

Jonathan Schipper
Cubicle





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6 October - 4 December 2016

Rice Gallery







Foreword

Curator Josh Fischer and I first saw Jonathan Schipper's installation, *Slow Room*, 2014 in the landmark exhibition, *State of the Art* at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. *Slow Room* had the appearance of a museum period room in which furniture and design create a sense of a particular time and place. Visitors view the room from behind a barrier, allowing their imaginations to dwell between the created time of the room and real time of the present. It was from this perspective that we viewed *Slow Room*, a cozy and familiar scene instantly recognizable as a typical American living room, apparently created with objects carefully culled from Bentonville's secondhand stores. Every item in the room was connected to a white line of what appeared to be string, the dense web of lines all disappearing into a donut-sized black hole at the center of the back wall. Unbeknownst to us, the room's entire contents were on the move, on an imperceptibly slow collision course with the wall. Behind the hole a powerful mechanical winch was reeling in the lines at a snail's pace over the course of the next month. Paintings and photographs already tugged slightly askew were the only clue that the room was in motion.

Josh Fischer invited Jonathan Schipper to create a site-specific installation for Rice Gallery, and shortly after Jonathan's site visit we were excited to receive plans for *Tire Shop*, a new idea for his slow room series. *Tire Shop* proved to be an education for all of us regarding tires' flammability and Houston's fire codes; undaunted, Jonathan came back with his idea for *Cubicle*. Our 40' x 44' space was the right scale for a believable office setting and Schipper was enthusiastic about making the generic cubicle, symbolic of the uninspired, the basis for a work of art. The scavenging of discarded office furniture and supplies began immediately with the goal of fulfilling Jonathan's vision for a circa-2000 office including fax machines, file cabinets, and of course, a water cooler. Josh and I raided the tables and bins of Rice's annual Freecycling event gathering trays of floppy discs, outdated rubber stamps, and used file folders. However, it was Houston Public Media at the University of Houston that provided the bulk of the installation material by donating and delivering enough complete cubicles to transform Rice Gallery into what appeared to be a functioning office, light years away from today's trendy digital, paperless, open plan workplace. I am grateful to Houston Public Media

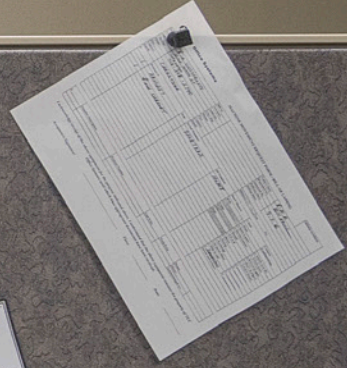




and UH for this exceptional generosity. I also thank Christine Medina, Rice Gallery's manager, who went above and beyond her normal duties to secure this donation and creatively source many other materials critical to the installation. Many thanks to our colleagues at Rice University who donated equipment and personal items, among them the children's artwork, vacation photographs, and personal mementos that allowed us to create a unique personality for each cubicle's imagined inhabitant.

Cubicle captivated Rice Gallery visitors through its verisimilitude and building of viewers' curiosity to see what might happen next. It brought into sharp relief our elemental relationship with time. We are often oblivious to subtle changes being wrought by time's passage; fascinated by the particularities of historical time (hence the period room) or the fantasy of traveling backward or forward in time; and anxious in thinking of the amount of time that will comprise a lifespan. Jonathan Schipper's idea is to look unflinchingly, but with humor and an acute sense of humanity at what is happening before our eyes as a result of time whether or not we are aware of it. It is easy to be in awe of Jonathan's formidable engineering know-how, but his installation was much more than a technological feat whereby hundreds of pounds of walls, machines, desks, and by inference, the lives lived behind those desks, were pulled apart before our eyes and yet so slowly that the process was all but unseen by us. *Cubicle* was an ephemeral experience that provoked philosophical questions about the nature of an artwork that refuses stasis and conservation, as well as the nature of time and where and how we spend it.

Kimberly Davenport
Director



Office Hours

The most static object is still in motion at a molecular level and the world is always changing. Even if the object was this perfect thing that stayed the same, we as a society change how we view it. My installations are about destruction and creation, and they generally have no static point. It is the process of changing them that is the point.

