Daniel A. Henderson's Sculpture: Monuments for Contemplation on the Present

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The appearance of cellular telephones was virtually unknown to me prior to my first participation in an art fair in Tokyo in 1990. There was one quietly imposing Japanese gallerist who made certain her phone was by her side at all times, whether she sat at a table or wandered the aisles of the exhibition center with prospective clients. This early manifestation of the cellular telephone was known in the industry as "the Brick." Although the design was clunky, unwieldy, and shy on elegance, the Brick was clearly visible in social circles. For a gallerist or a client to be seen toting a Brick meant status. The technology we assume to be the case today was only beginning to enter the public realm twenty years ago. In retrospect, if there were anyone aware of this technological rite of passage between analog and digital modes of telephone reception, it would have been Daniel A. Henderson. While a major innovator in the field of cellular technology during its emerging stages of development, Henderson has recently turned his expertise toward sculpture. One project includes a monumental work, *The Brick* (2008), in black Champlain marble, anodized aluminum, and gold-plated brass with a black granite base. To witness the artist's upscaled cellular appliance not only suggests the passage of time, but also reinforces the notion that we equate technological change with visual design.

Following a family tradition, Henderson was initially motivated to become an inventor years before he began to produce a unique hyperrealist style of sculpture. His earlier interests were focused entirely in the field of advanced communication technologies, where, by 1993, he developed the system for receiving wireless and video pictures via mobile phone. His invention transformed much of what has been taken for granted in recent years. The concept had been prophetically shown and discussed in many science-fiction novels and films, but Henderson found a way to bring this fiction into the nonfiction world of everyday reality. This passage between art and technology was not foreign to him. Like many artist-inventors over time, including the nineteenth-century landscape painter and telegraphic innovator Samuel F. B. Morse, Henderson understood that technological invention and artistic practice were not so far apart. Since Morse, and later Guglielmo Marconi (for whom the artist titled a Rouge du Roi marble sculpture of an early radio receiver), the structure of thinking between the two fields has in some cases become nearly commensurate. "Although the two disciplines utilize different mediums of expression," writes Henderson, "both share the ability to affect our perception and how we interact."

Recent history has shown the direction of Henderson's interactive career moving in a cause-and-effect relationship in which his work as an inventor has increasingly shifted toward sculpture. Following a distinct history going back to the Renaissance, art and technology have reached a point where a series of unexpected convergences have been made. Throughout the course of twentieth-century Modernism, artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Marcel Duchamp, Naum Gabo, Thomas Wilfred, Seymour Lipton, Len Lye, Gyorgy Kepes, and, more recently, Gary Hill have all worked with methods and techniques emanating from these seemingly divergent points of view. Within recent decades, digital software has been responsible for revolutionary new forms of sculpture, painting, film, and architecture. Taken to a higher level, the pursuit of this phenomenon continues to open up and explore infinite new forms and significant ideas. At best, these forms suggest heightened cognitive levels of sensory perception that may involve interactive components. While optimism is the working criterion for Henderson, he also acknowledges that "unintended consequences" among those working with both art and technology cannot be avoided. At worst, some experiments drift into mindless spectacles, self-destructive formulas, and degenerate impulses that lose contact with human reality. As

the synthesis between art and technology progresses into the future, greater attention should be given to obsolescent models grappling with misinformation based on archaic research taken from outworn examples of specialization still lingering in the shadows of another era. Has anyone considered the possibility that conceptualization may have surpassed the need for a universal logic of specialization? Henderson may be one of the few to have taken notice.

