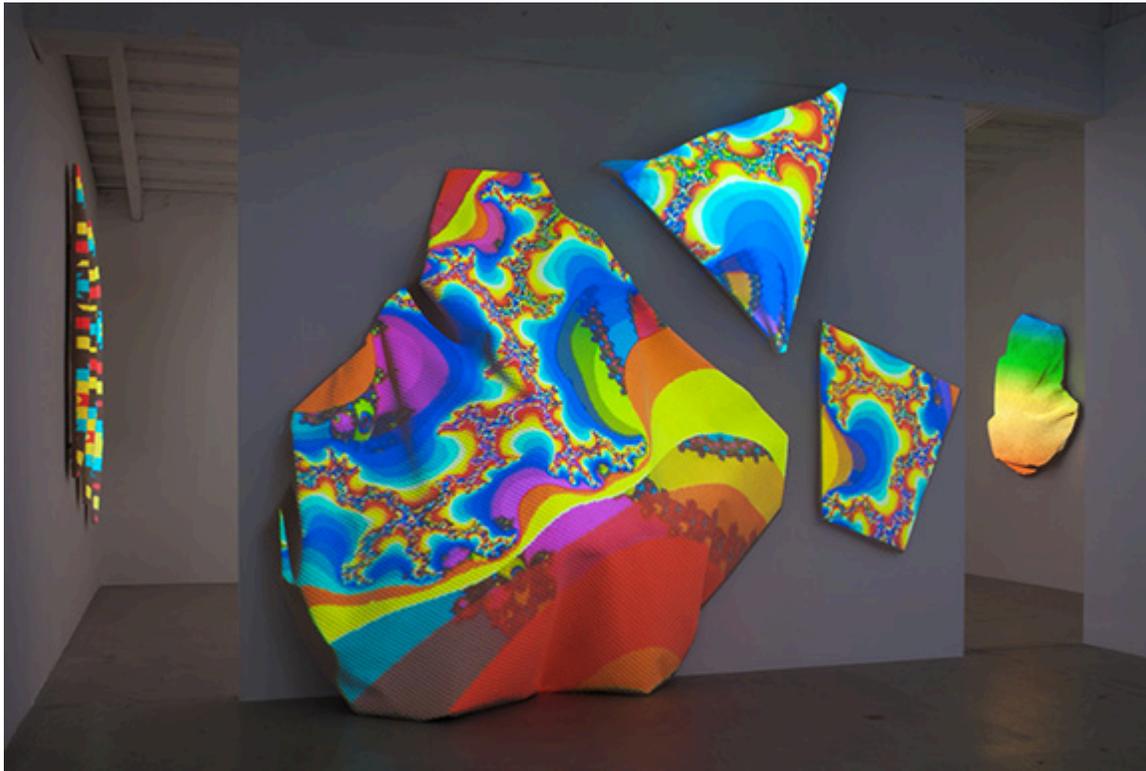


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Animal Charm's Underground Film and Sculpture

Robby Herbst



Installation view of Animal Charm's "Hot Shot Tuscan II." | Photo: Robert Wedemeyer

Animal Charm is a video centric artist collaborative and it's also the spell you use in Dungeons and Dragons to get an animal to do your bidding, a quote from 60's poet Rod McKuen, and recently, it is Jim Fetterly and Rich Bott whom "much like 'Bobby Brown of New Edition'" (according to them) want to put their names next to their collaborative title. The duo has been composing and projecting disruptive and entertaining found footage video collage in live events in clubs, social settings, art museums and galleries since the 1990's. "The 1990's -- it was a different time for how anonymity was received," they say. Their current exhibition at **China Art Objects** in Culver City is open through August 9.

In their China Art Objects show called "Hot Shot Tuscan II," they are exhibiting upholstered sculpted forms with abstract digital patterns projected upon them. The forms are wooden and PVC frames. The upholstery giving their curvilinear shape is generic beige office carpeting.

