

Art in Review — "Tools" at Axle Contemporary

Iris McLister | Friday, October 24, 2014

***Tools*, Axle Contemporary, mobile art gallery,
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Axle Contemporary, Santa Fe's roving gallery on wheels, invited guests to explore the things that make art possible in the recent exhibit, *Tools*. The show's display of objects, both practical and fanciful, were constructed by 14 New Mexico artists. The smart, fun, and wildly creative concept is another example of the kinds of intriguing projects Axle has come to be associated with. Founded in 2010 by artists Matthew Chase-Daniel and Jerry Wellman, the gallery itself, a converted 1970 Grumman-Olson Stepvan with a rebuilt engine, exists as a mechanic's labor of love.

Though Axle Contemporary's interior measures only 6 by 10 feet, it still feels surprisingly roomy thanks to a high roof and a stripped-down exhibition space. The show included tools actually used by artists, as well as novel interpretations of what an artist might pick up to create something. Christy Georg's *Phi Rule* (*armspan*) zigzagged across one of the walls, splayed hither and thither to report random, nonsensical, and highly questionable measurements. Michael Sumner's *Plugdriver* may have the ribbed handle and metal shaft of a standard screwdriver, but its top is a metal-pronged plug. What would this tool be used for? Even though its components are familiar, it practically begs to be touched, held, and used — all of which might result in bodily injury.

Though some of these tools could ostensibly serve a purpose, most of them have aims that are obscured or delightfully perverted, like Michael Schippling's *Reverse Scissors*, an office supply whose function opposes the handler's intuition. Bunny Tobias' *Power Tool* is a bunch of simple antique-looking implements — screwdrivers, picks, and pestles — bundled together with wire and



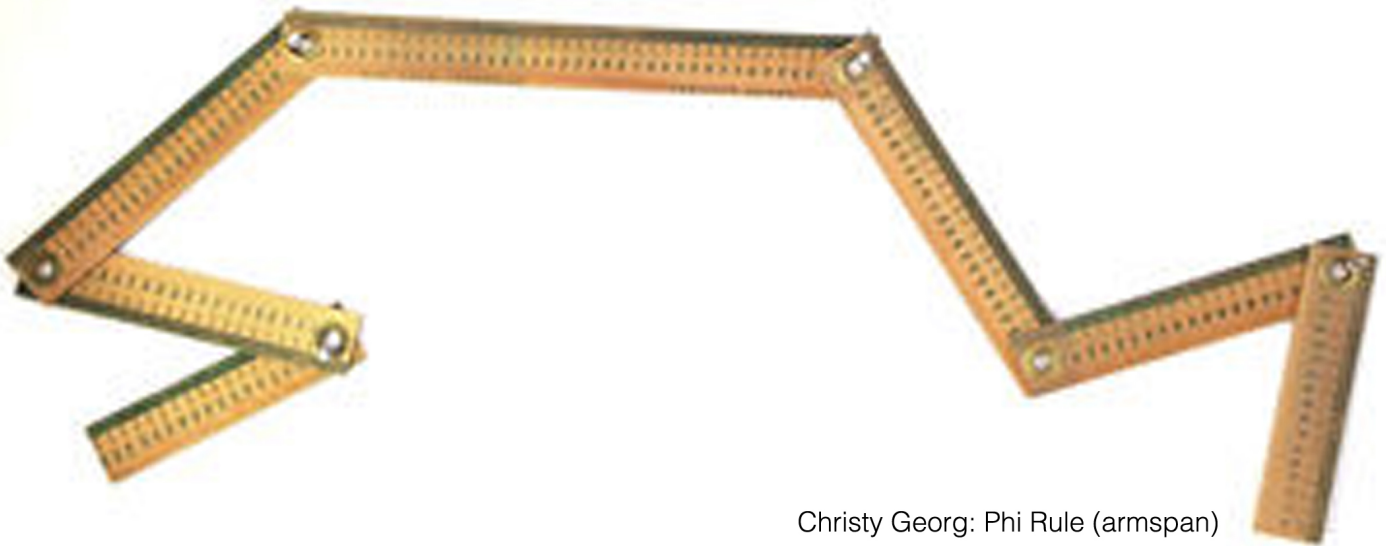
Power Tool

Bunny Tobias: Power Tool

labeled, on one wooden handle, POWER TOOL. The artist is referencing an electrical or pneumatic tool, but in exhibiting hand tools, she also speaks to the inherent power needed to do the same work by hand, with no mechanical advantage. This work includes time, effort, strength, endurance, and skill. *Power Tool's* topper, a tiny cluster of clear crystals, makes this piece all the more bizarre. Tobias' disassembled group of old tools might well exist to challenge and loosen our assumptions about modern machinery's cold mechanicality.

Not at all on opposite ends of a spectrum, art and technology instead inspire and advance each other. For multidisciplinary artist and musician Prakash Spex, whose work was included in *Tools*, "Understanding and mastering your tools is essential to creative expression and form." But Spex is careful to note that making one's own tools is crucial to creative development: "Producing your own tools is an important element of the artist's education and evolution; it shows yet another level of independence."

Works of art contain multitudes of things: systems within systems born of both ideological and physical impulses. To look at a finished sculpture, painting, mosaic, or tattoo is to witness a construct that is isolated and self-sufficient but also absolutely dependent on its disparate elements. Technology, a natural part of human development, is an extension of our practical and creative goals, a means to an end. Thus Axle Contemporary's show functioned for its viewers as a sendup to unfettered creativity and as a serious investigation into human industry and innovation.



Christy Georg: Phi Rule (armspan)



Michael Sumner: Plugdriver