

Gordon Hall



THROUGH AND THROUGH AND THROUGH, 2019 Performance still. Performer: Gordon Hall. Portland Institute for Contemporary Art. Curated by Kristan Kennedy and Roya Amirsoleymani. Performance correlating with: Turned Hanging Bar (Beige), 2019 Laquered cast concrete

Gordon Hall's deceptively quiet work calls out to the parts of objects that viewers don't normally have access to. These objects are replicas of architectural or everyday functional components that are decontextualized and stripped of their utilitarian design, only to find their place in a new ontological arrangement. Thus, a New York City drinking fountain, a flight of stairs, a one-of-a-kind piece of furniture, or a simple ramp are re-engineered as autonomous objects that subtly imply bodily interaction but never demand it to fulfill their purpose.

We spoke in Gordon's studio in Brooklyn, surrounded by the molds used to cast the works in concrete. We first discussed a particular current emphasis on identity in the art world that carries with it a demand for evidence. From this, the conversation branched out on Hall's commitment to the durational, compassionate qualities that abstraction asks of and offers to its viewers.

Gordon Hall is a Brooklyn-based artist and a 2019-2020 Provost Teaching Fellow in the Department of Sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Hall's book "Over-Beliefs: Collected Writing 2011-2018" was published in 2019, alongside the exhibition at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA).

This interview was conducted by Brian Paul. Brian is a writer living in Brooklyn, NY.

Brian Paul: I want to start by asking you about a specific group of objects that you mentioned in a talk I saw you give at Hampshire College, back in 2014. These objects had a hidden, bright color on

talk I saw you give at Hampshire College, back in 2014. These objects had a hidden bright color on their backsides. In the talk, you mention your interest in engaging the public by drawing attention to “the other side” of the work; the “unseen”. This feels like a good entry to talk about how you’re thinking about making objects in relation to the public.

Gordon Hall: The brightest or most engaging part of those sculptures you mention was the side you couldn’t see directly because it faced the wall. You would see the color only as its cast on the wall behind the object, a combination of a reflection and a shadow.

I make things that ask you to consider the parts of an object that you don’t usually have access to. This might be the bottom, the inside, or the other side as you go around it...

I like the same things in objects that I like in people. People who don’t give it to you all at once. With whom you have the sense that there is something else that you’re not able to see directly, but you can see its effects. Maybe another way of saying that is that I like introverts. Both as people and as artworks. Someone or something that lets me look but doesn’t need me to look, or that won’t fully reveal itself to me... that’s magnetic. To me, this feels generous because I’m able to keep my attention on it longer and look more carefully.

BP: It pulls you even further.

GH: ...and maybe I think of it as an effort to counter the way in which a lot of things operate nowadays: constantly trying to get the most attention they can, as quickly as possible.

BP: Yes. In a confessional and immediate way.

GH: Absolutely. So much of the way that – I guess the word for it is “identity” – operates in art, is according to a confessional logic, where lived experiences get explained or demonstrated for the benefit of an outside viewpoint. It’s almost anthropological.

BP: I heard someone use the word “evidence” recently – making art about identity relies on the mechanics of evidence, and putting something on trial.

GH: I’ve used that word before to describe this dynamic, definitely. I think it’s a good description of the relationship between institutions (particularly museums) and the bodies of artists that are, in any way, non-normative. Institutions invite these artists to do public-facing performances and programs that result in their bodies serving as evidence of their own inclusion in the museum as a way of... what’s the polite way to say?...

BP: Coopting?

GH: Right, of using the artists’ bodies as proof, serving as physical evidence of their own inclusion, and to educate “the public” about their position. This dynamic upsets me a lot, it’s something I feel strongly about, and I have built my career trying to resist participating in it. Because what this kind of curatorial strategy essentially means, what it actually produces, is an expectation, even a requirement, that art made by people “of difference” needs to make those differences immediately visible in the work through performance or figuration or documentation. These bodies need to appear. From the point of view of an institution who is working in this way, art made by anyone who inhabits a non-normative position is essentially rendered worthless if it doesn’t make that difference immediately visible and consumable.

I think that institutions paper over how little work they have actually done to equally support, collect and invest in the careers of truly diverse artists by making these very forward-facing situations that highlight their “inclusivity.” It’s basically the art world version of mostly white liberal arts colleges putting their three black students on the cover of their admissions pamphlet. So, I find all of this really disheartening and then am further disheartened by the ways that many artists seem to have bought into this model of identity and representation. I recently went to a residency where I was the only artist who didn’t describe my identity in the first sentence of my artist bio, and I have been thinking about this a lot, trying to figure out what is going on here. How have we arrived at a situation in which many non-cis and non-white artists feel they can’t get institutional attention unless they make their identity position the primary way their work is framed? Which is not at all to say that people’s positions and experiences aren’t central to their work, but that there needs to be space for work to deal with identity in complex, subtle, and highly specific ways. This is what is at the heart of my investment in abstraction. How can bodies appear in ways that don’t allow for them to be easily categorized, generalized, coopted, and used for other’s benefit? How can we meaningfully engage our differences while rejecting a model of identity that is generalizing and obsessed with representation and performances of inclusion?

