

Adam McEwen
on Tom Friedman

Some assembly required



• **Untitled** 1990 Bubble gum 13 cm diameter
Approximately 1,500 pieces of chewed bubble gum moulded into a sphere. It is displayed wedged in a corner at head height and hangs by its own stickiness.



• Untitled 1999 Cereal boxes. 79 x 54 x 17 cm
 Nine Total cereal boxes cut into small squares and combined to make one large box

Tom Friedman's studio is a sensory deprivation chamber. A small shed about 50 feet from his home in the western Massachusetts countryside, it is windowless and featureless, immaculately tidy, completely empty and painted white.

He has compared it to the blindingly white prison cell in the science fiction film *THX 1138* (1970).

Friedman works in this environment to get a better view of the shape of his own thoughts. Knotted, looping, self-generating, endlessly expanding and dissipating, these are the raw materials with which he makes his sculptures and drawings. The end result, the object, whether it's a frail thread of chewing gum stretched between ceiling and floor or a hyper-real dragonfly assembled from hair and clay, is just a diagram and a trace of the stuff he's scraped from the inside of his head.

Friedman's works operate as closed, repetitive systems which run until they break down; at this point an eerie sense of the unreal begins to seep from the split gaskets. 'The idea of pulling things further and further apart is interesting', he has said. 'Stretching a piece of gum is an analogy for this idea: as you stretch the gum the connecting thread becomes thinner and thinner. I reached a point where the idea of fantasy started to filter in, because when the connection between things becomes so slight, they are not read as a cohesive whole.'¹

One sculpture consists of a clear plastic monofilament repeatedly knotted and then hung from the ceiling. Delicate, beautiful and profoundly unfamiliar, it looks like the ghost of a snake's intestine. The plastic has been transformed by intense, repetitive labour into something mute and elusive, an organic residue that remains, paradoxically, the definition of a 'man-made' object. The finished work, though comprehensible, confounds.

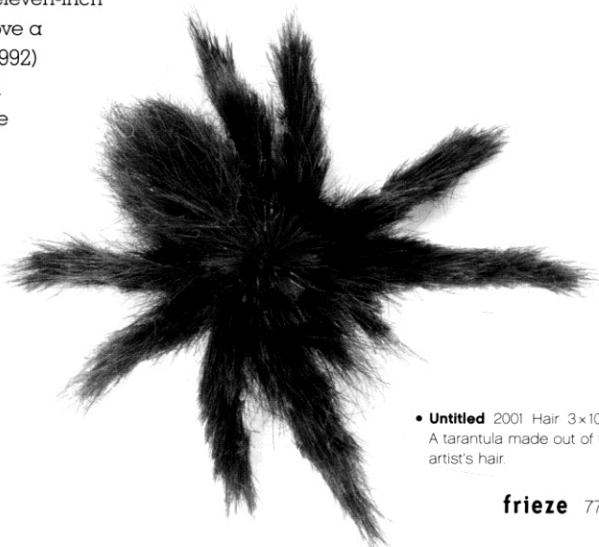
Most of Friedman's objects are named 'Untitled', and almost all are accompanied by clear descriptions: *Untitled*, 'a self-portrait carved from an aspirin' (1994); *Untitled*, 'a gelatin pill capsule filled with tiny spheres of Play-Doh' (1995); *Untitled*, 'a continuous ring of plastic drinking cups one inside the other' (1993); *Untitled*, 'all the words in the English language written on a large sheet of paper which sits on the floor' (1992-5). But the declarative simplicity belies an uncanny sculptural presence. A cardboard box covered with tiny polystyrene balls, *Untitled (box balls)* (2002), seems to lay bare some secret of its physical make-up, but in a language that, though strangely familiar, we cannot translate. Other pieces, such as a partially used bar of soap which Friedman has painstakingly inlaid with a perfect spiral of his own pubic hair, or a large white plinth displaying a half-millimetre sphere of his own shit, are the result of a collision between deadpan humour and an obscure and irrefutable logic.

Sometimes the title is all. In works such as *1,000 Hours of Staring*, 'a piece of paper the artist has stared at for one thousand hours' (1992-7) or *Untitled (A Curse)*, 'an eleven-inch spherical space eleven inches above a pedestal was cursed by a witch' (1992) the element of fantasy is contained entirely in the language – in the title – in which case Friedman operates as a kind of poet. He appeals to belief, but only in order to test its effect on thought: what, he asks, is the difference, in terms of shape, between a thought that we believe to be true and one we don't?