Often inventors who enter the field of advanced technology are separated from scientists who remain in laboratories where they perform pure research. In the case of Henderson, who legitimately portrays himself as both inventor and sculptor, it would appear that some genuine knowledge and involvement in scientific methodology cannot be disregarded in his practice either as an inventor or as an artist. This ensemble of perspectives whereby Henderson works through the terms of various disciplines implies a certain conceptual aspect in his work that has proved both useful and timely. While he has seen the limits of specialization and opened the threshold to new crosscurrents of thinking, others stand in favor of separating science from technology, arguing that the former is essentially a research enterprise while the latter involves technical applications that will presumably augment the quality of life. From the position of historical idealism or from a humanist perspective, this sounds convincing, even hopeful. Yet in today's fiercely competitive, abstract world of business — citing "economic totalism" — the built-in profit motive has become essential in developing applications of research before they even begin to enter into design and production. In line with this argument, Henderson asserts: "We should consider the ethics of products manufactured with toxic disposable materials. In a world of virtual reality…, we are confronted with the decline in face-to-face communication, the erosion of community, and the expectation of instant gratification." He then concludes with a rather formidable comment: "I want people to talk about technology — rather than merely use technology to talk." This recalls a somewhat parallel statement by the designer Ralph Caplan, made at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1982, to the effect that we need to talk more seriously about design, as if it really mattered. In Henderson's case, the language has moved less into professional rhetoric than into the premise of sculpture. His intention represents the appliances of the recent past not merely as formal or hyperreal signage, but as a highly crafted visual monument, if not an ironic critique of culture.

Here is a side note that may help clarify the problem. The Russian-born writer Vladimir Nabokov was reportedly asked for a definition of art during an interview by Maurice Girodias in the early 1960s in Paris. Nabokov replied quite simply that art was precision. In a split second, Girodias (then the editor of Olympia Press) retorted that if art was precision, then what was science. Nabokov answered that science was intuition. Thinking the writer had made an error, Girodias suggested that perhaps the definitions should be reversed, whereupon Nabokov became infuriated, insisting that he meant exactly what he said. One may only speculate on how Nabokov would have defined the meaning of technology had the question been posed, but perhaps technology had not arrived at the point where its course was clear enough to define. Although technology has existed since the Stone and Iron ages, one may consider that it has only recently come into its own. (Some artists and theorists have made a similar claim about art.) The term "postindustrial" — a flagship of the 1950s — represented a kind of transitional phase between the old industrial factories and the current rebirth of technology, a rite of passage that appears strangely out of sync with how some of us might view today's virtual processes.

As the digital age has come upon us, time appears to be moving faster. The speed of erasure with respect to the intimacy of communication appliances connected with the analog period of postindustrial culture has been a major influence on Henderson in his turn toward sculpture. To label it nostalgia would be too shortsighted. We tend to remember events in relation to objects, and objects in relation to events. This is an indelibly human trait, what psychologists call mnemonic association. To encounter Henderson's enormous *Princess* handset phone (2008) — carved pneumatically in pink Iranian onyx with added elements, ranging from stainless steel to aluminum — may appear at first glance overwhelming in its intimate and cultural implications. Thus, it is difficult to disengage the seduction of its appearance from our personal history, depending to some degree on our exposure to mass culture through generational differences. To the extent that we remember someone's voice or an incident of description or emotion in relation to the original Princess handset is perhaps less miraculous than it is natural. It enters into the flow of our everyday lives.

Henderson argues that "the permanence of iconic products [such as the Princess] sculpted in stone represents the connection with the natural

world and contrasts with the temporality of the technology and the materials they are built from." Given his preeminent role as inventor and sculptor, he is cognizant of temporality as the economic basis for programming the release of technological objects. At the moment they are in vogue, such appliances occupy our full attention, to the extent that they become the focus of our attention as they move from the production line into our homes. From the time it was first advertised and distributed, the Princess became an actuality — a virtual embodiment of present-day culture. Yet from an advertising perspective, the concept of the present is always relative. Time is money, and the turnaround is essential. New applications and inventions come along — some obviously more significant than others. Brand-new appliances replace older, worn-out ones — at least from the perception of advertising. Whereas the Princess handset phone was originally designed to appeal to our sentimentality and adolescent narcissism, today it functions as another form of kitsch, a gadget or memento of our past techno-cultural heritage. But it does not end here, at least not in the sculpture of Daniel A. Henderson. The appliance will never appear the same as before, for the following reasons: scale, material, and weight.

