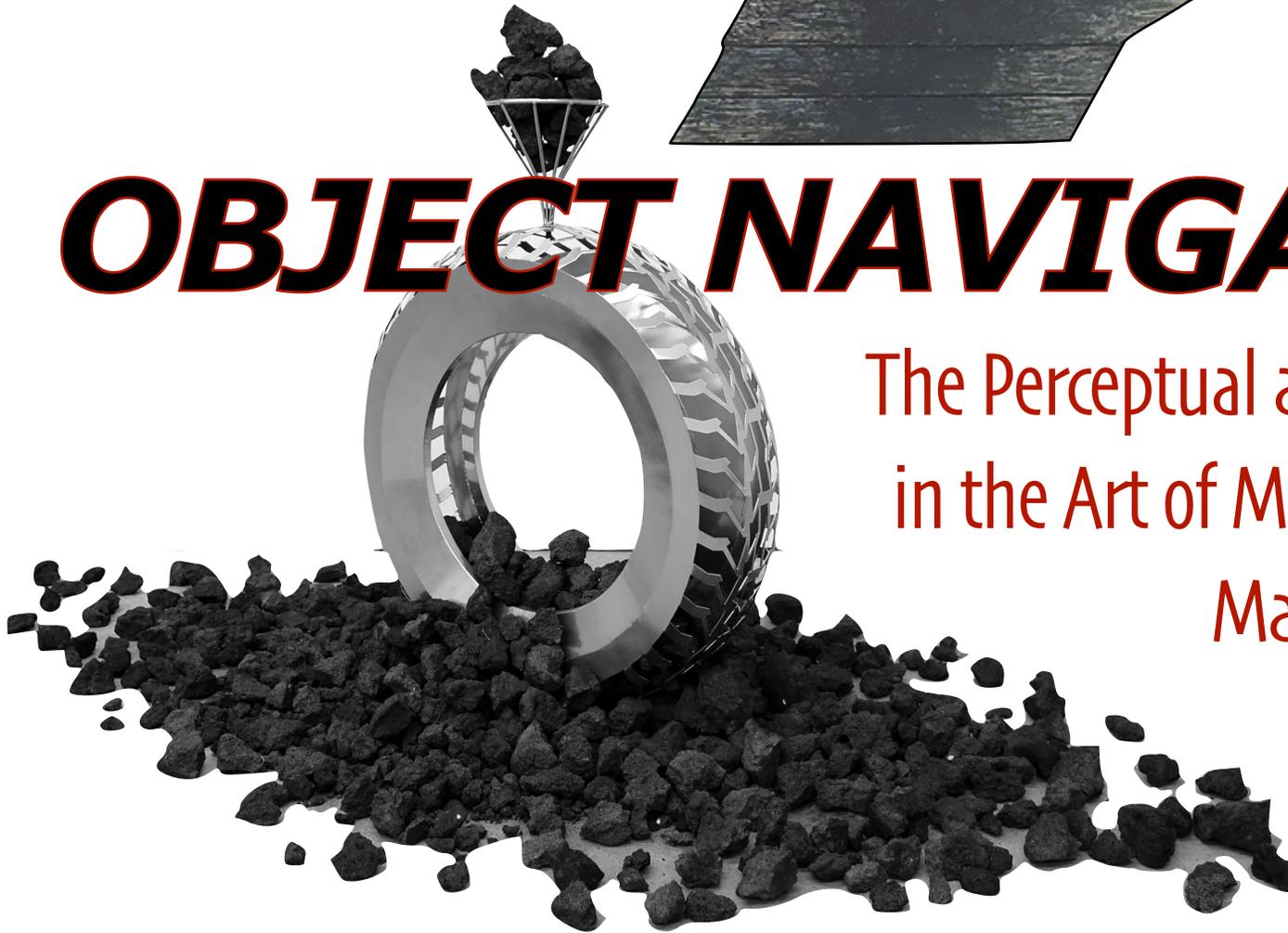
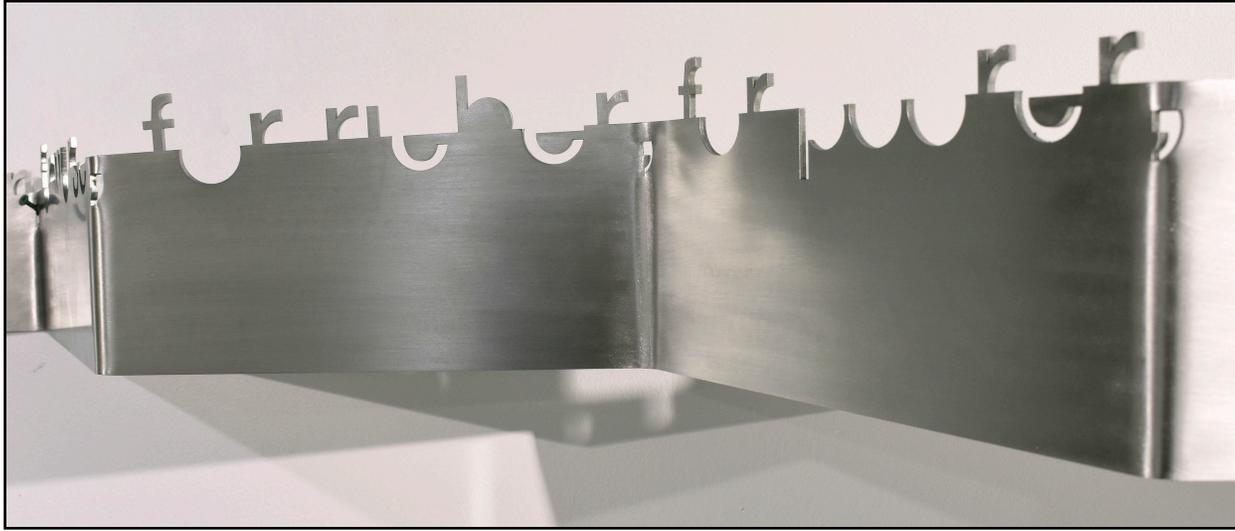




