

# PAUL DICKERSON AND AN UNENDING QUESTION OF PERCEPTION AND BEING

—Alison Green

*“P.S. ANOTHER POSS. WOULD BE:  
FABRICATING PHYSIQUES CAUSES & EFFECTS”\**

I begin with this ending, for what it indicates about Paul Dickerson’s process, and the continuously open-endedness of his practice. This postscript was handwritten at the end of a two-and-a-half page letter he wrote to the Director of the Sculpture Center in New York, proposing two panel discussions on the state of sculpture in contemporary art. Titles he has already listed in the letter include: *The Procedural Physique*, *Casting Perception*, *Catagorical* [sic.] *Perspectives*, and *The Idea of Fabrication*. Elsewhere he lists artists and critics he’s been in touch with, and explains in a uniquely complex manner his ideas about the bodily basis of sculpture, language’s impact on perception (language as a medium), and something he saw as of utmost importance—a link between categorizing objects and artifice. In the letter he explains: “All of these issues it goes without saying are issues of evolution and development. How things got to be designed *that way*, and how they were fabricated—*made*.” In fact, there are other additions to the typed text—a couple of crossings out and one phrase added to the top of page two. The letter is a palpable demonstration that this is only the tip of an iceberg, one small view of a large, consuming project. For Dickerson, there is no way of ending such a letter, because there’s always more to say.

The letter also provides some insight into Dickerson’s sometimes confounding, aesthetically peripatetic, sensual, and funny work. On the one hand there is his keen observation of the man-made world; on the other a dogged pursuit of a full experience of things. Dickerson took in everything, and saw it all as connected. Everything could be art, and in fact art was about everything. In his purview were materials, structures of knowledge, processes, images, and historical ideas. His working procedure included experimenting with some of those materials, appropriating things (both new and old, found, sourced, bought, or merely pointed to), and combining these processes into objects, environments, and commentary in ways that suggest that understanding things and making things are fundamentally connected. For Dickerson there was material; it had substance, structure, gravity, and meanings that inhered therein. Then there were representations, already-made objects and images that equally form experience. The important thing he understood and tried to communicate is that these were not separate, but part of a continuum. Making and appropriating were tools of equal value for understanding perception. This is perhaps what resounds in his work now, looking back on it from a ten-year distance. He was neither a neo-formalist nor a neo-conceptualist. He neither idealized a lost connection with the material world, but nor did he adhere to the position that such a connection wasn’t possible.

*\*Excerpted italicized text is from Dickerson’s own writings.*



*“A MAN CAN BECOME AN ARTIST  
BY STANDING NEXT TO AN ARTIST.”*

Amongst the many things that Dickerson made, there’s one work which is a kind of key to what he was up to. I remember him explaining it to me in his studio, and he described it in terms that suggest it worked that way for him. It’s a “painting” from 1990 called *Bridge Metric*. It’s really an adapted found object, a paint-covered drop cloth with two squares of plywood attached to the upper corners. Dickerson told me that he found it (read, “appropriated” it) from some place on the Williamsburg Bridge that was being painted. What intrigued him was that part of the cloth had been flat on a horizontal surface, and the other part had hung vertically. This can be traced by the fact that the paint had dropped differently in each part, falling in symmetric, round spots on the flat part and elongated drips where it had been hanging. What we see then in this work is: first, the record of a certain truth, that gravity affects paint in different ways. Then there is the observation (seeing/finding) and appropriation (naming) of the thing; Dickerson wouldn’t presume to say that the bridge painter didn’t notice this paint effect; he might maintain that unintended effects of materials are at least as interesting than those made by artists. Then there is the inversion of the object (opposite to the

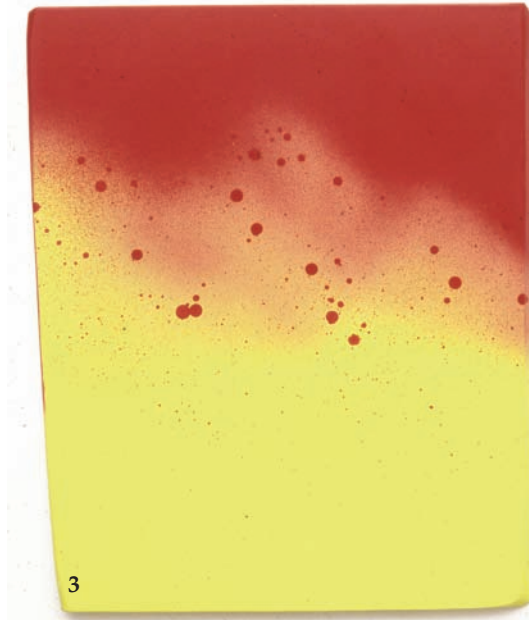
gravitational direction) and the addition of the two square panels, making it as an object conform to the category of Painting, making us view it as a painting, and waiting to see if we start to unpack what is right there in front of our eyes. It is a trick of sorts: what appears as an abstract pattern of paint—a painting—is a beautiful found object, still in essence a painting, although not made in an intended way. There is no doubt that Dickerson was also attracted to genuine work of which this is an artefact (the paint—undercoat; the cloth—canvas; they’re not fancy; they speak of labor). So with this work, he shrugs off in a single gesture the need to make anything, the modernist obsession with materials being “true” to themselves, but also, somehow, the postmodernist assumption that representations necessarily come out of media culture. This object is an image, just like a photograph is, in the indexical sense. It’s a stand-in rather than something created, but it was in fact made.