- Jonathan Schipper

When *Cubicle* first opened, many people said they walked by Rice Gallery, glanced through its front glass wall and mistook it for a functioning office space. This was a natural reaction to the convincing accuracy of Jonathan Schipper's installation. Cubicles lined the perimeter of the gallery, enclosing a conference table and copy machine. Each cubicle contained ubiquitous office goods: a black Dell computer, stacks of file folders, and Post-It Notes. Mimicking how employees personalize their workspaces to combat such uniformity, Schipper pinned to the walls family photos, cartoons, kitschy motivational messages, and to-do lists. Each workspace conveyed something about the person who inhabited it. Papers were piled high at the desk of a messy officemate. Anime characters decorated a video game enthusiast's walls. A proud employee displayed collectible owls, the mascot of Rice University. The only hint that this was not, in fact, a normal workplace was the dense web of white cables emanating from the objects and stretching toward the back left corner of the gallery. Schipper had run high-strength fishing line from nearly every item in the installation through a small hole in the sidewall. The lines were connected to a mechanical winch that was behind this wall and hidden from view. Capable of pulling 45 tons, the winch ran continuously over the course of the two-month exhibition like a very strong and very slow fishing reel hauling in its catch at roughly one millimeter (.039 inch) per hour. The neatly ordered rows of cubicles were gradually condensed to a pile of rubble.

Devoid of people and moving at a speed unnoticeable to the naked eye, the stillness of the abandoned office was eerie with the moments of change intensified. Sporadically a computer or cubicle wall crashed to the floor or creaked and





popped as it was being pulled apart. A metal file organizer teetered on the edge of a file cabinet for days as it was stretched like an accordion and eventually spilled its contents. Compared to a destructive event, like an explosion, it was achingly slow. Compared to geological change it was happening at lightning speed.

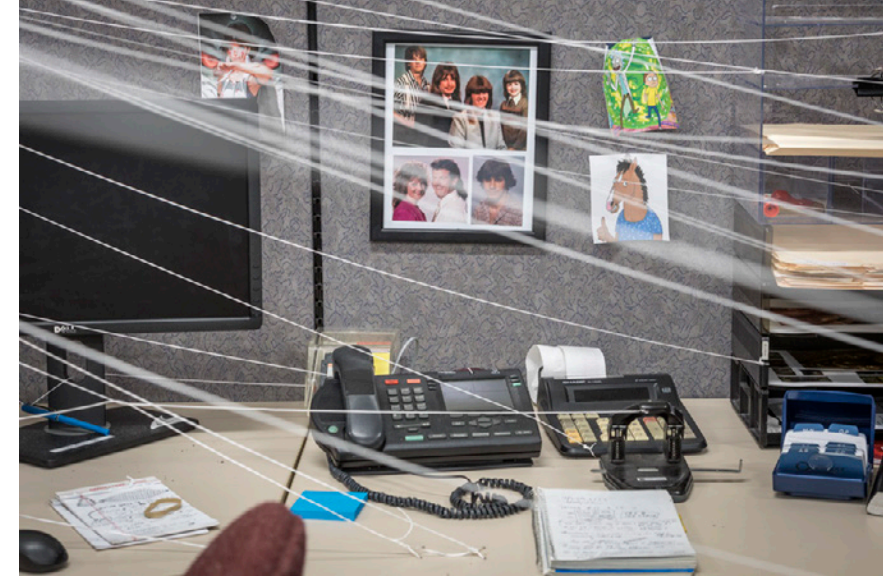
Manipulating how quickly something does or does not happen is how Jonathan Schipper began developing his kinetic sculptures and installations that use time and physical force as their primary materials. To create the *Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle* in 2008, an early breakthrough work, he engineered two full-size Pontiac Firebirds to ram into one another to simulate the force of a 30 mph head-on collision decelerated to unfold over several days. Facing one another, the cars were set on top of railroad-like tracks that pulled them closer and closer until the fenders and hoods folded into one another as the cars ground together. Inspired by the spectacle of car crash scenes in movies where the camera can slow down a collision for dramatic effect, Schipper wondered what it would be like to realize such a moment in real life. A collision that would normally take place in a split-second was artificially slowed down to allow for heightened awareness. Just as this moment of physical impact occurs too quickly to foresee or to perceive its granular details, historical change can be equally ungraspable and unpredictable. Schipper's *Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle* was done during the global financial crisis of 2008 as the American auto industry and America's unquestioned role as a global superpower appeared to be on the decline. As a result of very different kind of "crash" (the stockmarket), the American muscle car suddenly became a loaded relic from pre-recession times.

