



EMBODIED MINDS  
AND ENMINDED  
BODIES: MICHAEL  
REES'S SYNTHETIC  
CELLS — PLAYING  
WITH THE VIRTUAL  
GERMINATION OF  
JOY AND WISDOM

Edward Shanken

"I really felt that you were breaking up the atmosphere around me, that you were clearing the way to allow me to advance, to provide room for an impossible space for that in me which was as yet only potential, for a whole virtual germination which must be sucked into life by the space that offered itself. I... have tried to get hold of things, to create within ourselves spaces for life, spaces which did not exist and which did not seem to belong in actual space."

- Antonin Artaud  
*The Nerve Meter*, (1925)<sup>1</sup>

The opportunity to see a new body of work by Michael Rees is cause for excitement, because there is a good chance that you will see something unlike anything that you ever have seen before. That is certainly the case with his solo exhibition, *Synthetic Cells: Site and (Para)Site*, at Grounds For Sculpture. In accord with Artaud, who has been an enduring influence on the artist, *Synthetic Cells* offers the "potential, for a whole virtual germination... which did not exist and which did not seem to belong in actual space." Rees's "impossible space" creates the possibility for seriously playing with the multiple valences of experience in ways that challenge conventional epistemological and ontological constructs, offering a glimpse into alternative systems of knowledge and ways of being.

The striking originality and potentiality of Rees's work was already evident in 1991 at his first solo show in New York at 303 Gallery. This exhibition cemented in my mind that the artist, then in his early thirties, had a powerful and unique voice. It demonstrated an inventive and virtuosic handling of materials and concepts, generating extraordinary juxtapositions that were at once surrealistically contorted yet strangely harmonious. This slightly perverse sculptural athleticism was joined with a disarmingly intimate psychological self-probing, in which the artist courageously exhibited uncensored emotional states and sculpted body



parts alongside raw construction materials. Humor and absurdity abounded in this exhibition. Indeed, Rees's work, like the artist who makes it, consistently orbits the comical, engaging in forms of clowning around that balance the seriousness of its endeavors, offering an escape valve from the intense, if not uncomfortable, probity presented to us. The clown, for Rees, is itself a conflicted figure, whose smile is at once a frown. [fig. 1]

Whereas the rest of us intentionally obscure the masks we wear, hiding the artifice and emotional complexity of our identities, the clown, although hidden behind the



mask that defines it, openly reveals its artifice and emotional conflict. Like Rees's YouTube profile icon—a clown head that simultaneously smiles and cries—the tensions in Rees's work cut both ways. The artist's use of humor extends the promise of catharsis, but the work simultaneously denies and complicates it. This combination of elements set my head spinning. I had never experienced anything like it before. The 303 Exhibition offers an important roadmap to Rees's oeuvre, including *Synthetic Cells*, which expands on the artist's highly inventive and sure-handed use of materials, masterful and conflicted juxtapositions, insistent self-probing, and relentless humor,

LEFT [fig. 1]

Michael Rees

**Long Stom Recursive**  
2016

aluminum, glass,  
plexiglass, photograph,  
augmented reality  
application

RIGHT [fig. 2]

Michael Rees

**Converge Ghraib Bag**

Fiberglass over Styrofoam  
and Steel Frame, with  
Concrete Base, 2008.  
(Attendant animation  
accessed through QR  
code)

which can be at once uplifting and discomfiting.

The first thing I noticed upon entering the Grounds For Sculpture exhibition is that *Synthetic Cells* is, above all, an installation. The exhibition comprises a total architectural field that we, the audience, cohabit. This sense of cohabitation stems from a combination of elements: the human scale of the individual “cells,” their formal, ephemeral consistency, the buoyant density with which they occupy the gallery, their hovering suspension from the ceiling in the gallery, and their spatial relationships with each other. The installation mode of *Synthetic Cells* is a radical departure for Rees, whose exhibitions typically consist of individual sculptural objects or a single monumental public sculpture, as in *Ghraib Bag* [fig. 2]. When exhibited together, Rees's objects attain a cumulative force. However, *Synthetic Cells* is the artist's first show that so strongly asserts the primacy of the installation as a whole, indivisible work. At the same time, each of the cells is a unique object unto itself that demands contemplation on its own terms as a discrete entity. Following Artaud, Rees has created a space of possibilities that enables virtual germination by sucking us into itself. I interpret this virtual germination as a florescence of the potentiality of the integration of mind and body, of the sculptural objects, and of our co-presence in/with the work

as an emergent, hybrid amalgam of human and non-human actors.

