Markus Schinwald at Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

by mousse

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Mark Schinwald gives inanimate objects personalities of their own: they have good moods, bad moods, nervous tics, and psychological baggage. His paintings, sculptures, and installations have “issues,” in the

way that most relationships do. Conversely, he also imagines a world where a state of mind could give rise to an object. “What if,” the work asks, “a moment of anxiety could generate a neck brace?” Clearly, this gives a whole new meaning to what we say when we talk about prosthetics.

This is an impossible body. Some parts are painted, some are bagged, some stand straight, and others are perched up high. A network of metal rods holds them together, forming a central nervous system that allows each painting, sculpture, or piece of architecture to function as a dispersed limb of a single organism. As such, they belong with and fold into each other. Objects migrate into paintings, and bodies find a way to slip into objects. The flat surfaces of walls soften and take on the properties of fleshy skin or upholstered furniture, and cling to the paintings that hang on or inside them. The thin lines that cut through the space reappear on 19th-century portraits in the form of prostheses, and wooden sculptures cut from table legs contain that same sense of distortion.

Each element depends on another—*the way a hand depends on a wrist*—and it seems entirely possible that any change made to a painting would alter the shape of a sculpture or the angle of a wall on the other side of the room.

In many ways, this is what the future looks like—a cybernetic entanglement where bodies merge with matter and space has a consciousness of its own.

Until fairly recently, bodies and objects have been easy to tell apart. People put objects on their bodies and put their bodies on objects all the time, and they don’t usually lose their ability to distinguish between the two—*no one mistakes the neck for the necklace*, and everyone knows which is the finger and which is the phone. There has been a basic understanding of where the body begins and where it ends.

The history of technology, for some, is a story about the body and its dependency on artificial forms. Used to enhance (and at times to replace) the body, objects have helped develop a more efficient and productive body, one capable of overcoming its vulnerabilities.

Markus Schinwald imagines new, other, and sometimes impossible types of bodies and ways of thinking about bodies. His paintings, sculptures, videos, performances, and installations confuse the boundaries between bodies, objects, spaces, and behaviors, and complicate the norms that govern the ways we understand how they all coexist. “I’m not trying to rob people of their personalities, but to give objects personalities, too.”

Schinwald’s works have good moods, bad moods, nervous tics, and psychological baggage. They have “issues” in the way most relationships do. Conversely, the artist also imagines a world where a state of mind could give rise to an object. “What if,” the work asks, “a moment of anxiety could generate a neck brace?”

In its most basic form, the prosthesis is a technology that joins two disparate parts to create something new. When inscribed within the norms and conventions of human progress, the prosthesis exists to correct a fault, fulfill a void, and make an impossible body possible again.

But when freed from those norms, the prosthesis is able to make a body impossible again. Buying minor 19th-century portraits at auction, Schinwald carefully alters the images by adding incoherent characteristics such as surgical masks, straightjackets, neck braces, nose piercings, or even orthodontic apparatuses. These new details manipulate as much as they decorate. The types of portraits he purchases proliferated during the Biedermeier era (1815-48), when restrictive political policies and censorship resulted in conservative paintings of poised figures in buttoned-up shirts and flawless hairdos. Schinwald intervenes by adding possible defects, and imagines how the sitter’s interior mental state might manifest itself in the form of an artificial prosthesis, albeit one with a purpose that remains unclear. One can only

presume that should the figure's mood change, or a sudden moment of panic or joy emerge, the prosthesis might disappear or readjust. In other words, the object is not a defect at all.

Similarly, Schinwald's sculptures of wooden table legs inject the properties of life into inanimate objects. Sawed off from Chippendale-style tables, the sculptures are placed around the room as if an object's erratic movements had been captured in a series of frozen moments… Uninhibited by their object hood, they are instilled with a heightened sense of agency and, as such, become deviant objects—they *bend*, they *stretch*, they *crawl*, they *itch*, they *flirt*. Some even wrap themselves around bronze poles and s p r e a d their legs.

The mechanism that holds the paintings and sculptures together is the room itself. Schinwald establishes an *architecture of dependency* among padded walls, brass rods, wooden legs, and painted faces, with each part of this network unfolding through the space like a dismembered limb or an artificial joint.

It seems counterintuitive that something that constrains or distorts a body can be what a body wants or needs. But Schinwald's work is less about celebrating fetishistic dysfunction than it is about challenging the ways we think about the nature of dysfunction itself. Inserting impediments not only disrupts the natural tendency to correct, replace, or repair, but also imagines a state where concealing a problem is more dysfunctional than putting it on display.

This would be a world where knees happily *twitch* whenever they come close to their favorite doorknob, and where metal objects experience the same moments of despair or excitement as the rest of us.

