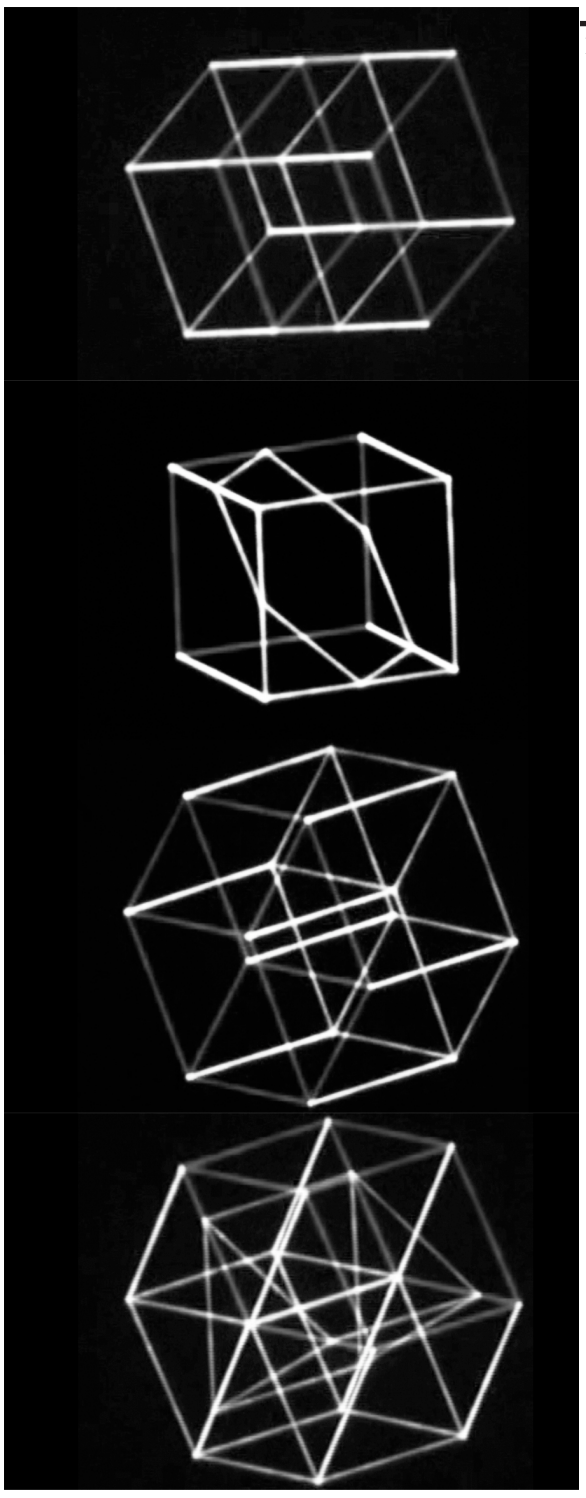


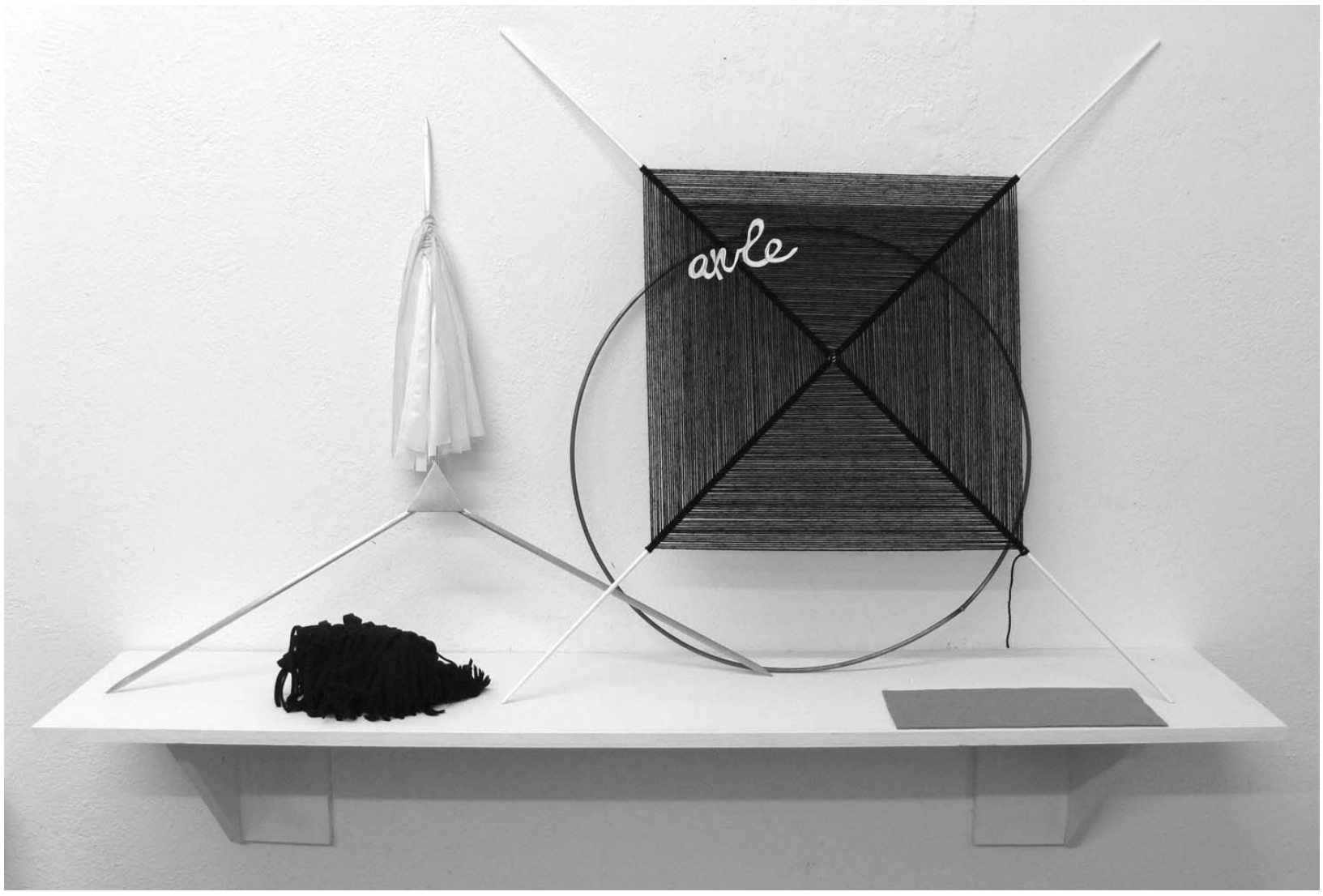
Krysten Cunningham, *Hypercube*, 2006 (video stills)

November 8 - December 13 2009

Krysten Cunningham
Tangental

DISPATCH
127 HENRY STREET NEW YORK NY 10002
TELEPHONE / FAX 1 212 227 2783
DISPATCHBUREAU.COM
HOWIE CHEN – GABRIELLE GIATTINO

DISPATCH 2



Krysten Cunningham, *Axle*, 2009

GG: You've cited Anni Albers as an important influence on your work. I'd like to hear more about your interest in her textile work and how the materials you work with, the forms that you create, and the amalgams that you assemble contribute to the idea of weaving as text.
KC: Anni Albers's work has a simplicity that I am drawn to. And I respect the way she integrated old and new materials. For instance, she combined acetate with wool, which is now common practice in textiles, but she pioneered it. The inherent properties of each material present a set of unapparent problems that one discovers by working directly with the material. Wool and acetate just don't move or stretch in the same way, so when you combine them, you get something non-compliant or unwieldy. She understood that you can't fix this sort of material problem sitting at a design desk, and that material discrepancies make something interesting. That is a more sculptural way of approaching material than functional. She made it look easy. I attempt that integration in my own work.

Also, her scholarship of Inca and Nazca textiles is extensive, inspiring and direct. She would buy a seriously old textile and cut a square out of it in order to see how it was made. That is galling. But there is no better way to understand how something is constructed, than by taking it apart, no matter how old or important it is. The result is a hat with a significant piece removed. The cut hat is more of an object and less of a garment. She wrote that 'cultures without developed written language systems had very sophisticated forms of textile art.' The Incas obviously had an advanced civilization and were communicating through fibers, woven patterns and series of knots. How do you read knots as information? What does this knot mean? It seems like a more haptic and visceral way of thinking and communicating, but it doesn't lack sophistication. Their textiles were very advanced. And the Nazca, what were they communicating with all those patterns in the desert? These sorts of texts are mind blowing.

This is the first time I've actually used a real word in my artwork. I used Axle because I like the way the letters work together formally, the "x" and the "A" and the "l" and "e". But I view the "word" like an object, a counterpoint to the "ball of fringe" that comprises the sentence (sculpture). I use weaving in a way that ignores the warp and weft. So if you think about my weaving as text, the words have left the page. But fiber itself shares a "linearity" with traditional grammar.