As with the conflicted nature of the clown, the architecture of *Synthetic Cells* presents us with many tensions. These include the relationship between the overall installation and the discrete physical objects that comprise it, the disjunction between ideal geometry and actual objects, the relationship between physical sculptures and the virtual “para(sites),” and the transit between twentieth century modernism and twenty-first century modes of knowledge and art production. As the artist has stated, “I place strange experiences in a conflicting context to create novel interactions in the mind.” These tensions and conflicts operate on our experience of the work both intellectually and viscerally, with the immediacy and directness of our embodied encounters informing our cognitive processing, and vice versa.

At its architectonic core, *Synthetic Cells* consists of seven pneumatic ten-foot plastic cubes. The alchemical element of air symbolizes both structure and conscious realization, both formation and abstraction—a fitting description of the work. Each cell is colorful and transparent, enabling us to see both the external and internal chambers. The internal chambers form apertures that meet the external surface, creating passages that meander through the cubes, like intestines, blood vessels, or



TOP [fig. 3]

Theo Botschuijver &  
Hannie van den Dop  
*Corpocinema*  
1967

BOTTOM [fig. 4]

Haus-Rucker-Co,  
Documenta, Kassel  
*Oasis No. 7*  
1972



synapses. These organic passages lend these objects a sense of vitality, like a living organ: a heart, a lung, a liver. Although we cannot physically enter them, their scale invites us to imagine ourselves inside them or moving through them as though flying through a wormhole. They become portals for exploring the extension of our own organic vitality, as we envision projecting ourselves into and beyond their space-time continuum.

The fascinating history of pneumatic structures in experimental art and design provides an important context for considering *Synthetic Cells*. Key landmarks include expanded cinema events such as *Corpocinema* (1967) [fig. 3] by the Eventstructure Research Group (Jeffrey Shaw, Theo Botschuijver, Tjebbe van Tijen, Sean Wellesley-Miller) in the Netherlands; and the utopian architectural interventions of the Austrian collective Haus-Rucker-Co (Laurids Ortner, Günter Zamp Kelp, Klaus Pinter, Manfred Ortner), most famously *Oase No. 7*, for Documenta 1972 in Kassel. [fig. 4] Although they share a formal similarity, these earlier public works, informed respectively by John Latham's theory of "event structure" and the Situationist theory of "détournement," were produced during a highly charged political moment and were motivated by intentions that differ from *Synthetic Cells*. *Corpocinema* took place in open-air public spaces in central Rotterdam and Amsterdam,

where an inflatable, twenty-three-foot-diameter dome served as a projection surface for a performative, multimedia spectacle. *Oase No. 7* was intended as a space of relaxation for a single occupant, simultaneously public and self-enclosed. Complete with small palm trees, this clear, womb-like sphere spilled out, bug-eyed, from an emergency exit on the façade of the Fridericianum, one of the oldest museums in Europe. *Oase* suspended a single occupant in a liminal space that was simultaneously connected with the museum yet outside of it, literally in the city but isolated in a bubble. Rees's work plays on this history but moves in other directions.

Whereas *Corpocinema* and *Oase* were purposely staged in public spaces in order to intervene in them, *Synthetic Cells* inhabits a gallery space, separate from the flux of everyday life. It situates itself within the realm of museological authority, drawing on the privilege of that site in order to operate on its audience. In this context, *Synthetic Cells* offers a place for playful interaction that is primarily private and contemplative. But this place is not one of simple romantic reverie. Rather, like Rees's use of humor, it extends the promise of catharsis while simultaneously denying and complicating it. When interacting with *Synthetic Cells*, we are persistently confronted with the primacy of the human body and all the nervousness and



LEFT [fig. 5]  
 Larry Bell  
**Cube**  
 1966  
 Vacuum coated glass  
 12 1/8 x 12 1/8 x 12 1/8 in.  
 Gift of the Frederick R.  
 Weisman Company  
 Digital Image © 2020 Museum  
 Associates / LACMA. Licensed  
 by Art Resource, NY

