ART PAPERS
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DEVORAH SPERBER
ROANOKE, VA

In her catalog essay for the exhibition *Devorah Sperber: A Strange Sense of Déjà Vu*, Stephanie Cash makes the observation that Sperber's work "...embraces the dematerialization of the art object in the age of digital reproduction" [Taubman Museum of Art; March 20—May 31, 2009]. Coupling Lucy Lippard's concept from the late 1960s with a slight alteration of Walter Benjamin's well-known phrase provides a concise description of Sperber's interest in both the science and art of seeing. Here, science entails the biological functions of the eye and brain and their interconnectedness. The art of seeing lies in attention and the subjectivity of sight. That is, as the mechanism of the eye presents information to the brain, the tasks of recognition, construction, recreation, and interpretation are accomplished within the context of myriad mental and emotional factors. Quoting Jonah Lehrer's book *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, Cash points out in her essay that "'...to look is to create what you see.... Reality is not out there waiting to be witnessed; reality is made by the mind.'" Similarly, Sperber's project reveals that the artwork is "made" by the viewer, whether experiencing an object firsthand or through photographic reproduction—a remarkable though challenging truth about sight and subjectivity that supports Duchamp's ideas about the essential creativity and collaborative role of the viewer and the spirit of Barthes' appeal for the "birth of the reader."

For hundreds of years, artists have explored and speculated about the process of seeing. Among them are Leonardo, Holbein, Vermeer, Cézanne, Seurat, Albers, Hofmann, Dalí, Hockney, Close, and more recently Finch and Kentridge. Their inquiries along scientific and intuitive paths have contributed to our understanding of sight and prompted advances in artistic styles, media, and treatment of subject matter—that is, play towards ambiguity, investigation of abstraction, dissolution of form. Sperber's approach is unique in its conceptual, formal, and experiential multi-dimensionality. It addresses issues of sight in general, though there is an emphasis on the process of looking at art, especially through photographic reproductions of art-historical paintings or images from popular culture. Sperber explores this two-dimensional visual source by constructing elaborate pixelated fields of three-dimensional form; her media includes everyday objects like spools of colored thread, multi-colored pen caps, and chenille stems. She often employs thousands of these items in a single work, and thus is a participant in the culture of compulsiveness and transfiguration pioneered by Tara Donovan. But whereas Donovan operates in a realm of poetry and improvisation, Sperber's repetitious use of familiar objects is preconceived and more clinical, located at the intersection of aesthetics and science. Sperber relies on repetition out of necessity, too, as each individual object functions as a "low-tech pixel."

Accompanying each abstract assemblage or sculpture is a viewing device, a clear acrylic globe or convex mirror that serves to unite and focus Sperber's pixelated assemblages and sculptures. Looking into one of these, a suddenly sharper image appears—a visual presence that more closely links us to the reproduction and the original, but where the original is a ghost of the reproduction. This presence by absence is another reminder of the uncertainty of what we see. In conjunction with contemporary image culture, Sperber's work underlines the primariness of the photographic reproduction—instead of the original artwork. As we engage with different views and visual impressions through the nine exquisite works on display, our attention turns to the *activity* of sight. Orchestrating play between object, image, eye, and brain, Sperber sets up this activity as a kind of happening.

—Paul Ryan

Devorah Sperber, installation view of *A Strange Case of Déjà Vu* (courtesy of the artist and the Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA)