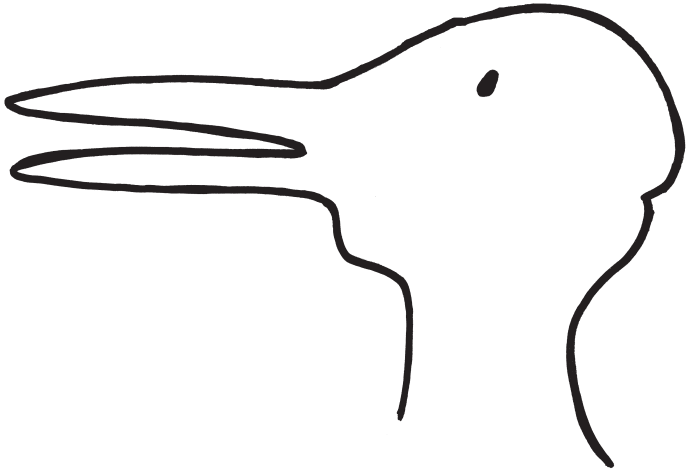


We named the exhibition *duckrabbit* after the following proposition:



The duckrabbit is a gestalt illusion in which a singular picture can be perceived as two or more discrete images: in this case, a duck or a rabbit. The duckrabbit is perhaps the most well known image of this kind. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein employs the duckrabbit during his grammatical investigation of our use of the concept of “seeing.”

In Book 2, section xi of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is attempting to uncover what we mean when we use the word “see.” His grammatical investigation is not attempting to manifest our ignorance about seeing, but rather to demonstrate how much we already know, as evidenced in ordinary speech. Wittgenstein analyzes our use of language with regard to speech in order to reveal the way that our ordinary language constructs our experience of seeing and determines our criteria for what constitutes seeing. That is, the grammatical investigation will answer the question “Under what circumstances do we say...” Wittgenstein’s insistence that we vocalize our perceptions—his reliance on language—draws us into a social situation. The effect of this is that Wittgenstein is forcing us to objectify or reify our subjective experiences, thus building a bridge among ourselves, others, and the world.

Wittgenstein imagines showing the duckrabbit figure to an interlocutor and asking them “what is it?” to which they may respond “I see a duck” or “I see a rabbit” depending on their familiarity with ducks, rabbits, and pictures. But the duckrabbit also affords the opportunity to see as: “I see a duck; but now I see the figure as a rabbit!” Nothing has physically altered in the figure, but we have had a change. Wittgenstein calls this noticing a change of aspect, which he contrasts to continuous seeing-as.

To say “I see a duck” is an example of continuous seeing-as in that the statement does not acknowledge any ambiguity in the figure, nor does it explicitly reveal thinking or interpretation. It merely states what is seen unambiguously. It is the change of aspect, however, that perhaps feels most reminiscent of the flip between the abstraction’s references in the artworks we have assembled for *duckrabbit*, because, as Wittgenstein points out, a change in aspect usually comes as a surprise and, therefore, is an act done unto a viewer rather than a feat of superior perception. To say “I now see it as a rabbit” is to acknowledge an ambiguity in the figure or notice a change of aspect, which combines seeing with thinking in the form of interpretation. In this case, seeing-as finds a new possibility within the same figure.

Whether seeing continuously or via a change in aspect, the viewer sees through the figure to access recognition; however, one could also see the figure as merely a shape or form constructed from a line and a dot, whether or not you are familiar with duck or rabbits. Seeing the figure this way, one wouldn’t have to see the figure as a recognizable object either at first or at all. Rather it is another mode of seeing that does not make comparisons to an imagined or real model and validate its truthness in relation to that model. In this case, if asked “what is it?” our language would take the form of a description. To greater and lesser extents, the artworks in *duckrabbit* might go unrecognized as anything other than an abstraction—their referent invisible to the viewer—because these are all accomplished artworks that may be discussed in solely formal terms. Our goal, though, is not to exhaust all the different approaches to seeing and taxonomize them tit-for-tat to each artist in the exhibition.