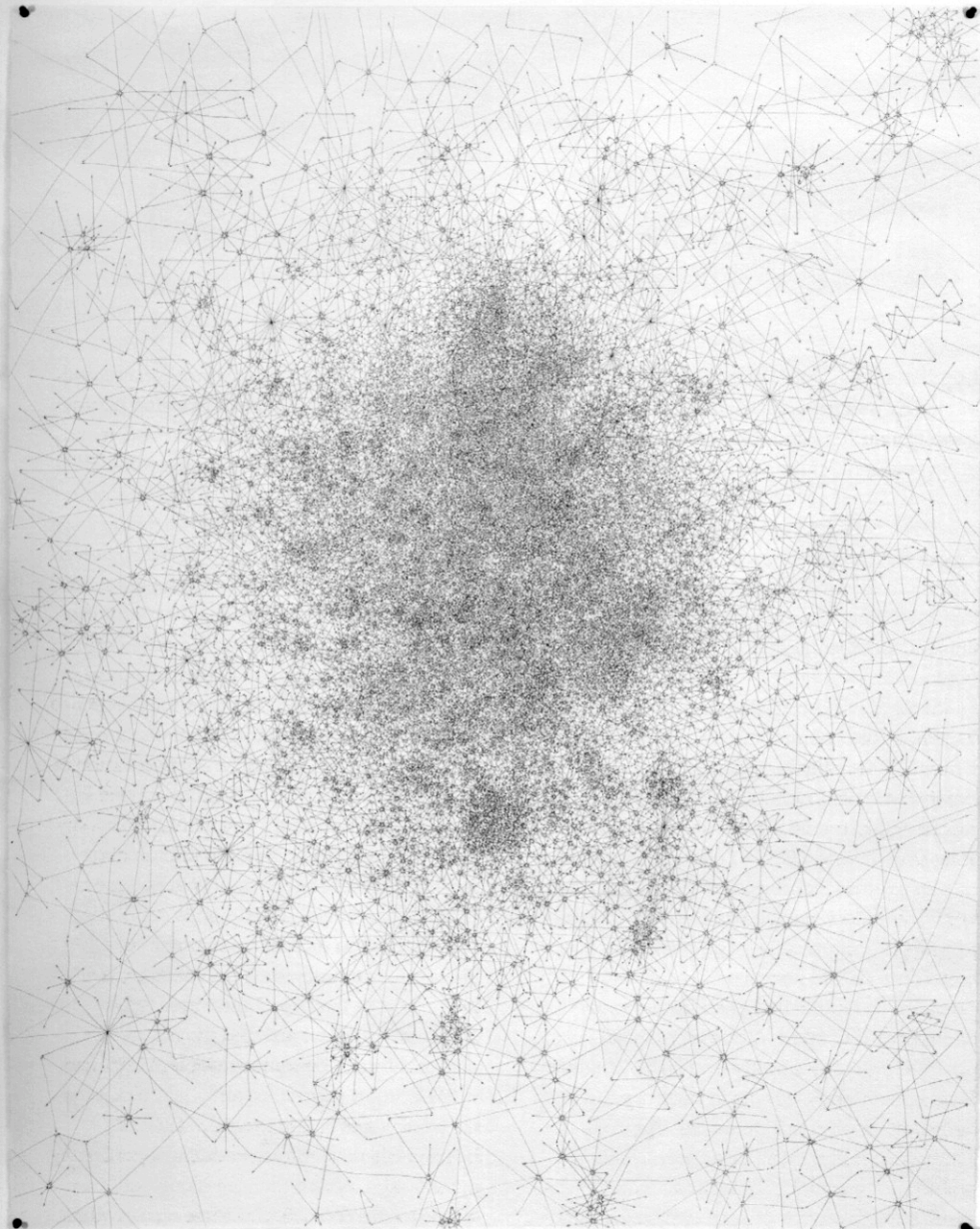
More recently Friedman has constructed sculptures from cereal boxes, cutting up tiny squares of the printed cardboard and reconnecting them in slightly staggered form. He has made one box from nine, and four boxes from one. They seem to shiver, as if they were buzzing, humming, on the spot – which, on a sub-atomic level, they are. Digging beneath the surfaces of appearance, he extracts the archetype that lies buried in the ordinary.

Sometimes Friedman's work seems to share something with that of Martin Creed: a gravely hilarious literalness that challenges the viewer to take it literally – Creed's blob of Blu-Tak, say, as a way of sticking art and life together, or Friedman's strand of gum in terms of stretching a thought to breaking point. If Creed is concerned with nothing as it tends to everything, Friedman is concerned with everything as it tends to nothing. Perhaps, eventually, they get to a similar place, where the object manages to be both dumb and mysterious, and the nature of physical reality becomes deeply ambiguous.