Attracted to these notions of cultural change and technological obsolescence, Schipper chose a cubicle-filled office space for his Rice Gallery installation as a symbol from a not-too-distant past that like the muscle car was once viewed with optimism. The cubicle was introduced in the 1960s with the promise of increased workplace comfort and privacy for employees, but has now fallen out of fashion with the reemergence of the open-plan office. With its utopian veneer stripped away, the basic cubicle may now conjure despair and entrapment. Schipper also chose to use for his installation only outdated technology, such as rolodexes, adding machines, zip drives, and even a blackberry mobile phone, to capture the phenomenon of "how things are obsolete almost by the time they reach your desk."¹

1 Walley Films, *Jonathan Schipper: Cubicle*, 2016, <http://vimeo.com/201396420>



The cubicles and these artifacts of office life invoked the presence of humans, but like an apocalyptic movie, visitors to *Cubicle* were survivors left to survey the installation's deserted scene. Despite being unable to physically enter the abandoned office, many visitors who worked or continue to work in a similar setting could not approach it with the comfort of distant historical remove or as something detached from personal experience. It was also not hermetically sealed for conservation and kept static, but undergoing active destruction as everything was sucked slowly toward the black hole in the corner. This slow transformation and the uncertainty about what exactly may happen next was an apt metaphor for our current historical moment when many speculate about the changing nature of work. Millennials increasingly enter the "gig" economy structured around roaming freelance work or an open office where they sit shoulder to shoulder at long desks. Maybe in twenty years younger people might look at pictures of Jonathan Schipper's installation and ask, "what's a cubicle?" Having no experience with working in such an environment it could look like a welcome relief to the noisy distractions of the open office, and history may repeat itself with a new permutation of modular, blandly upholstered walls.

