

# Michael Rees

- American, b. 1958 in Kansas City, MO
- Lives in North Bergen, New Jersey, serves as Professor of Sculpture and Digital Media at William Paterson University and the Director for the Center for New Art
- MFA 1989 Yale University; 1983-84 studied at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf as part of a Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst award; BFA 1982 Kansas City Art Institute; studied at Vassar College from 1976-78
- [www.michaelrees.org](http://www.michaelrees.org)



## Body of Work

Artist Michael Rees works in themes of figuration, language, technology and society. While exploring these themes, his work crosses over many mediums, incorporating sculpture with media and animation. At New Jersey's Grounds for Sculpture, June 2018-July 2019, *Michael Rees: Synthetic Cells* presents an unparalleled dialogue between objects, perception, and reality. His newest sculptures challenge viewers to question how the boundaries of our physical and digital experiences are converging.

Rees was a Charlotte Street Foundation Visual Arts Fellow in 1999. He has shown work in public venues around the world including Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton Township, New Jersey; the Whitney Museum, the OMI International Arts Center, Columbus Circle, and the Museum of Art and Design, New York; The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; MARTa Museum in Herford, Germany, and the Pera Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, among others. His work was featured in the 1996 group exhibition *Perspective - Kansas City*, curated by Dan Cameron, at the former JCCC Gallery of Art.



Michael Rees, *Skin*, 1995,  
computer-generated resin-coated photograph,  
20" x 16"



2005 *Putto* 2x2x4, steel core, fiberglass resin, 0':48" animation, stadium display screen 96x120", collection of the Kemper Museum, located at 12th Street, across the street from the Kansas City Convention Center (video is no longer showing)



1996 *Ajna* 3, stereolithography print in photopolymer, 14"x8"x8", private collection

## LOBBY

*Synthcell 009* (red, blue, yellow, orange, clear), String Thing, Rooster, 2018

Air inflated PVC vinyl, augmented reality application, wall mounted inkjet print, 116x116x116"

LOAN courtesy the artist



Oppenheimer Gallery

*Synthcell 012* (clear, blue, red, inkjet), Hatch, Butterflies, 2018

PVC vinyl, inkjet print on PVC vinyl, 130 x 130 x 130"

*Synthcell 003* (pink, yellow, clear, printed), Rock Wall, Pig, 2018

Air inflated PVC vinyl, augmented reality application, 130 x 130 x 130"

Thompson Gallery

*Synthcell 005* (clear), 2018

Air inflated PVC vinyl, 130 x 130 x 130"

*Synthcell 007* (blue, inkjet print), Stone, Turtle, Turtle Clock, 2018

Air inflated PVC vinyl, augmented reality application, 130 x 130 x 130"

Temporary Exhibition Gallery

*Synthcell 006* (yellow, clear, inkjet print), Gradient Clown\*, Ants, 2018

Air inflated PVC vinyl, augmented reality application, 130 x 130 x 130"

ALL LOANS courtesy the artist



**The touchscreen tablets are here for us to explore AR.**

**Insects are beyond our control, but you can use the AR feature to interact with the animals.**



**Enlarge, minimize the primary creature.**

**Use more fingers to make it move:**



**Change directions.**



**Rotate.**



**Orbit .**

## **Michael Rees - *Pneumatopia***

These sculptures are a speculative investigation that are part science fiction, part architecture, part figure, and part pastoral. They are abstract and extended almost to immateriality. They contain images, virtual objects, animations, and interactive apps accessed by digital tablets. As they are mostly air, they are also made up of form, color, photos, and graphics as well as screen based experiences of augmented reality. I seek to place strange experiences in the conflicting context to create novel interactions in the mind. These structures are open ended and they change as we move around them. My ideal scenario with the viewer is that we will look together into the theater of my invented space to find what might be there for both of us.

I've developed a sculptural practice that weaves experiences together in a contemplative mélange against the backdrop of the complexity of contemporary life. The work hopes to deal with philosophical issues and conceptual problems in art balanced with personal experiences of the absurdity and beauty of life. These forms coalesce around the traces of thoughts and actions, each an ephemeral construct. The work takes place within the context of an expanded sense of things. The subject of the work are the incongruent spaces of computer representation, math objects, and animals and insects commensal with humans.

The pneumatic sculptures should hold something else though, something like joy. I aspire that you would be touched, as pleased as if you had seen a flock of butterflies. These kinds of experiences can hold so much and be connected to so many ideas and yet to explain them to another is futile. Content fades away into a momentary glimpse, into some possibility, something at the edge of your thoughts.

\*Augmented Reality is a type of virtual reality that aims to add to the camera viewfinder's environment an overlay of digital information as image, animation, or virtual object. An augmented reality system generates a composite view for the user that is the combination of the real scene and a virtual scene generated by the computer that adds additional information to the scene (through the phone's or tablet's viewfinder).

## Breathing Art.

### Michael Rees' Contagious Codes and Plastic Visions

*Pneumatopia* reveals itself as an artistic laboratory. For the show, Michael Rees has created inflatable structures with eccentric and party-fluorescent interiors that borrow from medical equipment and anatomic structures. They could equally be mistaken for equipment on a psychedelic playground or the props of futuristic sci-fi film set. Look 'the future is there. Looking back at us [...]!' <sup>1</sup>, a paraphrased quote by Cayce Pollard, William Gibson's female protagonist of his sci-fi novel *Pattern Recognition* comes to mind. Indeed, pattern recognition appears as one type of logic underpinning Rees' show.