Nor is our purpose, or Wittgenstein’s, to prioritize one form of seeing over the other. Wittgenstein is unwilling to allow the meaning of seeing to be reducible to a merely physiological event, because even the most exhaustive description of how the eye works would not capture all that we mean when we deploy the word “see.” The duckrabbit is a case that challenges reductive physiological accounts of seeing because nothing has physically changed in our experience of the figure, yet we are able to experience a change of aspect and draw a new interpretation from it. He is equally unwilling to allow all

seeing to be interpretation because we have a number of experiences in which seeing is not mixed with ambiguity, interpretation, or conscious thinking.

Wittgenstein’s goal is to problematize theories of perception through language. In his investigation, he reveals the many meanings we have for seeing: sometimes as interpretation (perception plus thought, or seeing-as), sometimes as a direct experience (continuous seeing-as), sometimes learned or discipline-specific, like when reading a schematic drawing (knowing one’s way around a picture), and sometimes as a simple description of non-objective or unfamiliar figures. We find this multiplicity of seeing compelling, and we perceive a similar interest in the earthbound abstractions we chose for *duckrabbit*. In our experience with these works, we found ourselves constantly employing multiple modes of viewing, toggling among them. We believe that the artworks invite us to problematize our own viewership and be self-reflexive about our seeing.

Looking at an art object like those in *duckrabbit*, we go back and forth between noticing its formal properties and then noticing its representational properties, like you see a rabbit and then a duck in the eponymous illusionary glyph. The change—made facile by our contemporary moment well versed in abstraction and these artists’ adherence to some worldly referent—comes so naturally that both recognitions juggle in the mind. We find we can only be provisionally apart from the world; however, that step back into an abstract space instructs us how to see the world more acutely and with greater sensitivity. This establishes a circulation from worldly object to aesthetic remove and back again, alighting in us a greater empathy for the world.

To bring the world into focus, one has to step back from it. Optical instruments like telescopes and microscopes materialize the physical distance from you and the subject; however, they bring you a closer understanding of the subtleties and the nuances of that corner of the world. Metaphorically, these artists perform a similar operation in which their various areas of interest are intensified from the distancing activity of abstraction, making it clearer to see. This is only metaphorically accurate, of course, because seeing-as is a concept of language—how we describe what we see—not perception, per se; furthermore, art, more so than tools that help us labor in the world, take up a unique place in our public realm.

The proposition we are making is very much indebted to Hannah Arendt and her thinking encapsulated in *The Human Condition*. Arendt’s conception of the common world is not the planet we live on but “is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates man at the same time.” Using this conception of the world we live in, art objects and our discourse about them are part and parcel of that world. They bring us to a sense of worldliness, a greater concern for the world around us, through a process that distances us, focusing our attention; furthermore, this process is available—mostly—to all, binding us, as the inhabitants of the world, closer together. Both art object and language can be seen as Arendt’s “table,” our shared home, our commons.

Another intriguing notion of Arendt’s that deserves attention is the special space she makes for art objects among the other useful products of human work. Art is given a primacy in her cosmology of human existence because, in part, it has no utility or fixed monetary value, making art at a greater distance to the world as well as the closest thing to thought. For her, that proximity to thought is only bested by one thing: language. The observant, formal, tactile, and sensitive art made by *duckrabbit*’s artists and the conversations those works inspire, then, are what endeared us to the work in this show.

On the one hand, the objects in *duckrabbit* are akin to their more metaphysical cousins in so much as they are made with an emphasis on formal elements over illustration. These are resolved works of art that can be appreciated specifically for their aesthetic properties. We also found that the works instruct us on how to see-as. In this case, seeing-as concerns discovering new or multiple possibilities in the same unchanged image/object. Although initially surprising, we found ourselves seeking new possibilities in the familiar ground of our immediate surroundings upon experience with these artworks. For us, it is refreshing that these works mobilize abstraction’s tendency for remove in order to instruct us to tarry in the complexity of the world and not to retreat from it. In our experience, the artworks emphasize immanence and commitment to the world; they invite us to dwell here, now, together.

- Michael Milano & Jeff M. Ward

*Special thanks to our participating artists- Alberto Aguilar, Peter Fagundo, Julia Fish, Michelle Grabner, Jessica Labatte, Nick Ostoff and Allison Wade.*