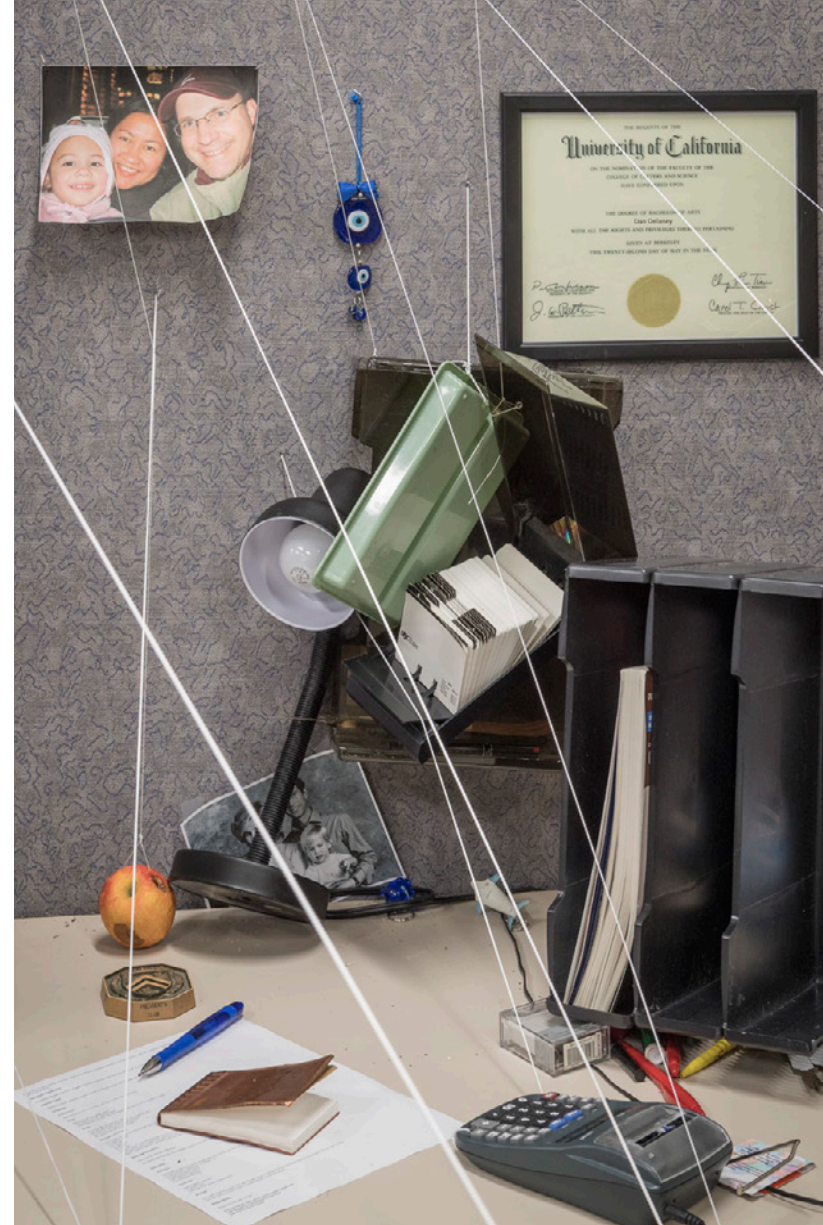


Joshua Fischer
Curator

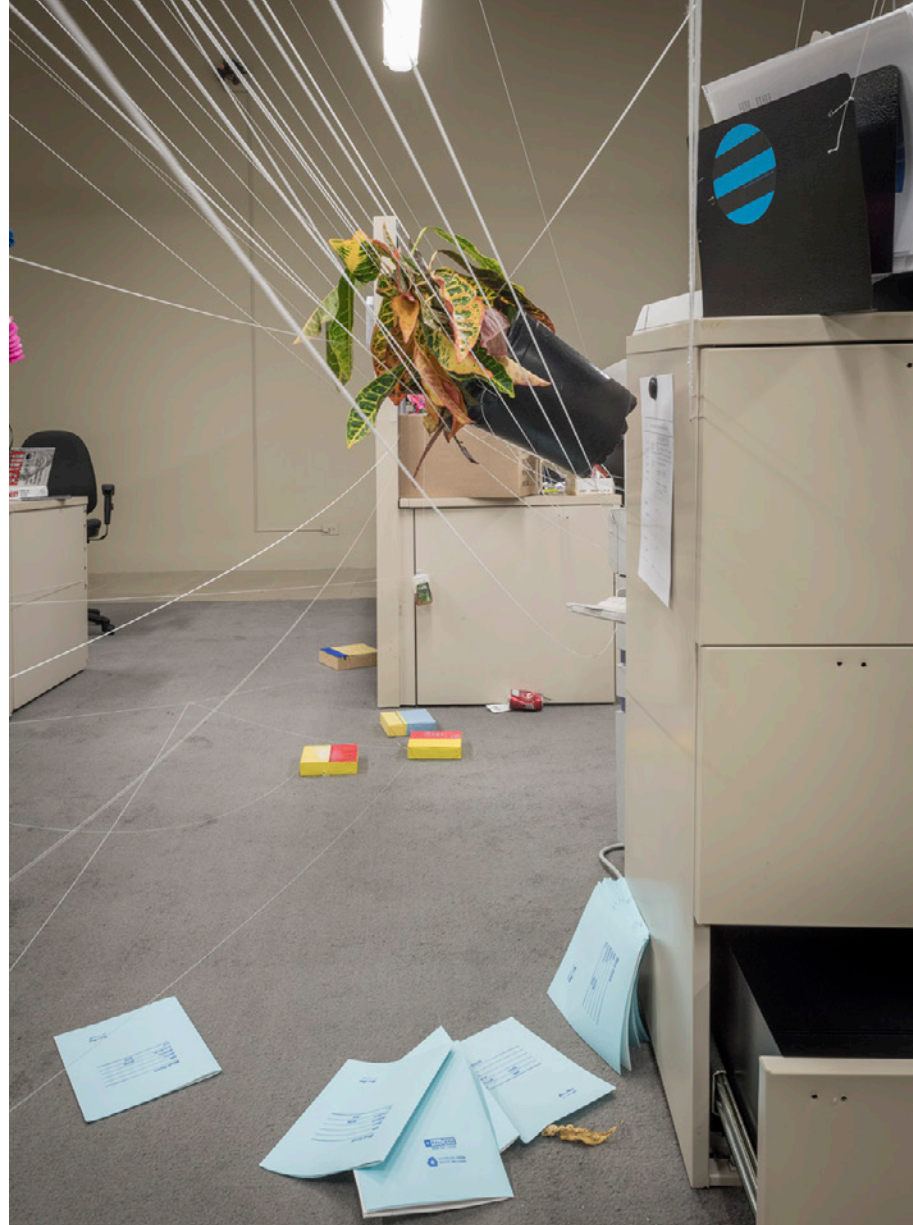




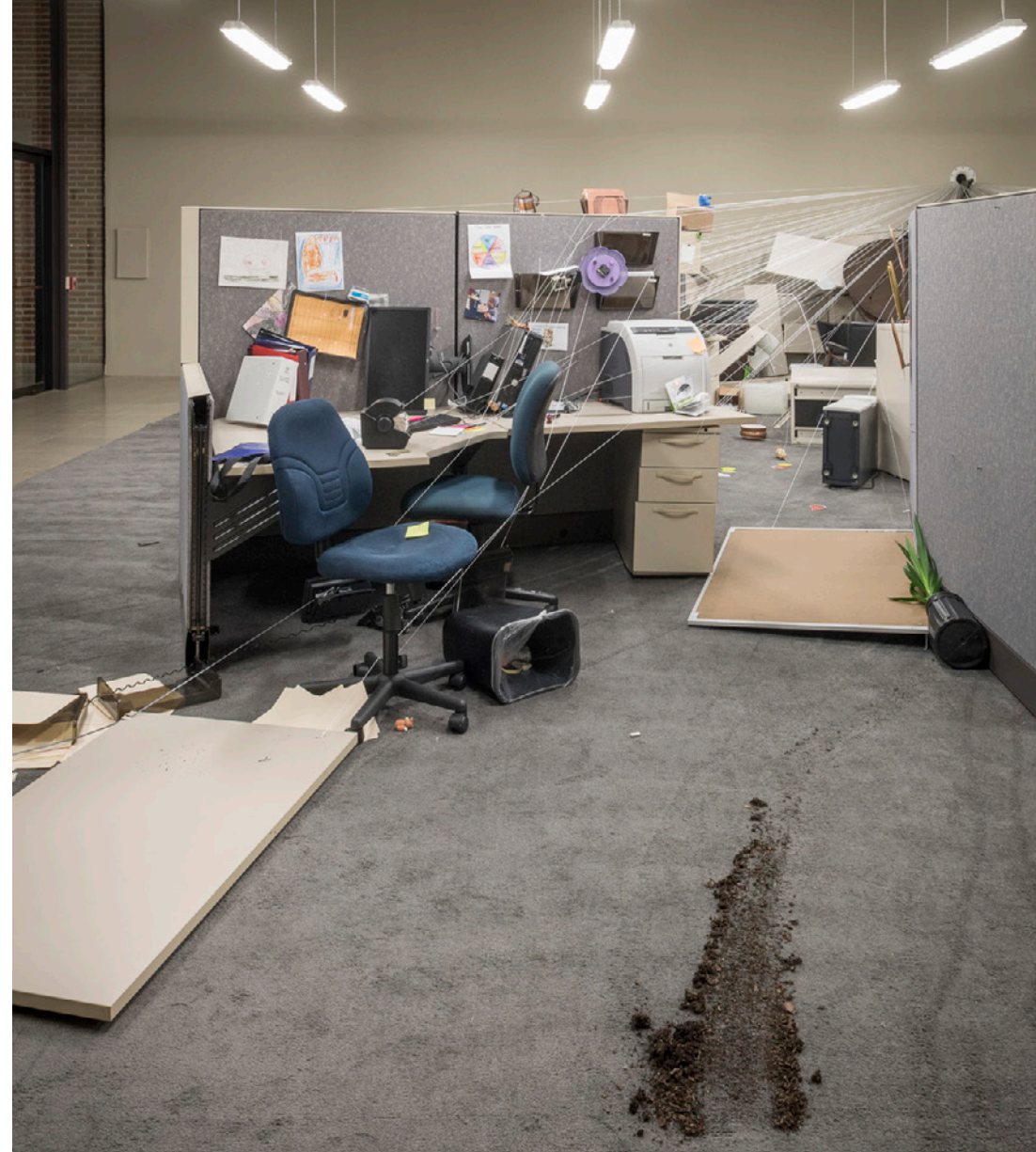


















About The Artist

Jonathan Schipper was born in Chico, California in 1973. He received a BFA in sculpture from San Francisco Art Institute in 1996, an MFA from Rinehart School of Sculpture at Maryland Institute College of Art in 1998, and was awarded a fellowship from Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine in 2001. Schipper has exhibited throughout the United States and Europe, including at the Swiss Institute, New York, New York; Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, Texas; Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China, and Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland. His work was included in *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, an exhibition organized by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas (2014) that traveled to The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina (2017). His *Slow Motion Car Crash* was featured in The Amory Show, New York (2016), and he is represented by Pierogi, New York. Jonathan Schipper lives and works in Ellenville, New York.





Jonathan Schipper, *Cubicle*
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
6 October – 4 December 2016

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

Rice University Art Gallery Patrons provide major funding for exhibitions. Additional support comes from Rice Gallery Members; The Brown Foundation, Inc.; the Robert J. Card, M.D. and Karol Kreymer Catalogue Endowment; and the Leslie and Brad Bucher Artist Residency Endowment. The Gallery receives partial operating support from the City of Houston; KUHF-FM and Saint Arnold Brewing Company provide in-kind contributions.

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Printing: Specialty Bindery, Houston, Texas

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ISBN: 1-932281-51-7



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