Friedman yearns for entry into a communal space, beyond the purely physical, beyond the now clumsy-seeming fiction of cyberspace, where thought alone connotes existence. In a piece of writing entitled *Future* (1999) he describes a society that, through a fusion of technology and consciousness, has outgrown the need for the physical body. He is interested in the work of Timothy Leary, the acid guru whose early 1970s vision of a technology-based neural network now seems soberingly prophetic. 'I imagine a collective mental space',



• **Untitled** 2001 Hair 3x10x9 cm
A tarantula made out of the artist's hair



• **Untitled** 1997 Ink on paper 137 x 108 cm
A drawing made of an accumulation of dots connected by lines and arrows.

Friedman says, 'where all potential lies in the ability to construct a thought.'²

Friedman's work argues that everything is endlessly connected, and therefore endlessly mutable. Like some autistics who see the world as a landscape of numbers, and for whom the solution to a mathematical problem is found simply by walking out into the landscape and picking up the answer, he proposes a universe in which the atoms, like meaning, continuously verge on collapse and rearrangement. Referring to a sculpture entitled *Dustball; a three-quarter inch diameter ball made of house dust which sits on a ground of sifted dust* (1994), Friedman once said that he was interested in 'the idea that much of us is falling apart and we are tending towards this different kind of unity'.³

If everything is constantly falling apart, then, conversely, everything is also constantly being remade, in new forms. Friedman's tiny,

bewilderingly precise fabrications of insects are not so much decoys as stopping points on a path of ceaseless and fantastic transformation: from minuscule ball of shit to fly to dragonfly to caterpillar to spider, they mutate freely and endlessly. For him art offers an entropic mental landscape in which all elements are in constant flux. In this he is close to Robert Smithson, the quintessential avatar of entropy and spirals, psycho-archaeology and science fiction. (Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1972, can be seen as a time machine, designed to provide access to an infinite archive of thought.) For both, thinking is a synonym for the cosmos.

There are echoes of Friedman's preoccupation with *quanta* and multitudes in the visions produced by the human brain when in an unstable state. In *Crowds and Power* (1960), his exhaustive compendium of cultural and mythic symbols, Elias Canetti gives various accounts of the notion of 'multitudes' found in the hallucinations experienced by alcoholics and drug addicts. 'In delirium due to cocaine poisoning', he writes, 'the visual hallucinations often become 'microscopic'; innumerable tiny details are registered - animalcules, holes in the wall, dots.' He notes 'the frequency of *diminution*' in the visions: 'Not only is everything perceived and felt which actually *is* small; not only is a world formed in which things known to be small predominate, but also large things are diminished in order to be able to enter this world [...] Everything is multiplied and everything is reduced in size [...] In every possible way there is *more life* around him, but it affects him as though he were a giant.'

Forming his Lilliputian elements from Play-Doh, scalpelting tiny pieces of cardboard, knotting filament, kneading galaxies of pills and furballs, Friedman uses repetition and extreme distortion of scale as a way of gaining more information. They allow, he says, 'a closer and closer investigation of something, like looking into its molecular make-up'.⁴ In fact, his work mimics the shape of thought in more specific and literal ways. Friedman's drawings and sculptures abound with spirals, lattices, constellations, images of tunnels and patterns that explode from a central point. These constantly reap-

Friedman proposes a universe in which the atoms, like meaning, continuously verge on collapse and rearrangement.

pearing templates coincide closely with the visual experiences of those hallucinating on LSD or mescaline. These were first classified in the 1920s by Heinrich Klüver, a neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, who discovered that the images commonly reported by subjects in the early stages of drug-induced trips fall into distinct categories. 'The typical mescaline or lysergic acid experiment begins with perceptions of coloured, moving, living geometrical forms', wrote Aldous Huxley in 1954 in *Heaven and Hell*. 'In time, pure geometry becomes concrete, and the visionary perceives, not patterns, but patterned things, such as carpets, coverings, mosaics.' Klüver, after interviewing dozens of subjects, classified these patterns into four 'form-constants': tunnels, spirals, cobwebs and honeycombs.