In his 1962 novel *The Ticket That Exploded*, William S. Burroughs imagines that the human body contains within it a set of "pre-recordings" that behave like parasites, always ready to take over. "Carry Corders of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your pre-recordings."

The only way to fight back is to record the pre-recordings and then cut them up, displace them, play them against each other, and allow the ensuing distortions and hallucinations to produce another world.

Schinwald, like Burroughs, does what good science fiction does: He formulates a critique of preexisting norms and laws, devises ways to short-circuit them, and proposes other possible (or impossible) alignments and alliances between bodies, objects, emotions, and spaces… His is a future where inefficiency and dysfunction are not only normal, but entirely efficient and functional.

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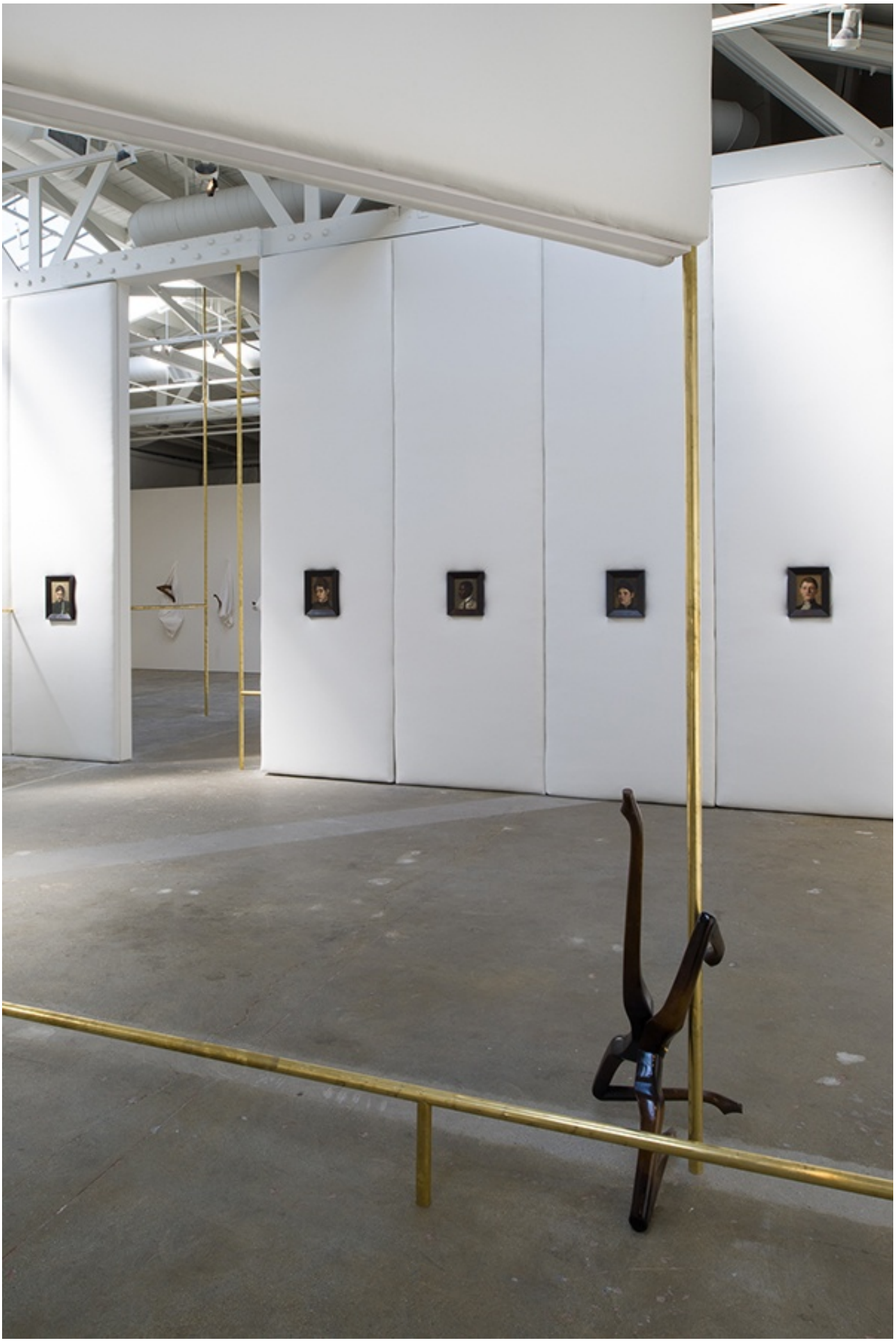
at Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

until 13 December 2014



Markus Schinwald installation views at Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2014

Courtesy: Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Johnna Arnold.