

# bitforms gallery

**Björn Schülke, *Cosmos***

January 21–March 11, 2023

**Opening reception:** Saturday, January 21, 5-7 PM

**Gallery hours:** Tuesday–Saturday: 11 AM–6 PM

Björn Schülke's practice asserts an expert balance between action and reaction, surveillance and performance, anticipation and surprise. His sculptures, masterfully crafted in fiberglass, carbon fiber, wood, and brass incorporate elements of sound, movement, and smell through kinetic moments. Using a visual language inspired by elements of surveillance, science fiction, and aerospace engineering, Schülke's work is as striking in its form as in its execution. *Cosmos* presents a range of large-scale and intimate sculptural works created from 2008–2023 that are imbued with playful ardor, akin to a Dadaist attitude of irreverence. The artist references his works as absurdist apparatuses, devices that act but do not serve a function.

*Cosmos* reveals several works with unexpected acoustic elements. *Supersonic #3* is a sound sculpture that emits low frequency sounds from within a fiberglass shell. Within a form reminiscent of a Zeppelin, a theremin produces sound based on the viewer's position in relation to the piece. This early electronic musical instrument uniquely creates sound without physical contact. Though immobile, the sound emitted from the sculpture suggests celestial motion. *String Rover* consists of a fantastical stringed instrument located in the center of a kinetic, interactive sculpture that combines surveillance technology, solar energy, and sound. Awakened by the presence of a spectator, it starts to behave according to its own hidden logic. *Aerophone #5* is also motion-activated and its kinetic process results in the activation of an organ pipe that Schülke engineered using motors, air, and wood. *Aerophone #5* surprises the viewer with its audible reactions and refined tone.

While viewer interaction drives the behavior of some works, not all pieces are triggered by gesture. Observation, on behalf of both the spectator as well as the artwork, is a characteristic within much of Schülke's practice. At times predictable, other times erratic, each piece has a personality of its own. *Mirror Machine* is a series of solar-powered works equipped with mirrors, magnets, and motors. Over time, each work draws energy from light sources, charging up its solar battery. Once full, solar energy is converted into active responses that delight, disrupt, and disorient the viewers' expectation. *Rollercoaster* acts as a hallmark of Schülke's modernist yet humorous style. The sculpture utilizes energy from a solar panel to drive a magnet and ball around a winding track. The machine itself is a farcical object, replete with curiosity. *Space One* is Schülke's first olfactory sculpture that is motion activated to inflate and, at sudden moments, emit a scent specifically engineered by Scent Communication for NASA that smells of space. The scent is modeled after the experience of astronauts and an analysis of space molecules from NASA. Visitors may experience this smell by spending time with the artwork—first the motion sensors will activate, leading the scent to flow from granules, through tubing, into the open air.

Schülke considers complex cycles of communication and movement that are fueled by infrared surveillance, motion sensors, solar panels, sound, and air propulsion. *Space Observer* is a large-scale public sculpture commissioned for California's San Jose airport in 2010. Surrealistic in both form and function, the permanent sculpture stands on 8-foot tripod legs supporting a propeller-powered rotating body. The legs of the sculpture rise from the floor, allowing pedestrian traffic underfoot. Within this exhibition, Schülke presents a model of the celebrated sculpture, sharing insight into his process of drafting and modeling. The completed sculpture's upper body rotates, propelled by its extended wings. Thin kinetic camera arms collect live video that is displayed on embedded monitors within the sculpture's body. Triggered by motion sensors and custom electronics, the work's movement is dependent upon the presence of its traveling audience.

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Björn Schülke

b. 1967, Cologne, Germany

Lives and works in Cologne, Germany

Björn Schülke is a sculptor who playfully transforms live spatial energy into active responses. Slow deliberate movements in his sculptures consider mass and weight of form, while their striking physical presence is anchored in the formal vocabulary of modern abstraction. His constructions delight, disrupt, and disorient the viewers' expectation— staging an unpredictable behavioral exchange between the audience and the machine.

Portraying an animist worldview, Schülke's work is characterized by its lively interior consciousness. Revealed through a complex cycle of communication and movement, each object possesses irrational character traits or distinctive emotional features. Using solar panels, infrared surveillance and air propulsion to trigger movement or sound, the immediate surroundings of Schülke's sculptures become sites of observation and intervention. His 'creatures' are suspicious, vulnerable subjects that are awakened by motion sensors as the viewer approaches. Psychically charged, these automated works seem fantastical, inheriting an odd performative humor from Valie Export, one of Schülke's mentors at the Academy of Media Art, Cologne. Evoking the tools of modern observation and precision, his work suggests artificial intelligence as well as absurdity.

Collected privately throughout Europe, the US and Australia, Schülke's work has also been acquired by Bank of America, The Progressive Collection, the Borusan Collection at Perili Köşk Museum; 21C Museum and Hotel, Sharjah Art Museum; Sculpture Museum Glaskasten, the Neiman Marcus Collection, Jülich Research Centre and the City of San Jose. Selected exhibitions of Schülke's work include the Telfair Museum of Arts, Savannah; Museum Villa Rot, Burgrieden; KulturBahnhof, Kassel; Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid; Verbeke Foundation, Stekene; bitforms gallery, New York; Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin and the Biennale of Electronic Arts, Perth.