

Don't Make That Face: The Weavings of Lia Cook

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I recently encountered the term *affordance*, coined in 1977 by the psychologist James J. Gibson. Arguing against the perception of discrete qualities to which an observer then adds meaning, Gibson posits a more immediate recognition of what actions a thing (object, person, surface) affords. The affordance is located neither in the perceiver nor the perceived, but is rather a kind of second-order relation, pointing “two ways, to the environment and to the observer.” (Gibson, 141)

Affordances are properties taken with reference to the observer. They are neither physical nor phenomenal. (Gibson, 143)

An affordance is not bestowed upon an object by a need of an observer and his act of perceiving it. The object offers what it does because it is what it is. (Gibson, 139)

The postbox “invites” the mailing of a letter, the handle “wants to be grasped,” and things “tell us what to do with them.” (Gibson, 138)

The affordance of an object is what the infant begins by noticing. The meaning is observed before the substance and surface, the color and form, are seen as such. (Gibson, 134)

One way to talk about an artist's work is to talk about what it *is*, to treat it as an endpoint. This is legitimate. But it's not the only way to punctuate the circuit that contains the making and viewing of art and I am curious what happens when we take the work as the starting point, when we come to know the work by asking what the work produces, what it generates, or, borrowing Gibson's term, what the work *affords*.

When I first encountered Lia Cook's work, hanging in a Chicago gallery many years ago I was struck by its scale, its technical virtuosity, its sheer visual impact. I want to get this out of the way—to say yes to the high craft of the work, yes to its virtuosity, yes to the fascinating complexity that computer-assisted weaving makes possible, yes to scale that dwarfs us, yes to the irresistible swimminess of old family photos, and no to thinking that any of those things are the locus of the work's most insistent call.

In a review of a later show for the journal *Textile*, I described my first encounter with Cook's work:

Approaching one piece after the next, I became acutely aware of how the woven construction of the image frustrated my attempts to resolve that image. At a certain distance I could only see image, not thread. At another distance I could only see thread, not image. Standing at the precise threshold demarcating these two possible views of the work, and rocking first forward then back, I found that the resulting perceptual confusion released a particular affective response – something in proximity of grief or longing though not exactly either of those. Something that in a story would be evoked by the word *ago*. (Leemann, 333)

It is a common experience among viewers of Cook's work—this intense affective response—and it is one that will be entirely misattributed by anyone viewing documentation of her work on the page or screen. The still image deceives—it pretends the work is singular, it pretends the work is fixed, stays the same. With performance and other live art forms, we know that documentation is unreliable and cannot produce what the work itself produces. But with an essentially flat, frontally viewed image/object we think the photo of the work essentially does what the work itself does. But with

Cook's work this isn't the case. And why it isn't the case is at the heart of what her work *does*, of how it *behaves*.

The experience of Cook's works on the page or from a fixed viewpoint will always have a false concreteness to it. The work is made to be encountered live and by a mobile viewer, behaves live with a complexity that does not translate into documentation. On the page, or in stillness, the thresholds that are the distinguishing mark of the work just don't function. So you may press your face against the page, you may even smell fresh ink, but you will discover nothing of the perceptual bifurcation built into Cook's works by the relationship they take up with your eyes, your steps, your desire.

An encounter with Cook's work is an absolutely satisfying aesthetic experience, but her work affords something else that both exceeds the work's value as an art object and folds back into its value as such. What the work affords is a nuanced and rich experience of how things digital and things analog *behave*. Recall that in Gibson's theory, the affordance belongs neither to the object nor to the viewer. If it has a location, it is in the interaction. And so here, the embedded lesson on the nature of the digital and the analog belongs neither to the work nor to the viewer, but is located rather in the relationship between how Cook has constructed her work and how evolution has structured our perceptual systems.

The digital exists within the analog. The digital is a special and limited case of the analog. Discrete information does not exist outside of an analog matrix, outside of a continuum that includes the material, the affective, the live. Seeking language for my experience of Cook's work, I encounter the writing of Anthony Wilden, precise and often beautiful, moving fluidly between the terse language of mathematical logic and the poetics of the physical world. Sometimes the two modes collide in such singular phrases as "there simply aren't any gaps or holes in the natural world." (Wilden, 178)

The analog (continuum) is a set which includes the digital (discontinuum) as a subset. (Wilden, 189)