***OBJECT NAVIGATION***

The Perceptual and the Cultural  
in the Art of Michael Dinges &  
Matthew Boonstra





## Object Navigation: The Perceptual and the Cultural in the Art of Michael Dinges and Matthew Boonstra

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Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, Mt. Vernon,  
Illinois

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Matthew Boonstra.

COVER: TOP, Michael Dinges, *National  
Recovery Act, Dormer*, 2018, vinyl siding,  
acrylic paint, 11 feet x 3.5 feet;

BOTTOM, Matthew Boonstra, *Marriage*, 2012,  
CNC plasma cut and fabricated steel, powder  
coat finish, coal, 8 feet x 3.3 feet x 5 feet;

THIS PAGE, Matthew Boonstra, *Vowsaw*, detail,  
2015-2021, stainless steel, 11x86x21”.

All Dinges works courtesy of the artist and  
Aron Packer Projects, Chicago. Dinges' works  
*Container Ships* and *Spotted* made possible by  
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# Object Navigation: The Perceptual and the Cultural in the Art of Michael Dinges and Matthew Boonstra

by Rusty Freeman, Director of Visual Arts

Artists Michael Dinges and Matthew Boonstra use common objects from everyday life but toward very different ends. They are in some ways, similar, and at the same time, profoundly different. Objects from mass culture are selected for their perceptual (literal, face value) and cultural (symbolic) values. Dinges poses his awareness of the ways in which culture works without our consent or the public good, asking “Is this what we want?” Boonstra constructs visual dichotomies that frame his topics. Dinges’ art looks outward to society-at-large; Boonstra’s art looks inward to self and family. Above all, the artists share a vision embracing the idea of making as a way of navigating the world.

Michael Dinges has lived and worked in Oak Park, Illinois for the past thirty years. His professional pursuit of art began as a commercial illustrator over 25 years ago before turning to fine art in the early 2000s. Dinges addresses the biggest modern day concern of all – the relentless appropriation of all culture and nature into the markets of commercialism. “In my art

practice – by drawing parallels through the use of scale and materials – I want to ask the viewer to contemplate their own relationship to their social and physical environment.”

Matthew Boonstra, a Detroit native, lives and works in Charleston, Illinois, where he teaches at Eastern Illinois University. “My work focuses on investigating feelings and thoughts as community member, spouse, and father.” As we will see, Boonstra’s diverse works of art express far more than personal feelings. Traditional sculpture processes and digital visualizing platforms are combined by Boonstra to realize his themes of family, relationships, and sense of place.

Both artists regard the very process of art-making to be as important as the final piece itself. “Getting there” is critical to their thinking; indeed, their art-making frees them to think.

Note on essay title: “Object Navigation” works on three levels. First, the artists through their creation of new works gain their own bearings to navigate the world. Second, my curator role assists visitors with navigating through the multiple levels the art object offers for interpretation. And the word “object” is a synonym for goal. Both artists set goals to understand and navigate the world by creating carefully crafted works of art.

## MICHAEL DINGES

NATIONAL RECOVERY ACT, DORMER

*National Recovery Act, Dormer (cover)* is majestic in size at eleven feet across, rich in semiotic resonance informing its dichotomy of synthetic material and symbolic grandeur of the eagle. Dinges makes strong symbolic use of the humble vinyl house siding. Vinyl siding is an affordable method and material for some homeowners. The leftover siding was salvaged from a neighborhood home Dinges renovated.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the National Recovery Act in 1933 to jumpstart the economy mired in the Great Depression. The NRA was repealed by the Supreme Court who in 1935 decided that too much power had been seceded to big business. The NRA was a short-lived effort to keep businesses solvent and workers thereby employed.

It was the local story of a homeowner’s loss that motivated Dinges in the making of this work. The homeowner fell ill, was forced out of work, could not keep up mortgage payments, and subsequently evicted during the great recession of 2008-09. Dinges learned this after the fact.

Michael Dinges,  
*Container Ships*, 2014,  
altered push brooms,  
62"x 24 feet, and detail



The graphic eagle suggests both the eagle on the National Recovery Act logo and the Bald eagle as national symbol. Dinges' eagle represents the American government trying to aid workers and their employers. The vinyl siding represents for Dinges "a false front, a thin veneer covering a horror." For both the 1930s and 2000s businesses and homeowners, the market can be a nightmare reality. Even government intervention was not enough to mitigate market forces.

The art work is an homage to the homeowner, who did nothing wrong, but faced with the impersonal way the system works, lost his job and home. Dinges resurrected the piece of vinyl siding from the ashes of the foreclosed house and made it rise again like the Phoenix, as the resurrected New Deal eagle and symbol of America. This sculpture addresses both the problems of the market while embodying materially the American spirit of the little guy, the worker rising again and again in the face of adversity.

#### CONTAINER SHIPS

The container shipping industry took off in the 1970s and revolutionized the global shipping industry becoming a key driver of globalization. China dominates the industry with seven of the top ten busiest ports in the world. The US is a distant second. Of the world's goods, 90% are shipped and 60% of those are shipped in containers.

Shipping by modular containers was the idea of North Carolina trucking magnate Malcom McLean. In 1955, he bought a steamship company to ship truck trailer cargo. The idea developed intermittently over the next fifteen years.

Container shipping began replacing pallet-laden cargo that was labor intensive to load and unpack; it took days to load a ship properly for overseas passage. The "box" had another advantage, upon arrival it went quickly from ship to truck.

Overseas shipping became very low cost compared to what it had been. As a matter of course, longshoremen lost thousands of jobs worldwide.

Dinges ingeniously used push brooms onto which he abstracted the ocean's horizon sculpting into the bristles silhouettes of container ships. At 24 feet across, the work's scale dramatizes the breadth and reach of the industry. The brooms represent the thoroughness with which the container revolution "swept through" the shipping industry creating new jobs, while ending many more. According to Dinges, the brooms stand for jobs lost; the brooms hang on the wall "idle." The graduated handle-lengths represent functionality, the ability to perform work. Short handles do not perform well. The arc, therefore, shifts from one high-functioning economic sector to a middle sector performing poorly rebounding to another performing well.

#### PVC DRUM

What values accrue to a plastic five-gallon bucket? Worthless, until you need one. Valueless until put into action. Kids and buskers make music with it. However, the first ever tools were woven baskets to carry things. The first clay pots held precious water.

*PVC Drum* totes colloquialisms, epigrams, and bromides. Engraved in the plastic as a scrimshaw artist



Michael Dinges, *PVC Drum*, 2005, plastic, metal, 14.25" ht.

might, Dinges has turned the humble bucket into a soapbox. "No War without Representation." "Demand Separation between Corporation and State." Dinges issues do not reduce to right or left viewpoints; these topics affect Humanity.

Today, we might find prophetic commentary like this buried somewhere in social media or podcasts. Earlier social critics—Aldous Huxley, George Orwell—wrote dystopian novels of speculative fiction. Television



Michael Dinges, *Over Quality*, *Dead Laptop Series*, 2012, engraved plastic, acrylic paint

slowly indoctrinated us to visual entertainment. Today, we carry TVs in our pockets. Social critics ask what happens when politics and public discourse have been turned into forms of entertainment. Where are we headed when religion, education, and journalism are broadcast as show business?

Dinges beats the drum call. This bucket carries precious words.

#### OVER QUALITY

Taking inspiration from sailors who scrimshawed whale teeth and American soldiers who engraved everything from cigarette lighters to artillery shells Dinges engraves a variety of discarded objects made from plastic, such as Apple MacBooks. A beautifully detailed visual work of art, *Over Quality* depicts an eagle threatening a shackled sheep. The laptop cover is rich with engraved images and warning messages.

From Aesop to John James Audubon images abound in the art world of eagles preying on sheep. Here, Dinges' allegory aligns shackled sheep with the naive consumer trapped by a powerful eagle as internet entrepreneur. Dinges' point is well-taken, the internet seems more than capable to fulfill any desire or need we have and can do so these days overnight.

Dinges wrote "the internet offers us anything we want, information, goods, services, etc. It flatters us into thinking that all experiences are available to us and we will be fulfilled by that access."