GG: I know that color is extremely important to the language that you create. Can you talk about your process of selecting and dyeing, and how different theories of color relationships inform your work?
KC: The Quercitron sculpture is named for its color. It comes from the Latin name for Black Oak, Quercus velutina, which is the dye that I used to color the yarn. Natural dyes are interesting not only for the subtlety of their color but they also are important to the history of dying. The Black Oak tree is native to the Eastern United States and its bark has been used as dye in this country for a few hundred years, so it is authentically American. It is also a stable dye color when mixed with metal salts. It is not 'fugitive' as some dyes are called (because they change). But I didn't choose it for its stability, or even for its color, I actually like the idea that a dye can be fugitive. I was interested in the Black Oak part, because it seems mythical in origin.

The early Americans were restricted from trading directly with certain dye merchants and this was one of the causes for the revolution. Logwood, which produces dark blues and blacks, was in high demand during the 18th and 19th centuries. It comes from South America and the settlers had to buy it from England, which doesn't make sense geographically. They used to trade illegally for it, even using pirate ships to get it. I think that's cool, putting your life on the line for a certain color.

On the other hand I am also interested in how color effects our perception of space. For instance I am working on a video project called '3 to 4' that uses color as way to expand out notions of dimension. I'm linking RGB or digital color with Cartesian space. The piece includes 5 dancers and a sculpture constructed out of 3 wooden rods. The rods are colored red, green and blue to depict the video color blocks that we view on LCD monitors. The dancers each wear a glove of a corresponding color. From the rods, they construct a Cartesian vector system (XYZ), and then pass the sculpture from hand to hand while turning it. The choreography is based on how the body interprets ideas of left and right, orthogonal space, and foreign objects. The RGB color depicts a visual 'color space' while the sculpture represents the physicality of the 3rd Dimension. The moving human body suggests that these activities occur in a 4 (or more) dimensional extent.

GG: In your interview with Jon Wood, you talk about how your work in the UCLA Physics Department has served to create an outlet and counterpoint to your studio practice. In the lab you have the chance to consider the more practical and physical qualities of your materials, and the relationship of objects from a scientific angle. While all artists have to consider their materials to varying degrees, it is quite unique that you have this kind of resource available to your practice. Can you tell me a little more about how it has informed your work, either generally or more specifically in terms of particular works?
KC: The Hypercube video came from my work in the Physics lab. I was showing one of my sculptures to a professor and he said that I ought to look at that film because my piece looked similar to the hypercube. So I did, and to my amazement the sculpture did resemble a hypercube. I started trying to think about a multi-dimensional space, even though it is nearly impossible to understand. It exists theoretically but none has perceived it. And in the studio I adopted a kind of scientific approach, constructing my sculptures like topological experiments. I started with an XYZ structure and wove around that. As far as the video goes, I altered the original film slightly and then re-narrated it in a kind of monotone, but what I said was pretty outlandish. So the result is a commentary on how scientific information is delivered. When you suggest an alternative to the pedagogy, using an authoritative tone with blatantly subjective information, what happens to the viewer? How do they process the information when the signals are crossed?

GG: For someone who has a pretty solid background in physics and science, there is an aspect to your work that I would call somewhat mystical. While the intent in the work is grounded in the innate qualities of the materials with which you work, you also seem sensitive to the intangible desires of these substances. You have said, "I try to pay attention to how my material wants to move, unwind, tighten, solidify, fall apart," and I am interested in the idea that a material has a want, that is maybe outside of physics, but a nuanced combination of motivations. I see your practice as a balance between the physical and the intangible, between the hard edges of geometric abstraction and the mystical properties of icons and I wonder if you could speak to this nuance.
KC: I don't have a proper scientific background at all, but I have been working in a Physics Lab for eight years building demonstrations and designing Van de Graff generators etc., which has been an education in itself. But I'm not willing to do the algebra and never applied myself at calculus. My foundation is in object making so I go ahead building things accepting certain guidelines and theories without mathematical proof and that is really the antithesis of the scientific objective. But only scientists need all that proof and it is important that they do. I see the scientific method as another paradigm. And it is my artistic duty to question it. I do think that I can 'listen' a material and that I am hearing more than just my own subjectivity when I do so. Whether or not I can quantify this experience or prove it with a double blind experiment doesn't matter to me.