*“BY SHOWING THAT CRAFT ISN’T NECESSARY  
TO INVEST SKILL OF LIFE OR ‘MEANING’  
INTO AN ARTEFACT, I LEARNED THAT  
CRAFT ISN’T EVEN LOCATABLE IN CRAFT.”*

Here’s a story—apocryphal?—recounted in one of Dickerson’s drawings:

*One evening I was at an opening at the Colin de Land Gallery on Wooster bet. Grand + Broome. A sculptor had a show of humidifiers that were custom shaped sculptures. On the wall by the desk was a store bought humidity gauge of some sort. Obviously not part of the show. I made this object into a sculpture in a show that wasn’t even mine by asking the assistant how much it cost. The assistant went to the dealer apparently to see if it was for sale (it was not on the price list). De Land came back with him + told me it was for sale + the price—\$500.00 or so. I left my new sculpture there for them to deal with.*

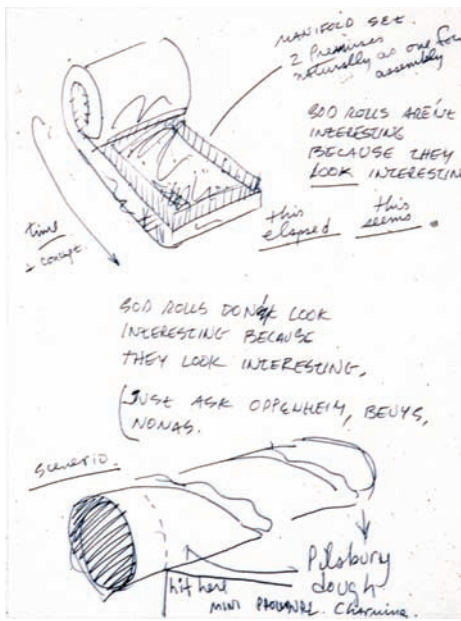
This bit of appropriationist humor doesn’t need much explanation (read about Duchamp if you don’t get it). What is also interesting is the social story it tells: Dickerson’s insertion of “his” art into a particular gallery in which he was interested, and which hadn’t shown much interest in him, the play on the everyday work that dealers do, and his somewhat subversive identity switch from artist to buyer and back to artist again. (And the irony, of course, is that this gallery staged the excellent exhibition of his work the year after his death—so he did get there). Dickerson’s “appropriations” here and elsewhere were serious because they conferred meaning on the things he observed, and they were far from arbitrary, although it was often far from obvious what he was driving at. Galleries were part of the problem of understanding art—he argued in writing that they do a lot of categorizing, and a lot of missing the point. They also carry meaning in inadvertent ways. I recall him remarking on the quality of the paint at Leo Castelli; he said the walls had been painted so many times the surface had become like an orange peel. He wanted some of that history; he wanted his work to be experienced at the crossroads marked by these kinds of observations. In another one of his drawings he wrote: “I want to go like the kid running his hand or a stick along a fence in regard to my work + the fence of career, history, all that art shit.”



*“MAKE THE THING THE THING”*

Dickerson had an active relationship with materials which needs some consideration. He was attracted to all sorts of esoteric substances and chemicals normally used in industry: fibers, crystals, glues, epoxies, plastics, as well as construction materials like cement, mastic, asphaltum, as well as packing materials like honeycomb cardboard, MDF and stretch wrap. He made a large number of works that were experiments with dental resin. He made a lot of works where he “grew” crystals (only he knows how). Colored cement of various textures ended up covering objects of various types. The thing that seemed to be driving these investigations is the quality certain complex materials have of being able to morph, and to be inherently themselves at the same time. He wanted both sides of this. Things that are different can resemble each other, perhaps even become something else, but there is a trace back. Same goes for already-made objects that he reformed into sculptures, such as the faux-wood house siding he heated and bent into an s-curve in *Outlet* (1994). There is an existing meaning carried in the material (already a copy of a natural material) and a situational meaning created by the way he used it (in this case, sited outdoors, in “nature”).

One can point to certain episodes in the history of art to establish a context for Dickerson’s ideas, other moments where artists worked with form but against categories. The Surrealist writer Georges Bataille used the word *informe* (the “formless”) to undermine systems of classification. Giving words “jobs” rather than fixed meanings meant that one thing could turn into its opposite (and like Dickerson, the Surrealists were interested in representations sent up by the natural world, such as camouflaging insects). Much later, Robert Smithson emphasized the “failed dialectic” of technology, and famously embraced a drive toward entropy rather than form in the materials he used. In Dickerson’s own time and place, one might mention Matthew Barney’s involvement with the signifying and material sides of substances like Vaseline. Dickerson’s interest was not in things that were obviously similar, but in seeing visual or



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material connections between things that are different. “How can you be an artist and not be interested in illusion,” he asked in another drawing. Illusion, particularly shape, connects objects across different categories. He shows us that a Stetson and the gates for a highway tollbooth have similar shapes, and this observation is in equal measure perverse and profoundly indicative of how and why things get made the way they do. One might say that a long project in twentieth-century art has been to work against the inevitable tendency to fix aesthetic experience. Dickerson’s work should be seen as part of this.