They refer to these artworks generically as "mudpuppies." These mudpuppies are departure for the Animal Charm, who were included in the 2012 iteration of the Hammer Museum's Made In LA exhibition. In that

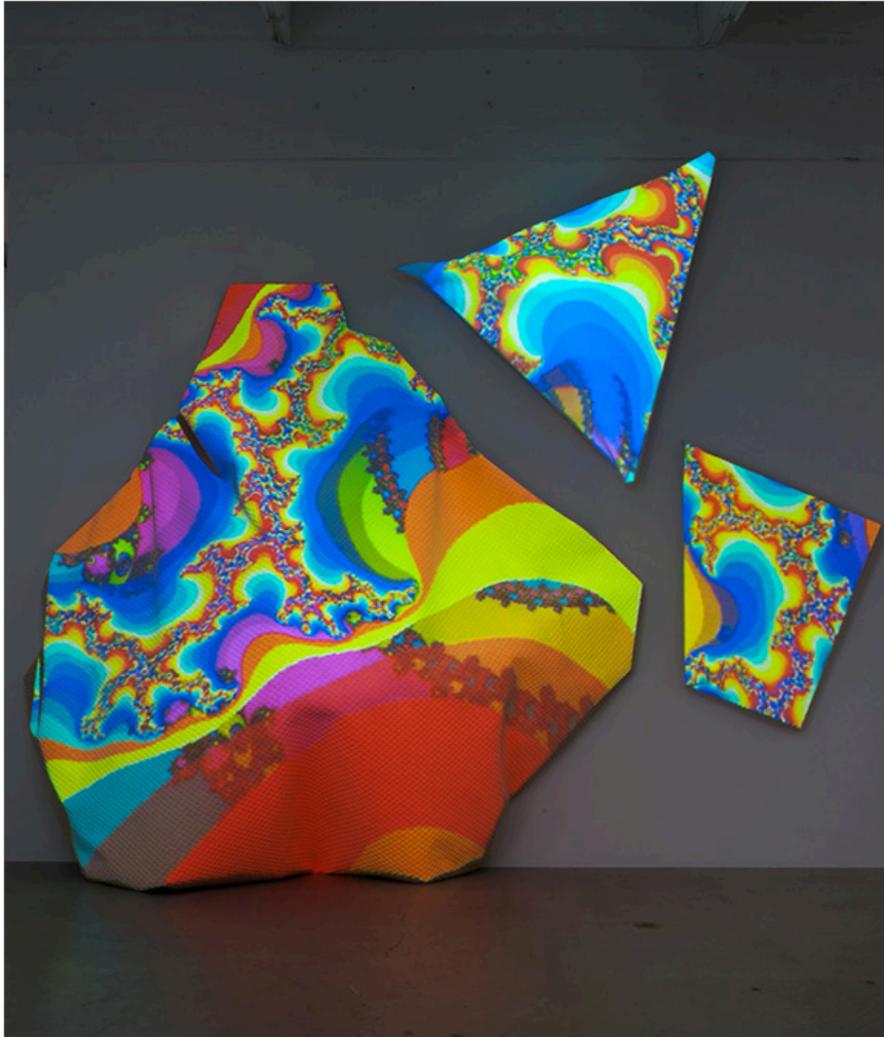
show, Animal Charm installed a two-channel video involving rhythmic and arrhythmic cuts and juxtapositions of found footage, typical of their work.



All Night Water from Animal Charm on Vimeo.

Today these mudpuppies at China Art Objects, they have more in common with James Turrell or Donald Judd's artwork than a mix by 1990's audio collage provocateur **Negativland** or SF based film-maker and Animal Charm supporter **Craig Baldwin**. Besides, one of the sculptures, Molto Caldo, which has a projection of a pizza abstractly cycling upon its surface, there's not a wink of irony in the show, nor a sound. And while the forms are hand built, and the digital mapping software that enables the projections to appear as a second, and at times moving, skin on the otherwise stable object is used in an unintended manner, this Animal Charm exhibition is contemplative rather than subversive.

The first artwork one encounters in the exhibition, "Tapeto Mortale," appears as a wall mounted three-dimensional landscape. As my first encounter with this form of digitally mapped projection, it took some adjustment to figure out the illusion of the alternatively psychedelic and geo-spatial patterns that move across its surface. And in that time of adjustment all sorts of reflections on the nature of contemporary landscape and technology occurred to me. The additional three pieces in the show play with other shifting patterns and eclipses of light (including the aforementioned pizza), to varying effects of art and cultural/social reference.