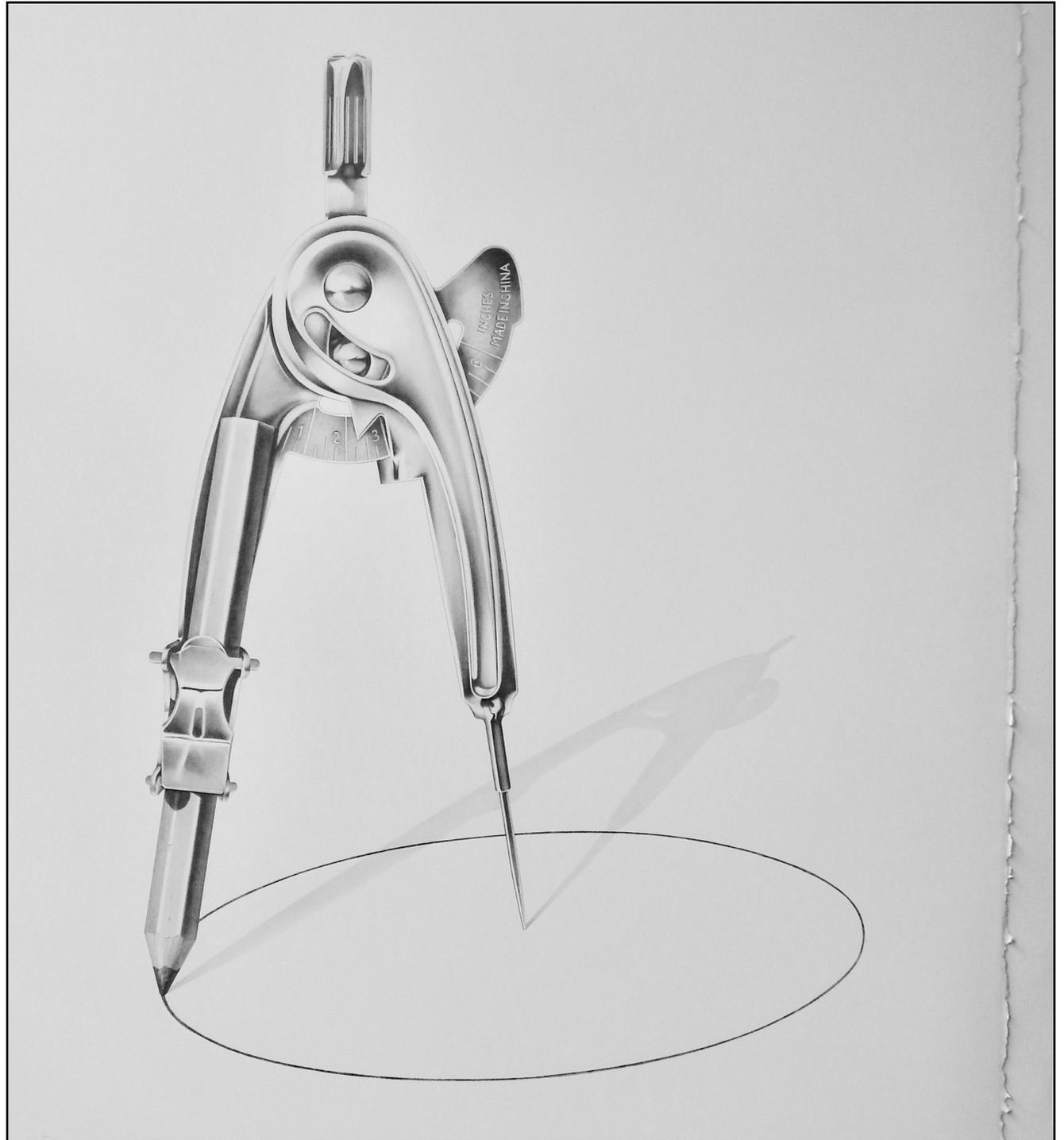
Dinges' visual combination of image and text echoes the manner of 16th and 17th-century broadsides. Broadsides were inexpensive one-page sheets printed with image and text. Broadsides delivered news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment. They were one of the first methods of dissemination of the daily news to a wide readership. But Dinges' message is more sweeping than a simple critique of online markets. Dinges' beautifully engraved laptops point to larger patterns of coercion and manipulation that have many concerned.

#### COMPASS

*Compass*, the superb graphite rendering depicts a "drafting compass." Also known as a pair of compasses it is used to draw circles, arcs, or measure distances between points on a map. Our English word derives from Old French, *compasser*, to measure. The instrument was used by Euclid in the mid-fourth century BCE. While computer-aided design has largely replaced the hand-held drawing compass, it is still used

Michael Dinges, *Compass*, 2001, graphite on paper, with deckle edge, 30x22.5"

Navigation is a leading theme of this exhibition. Both artists regard their art-making as ways to establish orientation.





Matthew Boonstra,  
*Sands of Time*, 2021, steel,  
rubber, plaster, sand, 87x40x88"

by architects, mathematicians, draughtsmen, engineers, artists, and graphic designers.

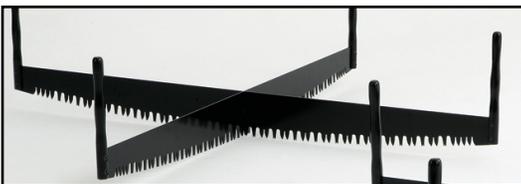
Dinges on the compass: "Tools of orientation or description have always fascinated me. Their utilitarian yet, simple construction inspires me. We however, take these tools for granted, but could not complete certain tasks without them."

The *Dinges Compass* is the companion piece to the Boonstra *Reverse Reflection*. Both art works portray navigation and put a symbolic mark on the land establishing "I am here."

#### SPOTTED

Interestingly, both artists choose the crosscut saw as a symbolic object to work with. Dinges titled his *Spotted* for the Spotted Owl that is endangered through the harvesting of its forest habitat. Dinges crossed two crosscut saws, suggesting that two or more forces were working at cross-purposes sacrificing wildlife, valuable lumber, and natural habitats by not embracing sustainable management of natural resources.

The Spotted Owl species is monitored today with its numbers still in decline. Some progress with backsliding is being made in abating deforestation, but the future of our forests remains in jeopardy with its continuing consumption in the US and globally.



Michael Dinges, *Spotted*, 2008, cast iron, steel, 72x72"

#### MATTHEW BOONSTRA

##### SANDS OF TIME

*Sands of Time* compels astonishment as well as engagement. A beautifully conceived sculpture-installation rich in conundrum. Five dichotomies are at work. First one, clock hands have been wrenched from their parallel orbit and forced perpendicular; so configured, they represent time distorted. One clock hand points to the neoclassical busts piled in disemboweled sand, presumably from an hourglass. Second dichotomy, mechanical clock hands and natural sand are both markers of time. Third, the clock hands with a telephone manhole cover represent technological tools. The manhole cover cast in flexible white rubber drapes the clock hand. The manhole cover impedes the movement of time. The manhole cover represents telephone technologies that have intruded upon our time. Smart phones are an interminable black hole consuming precious time. The fourth dichotomy is the sand pile mixed with busts. Heads from neoclassical sculptures stand for aspects of culture, and for Boonstra, the Enlightenment. Meaningful culture seems to be slipping easily through our hands like so many grains of sand.