Moving around his installation, one immediately begins to recognize glaring patterns. As destabilizing forces, they are inscribed into the vulnerable surfaces of the inflatables or embedded as images into the objects. When scanned with a tablet, the dazzling patterns become passages. Pattern recognition, the mechanism of machine vision, opens up the works' gangly physicality by superimposing them with an augmented reality. In this computable terrain, the digitally conceived simulations appear as the surrealist spawns of the inflatables' psyche. A pig leisurely strolls up and down a stone wall beyond any law of gravitation. A flutter of butterflies interrupts the cool formal language of a cropped Sol LeWitt. A faceless clown seems to have nothing but algorithmically animated ants in his head. The viewer can interact with Rees' ecstatic world by zooming in and out of it or turning it every impossible way. As such, the artist breathes life into his pneumatic sculptures, literally and digitally.

In Stoic thought, 'pneuma' not only referred to 'breath' but was considered to be the creative force, the vital spirit organizing both individual and universe. Like the cosmos of the Stoics, Rees' artistic universe derives from breath but is held together by plastic and permeated by math. Conceived and modelled with 3-D software, each inflatable sculpture has emerged from a higher dimensional, mathematical terrain. In a Chinese factory, the object's digital plasticity has then been translated into plastic reality. There is a strange similarity between Rees' two preferred materials: the properties of code and vinyl, arguably a type of 'soft' ware as well. Both are fragile substances, yet used to make enduring structures. They can be brittle, yet are infinitively malleable. They appear immaterial at times, yet their impacts can be both astonishingly and frighteningly material. Unconcerned by material contradictions, plastic and code can oscillate between states. They are the 'pneumatopian' material par excellence for they can be sculpted, modeled and molded into any imagined shape. It is thus not surprising that American post-war culture expressed its fantasies preferable in plastic or code.

The charmingly awkward and strangely elegant plasticity of Rees' inflatables resonate with such utopias imagined by artists and architects of the 1960s-70s. Activated by the enthusiasms and progressive moods of the hippie movement, plastic became the metaphor for political resistance and anarchical experimentation. Its flexibility, lightness and transparency formed the basis of a radical artistic counter-language symbolic of the opposition to mainstream brutalist architecture. In their outrageously funny and deadly serious *Inflatocookbook*, for instance, the collective Ant Farm offers a detailed manual to create giant blow-up cushions, including the plans of the world's largest snake. The habitable inflatable media center also comprised several screening rooms exemplary of the fact that the experiments with pneumatic structures coincided with an intense investigation of information technology. Within this 'plastic' framework, artists and architects such as Les Levine, Haus-Rucker-Co, Paolo Soleri or Buckminster Fuller negotiated utopian ideas of technology arising from military-funded research

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<sup>1</sup> William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (London: Penguin, 2011), 57.

during the Cold War as socially progressive and capable of expanding human potential beyond a pure military use.

The aura, assembled by Cold War technologies, Avant-Garde art practices, and plastic Utopianism, is immanent within Rees' *Pneumatopia*. As early as 1987, the artist incorporated digital technology in his practice to produce objects emerging from the hybrid interfaces of virtual and actual space. His kinetic, inhaling and exhaling *Breathing Sculptures* (1984-87) or the 3-D printed *Anja Spine* (1998) with ears protruding from it, share the anatomic references with the most recent objects. They equally transcend the familiar structures of bodies towards the intuitive and surreal, for instance a faceless clown or an agravic pig. Yet, Rees' augmented sculptures are symptomatic of a timespan which has significantly changed through the comprehensive impact of the digital.

A novel understanding of the object manifests itself here, one that expands itself beyond physical boundaries, is active, productive, eccentric and ecstatic. Do we interact with the work, or does the work rather interact with us? Where does the object begin? Where does the subject end? In their blurring of boundaries between subject and object, these works share a proximity with Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology.<sup>2</sup> In his version of Speculative Realism, the American philosopher targets Kant's privileging of epistemology over ontology through an insistence upon 'the independence of the world, and of things in the world, from our own conceptualisations of them.'<sup>3</sup> Harman argues that the world contains a multitude of agential objects and concludes that none of them, including humans, has access to any other object in a privileged way. The gesture of object-oriented philosophy is one that does not allow for the impersonal world to remain the eternally excluded other of human existence. Rather, it makes it, just like Rees' objects, into something that we can interact with, question, explore, and multiply revise. It is in *Pneumatopia's* augmented and plastic reality that the utopian promises of the past collide with recent projections of our contemporary. Like cosmic wormholes, Rees' air-filled sculptures thus outfit spacetime. Revealingly in 1969, perhaps after visiting Ant Farm's giant blow up snake, Heidegger remarked that sculpture must be conceived as an 'embodiment of places'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in their supple fragility and almost immaterial grace, Rees' sculptures preserve and embody an invisible place. It is a blank which holds something free, a dwelling for us in the midst of politically daunting events. Perhaps it is here, air-suspended by pure breath, where creative forces abide and thus our futures reside?

- Mara-Johanna Kölmel Art  
historian, London

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<sup>2</sup> See Harman, Graham, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Peru/Illinois: Open Court, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Steven Shaviro, 'Spekulativer Realismus für Anfänger' in *Texte zur Kunst* (March, 2014), pp. 41-51, here p. 44. In *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781). Kant argues that we know the world exclusively through the filter of our own minds-through a compulsory correlation of structurally separable subjects and objects. In Cartesian logic, this means that we must never talk about the things we encounter in the world but only about the process of how we encounter them, see Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), ed. Jens Timmermann (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Art and Space* (1969), trans. Charles H. Seibert,  
<https://pdflibrary.files.wordpress.com/2008/02/art-and-space.pdf>, 3-8, p.7.