The notion of the discrete being borne by the continuous is an interesting one, for it can be read as corresponding to the relationship between energy and information: continuous energy processes bear both (analog) differences and (digital) distinctions. Energy interferences in the channel contribute noise, and noise, as [Gregory] Bateson has pointed out, is the only possible source of new patterns. It is 'noise' in the genetic code which constitutes random variation in evolution. Information, by definition, is not random, and the 'noise' does not long remain as such, because of the adaptive characteristics of goalseeking open systems (language, minds, societies, organisms, ecosystems). (Wilden, 169-70)

There are thus two kinds of DIFFERENCE involved, and the distinction between them is essential. Analog differences are differences of magnitude, frequency, distribution, pattern, organization, and the like. Digital differences are those such as can be coded into DISTINCTIONS and OPPOSITIONS, and for this, there must be discrete elements with well-defined boundaries. In this sense, the sounds of speech are analog; phonology and the alphabet are digital. . . . Similarly, in order for the analog differences of presence and absence, raw and cooked, 'o' and 'a', life and death, or the analog and the digital themselves, to be distinguished or to be opposed, they must first be digitalized either by the sender or the receiver or both in a language of discrete elements. (Wilden, 169)

We can say therefore that digital distinctions introduce GAPS into continuums (here the gap is filled by the empty set), whereas analog differences, such as presence and absence, FILL continuums. The line between presence and absence is not in fact a line at all. (Wilden, 186)

You enter a room. Large works hang on walls or throughout the space itself. You and they exist in a physical continuum. Body touching air touching cloth. You see faces. Larger than you. Not clear, not resolved. You want to see a particular face more clearly. Your feet move you towards the face. You approach and some part of you registers that though you approach, the face doesn't in fact get any clearer. By force of habit you keep moving closer. Note the absence of gradient—the face never becomes more clear. At a precise moment though, something new does come into focus and that something new is thread. Black and white. Up and down. Showing or hidden. At the precise moment that it becomes possible to see the thread, it became impossible to see the face. If you want to see the face again you have to step back. You lose the thread and you gain again the face. So the work has precisely two states, with a threshold between those two states.

I suggest that perfectly reliable and automatic tests for reality are involved in the working of a perceptual system. They do not have to be intellectual. A surface is seen with more or less definition as the accommodation of the lens changes; an image is not. A surface becomes clearer when fixated; an image does not. A surface can be scanned; an image cannot. . . . No image can be scrutinized—not an afterimage, not a so-called eidetic image, not the image in a dream, and not even a hallucination. . . . The most decisive test for reality is whether you can discover new features and details by the act of scrutiny. Can you obtain new stimulation and extract new information from it? Is the information inexhaustible? Is there more to be seen? (Gibson, 256-57)

Cook's works trouble the distinction between surface and image that Gibson so carefully articulates. The cloth is real. I can, by scrutiny, discover new features on its surface. But the face that it holds is not real. I can gain no new information on approach. It is image, imaginary, inscrutable, specular. In my still-unsatisfied desire to understand exactly what aspect of Cook's work consistently triggers such strong affective responses, I find one possible clue in this unsettled and unsettling oscillation between the real and the imagined.

If you could look at Cook's work as just a hanging blanket, there would be no threshold experience—the rectangular shape of the blanket would upon scrutiny reveal itself as textured, made of thread, thread in turn made of smaller fibers. But the rectangular surface, and the patterning of those real threads, give rise to something that is both compelling and simply not there, namely a face. A face you will never get closer to. A face with a fixed resolution. A face that will disappear at a limit set as much by your vision as by the scale of the threads Cook has selected.

In Cook's works, you are prevented from perceiving both image and surface at once. You either place yourself to see the face or you place yourself to see the threads. But memory leaves traces and so when you step back again having taken in how the work is constructed, you have a new experience which is (face/knowing it's really just threads.) Stepping back in again you have the experience (black and white threads/knowing they make a face.)

Typical of her insistence on folding patterns in on themselves, Cook in recent works takes this perceptual experience and materially inscribes it back onto the surface. What once existed within the mind of the viewer is now rendered physical. (Which doesn't mean it's not *still* happening in the mind of the viewer!) Now when I step back, that recalled sight of the threads making up the whole is there in front of me to be seen. Embedded. Afterimage become real. Large as it was in my field of view when I stepped in close to see the threads. And in rendering it as image, it takes on the face's inability to reward scrutiny with information.