Conversely, the sand pile may stand in for the beach (salted with culture), leisure, vacation, and time away from work. This playtime symbolism might be one mitigating factor against the tyranny of the hapless clock.

The clock itself can stand in for work. Lewis Mumford wrote in 1934 on the dehumanizing effects of technology citing perhaps the most insidious of all, the clock. "The clock, not the steam-engine, is the key-

machine of the modern industrial age." "Organic functions themselves were regulated by it: one ate, not upon feeling hungry, but when prompted by the clock: one slept, not when one was tired, but when the clock sanctioned it" Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*.

A fifth conundrum/dichotomy exists between the clock hands/manhole cover and the neoclassic heads/sand. The clock hands/cover represent competing technologies both governing our time. The heads/sand represent culture/nature competing against each other. Together these pairs of oppositions are entangled polarities, each necessary, each contradictory to the other. One cannot exist without the Other.

#### REVERSE REFLECTION

Interactivity is the crowning moment in the magisterial *Reverse Reflection*, where the unity of opposites work together like the yin-yang with movement, dichotomous relationships, and multiple levels of interpretation. The busts actually pivot on horizontal and vertical axes.

The entire *Reverse Reflection* apparatus functions like an interpersonal compass guiding navigation through the world. At its center, two busts flow into the other, neither completely whole, each bust supporting its Other. The busts are modeled on the artist and his wife, Ashley.

The second most remarkable feature, after the inter-flowing busts, are the horizontal and vertical axes upon which the united busts revolve. Each opposing axis turns on 360 degrees. Both heads share an axis. The symbolism is clear: each partner has the capability to



Matthew Boonstra, *Reverse Reflection*, 2019, steel, resin, 63x21x23"

scan and survey the world; each in effect seeing what the other cannot. This amazing device demonstrates how the unity of opposites performs.

#### NOWHERE IV: MY FAMILY IS MY HOME

The *Nowhere* series is a personally important series for the artist. As Boonstra explained, the series represents a transition for his family moving from urban life to a rural life. It seemed, he and his wife had moved to the "middle of nowhere." Still, in rural Illinois, where windmills are ubiquitous, Boonstra appreciated how they always point "in a particular direction." This Boonstra took as a sign. Now living with less, living in the wide open prairie helped define what is important, who is

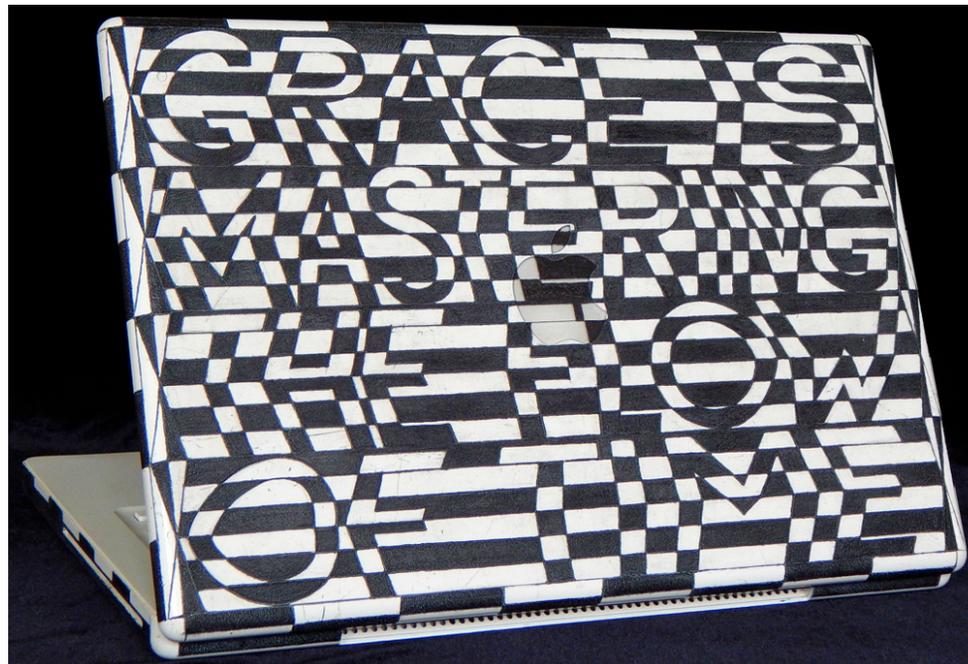
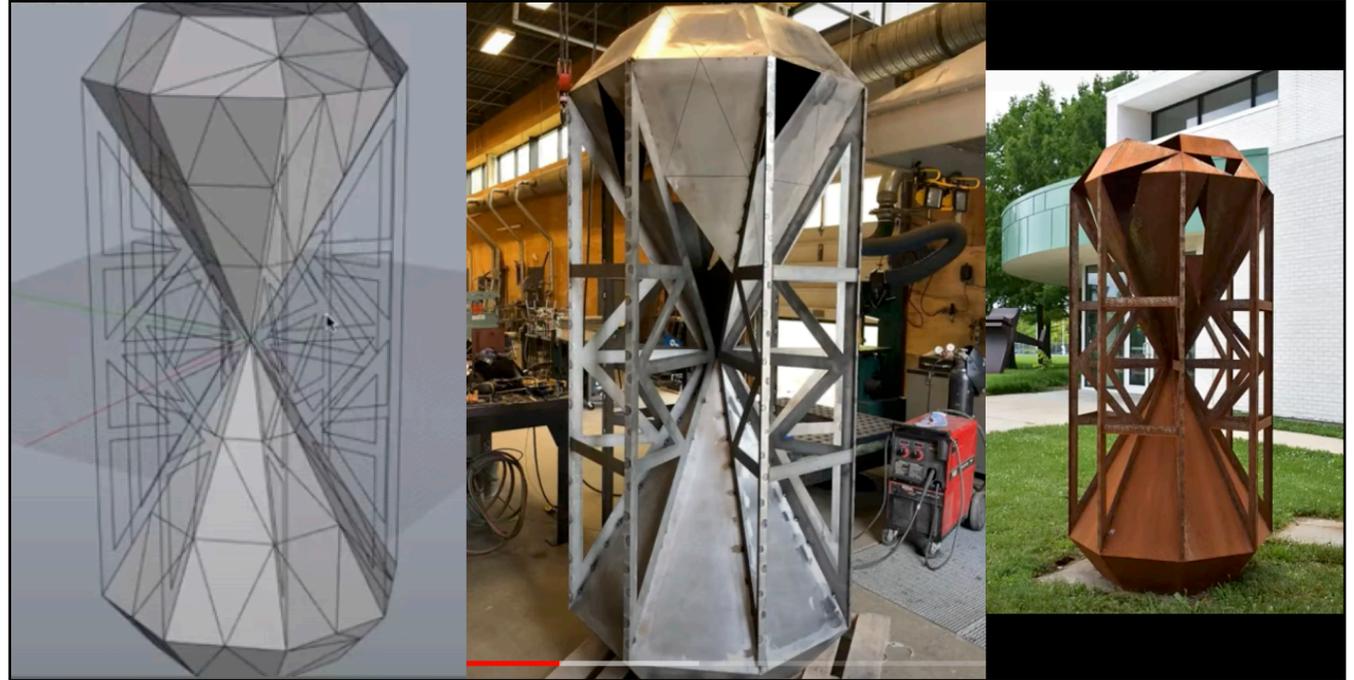
important, and what defines home. The subtitle says it all – *Nowhere IV: My Family is My Home*. Boonstra elaborated, "Nowhere is exactly the opposite, it is somewhere." Nowhere is the literal translation of utopia.

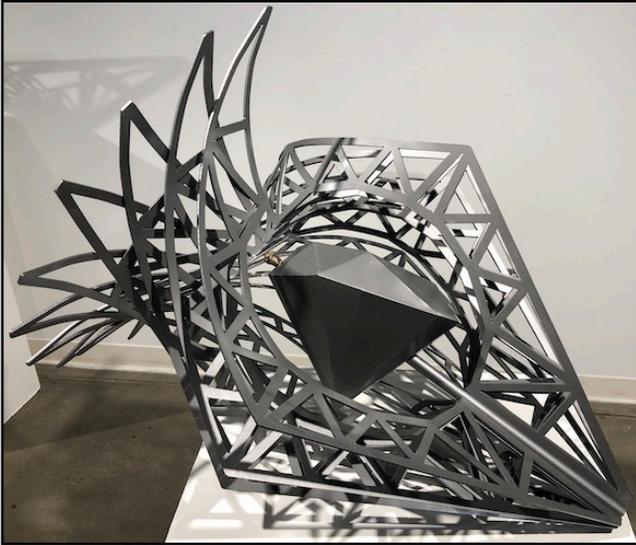
Aesthetically, this piece is a unity of opposites, two visual systems merged. *Nowhere IV* involves a diamond nucleus surrounded by what I read as an energy field. His dichotomy superimposes two distinct visual forms *working in tandem*. Boonstra characterized the arcing arrays as "scaffolding"; the kind used in building one's home.



RIGHT Matthew Boonstra, *The Passing*, an outdoor sculpture dedicated to the artist's mother who passed away in 2019. The process begins with computer sketches, to traditional metal fabrication, to final piece. Note the diamond shapes which relate to the *Nowhere* series.

BELOW Michael Dinges, *Pattern Recognition 3*, *Dead Laptop Series (Grace is Mastering the Flow of Time)*, 2018, engraved plastic, acrylic paint, 9x13x9" Top line begins: "Grace is"





Matthew Boonstra, *Nowhere IV, My Family is My Home*, 2016, bronze steel, 25x25x31"

The diamond symbolism is another matter altogether. From other works, we know it may represent the artist's mother, or more symbolically, the Boonstra family. Kathlene C. Boonstra passed away in 2019. Boonstra created an homage to his mother with an outdoor sculpture, a 12-foot high, computer-designed, hand built, metal sculpture of an hourglass titled, *The Passing*. The hourglass's two vessels are diamond-shaped.

In *Nowhere IV: My Family is My Home*, the convergence of two distinct visual fields—one solid (diamond) representing family, the other dynamic structures (building scaffolding)—coming together perhaps signifying the next generations of the Boonstra family.

#### VOWSAW

Vowsaw cuts to the heart of the matter: the semiotic power of words. Semiotics unpacks words and language laying bare sources and values and their cultural powers to shape identity and actions. Vows are a form of sacred language; they are a promise to perform. Vows, as the saw makes clear, have teeth and can bite. Bite can mean to take effect, be effective, function, act, have results, go as planned, succeed. To bite is to form a relationship.