RIGHT [fig. 6]  
 Michael Rees  
**Synthetic Cells**  
 2018  
 installation shot

anxiety associated with the meat of corporeal existence, the status of which has become increasingly destabilized with the advent of “para(site)ic” forms of augmented presence. As the artist has written, “The [political] left and the right both fear the ecstatic body so it seems like a good place to start.”<sup>2</sup> The ecstatic body is a body that refuses the authority of reason, a body that recognizes and is driven by its own corporeal desires and delights. It is an uncontrolled, uncontrollable animal body, an enemy of the state, all the more so when that body simultaneously coexists across meat-space and virtual space. One might interpret Rees’s embrace of the ecstatic body as a countercultural gesture that invites us to “turn our backs on the political moment” in the way that a “child in serious play turns their back on the adults.” Rees shifts our focus from the idealized spaces

of authority—the museum, the White House, the word—to the messy places where physical and virtual mind-bodies dance together in willful defiance of empowered institutions.

Similarly, Rees’s pneumatic sculptures reference modernist formalist strategies but push beyond them and the utopianism they embody. They are commercially manufactured, as in the tradition of minimalist sculpture. The craftsmanship is superb. The materiality of the transparent colored plastic skins—clear, blue, red, pink, and yellow—combines both painterly and sculptural qualities. As one moves around the space, the layers overlap and produce a kaleidoscope of complementary colors, referencing color theory and kinetic sculpture. Unlike the rectilinear objects of minimalist sculpture, Rees’s inflatable structures are not hard-edged; they

are, as their title suggests, more like organic cells than Platonic cubes. Indeed, their geometry is rounded, pinched, imperfect, somewhere between a bouncy castle (the idea for which has been credited to Haus-Rucker-Co), Claes Oldenburg’s twenty-foot-tall *Giant Icebag* (1970) and Larry Bell’s glass cubes since the mid-1960s. [fig. 5]

The multiple chambers of Rees’s inflatable structures are much more organic than *Corpocinema* or *Oase*. As we gaze into the colorful transparent cells, we may not fully appreciate that the pressure must be carefully calibrated between the internal and external chambers in order to maintain the appropriate shape. I believe, however, that we intuit this delicate balancing act. On some level we understand Rees’s pneumatic sculptures as surrogates for living organs or even living beings. Like them, our internal organs and metabolic functions are systemically interconnected through feedback loops that regulate their behavior in order to maintain homeostasis, e.g., maintaining our body temperature at 98.6 degrees. The cells exemplify key principles of cybernetics and systems biology in a way that we experience and understand kinesthetically. In other words, we do not need to possess a theoretical understanding of the scientific ideas in order to implicitly recognize some basic principles through embodied, experiential knowledge. By seeing the internal organization of Rees’s work, we can relate to his

inflatable plastic cubes as cellular bodies like our own, the particular internal organization of which is held in balance at the systems level. That perception, or, rather, apperception, links our experience of the quasi-organic cells to our own organic bodies. It opens up spaces of possibility, of virtual germination, to reconsider the relationship between human and non-human entities. In this way, *Synthetic Cells* also exemplifies key concepts in object-oriented ontology.<sup>4</sup> This intellectual movement shifts Western philosophy away from its conventional privileging of the human at the center of all ontological and epistemological considerations and attempts to consider what a non-human ontology might comprise. Again, we need not possess a theoretical understanding of the philosophical ideas in order to implicitly grasp some of their basic principles through the embodied knowledge derived from our experience of the artwork and the questions that it provokes.

The physical structure of the inflatable objects is an important starting point for our consideration of *Synthetic Cells*, [fig. 6] but it is really just a starting point. On the surface of each cell is a machine-readable image, or tag, that opens up a deeper interiority, a virtual artistic realm. We can access these virtual artworks on touch-screen pads mounted on wheeled carts, which we roll along with us while exploring the installation. As we focus the pad on a tag, a virtual

artwork created by Rees or one of the six collaborating artists (Claudia Hart, Chris Manzione, Will Pappenheimer, John Craig Freeman, Tamiko Thiel, and Carla Gannis) pops up on the screen, superimposed on the physical installation space. In contrast to virtual reality (VR), which refers to the experience of a completely immersive and autonomous virtual world, in the augmented reality (AR) that we experience in *Synthetic Cells*, virtual objects are layered onto the fabric of the physical world in which we remain perceptually embedded. It lies outside the scope of this essay to address these individual works; suffice it to say, as Rees has stated, that the AR content offers the audience “a glimpse of... [an] impossibility at the edge of your thoughts.”<sup>5</sup>