Cook experiments with the rules by which the detail reinscribes itself. In *Maze Girl* (2006), *Wove Girl* (2006), and *In The Maze* (2005) the overlay behaves as the layering of two film negatives might, where anything white shows up and anything black simply lets the other layer through. So across the pale cheeks of the child we see very little of the overlaid detail but across her shadowed forehead we see an image of the patterning of threads, enlarged. In *A-maze Doll* (2008) and in *Maze*

Gaze (2007) the overlay is played so that the image of dimensional thread (the white only) sits atop the image of the doll's face as if embroidered on in fat rope. It's worth trying to trace the imbricated patterning of image and material here as it teases the limits of how many levels of context a perceiving mind can hold at once. An image of fat white rope is made by weaving white and black threads to show the shading and highlights of that rope. The rope is only image, not real. The white and black threads were programmed to be in these exact locations, where they could produce the image of the fat white rope, by themselves being photographed and enlarged and translated via computer program from photograph into weaving draft. Trying to trace these relations produces in me much the same feeling as trying to track what happens when faced with "Disregard this sentence." or the famous "All Cretans are liars," spoken by the man from Crete.

The familiar catch of paradox has to do with its disregard of logical levels, its treatment of two things as parts of one whole, rather than as a part and a whole of which that part is a part. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson understood play in humans and animals as dealing in a similar confusion of logical levels. In observing the play of dogs, for example, he tried to understand how the animals communicated the difference between a nip that was play and a bite that was a bite. His characteristically precise gloss on what the nip communicates was this: "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote." (Bateson, 180)

Which bears for me a striking resonance with Cook's reinscriptions of the part into the whole, moving that which was experienced in the analog (real) now into the realm of the digital (image) while leaving us still with the analog untouched and undiminished—those small threads are still there, are still real, even as they've been moved also into the realm of image.

Which brings me to one last thing. The faces do matter. To write simply about the structure of Cook's work is to ignore the way we respond to a face, is to ignore how much communication occurs in and across faces. Is to ignore the revealing and hiding of faces and what they communicate.

Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, in the introduction to *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, articulate the central role played by the face in Tomkins' theory of affect. And within that theory of affect, the central role Tomkins understood shame to play.

More than the place where affects are *expressed*, Tomkins shows the face to be the main place in the body—though by no means the only one—where affect *happens*. (Sedgwick and Frank, 30)

The centrality of the face in affective experience may also be seen in the relationship between the hand and the face. The hand acts as if the face is the site of feeling. Thus when one is tired or sleepy, the hand commonly either nurtures the face, in trying to hold it up, to remain awake, or attempts counteractive therapy by rubbing the forehead and eyes as if to wipe away the fatigue or sleepiness. . . . (Sedgwick and Frank, citing Tomkins 30)

We are inclined to favor the theory that shame is an innate auxiliary affect and a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment. Like disgust, it operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy. Hence any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest or the smile of enjoyment will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure powered by excitement or joy. Such a barrier might be because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger. (Sedgwick and Frank, 134-35)

Shame is both an interruption and a further impediment to communication, which is itself communicated. When one hangs one's head or drops one's eyelids or averts one's gaze, one has communicated one's shame and both the face and the self unwittingly become more visible, to the self and others.

The very act whose aim is to reduce facial communication is in some measure self-defeating. Particularly when the face blushes, shame is compounded. And so it happens that one is as ashamed of being ashamed as of anything else. Thus occurs both the taboo on looking directly into the eyes of the other and the equal taboo on looking away too visibly. In short, self-consciousness and shame are tightly linked because the shame response itself so dramatically calls attention to the face. (Sedgwick and Frank, 137)

A flow, and an interruption in that flow. The interruption is both a break in the flow *and* a thing carried forward unbroken on that flow, communicated via that flow.

If Cook's work is *about* anything, it is *about* this. But it also *is* this.

And by *this* I mean shame and the way it is a reduction of communication, communicated. And by *this* I mean that to make a distinction between the digital and the analog is itself to impose a digital distinction on an irreducible analog whole. And by *this* I mean that the formal pattern we call paradox and that affords our minds a good riddle now and again also riddles the crossing of thresholds from child to adult with impossible choices. And by *this* I mean that I wouldn't be thinking such things were it not for time spent face to face with the imbricated material logics that emerge from Lia Cook's studio. And by *this* I mean to go back to the beginning and to say it as Gibson said it: *The object offers what it does because it is what it is*. And what the *it* of Cook's work *does* is circle, and circulate, and fold back on itself, and reinscribe the detail within the whole, and on the whole behave exactly like the rest of this world of which it is but one small, inanimate part. Which, paradoxically, strikes me as remarkable.

Notes

Gregory Bateson *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

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Anthony Wilden *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1980).

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