**“ONLY THE THINGS YOU CAN SAY WITHOUT BATTING AN EYE CAN BE EXPECTED TO REPRESENT YOU.”**

There is one more way of thinking through Dickerson’s use of objects and his desire to get to their meanings and that is to see his work as analogous to the functioning of language itself. An old friend of mine and Dickerson’s said: think of his work in terms of syntax. So I went to my old copy of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course on General Linguistics*. He tells us that conventional grammar is made up of morphology (classes of words, such as nouns, verbs, etc.) and syntax (uses of these forms, and groupings that make certain meanings). Saussure was interested, however, in showing how much form and function are indivisible, and so he proposes two new terms: associative relations and syntagms. In the latter, words or groups of words gain their meaning not by something inherent but through their opposition to the words or phrases around them. A syntagm could be a saying or a sentence; it’s a unit, internally coherent, and it has history. Associative relations notably include apparently arbitrary categories, such as all the words that end with “-ness.”



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Saussure writes, “Their seat is the brain; they are part of the inner storehouse that makes up the language of each speaker.” He wanted to show how language (collective use—fixed meanings) and speaking (individual use—freedom) put different pressures on words, and that nothing is in fact arbitrary, neither the mental constructions of language nor their regular use. I’m hoping it’s clear how well Dickerson’s often peculiar and certainly idiosyncratic juxtaposition of objects and ideas can be seen as a productive inquiry into the language of sculpture and other made things. It wasn’t material he was investigating, really, it was new forms that pointed to use, and pointed to structure.

**“THE ONLY THING I KNOW IS THAT ART ISN’T BAD ART.”**

An ending. Looking over what was written on the whiteboard Dickerson used in his studio, I was intrigued to see the words “Sonic Hedgehog.” I knew Sonic the Hedgehog was a video game, but such a straightforward reference in Dickerson’s normally loopy methodology seemed unlikely, and besides, he’d left out the “the.” I Googled® it, and found out that a “Sonic Hedgehog” is a protein—named after the video game—that regulates the organization of the brain and the limbs during the growth of the human embryo. Is it possible this is what he meant? Whether he did or not, it’s perfect. Syntactical complexity, an appropriation of an appropriation, and at the heart an agent—a chemical, a medium—that has the ability to form both the head and the hands. So much for the Cartesian split. It’s as apt a metaphor you could find for Dickerson’s work. Via the application of his observational skills, his mental processing, and his tactile manipulation, he effects a transformation that is a part appropriation, part craft. Dickerson perceived some of the deeper issues about form, that it’s not fixed and absolute but part of the structure of experience and the production of cultural objects. That he did this in a moment of such high infatuation with the thin veneer of image-culture, and for all the canny, inventive, and still resonant physicality of his work, his efforts are very worth knowing.



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**PAUL DICKERSON: AS ART**

Paul Dickerson (1961–97) pursued multiple and overlapping practices that drew on observations about the physical and intellectual capacity of art. Across a career that garnered group and solo shows in the U.S. and Europe, Dickerson combined and transformed found objects, created wall works of minimalist color and shape, and conceived site-specific installations. Influenced by such artists as Claes Oldenburg, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Irwin, he was interested in issues of perception and form and the possibilities for proceeding as an artist in the late twentieth century. Co-organized by the Betty Rymer Gallery and the Paul Dickerson Studio Art Museum/Art Research Center in South Haven, Michigan, this retrospective exhibition of Dickerson’s objects, drawings, archival sketches, and project plans is supported in part by The Judith Rothschild Foundation and by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. *Paul Dickerson: As Art* is curated by Dr. Alison Green and Barbara Houlberg.

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Paul Dickerson Studio Art Museum/Art Research Center

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**Image credits**

- Front: *Way One*, 1995–96, printed metal, 10" x 13" x 43" circumference.
1. *Bridge Metric*, 1990, drop cloth with lead primer and plywood, 64" x 54" x 5"
  2. *Outlet*, 1994, thermoformed vinyl, 12' x 3' x 9'
  3. *Untitled*, 1994, sprayed rubber on plastic, 19.5" x 15"
  4. *Untitled*, 1995–96, plywood, corrugated cardboard, tiles, silica, 14" x 25" x 26" plus sketch
  5. *Untitled*, 1994–97, cement block, cinder block, metals, epoxy resin, 38" x 18" x 8"
  6. Paul Dickerson, 1994. Photo: Anders Goldfarb



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the doing something  
 2d be done in many ~~or~~ versions  
 the one version that is  
 2d - right + not finding  
 after repeated attempts  
 only noticing when when  
 trying (as a version) is  
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**PAUL DICKERSON: AS ART**  
**January 23–**  
**February 23, 2007**  
 -WRESTLING- IDEAS  
 ends in a bime. dog/trail.

