

ULRICH PROJECT SERIES:  
**JOSEPHINE  
DURKIN**  
JANUARY 12-APRIL 27, 2008





## being moved: on the strange gestures, gentle actions, and moving works of **JOSEPHINE DURKIN**

What is the meaning of movement? In Durkin's work—a practice that can be characterized by the deft use of moving details in often large installations—viewers are jolted by small movements in the still and quiet context of the museum. Seeing Durkin's works is as if we are on a small boat and are hit by the wake of a larger boat we hadn't noticed and is long gone. First we are wakened, startled, and then lulled by the gentle movement to consider where we are, who is absent, and what this means. "Where's the action" is a phrase that captures some of the imperative that prevents us from ignoring motion. We are hungry for the movement; our eyes cannot not look, our brains can't ignore it. Movement demands our visual attention like nothing else, yet Durkin's use of it is novel, precise, often delicate, and defies the imagistic use of space that is the game of much contemporary installation-based work. So movement is her recurring device—a media even—but it works as more than that. It draws our attention to other movements, our own, draws us in, and in these contrived self-conscious situations, Durkin's work moves us, our bodies, and provides a dense cultural portrait.



Josephine Durkin, *Bloom (I knew I loved you when...)*, altered love seat, resin, paint, fabric, wood, motors, pressure sensors, electrical cord, suitcases, rubber bands and thread, dimensions vary; courtesy of the artist. Photo: Harrison Evans

In this Ulrich exhibition, we are invited to sit with another in the love seat, a familiar enough love seat that looks more like an image than an object. Still, we are invited to sit in the formalized formal setting we think—and then lo—umbrella's bloom out of suitcases. Suddenly, we forget that we are sitting uncomfortably within a tableau; the carefully contrived installation image is shattered by the movement; we might even blush at the strange disembodied action that, in blooming, suggests romance. All of our attention is on the movement, wondering what it is for, as we gather the scene around it.

How do we make sense of movement? How can we make sense of movement that is amputated from all the contexts in which we expect to see moving things? We wonder how it was triggered; did I do that? We look to make sense of the connections. The infrastructure required to make the movement is neither hidden nor revealed. The cabling



between the sofa and the suitcases, for instance, draws a very direct relationship between seating and the suitcase structure, but it pauses in a complex bundle, entangling your sense of direct connection, cause/effect, action/reaction.

Did I make this happen? Did we? Did you? How?

It is a detail—the excess cable—that is not rationalized, not minimized, not made to sneak neatly along the walls, that makes us understand how conditioned our sense of artificial movement is. Robotic arms move by themselves, but they are rationalized in assembly lines; toasters pop in service of daily routines; cars, sewing machines, printers drive with an explicit contract and understanding that they are enslaved, told what to do and when. But this is where and how Durkin ruptures our shared cultural expectation—machines and automated movement are scripted slaves, but not here. We are presented with a movement, an autonomous gesture that is outside of our control. Yet autonomous actions happen around us, increasingly: Lights turn on, toilets flush, to acknowledge our presence rather than in response to our deliberate actions. Durkin does not place us in techno-fetish celebration of technology and robotic action. She does not use the visual tropes of high-tech media and machine art, nor does she seat us in the context of the automated home, the semi-autonomous toilet slave. She places our sensibilities far from the industrial context of contemporary technology—the efficiency driven work context—into a realm of nostalgia and familiarity with which we are totally unfamiliar.

Philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek claims that our ideologies linger longer in our actions than in our knowing. So do the remnant gestures that Durkin re-creates and confronts us with. In earlier works, for example, a mattress is pulled where the stitches might have been sewn, as if retaining the gestures that created it; the gentle array of paper rocking chairs, clearly motivated by the fan that is blowing them but animated by the ghostly presence of many little memories, small actions, and comforts.



Josephine Durkin, *Smile and Nod*, installation of 480 digitally manipulated photographs on cut and folded cardstock, oscillating fan, paint and wall; folded paper rocking chairs are 5" and 7" tall; dimensions vary; courtesy of the artist. Photo: Harrison Evans



Zizek's comment was in relation to the 18th-century Enlightenment project—a cultural construct that we have held dear for hundreds of years, essentially the idea that knowing leads to action, that educating and disseminating information will organize our collective actions. But this hasn't worked so well—knowing does not lead necessarily to action. Actions are more like habits; they resist changes, they contrive to store a pre-scripted cultural history, they challenge our very sense of autonomy. And now, we face a climate crisis in which we all know about global climate change, and yet we do not abandon our cars or radically change our lifestyles. Knowing something is not sufficient to drive action. And Durkin's gentle quizzical actions seem to me a heroic exploration of our relationship to actions and culturally embodied movement. That, and disembodied movement can be confounding. Durkin, however, is not ridiculing nor teasing us. We can recognize and explore our own reactions, we begin to see our small gestures multiplied and reflected back at us. We understand that we are sewn together into a social fabric of shared gestures, familiar actions.