More than 70 years later research has found a neurological basis for the phenomenon. The primary visual cortex is a credit card-sized section of the brain about two millimetres thick that serves as the first layer of processing for images gathered by the retina. It consists of about 100 million neurons, each of which is wired to thousands of others. In a paper published last year Jack Cowan, a neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, presented a mathematical model of the visual cortex which, when given a virtual trip, produces patterns that match with uncanny accuracy the categories described by Klüver.⁵ 'We calculated that given the kinds of anatomy in the visual cortex', said Cowan, 'there are only four kinds of patterns it will make when it goes unstable. It turns out that those four kinds of patterns we get from

the math correspond exactly to the four classes of patterns that Klüver ended up with, based on his looking at the drawings.'⁶

In essence, Cowan and his colleagues demonstrated that the images produced under hallucination are a direct representation of the brain's circuitry. The tunnel leading to a bright white light reported in many near-death experiences, for example, is simply a reflection of the physical arrangements of strip-like columns of neurons in the visual cortex. Hallucinating is, as Cowan puts it, 'almost like seeing your own brain through a mirror'.⁷ Timothy Leary speculated in *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964) that 'these visions might be described as pure sensations of cellular or sub-cellular processes'. As he correctly guessed, the spaced-out brain-tunes into and visualizes its own architecture.

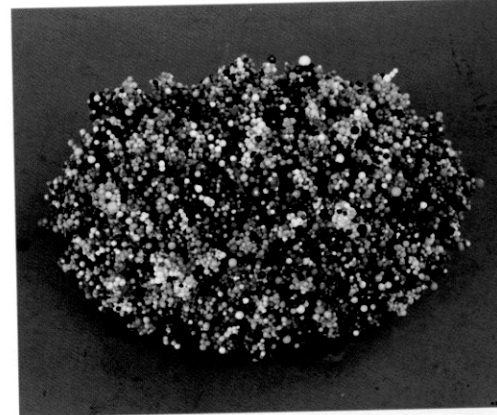
I don't know whether Friedman has ever hallucinated, and I have no idea if he has any experience with LSD, mescaline, alcohol, cocaine or any other trance-inducing mechanism – save, arguably, the making of his work. But when he says that 'for some reason, when I think about an idea I think about it as a physical thing [...] It's not so much what the ideas are, but what they look like, and where they are in relation to each other', he is precisely, and literally, as good as his word.⁸ His work invites the analogy of hallucinatory images because these images are just the products of a system working under abnormal conditions. And 'sometimes you learn a lot about a complex system from the conditions which occur when it breaks down.'⁹ Which is also Friedman's methodology.

There's a compelling argument which holds that for most of us schizophrenia is only as far away as a scratch on the surface of the skin. As we shed our skin, daily, hourly, by the moment, in an endlessly swirling blizzard of dead and dying cells, perhaps some 'other state' – Friedman's 'different sort of unity' – is more available, and more recognizable, than we might imagine. The phrase 'natural high' comes to mind; so does the intensified condition of mania – sensibly deadened by doses of lithium for better interaction with the 'normal' world – experienced by manic depressives. Such a state might be a useful one for an artist (and also a familiar one: current

research on ancient cave drawings concludes that whoever made these dots, spirals, tunnels and zigzags – forms that appear in the art of almost all cultures and go back more than 30,000 years – was, by whatever means, hallucinating).

Where we live, in the real world, and where we live in our minds, and the conceptual relationship between these two equally fictive places, are the subjects of Friedman's work. The ultimate aim of his artistic endeavour might be to reconcile these two realms through thought. It sounds utopian; it seems to involve notions of an afterlife, or a Platonic or Borgesian other-life. It is an ambitious undertaking. But, in the last words of Timothy Leary, spoken, perhaps hopefully, on his deathbed: 'Why not? Why not? Why not?'

1. Dennis Cooper in conversation with Tom Friedman, *Tom Friedman*, Phaidon Press, London, 2001, p. 38.
2. Interview with Hudson, *ibid.*, p. 138.
3. Interview with Robert Storr (extract) 1995, *ibid.*, p. 120.
4. Interview with Hudson, *ibid.*, p. 137.
5. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, vol. 356, 2001, p. 1.
6. Quoted in Ronald Kotulak, 'Seeing more than meets eye', *Chicago Tribune*, January 1, 2002.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Dennis Cooper in conversation with Tom Friedman, *Tom Friedman*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
9. Interview: Terry Sejnowski, Director, Computational Neurobiology Laboratory, Salk Institute, La Jolla, California.



• **Untitled 2000** (in collaboration with Julie Lichtenberg)
Painted polystyrene balls 15x23x15 cm
A mass made with Styrofoam balls of many different colours.