Animal Charm's "Tapeto Mortale," 2014 | Robert Wedemeyer. Carpet, PVC Pipe, Wood, Video Projection

Animal Charm emerged from the 1994 critical sports documentary "Hoop Dreams." Its producers had hired a young Jim Fetterly to learn and apply video editing techniques using Avid non-linear video editing software. Way after hours at the office, Fetterly and his art school friend Rich Bott would mess around, cutting back and forth and back again between footage they'd imported from found video cassettes. They would create mixes they first approached as a form of video driven music, and came to appreciate as visual art. They cite early inspiration in the cut-and-paste sound collages of **Jon Oswald**, **Christian Marclay**, and **Philip Jeck**. Like Animal Charm, they're all artists whose work continues to be hard to find because of legal issues surrounding the repurposing of copyright protected source audio and video. Fetterly and Bott bonded over a compilation of this sorts of music called Deconstruct, they found common cause with the 1994 publication of a book by the Critical Art Ensemble called "The **Electronic Disturbance**." They empathized with a cultural-movement that sought to place creative control of mass media images and sounds within the hand of individual producers tuned into the aesthetics desires of their communities in clubs with live performance and other venues; a vernacular that the prevalence of the internet and Youtube has summarily removed from the vanguard and placed into the very common place.

Animal Charm says that they've stapled their bacon to experimentation with new media technologies, like Avid in the 1990's. Their show at China Art Objects experiments with the application of the emerging technology of digital video mapping software in art, like their contemporary Cayetano Ferrer. This software allows projected video to appear on dimensional surfaces with an organic non-rectilinear shape and organic (rather than fixed) focal points throughout the object.

I spoke with Animal Charm, face-to-face and online about their current show, 1990's counterculture and the space between the two.



Video by Animal Charm

What's the significance of nature or natural phenomena within your art? I ask this because there's an apparent interest in landscape and reference to the light and space art movement in the current show. Also there are just a lot of animals in Animal Charm mixes.

Animal Charm: Nature is an inspiration for us, as a representational puppet often used as a stand in for innocence, where as culture can be seen as the human folly, or disruption, of this nature of innocence. Nature and Culture become these overlapping interrelated dynamics that we're usually playing with formally in our videos. Humans complicate natural order, disrupting it with the culture that human desire creates. This is a basic contradictory element in the Western notion of "drama." Conflict is the essence of this drama, providing an event of change which is the root of the humor and horror we play with -- expectations, predictability, and surprise. The anthropomorphizing of nature, and conversely the dehumanizing of culture, they are cliché'd tropes. We often flip the script to get to a point of dissociation, and disorientation. There is a spectrum between nature and culture that humans occupy. This overlap and confusion is significant in our work.

What can a social spaces (club, film screening, party) offer that an art gallery can't?

AC: Private parties and clubs offer a moment where the cultural value of art can be brought to the same cultural value AS booze, fun, group hysteria, and general edutainment. Commercial Galleries usually mean retail spaces where ideas meet commerce- but not always. Booze, fun, group hysteria and edutainment can happen there too.

There are many different and diverse audiences we've reached in venues of live clubs, screenings, and festivals, so it's difficult for us to pit "gallery vs. clubs." Galleries publics also can be defined by such a

broad spectrum made up of multiple concurrent art worlds. A comparison between the two is not easily expressed through contrasts. Clubs provide us with an ephemeral temporary installation, an opportunity best discussed as live performance versus an installed exhibition. Live audiences can be more casual, like at a venue for live bands. But then again we're able to perform 20-45 minutes with attention directed solely on a video screen. Whereas an installed exhibition gets an ambient audience that walks through, with not as much time in minutes per attention spent looking at an installation. An artists run DIY space has a different agenda than a commercial art gallery which groom dealers and collectors. Museum spaces add to all these flavors with a non-profit agenda catering to the museums mission.



Animal Charm's "Tre Amici," 2014 | Photo: Robert Wedemeyer. Carpet, Wood, Video Projection

What is the message of 3D digital mapping software for video projection? Is the medium the message?

AC: 3D video mapping is "video" as a physical material of light projection spilling outside the traditional recta-linear screen shape. With advancements in computers and math, video screens are being introduced into more and more architecture and integrated within the fabric of our daily life in much more organic, immersive ways. Screen space is further expanding into the landscape of human consciousness as our human flesh continues to blend with inorganic technology. Screen projection can now "skin" reality outside the box of what was once our collective dream house in the cinema. The TV and data screens have been freed from our devices and can now be motion tattoos on buildings, bodies, or any object you chooses to build. The "screen" that videos can now be projected upon is all around us, Screen space is essentially "reality." Currently, this scenario only works in the dark, with the lights off, but with the advent of alt. screen surfaces like LED fabrics and other materials being manufactured to transmit video, it is certain that we are leaving the era of flat rectangular screen space.