The unity of opposites comes into visual play with the two-person saw; working together, the opposing forces of pushing the saw, then pulling the saw accomplish the vow's promise. The spoken words of the marriage vow symbolize the union of opposites as seen in the wedding band where the beginning and the end are the same thing in a circle.

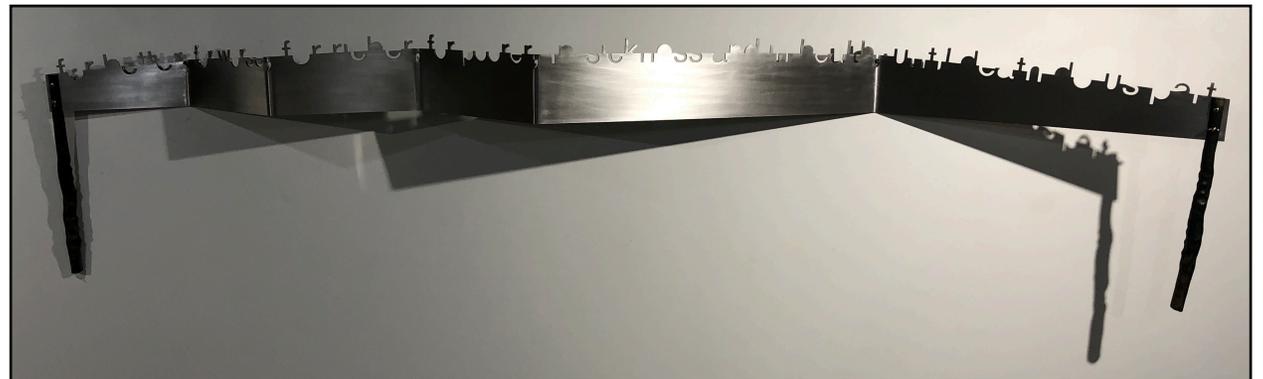
Consider how partners joined in wedlock exhibit varied personalities much as day and night form each other. Subjectivity and objectivity—the reversible positions of wedded partners—are but two ways of looking at the same experience.

#### MARRIAGE

The *Marriage* installation (cover) features a car tire resplendent in silver paint topped with a funnel of coal that completes the symbolism of diamond engagement ring nestled atop a gravel road of coal.

The Detroit auto industry had an unwritten, unsaid, implicit "marriage" with the city of Detroit that it would always be there with jobs for the city. The Detroit auto industry built the city. The slow decline of the Detroit auto industry deepened in the late 1960s and 1970s with job terminations escalating. Deindustrialization, racial conflict, white flight, lack of political vision, the oil crisis, and unfavorable corporate decisions led to the horrific and nightmarish collapse of the city.

If the silver tire/engagement ring stands as the Detroit auto industry, then the gravel road of coal may well be the people of Detroit. The citizens of Detroit were very much the energy that fueled the successes of the auto industry. *Marriage*, like *Have You Tried Walking?*, was made in 2012.



Matthew Boonstra, *Vowsaw*, 2015-2021, stainless steel, 11x86x21"

## HAVE YOU TRIED WALKING?

*Have You Tried Walking?* at first glance seems to be intended humor – a flexible nozzle with locking screw cap has been fitted atop a pair of legs. Intrigue deepens with the realization that the nozzle is for gasoline. Is title ironic, sarcastic, or a retort to what exactly?

The title is posed perhaps, sardonically, in an imaginary response to an implied critique of the auto industry and its reliance on fossil fuels.

The sculpture narrates with the human body being seen to metaphorically replace cars and gasoline as the means to get around in the world, to travel from home to work. Since travel by foot is impractical, the sculpture's deeper message begins to resonate.

Without cars and gasoline, we could not function efficiently. But the cars made in Detroit during the 1970s did not use gas as efficiently as the imports which were brought in further eroding the Detroit auto industry's viability and its jobs.

The sculpture's title challenges any criticism of simply switching to fuel-efficient foreign imports. To forsake American built cars is not necessarily the solution, yet the decision had ruinous ramifications. 2012, the year this sculpture was made was the year leading up to Detroit's official declaration of bankruptcy, the largest city to do so in American history. Boonstra's family worked in the Detroit auto industry.

Matthew Boonstra,  
*Have You Tried  
Walking?* 2012,  
steel, plaster



## POETIC UNIVERSALITY

Dinges and Boonstra question what is an object. What is its value, function, and purpose, and how does the object's value change and alter with each new context it is displayed in? What connotations do objects carry with them? What happens to these connotations when redirected into the context of a fine art museum? What values remain, which ones diminish, what new values attach? Dinges and Boonstra reuse the aesthetic (perceptual) and social (cultural) values they find in objects creating new considerations.

Michael Dinges focuses extrinsically on culture drawing attention to what it means to live in an age of manipulation in an overly commodified world under the sway of rapidly advancing digital technologies. Matthew Boonstra investigates layers of culture and its impact on lives with his intrinsic focus on family and their relationships to culture.

Dinges and Boonstra unpack oppositions. Both utilize everyday objects for the contradictions they represent and their potential as art. Dinges looks closely at

dichotomies throughout culture and specifically within new technologies questioning: valuable tool or manipulative diversion. Dinges celebrates tradition with his hand craft confronting the hegemonic, dehumanizing cookie-cutter mechanization of the markets. Boonstra scrutinizes paradoxes closer to home. Boonstra unpacks and weighs how certain life events affect his family. Boonstra celebrates the family's resolve and ingenuity to prevail against the unrelenting challenge to forge livelihoods in a post-industrial economy.