Augmented reality requires no physical object as its substrate, as in Sander Veenhof and Mark Skwarek’s “WeARinMoMA” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on October 9, 2010. For this unofficial happening, AR artworks were virtually “hung” throughout the museum, and the audience could view them on their own smart devices that displayed them based on proximity via geo-location. The combination of AR with sculptural objects is far less common. Indeed, there are relatively few accomplished sculptors who also have expertise using the tools and techniques of digital media to wed the physical and the virtual in a mutually reinforcing way. Rees—

who studied with Joseph Beuys in Dusseldorf, earned his MFA in sculpture at Yale, and has worked intensively with computer-aided design since the early 1990s—is a pioneer at this nexus of art practice. In *Synthetic Cells*, we may examine the augmented objects and scenes and virtually navigate them via the touchscreen, rotating them, moving them from one location to another, and so on. The AR objects are animated and three-dimensional, which greatly heightens the vitality of the experience. As Rees has stated, “I aspire that you will be moved, as if you had seen a flock of butterflies.”<sup>6</sup> So, in addition to the implied vitality expressed by the organicism of the multi-chambered cells, and the sense of bodily connection we have while wormholing through these quasi-biotic objects, we are invited to enter a second, virtual wormhole to interact with AR objects (including a flock of butterflies) that float in space, precisely layered on the cells in the installation.

Artist Mario Merz associated neon with the alchemical element of fire. It follows that any form of artificial light, including the screen-based AR artworks in *Synthetic Cells*, can be associated with the energy, assertiveness, passion, and transformation that characterize fire, adding a further element of animating vitality to the work. As the product of digital computers, or surrogate brains, the AR of *Synthetic Cells* might be likened to what philosopher

[fig. 7]

Jean Siméon Chardin  
*Soap Bubbles*  
ca. 1733–34  
Oil on canvas  
24 × 24 7/8 in.  
Wentworth Fund, 1949

Gilbert Ryle called the “ghost in the machine”: in this case, the virtual “mind” that inhabits the physical “body” of the sculptural objects. This interpretation, however, is misleading. Ryle’s theory contests the mind-body split that became dogma after Descartes, and which shaped (if not perverted) Western notions of cognition and consciousness for some four hundred years. From this perspective, the existential counterargument to Descartes’ famous statement, “I think therefore I am,” might be, “I am therefore I think.” By joining the physical and the virtual, Rees’s work questions the mind-body split by equally activating our embodied minds and our “en-minded” bodies.

The revolutionary spirit and utopianism that emerged in the 1960s no longer resonates compellingly as we approach the 2020s. The advent of neo-liberalism as global economic policy, the ill-fated Arab Spring, the Trump travesty, the looming Brexit, and the rise of fascism all demonstrate a turn away from the strides made by cultural criticism and activism over the last half-century towards equality, freedom, environmental protection, and other progressive values. In the early 1950s, when the US and former USSR initiated experiments with hydrogen bombs, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists advanced the Doomsday Clock to two minutes before midnight, the closest it had ever been to nuclear Armageddon. In 2018, amidst rising tensions



between the US and North Korea, the clock again advanced to two minutes before midnight: the first time in over six decades that the world has been so close to self-destruction. In addition to the fear of nuclear catastrophe, factors contributing to global precarity now include climate change, the “misuse of information technology,” and the “vulnerabilities of democracies to disinformation.”<sup>7</sup>

In this context, and particularly with respect to what Rees calls the “failure of criticality” (the inability of rational discourse to prevail in the arena of politics and in the public sphere), the artist decided that he “wanted to do something joyous.” Indeed, his inflatable *Synthetic Cells* brings to mind the joys of beach balls and pool floats, of bouncy castles and blowing bubbles. They are literally ebullient (the Latin root of which means to bubble).

In this sense, they recall Jean Chardin's painting *Soap Bubbles* (1733/4), a meditation on the transience of life. [fig. 7] Chardin offers a warning against idleness, while also treating the playful activity as serious. Two hundred years earlier, philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote, "Children's games are hardly games. Children are never more serious than when they play." Arguably, the boy in *Soap Bubbles* should be responsible and mend his tatty jacket before amusing himself. At the same time, he could not be more serious about his ludic task. Chardin recognizes and celebrates this focused attention as virtuous in itself.

