointment, rejection and buyer's remorse found within the monologue. The pace of the app is unrelenting so speaking in sync with the animation requires intense concentration by the performer, juxtaposing the earnest and often heartfelt reviews, and filtering them with the banality of a list.

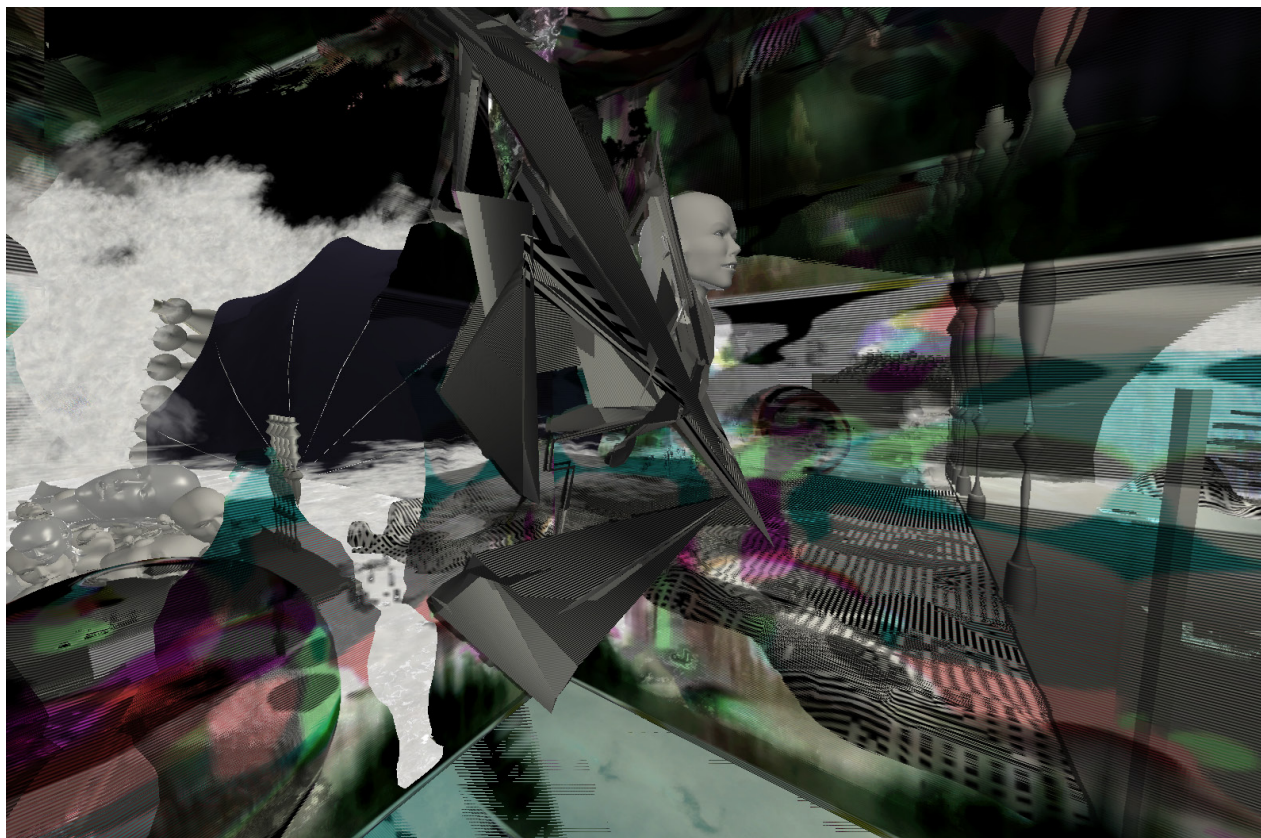
This work informs the approach taken in her piece Air On The Go, exhibited as part of Slipped Gears.

**Rosa Menkman** is a Dutch artist and theorist who likes to focus on visual artifacts created by accidents in both analogue and digital media. The visuals she makes are the result of glitches, compressions, feedback and other forms of noise, emphasizing their positive consequences. Since 2007 she has been developing both performances and static work.

*Every technology possesses its own inherent accidents.*

Miwon Kwon, in her seminal *One Place After Another* (2002), investigates the transformation of the notion of site-specificity in contemporary art from one of “permanence and immobility” to one of “impermanence and transience.” *Xilitla* was supposed to be a video interface that would make it possible for one to show video work outside of the impositions of Vimeo and YouTube. However, it has now changed into a performance tool and is best understood as an environment in which one can import alternative forms of story telling and poetics. *Xilitla* is neither a videogame nor a video interface.