Josephine Durkin with *Speed Shift (I thought you were with me...)*

When did we all start smiling in photographs? The somber images of dead relatives that would hang next to a couch like the one on which Durkin sat us—the images in the formal drawing rooms—never had a smile upon their faces. At some point, before service workers were scripted to smile and greet their customers in service of their corporate brand, we all started smiling in photographs. Was it that we all needed to display the happiness of our lives? Was it that we had to demonstrate that the pursuit of happiness had at least fleetingly been captured? Or was it a habit we started without deliberating, copying others? How did that gesture propagate through the social body?

In the installation *Speed Shift (I thought you were with me...)* embroidery hoops float, in an array, and catch still and moving images, actions, and animations. Again, these are not framed images, nor are they projection screens for moving images. They are something else: an installation of surfaces that fall or float?

The frames are not frames, but objects that might have contained and captured hundreds of tiny gestures that stitched cloth. But now the reimagined embroidery hoops present other action remnants. Has the domestic activity of embroidery been abandoned to the machines that embroider fast, hard, and for profit? Where are the gentle stitches that were motivated by other complex social relations: stitched handkerchiefs, tablecloths, and children's clothing? Each stitch measured



someone's time invested, and collectively they displayed the irreducible labor of drawing on cloth. This installation does not script us to participate in an uncomfortable romance on a love seat with another, but does ask us to measure our shared cultural ideas of domesticity and home labor. Our homes, each now with home offices where the market and work sphere have interpenetrated, complicate and transform the labors of home. On the hoops, the drawings are made and remade. The hand that made them is removed. They demand that we make sense of this larger cultural transformation.

Durkin's installation built from the gestures and images and denuded products of offices and commercial spaces contains and displays the actions of work. Again de-contextualized and reconstructed—these are simplified object-images. The stripped and sanded product containers are strange but familiar.

And what about actions that surround these products: typing typewriters, slicing paper cutters, stapling staplers, hinging clipboards, and paper unraveling into a ribbonous pile? The materials of work are our cultural histories and are embedded in these less-than-glamorous devices. More than we might have known, our shared legacy is housed in the actions. These are all familiar to a global audience—we have all experienced work like this—organized by and through this strange material reality.

The interactive technologies of our time are not present, but they are questioned by Durkin. One could not see through them to the social fabric made visible in Durkin's palette of things. We are too enamored with our technologies to see their social effect. Have they transformed the actions and activity of our work? Have today's technologies substantially changed the small actions involved in sending messages, copying, changing, and retyping? Or do we all still do these strange little actions with weird little objects? Seeing them reflected back to us in this installation, one might recognize a certain forlorn futility in these actions, the strange uniformity of the shared cultural medium of movement. Or we might see something liberatory in the deconstructed actions. We might even see a picture of a social movement.

These are indeed strange times, and it is hard to consider these actions and movements without considering the military who are now returning from the Iraq war minus their arms, legs, or other body parts. Amputees seem like anachronisms—they could be returning from a war 60 or 90 years ago—yet there are a tragic number of missing limbs and amputated actions that are freshly present. Seeing strange little actions in Durkin's installations—that themselves are not sensible—seems impossible. The actions that Durkin captures are the icons of normal functionality that these action-reduced service men and women now struggle to perform. We live in a sea of these movements, but few artists have explored this; few have pulled them out to examine and re-present them. They are unseen, unconsidered though ubiquitous. Durkin's work is novel and important for showing them to us.

We recognize that the actions are not where our activity makes sense, and yet at the same time, we understand that this is what and where the action is. I am, and remain, moved.

— **NATALIE JEREMIENKO**

Natalie Jeremijenko is an artist, engineer, and educator living in New York City. She currently directs the xdesign Environmental Health Clinic at New York University.



## JOSEPHINE DURKIN

Born 1980 in Leesburg, VA

Lives and works in Greenville, TX

### Education

- 2005 MFA in sculpture, Yale University, New Haven, CT  
2002 BFA in sculpture, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
2002 Lorenzo de Medici School of Art, Florence, Italy  
1994 Corcoran School of Art, Washington, DC

### Awards

- 2006 Faculty Development Grant, Texas A&M University-Commerce, TX  
2003–2004 Graduate Fellowship, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA  
2002 VCU World Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
2001 Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2006 *Tear, Cut, Fold, and Lean*, Target Gallery, Alexandria, VA  
2006 *Right on Cue*, State of Flux Gallery, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2006 *Annual Faculty Exhibition*, Texas A&M University-Commerce, TX  
2006 *VideoMixTape5*, Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria  
2005 *Community Theater*, Art Space Annex, New Haven, CT  
2005 *Video Pleasures of the East*, Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, CA  
2004 *Adapt and Overcome*, Green Hall Gallery, Yale University, New Haven, CT  
2004 *Gener8*, Gigantic Art Space, New York, NY  
2003 *Great Small Works: Toy Theater Exhibition*, HERE Gallery, New York, NY

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Wichita State University

1845 Fairmount Street

Wichita, KS 67260-0046

316-978-3664

[ulrich@wichita.edu](mailto:ulrich@wichita.edu)

[www.ulrich.wichita.edu](http://www.ulrich.wichita.edu)



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