In contrast to Kant's polarization of seriousness and play, Goethe argued that "true art can result only from the close union of seriousness and play."<sup>8</sup> Schiller claimed that "human beings play only when they are in the fullest sense of the word human beings and they are only fully human beings when they play."<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, play has been an important component of experimental art for at least half a century. As artists abandoned the Kantian pretense of disinterested contemplation and embraced Dewey's emphasis on art as experience, they increasingly invited audiences to take on an explicitly active role while interacting or playing with the artwork. Such play, which characterizes diverse strains of kinetic art, new tendency, happenings, and art and technology since the mid-twentieth century,

must not be dismissed as frivolous but rather respected as a serious aesthetic strategy that transforms the relationship between subject and object, and between artist, artwork and audience. For example, Thomas Mann's notion of play "in deep seriousness" has pervaded Roy Ascott's theory, practice, and pedagogy of cybernetic art of the 1960s and 1970s and telematic art since the 1980s, forging a historical link between the mid-century ethos of interactivity and new media art.<sup>10</sup>

Rees, clowning around in all seriousness, has taken on the role of Chardin's adolescent male bubble-blower. With seemingly insurmountable problems on a global scale, one might argue that to make, look at, or write about art is of no greater consequence than blowing soap bubbles. However, *Synthetic Cells* joins seriousness and play, demanding an integrated mind-body concentration on a complexly layered, ludic environment. Rees succeeds in focusing our attention on deeply serious forms of play, novel forms of engagement unlike anything we have experienced before. Through experiences that reintegrate mind and body, the artist pushes our sensoriums, broadens our sensitivity, and expands our consciousness.

Perhaps part of the "failure of criticality" lies in its failure to be sufficiently playful. If, following Schiller, we are only fully human beings when we play,

and if the only way we can solve complex global problems is by concentrating our full humanity on them, then we must, as Goethe argued, join seriousness and play. The serious/play dichotomy itself must be challenged, as *Synthetic Cells* implicitly does. Rees's goal to "do something joyous" should not be dismissed as a retreat from criticality, per se, but rather must be understood as a keen, suprarational insight into the importance of reintegrating joy into serious artistic and intellectual work.

Let's presume that criticality has failed due to its preoccupation with the same left-brain, hyper-intellectual rationalism that has fueled techno-scientific culture for the last five hundred years. For all its remarkable accomplishments, the anthropocentric madness of this same techno-scientific culture has precipitated climate change (to say nothing of other forms of mass annihilation). International efforts to counteract our self-destructive tendencies have not gained the traction necessary to quell global warming. Therefore, it would be completely irrational to continue to perpetuate that same form of criticality, for to do so would only hasten our doom. It must be recognized that we have cultivated great knowledge but not the great compassion and wisdom that are necessary to properly deploy that knowledge. Perhaps there is great wisdom in the joyfulness that Rees has manifested in *Synthetic*

*Cells*. Perhaps joy contains, within itself, its own form of wisdom; and, by turn, wisdom contains, within itself, its own form of joy. We cannot access these forms of insight by critical thinking alone. *Synthetic Cells* offers us a playground to engage the fullness of our humanity, to experience the unity of joy and wisdom through our embodied minds and enminded bodies—to be part of a virtual germination of new worlds, experimental paradigms of understanding, compassion, and polyvalent forms of being.

- 1 Antonin Artaud: *Selected Writings*, ed. and intro., Susan Sontag, U Cal P, 1988, p 79.
- 2 Michael Rees, Artist's Statement, Oct 13, 2018. <http://michaelrees.org/2018-synthetic-cells-site-and-parasite/>
- 3 Michael Rees, Email with the author, July 1, 2019.
- 4 Mara-Johana Kölmel makes a similar observation in "Contagious Codes and Plastic Visions." Exhibition essay for Michael Rees. *Pneumatopia*. Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas 2018.
- 5 Michael Rees, Artist's Statement, Oct 13, 2018. <http://michaelrees.org/2018-synthetic-cells-site-and-parasite/>
- 6 Michael Rees, Artist's Statement, Oct 13, 2018. <http://michaelrees.org/2018-synthetic-cells-site-and-parasite/>
- 7 The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists <<https://thebulletin.org/2018-doomsday-clock-statement>> Cited April 30, 2018.
- 8 Goethe, "The Collector and his Circle" (1799), Letter 8, Section 6, p 159.
- 9 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. Letter (Dover, 2004, c. 1794): p 107. (Letter 15, paragraph 9)
- 10 Thomas Mann, "The Artist and Society" 1952, quoted in Roy Ascott, "The Construction of Change," 1964, and in "Telenoia," 1993, reprinted in Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*. Ed. E Shanken, 2004.