Can you describe the "goals" of an earlier video of yours? Say something like "Stuffing" (from 1997) which is on your DVD compilation distributed by Other Cinema?

AC: In making videos like "Stuffing," we didn't have a goal per se. When we made it we didn't quite understand that we were mostly interested in the process of using a computer and appropriated videos to make something we had never experienced before. The shorts we made then would be taken home and played for friends, and ourselves, as entertainment. If there was a reason we kept returning to the editing room to make more compositions, it was probably because the surprising results made us laugh so hard.

Can you describe for me the "goal" for the work in the new show?

AC: By this time we are now aware that we are definitely more process oriented than goal driven. Deadlines for performances and exhibitions provide opportunities for more experiments to expand our processes. This past year, we set up a studio that is not in our home and let that change our process quite a bit.

Our process of projecting images on objects, as in the current show, came from the Video Campfire performance we did at the Festival Du Nouveau Cinema in Montreal in October 2013. We'd been experimenting and learning various techniques for live video mapped performances for a couple years, but this festival performance provided the model for creating permanent objects that we would construct to project upon. Prior to this, these sculptures were often one-night installations and our process was still very temporary. For this new body of work, a piece like "Classico" was an attempt to translate what we had worked on ephemerally with previous projects like the Video Campfire, to make objects that could be installed more permanently in a gallery setting. While the goal was process oriented it is more about formally constructing things so they can be reinstalled in different places, for more long-term exhibition.



Animal Charm, Video Campfire installation.

I found this quote describing the mission of Other Cinema, who distribute contemporary underground film (including your work) on their web 'page:

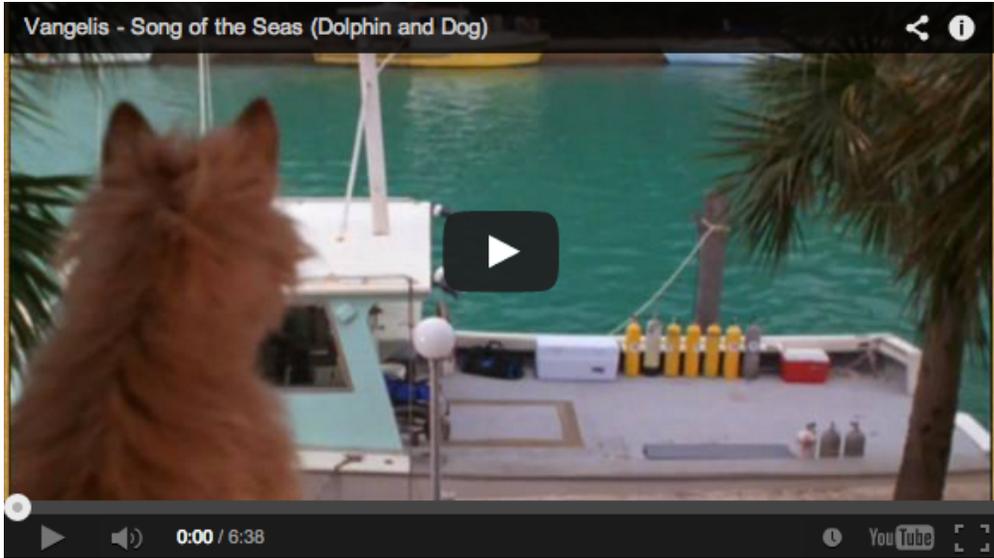
Whether avant-garde or engage', our emphasis is on the radical subjectivities and sub-cultural sensibilities that find expression in what used to be called "underground cinema".

How do you think that your current works fits into a lineage of "underground cinema" given that you are making static artworks?

AC: There is a garage aesthetic that we identify with that makes our current pieces objects of visual music as much as they are wall-mounted sculptures. They are experiments in that vein. Animal Charm relates to underground cinema. In that historically these were "movies" that were made by artists and poets and amateurs that were handmade, formal, and conceptual experiments in making and distributing motion pictures; all produced non- professionally.

If you were each asked to select an all time favorite nature film from the internet what would it be?

AC: Jim's favorite nature film:



Rich's favorite nature film:

