It is an often-repeated truism that in recent years the media landscape has broadly changed, and that, especially, ‘digital media has changed everything’. However, usually this is repeated without a true idea of what exactly has changed and how little the manual labor of the world has gone away. It is very easy to look at popular film, for example, filled with computer generated imagery and assume it automatic or procedurally generated. In fact this imagery can only be created by large teams of people working in what are essentially factories, tweaking minute details day in and day out to be fed to vast render farms, the steam machines of new.

The gulf between this reality and its outward perception gives labor like this the inauspicious designation of requiring an immense effort to produce something that then appears to come out of thin air.

This sentiment is pervasive, making everyone on the one hand assume that anything can be done digitally, and on the other see the products of digital labor as hollow, transient. Instead there are interesting possibilities that this conflicting situation presents, because digital labor has the potential to supplant traditional labor with a potential working mode that does not rely on the same degree of material and capital expenditure as other formats. The hardware it takes to generate and disseminate a digital image is certainly an important expense (and contributes to the current state of the ‘global digital divide’ of western privilege), but given the tools it is possible for artists to experiment with a wide variety of methods for producing work without needing to commit to costly and sometimes wasteful material expenses, the rendering out of a final work as ‘prototype’. To assume that there is a utopia either in materials or in ‘immateriality’ is unfortunately a false proposition.
In my view, nothing is more indicative of the tensions in this divide than in the many and varied issues with what is called virtual exhibition. Virtual exhibitions are those that started as a kind of escape trajectory for artists from the material production of art objects. Emerging especially as ‘online exhibitions’\(^1\), they take many forms and are distributed in a variety of ways, but most display similar intent. First, a seeming inversion of Lawrence Weiner’s take on conceptual work: here, the artist may construct the piece, but the piece may not be fabricated and must not be ‘built’. Second, the works are made accessible by anybody, from anywhere. A viewer doesn’t have to live in a wealthy metropolis to see the work, or travel to a physical location during open hours.

These central and essentially political motivations have often driven the rest of the decisions about how and why a virtual exhibition would manifest itself. For many such exhibitions this meant some kind of organizational structure binding a number of internet-based works, works of software, or of other media, text/image/video. These are what I would categorize as ‘online exhibitions’, which will not be my main focal point for the remainder of this text.

One particular strain of virtual exhibitions attempts to replicate or subvert architectural space even as it replicates or subverts the ‘art object’. This type of virtual exhibition, which for clarity’s sake I’ll suggest calling ‘prototype exhibitions’, consist of digitally rendered images of (relatively) realistic or plausible objects positioned within a (relatively) realistic or plausible virtual space. The spaces tend to replicate architectural convention, even if only deployed as an assumed ‘neutral’—one could call it virtual exhibition in a false white cube, applying architecture more as analogy or set dressing than as a central focus of the exhibition’s intent.

\(^1\) For a better historical understanding, begin with Oliver Laric’s ‘An Incomplete Timeline of Online Exhibitions and Biennials’, which as of this writing lists projects from 1991-2013. This is not a historical essay and will focus only on three exhibitions of a specific type which took place between 2010 and 2011. http://archive.rhizome.org/artbase/56398/timeline.html
The curious logic behind this has always appealed to me as much as it confuses: stage an exhibition independent of physical space, independent of material constraint, independent of most concerns of both labor and economic need, and yet invoke space, material, and labor in order to make it ‘look real’? At best this can be read as a provocative refusal of work (‘making things without making things’), at worst a capitulation to the idea that immaterial objects are only interesting insofar as they can be materially fabricated at some point in the future.

As far as I can tell some of the earliest versions of this were done by Miltos Manetas and Andreas Angelidakis (both for ‘Virtual Worlds’ in 1998 and ‘Neen World’ in 2002—as well as Manetas’ own ‘Whitney Biennial 2002’, a virtual exhibition which was not sanctioned by the Whitney Museum and is still squatting whitneybiennial.com). Looking at these now provides an interesting lens with which to view work of our contemporary moment. The tricks of digital modeling that were au courant at the time now show the distinct signs of deprecation, a planned obsolescence even the strongest mobilization of industry effects specialists can’t avoid.

Rather than exploring the history, I’m interested in looking at the propositions brought forward by three prototype exhibitions that took place between 2010 and 2011. By this point digital image quality was getting better, the tools easier, and importantly the Facebook-ization of the internet had made it more difficult to continue the illusion of the web as a non-space where non-identities could create content free of any other imaginable tethers. This was also a moment when a larger number of artists who had been engaged with work made explicitly for dissemination on the internet had begun to revisit

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(or for some, visit) materiality, folding the languages of sculpture, painting, and performance into their vocabularies.

On 23 January 2010, Reference Gallery, a now defunct project space in Richmond Virginia, opened one such prototype exhibition, a group show called *Mirrors*. Rather than ship work to Virginia the participating artists edited photographs of the empty gallery space, inserting Photoshop collages of various objects (some images taken by the artists of their own work or of unrelated objects, others appropriated) into the photos in order to suggest that the exhibition had been fabricated and held. Twenty images from multiple angles, including detail shots and images of individual works in situ, portray a modestly realistic physical space. Each work has been sited in its own part of Reference’s very real ‘white cube’, and remains stationary throughout the installation views. Visitors to the gallery—those that were—were greeted not by physical manifestations of these image and object collages, but instead by a lone projector showing a slideshow of the propositional works.

In my view this exhibition was a significant departure from online exhibitions that came before it. The works in *Mirrors* aren’t concerned with embodying non-space, they aren’t concerned with finding a radicalized alternative to the physical manifestation of the art object; instead *Mirrors* is more aligned with the ethos of punk. The exhibition essentially proposes that it doesn’t matter if we can put objects together well, it doesn’t matter if we can afford them, it barely matters that we have a space: Photoshop, Google image search, and a cheap digital camera are corollary to the ‘three chords’ one needs to learn to join a band. True to form the objects, while realistically placed, are edited together with a blunt hand, inviting an immediate

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3 Reference Gallery was an alternative space run by four then-students at Virginia Commonwealth University: James Shaeffer, Conor Backman, Ross Ianatti, and Edward Shenk. From 2009-2012 they hosted a number of exhibitions which gained a significant online following (artist Brad Troemel referred to Reference as a “Dual Site” for this reason), presenting work from artists internationally, and giving a number of early shows to artists who went on to strong early careers.
understanding that the installation image the viewer is taking in is a fabrication.

This is one method of constructing a prototype exhibition, especially insofar as it quite literally fills a real, sited, specific location with a number of sculpture and image works that could be fabricated almost exactly as shown. The work seems to relish in this designation as prototype, allowing for a set of formal compositions that don’t go much beyond that—the concept of the exhibition seems to satisfy the need for the works to be anything in particular. At most they could be read as concept sketches, or studies, by the group show’s three participating artists: Ben Schumacher (billed as Louie Schumacher), who in this same period was organizing group shows on frozen rivers and law offices; Brad Troemel, who would extend this exhibition concept into a more than fifty-artist group show the same year called An Immaterial Survey of Our Peers; and Forrest Nash, who would soon found the preeminent source for in vogue contemporary art installation views, Contemporary Art Daily.

But what if one doesn’t have a space? The luxuries afforded by Reference Gallery’s actual gallery already set up a contradiction to the above proposition of Mirrors as any kind of radical gesture. The artists in Mirrors held a physical gallery space vacant for the period of exhibition, while using altered documentation photos to wink at the idea that if materials, transportation, or labor were cheaper they might have fabricated the works after all.

In October of 2010, Timur Si-Qin released what could be called a more refined take on the Mirrors gesture, an exhibition claimed to be “Exhibition One” of Chrystal Gallery⁴. Promoted as a new venture (or extension) of Berlin gallery Gentili Apri, Exhibition One was a fully digitally rendered exhibition space consisting exclusively of digitally

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⁴ Sometimes stylized “Chrystal’s Gallery”. Exhibition One did not have a second exhibition to follow it until 2015, when a solo exhibition by Kate Sansom was released. 
http://chrystalgallery.info/exhibitionOne.html
rendered works. Si-Qin invited six artists\textsuperscript{5} to send him instructions or sketches of the works they wanted to make for the exhibition, which he then proceeded to render in 3D modeling software.

For the most part the works in the exhibition adhere to recognizable material formats. Billy Rennekamp used the opportunity to create a number of absurd propositional sports trophies, Harm van den Dorpel provided designs very similar to works he was physically producing at the time, and Charles Broskoski’s rendered wall works in irregular shapes and low relief appear eminently plausible. Most importantly, despite not being related to a specific physical location the works are all shown in a white cube with fluorescent lighting, underpinning a determination that this exhibition is an alternative to a traditional gallery hang while simultaneously employing its form.