Sculpture is more than an image. To understand sculpture requires a certain directness involving spatiality, awareness of materiality, and form. It demands a temporal contemplation as one circumambulates around it. Aesthetics are a kind of philosophy that establishes what is beautiful in a work of art. It deals with all of the aspects of how we relate to it — in this case, sculpture — and refers to the way we feel, move, observe, and talk about it. In recent years, Conceptual art — or the art of ideas — has somewhat changed our view of aesthetics by placing greater emphasis on the work's meaning and function and the kind of language used to contextualize it.

In the art of Daniel A. Henderson, we need to employ both feeling and thinking. Take the work labeled *Fossil Fuel* (2009). Replicating one of the first Sinclair gas pumps in every detail, *Fossil Fuel* — carved in black fossil marble with a granite base — carries a different kind of resonance from that of the *Princess* handset. They appear formally opposite from each other, yet they exist within a similar cultural context. Whereas the size of the *Princess* is overwhelming in its physical presence, *Fossil Fuel* appears in actual scale, with a height of approximately fifty-eight inches — one of the two actual-scaled works in the

artist's oeuvre. The other work is titled *Housecall* (2010), a replica of a physician's medical bag from the nineteenth century, cast in bronze with patina and nickel plating.

While the *Princess* is meant to express beauty, perhaps in an ironically seductive way, *Fossil Fuel* represents the beginning of extended road travel in the United States. Paradoxically, each work exemplifies sentimentality and power: the former feminine, the latter masculine. While the *Princess* carries a romantic, stylish, and maudlin connotation, *Fossil Fuel* suggests power on two different levels: one, gasoline power that activates the engine of an automobile; and two, economic power, as when natural resources are used to influence global politics. Both the *Princess* and *Fossil Fuel* offer contrasting signs embedded within a provincial history, yet intrinsically related to American culture today. While the products will become updated, the meaning of the signs the products represent will more than likely remain.

Like the *Princess*, another work by Henderson, titled *Yellowstone* (2009), is again upscaled from the original gadget. One is reminded of the paintings by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte, who played with the concept of scale in relation to intimacy. For example, in the early 1960s, Magritte painted a large green apple in a small room. In doing so, he prevails upon the viewer to consider the paradox of whether the apple is large and the room is small, or the apple is actual size and the room is even smaller — miniature, in fact, as in a doll's house. But then if the apple is actual size, we must consider the view through the window of the miniature room as to its distance in relation to the view we are seeing outside, and so on. Henderson employs a similar kind of irony in his *Yellowstone*. Reminiscent of the earlier stereoscopic viewers produced as a kind of parlor entertainment during the late Victorian era, the actual View-Master — popular especially in the 1950s — was an intimate device held to the face so that the viewer could peer through and see, for example, a three-dimensional illusion of the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park. In Henderson's monumental version, the 3-D effect is related to Magritte's idea of seeing an illusion meant to look real. It is so "real" that we forget it is completely still, without motion.

The monumentalizing of visual subject matter in the form of modestly designed technical gadgets and appliances, particularly in relation to the advanced acceleration of the communications "industry," offers

a new approach to sculpture. The question these artful artifacts propose is the exact context of how they should be read. Clearly there is a system of cultural signage — a semiotics within the structure of Henderson's work — but there is also a curiosity as to how they might read, for example, in a natural history museum or a museum of fine arts. Could they legitimately be placed in either context and be read the same way? Just as Minimal art was contingent on being seen first in galleries and museums so that it would be understood as art, I read Henderson's propositions in a similar way. Once the cultural signage embodied within these works becomes known through a consensus of seeing — that they represent an advance in art that reiterates the history and future of communications technology — not from a distant point of view but from a human one, then the sculptural viability of these forms will come into play. By "play," I mean the manner in which the content embodies feelings and ideas within a work of art — sculpture, in this case — and how the object endures through time as a principle of human recognition, even as the ideas continue to move into the stratosphere of an ever-evolving sensibility of further recognition. The fact is that certain works of art endure because they stand their ground, not only by material weight, but through a certain lightness of bearing that transcends gravity.