The artists share a desire to have their art seen as new ways of navigation. Dinges works his way through the relentless manipulations of the market, heralding handicraft as antidote to (and guide away from) commercialization. Boonstra seeks new ways of understanding and navigating the world. Above all, Boonstra foregrounds his personal mantra: "making is mending."

Their poetic statements stand visually on their own. Received notions of what a work of art can be are challenged. Rising above the personal, the artists articulate common concerns. Their complex, original works of art open new readings of interpersonal relationships, recognize interconnected communities, while navigating the shared reality.



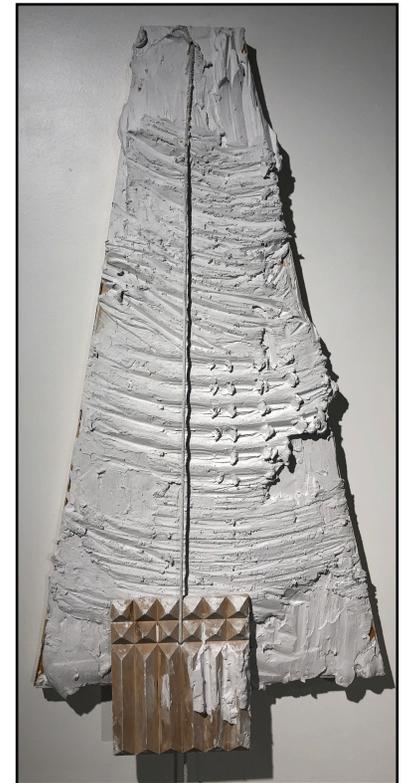
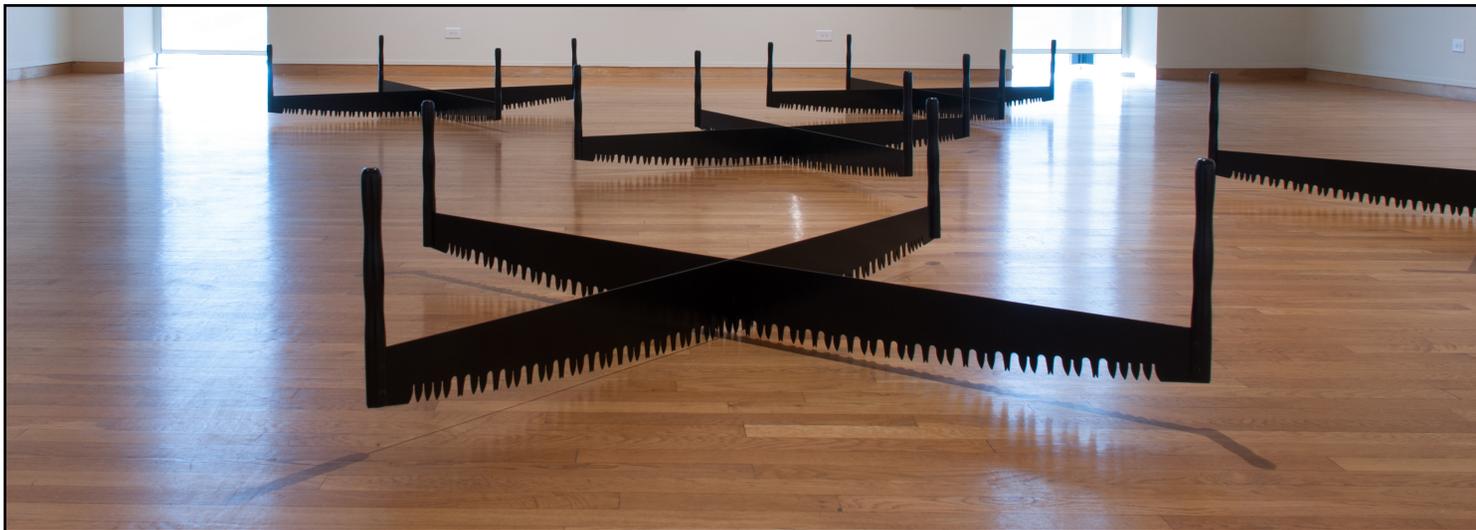
TOP LEFT  
Michael Dinges, *Pawn Shop, CO2*, 2019, steel, wood, plastic, 21x9x22"

Since Medieval Europe, three balls stood for the pawn shop. Carbon dioxide is represented by three molecules. The piece asks are we pawning our future with the use of fossil fuels?

ABOVE RIGHT Matthew Boonstra, *Manufacturing Sympathies*, 2009, video-sculpture installation, iron chips, magnets, steel,, plaster, used motor oil, paper; Detroit auto industry related

BELOW LEFT Dinges, *Spotted*, installation view, South Bend Museum of Art, 2019, the complete installation

BELOW RIGHT Boonstra, *Metronome*, 2021, plaster, wood, chicken wire; references time and performance



Michael Dinges, *PVC Drum* detail

Significantly, this humble saying, "Too Many Good Things in the Wrong Places" is a deep philosophy for the artist.

For too long, a "throw away" culture has developed to the point where such things as perfectly working smart phones are discarded for the "latest model."

Dinges combats this malaise with his art which often uses every day objects—laptops, vinyl siding, plastic buckets—turning the forlorn into works of art.





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