Two works in the show did subvert the format, defying status as propositional or prototypical objects. One is Lindsay Lawson’s aptly named \textit{Impossible Non-Object of Desire}, rendered as a massive, room-filling gelatinous blob, something like a droplet of water suspended while falling, or an enlarged glop of hair gel. Kari Altman’s piece displays a striking aesthetic similarity: also shown occupying the breadth of a room, \textit{How to Hide Your Plasma (Handheld Icon Shapeshift for Liquid Chrystal Display)} is a transparent non-object that also evokes liquid. Across thirteen separate installation views it is shown transforming into various stages, evoking an almost performative non-object that goes from distended sphere to puddle, appears to slosh apart and coat the entire room in its objectivity, and finally re-forms into a rectangle with rounded edges, an abstraction of a smartphone.

\textsuperscript{5} Kari Altman, Charles Broskoski, Lindsay Lawson, Billy Rennekamp, Maxwell Simmer, and Harm van den Dorpel
(top) installation view from Mirrors; (bottom) installation view from Chrystal Gallery, Exhibition One.
Altman’s and Lawson’s contributions signal an interesting dilemma for prototype exhibitions: if the architecture of gallery space is going to be invoked, and the materiality of work is going to be invoked within that virtual space, how does one make an object that can successfully subvert physicality? It obviously isn’t very provocative to suggest that the other works in the exhibition, which seem plausible to physically craft, in some way transcend materiality simply by not being made. Further, it wouldn’t be interesting to argue that no materials exist to make a work look exactly like the render. So if an artist’s goal is to subvert the whole notion of what an object is, one would need to explore conjectural materiality by developing forms that can’t exist, or can’t exist based on our current understanding of materiality. But then we run into a classic conundrum of trying to define something by its inverse—in order to make something that seems like a non-object, we get object forms that are visual and compositional tropes for materialities we can’t comprehend, for things that slip out of our fingertips at the touch or that can only be explained by theoretical physics. We get gels and blobs.

This is one of the reasons that prototype exhibitions could be so interesting. While, speculatively, virtual exhibition could be a platform for exploring what art could look like as non-objects, on the other hand a prototype exhibition—a virtual exhibition as extension of material reality, as proof of concept—can create a space of experimentation. In the press release accompanying Exhibition One, Si-Qin writes that Chrystal Gallery allows an understanding of the art work “as a three-dimensional representation of geometric data”, and questions “where ... an artwork stop[s] and its documentation begin[s].”

This kind of perspective allows for an understanding of the art object as always-already a prototype, a single manifestation of a larger potential among a multitude of instantiations. Rather than think of

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the object as a singular lump of material burdened with aura, the unique expression of some artistic genius, we can understand the object as set of instructions that are readily replicable. This has the equal benefit and detriment of meaning that an individual object could potentially never be lost to time, and instead endlessly reproduced after its destruction or decomposition, re-emerging always as both the object itself and a knowing mediated caricature of some past object or idea.

One could see this as a further manifestation of the cultural lineage of the conceptual project, in its separating a work’s object-being from its particular material chassis. While this is certainly the case it’s probably more realistic to understand it as part of broader societal trends fashioned by a contemporary knowledge/creative economy. Put another way, if the majority of societal output is ‘designed’, so to speak, by people who then have their assembly instructions carried out by others, while still retaining their authorship, is it any surprise that the contemporary artist adopts this same model? More than ever, the instructions or intellectual property that undergirds art objects consists of the actual work itself. The piece you see in a white cube, or in photos taken in a white cube, or digitally rendered to approximate a piece and a white cube, are equally the residue of the work as a whole; prototypes.

This doesn’t just apply to works made for virtual exhibition: in the planning stages for making an art object an artist may experience a sensation of having completed a work when they only see a mock-up in SketchUp, or a final Photoshop print file. When physically fabricated the work becomes not unlike what is called an information good, a term for those objects whose production requires a large amount of intellectual or creative labor, and whose physical product only matters as much as the information created in that labor (examples of other information goods would be pharmaceuticals, or writing).
This can give a great degree of contingency to the art objects themselves, many of which are now created using specifically industrial/commercial materials and techniques. The turn of many artists from the mid-twentieth century away from stable, time-resisting paint and toward less resilient home and hardware store pigments was only a lengthy preface to practices now, which commonly employ fabrication techniques new enough that no similarly produced objects have been around long enough to accurately judge durability.

It’s important then that these works could always be re-made or put back together, by virtue of their being made as information goods. They adopt the modular or refurbishable materiality of something like consumer electronics, those objects whose industrial shelf life has been fueled by a drive for perpetual and unrelenting progress, the modern project’s unsustainable propellant.