`xilitla.beyondresolution.info`



**Xilitla**, Rosa Menkman, 2013-2014



**MSHR** performing at Live Arts Week, Bologna Italy, 2014, *photo by Massimiliano Donati*

**MSHR** is a collaborative project by Birch Cooper and Brenna Murphy based in Portland, Oregon. The duo produces sculptural synthesizers, ritualistic performances and installations that place the human body into a dynamic relationship with sound and light, generating expanded sensory experiences. MSHR emerged from the five person art collective Oregon Painting Society in 2011 and has since exhibited and performed across the US and Europe.

MSHR's live performances currently revolve around a unique system of light-audio feedback that employs hand made analog synthesizers and sculptural interfaces. For Slipped Gears, this approach is employed in the interactive light and sound installation Solar Helix.

**Jaakko Pallasvuo** work has been exhibited internationally at venues such as Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen, Kiasma Museum Of Contemporary Art (Helsinki), Higher Pictures (NYC), W139 (Amsterdam), UCCA (Beijing), and Future Gallery (Berlin).

Some old guy asks where gen y is in policy making? Short answer: we're here, queer and virtually invisible to u. underemployed and overworked. Our world runs on favors. Our politics are a whisper and a y-even-care and a waiting-for-the-noosphere, bro. highly skilled in useless tasks.

I'll help u photoshop that if u do something about my neck pain. I'll be your escort / therapist tonight if u'll introduce me to the head curator of the zurich kunsthalle. I know how to make balloon animals. I love u and I'll never telll.

why do anything even once? The most powerful gesture is repetition. Serialz. Every generation has to murder fathers and reinvent everything: flip, reverse ceramics as a thing that's like ok just make the same pot ovrr and over again. u need 8 coffee mugs for this to b a series. It's cyclical. the same thing everyday w infinite variation.

It's ancient. Older than steel, The beginning of high culture, Older than paper. I can imagine a future right now: I live on this island. I write YA novels and make pottery. Maybe the book is a hit? Somehow I'm rich in an oblivious way.



**Low Epic**, Jaakko Pallasvuo, 2011, video still (not included in Slipped Gears)

**Katie Torn** builds fantastical virtual sculptures using tools commonly employed in commercials and Hollywood films. Past exhibitions and screenings of her work took place at multiple museums and galleries. Torn was the 2013 “Visions” Fellow at Eyebeam and was recently a resident at The Institute of Electronic Arts, Alfred, NY.

Breathe Deep is a film about a virtual sculpture that could only exist in the realm of the digital combining natural and synthetic, human and avatar, plant and machine. The narrative follows the mechanics of a dystopic female figure as it modulates trying to adjust to the toxic environment that it has created. The figure has become one with a pile of debris and transforms into a kinetic architectural ecosystem that produces and consumes. This is represented through a combination of live action video of performance with sculptures composited with 3D animation and special effects.

Breathe Deep is a commission for the Denver Theatre District | Denver Digerati, 2014



**Breathe Deep**, Katie Torn, 2014

**Matias Viegner** works solo and collaboratively in the fields of writing, visual art, and social practice. His new book, *2500 Random Things About Me Too*, is published by Les Figues Press, and he's the editor of *I'm Very Into You*, the correspondence of Kathy Acker and McKenzie Wark, forthcoming on Semiotext(e). His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. He teaches at CalArts and is a 2013 Creative Capital awardee.

## Black Mirror

While killer drones have remade global warfare, spy drones are taking over all forms of domestic surveillance, transforming public and private life. Like the rise of secret data gathering, drones evoke our fears of being seen, while they also speak to our desire to see, our desire to know everything. *Black Mirror* scrutinizes the rise of drone culture, the technological symptom of the fantasy of social control and total omniscience. A set of video studies uses footage shot with Viegner's drone, a Parrot AR, often in participatory groups, doing what it's made for: spying on people in unsuspecting ways. This haunting evidence conveys the apparatus's personality far more viscerally than a conversation. The image included is Viegner with his drone as he uses it to spy on his own car, a refraction of looking, seeing and being looked at. We learn new things about ourselves through our technologies, but we are also re-formed by them.



**Black Mirror #3**, Matias Viegner

**Thank you...**

Putting together this exhibition has been an absolute pleasure and I am very grateful to Robert Ransick for providing the opportunity. His ability to encourage and support the process was invaluable, as was his generosity of time.

An exhibition is nothing without artists and I feel genuinely lucky to have the opportunity to work with this incredible group. I am astonished daily that I know such brilliant people who never cease to challenge and inspire in such creative and fun ways.

Thank you to Usdan Gallery and Bennington College for the incredible institutional and production support.

Thanks to 4REAL Design for making this catalog look amazing and to Publication Studio for being the brilliant publishers they are.

And thank you to my partner Joon, without whom any reasonably decent idea I might have would never see the light of day.

**Roddy Schrock**

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