This is of course a rhetoric on these objects’ materiality that goes to an extreme, but this kind of various and contingent objecthood allows substantial differences to work of the past. If a work exists first in a prototype exhibition, rendered or sketched for public exhibition only as a mediated image, and then is fabricated once, twice, ten times, which is the real work? Clearly it doesn’t really matter. But the repetition and spread of that work—both through its physical object-copies and through its life as a mediated image—creates a democratizing accessibility to its form. A work could be seen in multiple locations simultaneously around the world, and those who couldn’t be present in front of one of the manifestations could see a mediated copy essentially the same. The work of art as information good could become itinerant, a kind of broadcast object.
Screen captures from Katja Novitskova, Sunny n shiiite
A relation to ‘broadcast’ reinforces one of the central principles in other forms of virtual exhibition: as mentioned before, the notion that the work be accessible by anyone from anywhere. After all, the central focus of this type of exhibition is the establishment of a kind of alternate platform, a different method of going about the same thing, which would ideally allow for a diverse range of artists from a variety of social and economic backgrounds to communicate their work freely. If you understand a prototype exhibition as an exhibition for broadcast, it becomes clear that for the most part one doesn’t need to necessarily rely on expensive or flashy rendering tools, like those used by Mirrors and Chrystal Gallery, in order to construct an alternate method of exhibition.

Katja Novitskova’s Sunny n shiiite (2011) provides one such interesting and alternative method of prototype exhibition. In March 2011 Novitskova simply directed a webcam at a blank studio wall and, over the course of one week, arranged and re-arranged a selection of found and fabricated objects. The objects weren’t strictly speaking prototypes, or virtual constructions, but hold a contingency in their only really existing for the camera, or only existing for the viewer through mediation. The arrangement of objects was not open to the public in any capacity—in her artist statement on the work Novitskova writes that Sunny n shiiite exists “in a geographically unlocated and thus ‘virtual’ space”7. The individual objects themselves were also largely presented as only important in their physical and formal relation to the other objects within the webcam’s view, rendering the entire exercise a play at flattening a group of objects into a singular work, that singular work into a singular exhibition, and the entire enterprise into a pictorial frame.

Sunny n shiiite manages to approach prototype exhibition without getting overly caught up in new technologies for rendering. After all,

7 Katja Novitskova, text accompanying Sunny n shiiite, http://katjanovi.net/sunnynshiite.html. Originally presented as a project for the curatorial project The State.
when we say something is *rendered* digitally, all we’re really referring to is an advanced and realistic method of expression, as when a skilled draftsman makes a finely rendered drawing or a skilled musician renders a fine performance. A prototype exhibition carefully sculpted in 3D rendering software could potentially be less widely circulated than a prototype exhibition drawn poorly on the back of a napkin. Novitskova’s proposition puts forward that what matters is the work itself and its method of mediation. To view the exhibition one doesn’t have to be geographically located anywhere particular, and she can reach an audience absent of external partnerships.

Further, the entire conceit of the exhibition is to not only present a series of prototype object arrangements, but also to display the act of their creation as the work. Consistently returning to the arrangement of objects and over the course of a week removing this, adding that, replacing a carpet that dominates, as a dark rectangle, the lower third of the frame with a metal lattice that utilizes the same compositional space, adding a spray foam cloud on top of it. One gets a sense the materials are contingent, the specifics of the objects variable, and that this prototype exhibition is constantly engaged with the process of constructing *itself*.

Better yet, you can do this right now. Anyone really can. It appears that even for Novitskova it was an experiment, not really wrought as an exhibition or as anything worth ‘advertising’, just an exercise in how an artist can gain a broad reach with little sacrifice. This was even before the seeming outbreak of streaming services, the popular embrace of an entire new genre of media personality whose central product is *presence*. This is arguably one of the ways in which contemporary art isn’t keeping pace with the rest of culture, considering that opening up this aspect of an artist’s practice—showing the process, showing the studio, showing the prototype—is still a worrisome issue for some. We shouldn’t be so worried that showing the process, or especially speaking aloud the *intellectual process*, behind a work will soften a ‘final original’ of its affective impact,
much in the same way that we shouldn’t be worried that having video work available on the internet hampers the experience of the video installed in space.

Ultimately given art’s contemporary toolset there will be countless more virtual exhibitions, online exhibitions, prototype exhibitions. While these appear to fall in or out of vogue at more or less random interval, it may be important not to outright dismiss something like the prototype exhibition on account of its contradictions. As a method of expanding the possibility of dissemination and augmenting our own conception of the physical objects around us, this is a platform that could yield interesting possibilities. Sometimes there is more to gain in embracing contradiction.