I am currently working on an essay that I’ve been trying to write for years called “Why I Don’t Talk About ‘The Body’” which is a polemic against certain turns of phrase that I think are representative of this essentializing theory of bodies and identity, specifically the term “the body,” but also its offshoots – “the female body,” “the trans body,” and “the black body.” I think that these ways of speaking are antithetical to an investment in bodies in all their complexity, intersectionality, and difference. How can we talk about bodies in a way that simultaneously values specificity and difference?

BP: I think it also brings in, or circles back to the idea we started with; of what’s visible.

GH: That question of evidence.

BP: Right. Those essentializations make actions possible up to a certain point by casting a really strong light on them, but this light is ultimately flattening gradients of difference, creating monoliths.

GH: Right – it's "making work about," or "talking about," rather than "talking from" or "making work from" one's identity position.

Part of what I'm getting at is that language is never just language. We use it with different kinds of strategic ends, even if we don't realize we have joined in. And I think we should all be as intentional as possible about what we do and don't say about ourselves. I feel like we've reached a really weird place where the art world is very excited about difference, but only when it's dished up in certain kinds of ways that lend themselves to particular kinds of language. I think artists should fight back against this, utterly. I have been trying to thread the needle between resisting essentializing labels while remaining findable by my community.

THROUGH AND THROUGH AND THROUGH, 2019

Portland Institute for Contemporary Art

Performer: Gordon Hall. Curated by Kristan Kennedy and Roya Amirsoleymani.

BP: There have been so many interesting conversations in the past years about visibility and hypervisibility in relation to the internet and surveillance. I really appreciate your work speaking on its own register, about these very specific objects and what they're doing. But are there also ways that viewers can understand your work through this tech discourse, this internet-addled lens?

GH: I can answer in a few different ways.

The ways we pay attention to things now is very affected by the kinds of technologies of perception that we use. Specifically, things like Instagram – which by no means am I against, I use it and enjoy it – sort of rewire our minds to register things really quickly. The logic of the swipe and the scroll. So, I make work that registers slowly. Which happens in formal ways. For example, the way color often operates in my work, in which colors are very similar to each other, such that when you enter the exhibition you don't notice the differences, but as you spend time there, they become glaring. Very similar things start to appear very different from each other when you spend time with them.

Or making a show where, when you walk into the room you see a bunch of objects, and, as you walk out, you see a whole bunch of new things on their backs, or hidden in other ways, such that you would only see them when you're leaving. The exhibition is made in such a way that you can't just peer in, you have to actually go around, and walk through it.

Or sculptures that have fun details that would really only be noticed by someone who bothered to get up close.

BP: Or get down on their level?

GH: Totally. Bright colors on the bottom that just peep around the bottom a tiny bit. Or surfaces or sides that would only be noticed by the art handlers installing the show, who work so hard, and who are often artists – I like to give them something special that no one else gets to see.

Not that these investments are solely related to the way online life has shaped our attention, but I think these shifts have helped motivate my commitment to them. I want to offer this more durational kind of attention to others, as well as to teach it to myself through making and viewing my own work.

So that's one way of thinking about my work's relation to the digital, the virtual, our tabbed, swiped lives. There is another sense, which is a little harder to describe. How do I say this? I believe strongly in the original promise of the Internet as a space of creativity and freedom, especially in regard to access to information and creativity with identity, sexuality, and modes of embodiment. I'm of the age where I sort of experienced that, just at the very tail end of it. I got on the internet when I was in high school, and was able to sense these possibilities, of experiencing virtual forms of body activities, and of meeting people in these spaces.

Even something simple, like having sex with someone over chat. It can be really creative, especially around language and naming of body-parts and roles and actions. It can be totally real, even though you aren't physically together, it can still be a powerful physical experience, and can make people feel seen by each other in ways that are different than being in-person together.

One of the ways I think about this, sculpturally, has to do with one of the big obvious questions people always ask about my

work, which is, “Is it interactive? Can the public sit down on it, grab the handle, open the door, and touch it?” And my answer is a bit convoluted. I say, “Yeah, sure, the work is pretty sturdy,” because I try not to make things that are so fragile that there is anxiety around using them. But I don’t explicitly invite people to interact, and it’s not to prevent them from doing something they want to do. It’s actually because I’m excited about what happens when you see an object that has a use but you don’t use it. What you do is – completely naturally without any effort – you basically create a virtual double of your own body that goes and uses it.

If you see a handle, it asks for a hand; if you see a step, it asks for you to put your foot on it. And that projection of an unrealized bodily use could be described as virtual. To me, this creation of another virtual body that is both you and not you, feels filled with possibilities. When I think about what I want to offer to the viewer, I want to give them that experience more than I want to give them the experience of sitting down on a sculpture and then getting back up and being like “OK, I did that.”

BP: This idea of the ‘unrealized bodily use’ as virtual is very interesting. Can you expand a bit on this?

GH: This way of thinking started in relation to trying to understand ways that bodies are both real and virtual, especially in relation to gender. All people, but especially many trans people, have creative relationships with their bodies that could be described as virtual. Body parts get renamed, are understood in non-conventional ways. There is a process of learning to see differently. Not just to interpret differently, or name differently, but to see different things than other people do. To me, this kind of reworked vision is endlessly fascinating, and it’s something that happens in concert with others. Am I making sense? Let me give an example:

A transgender woman might have something that would be conventionally called a penis. That’s what the world would call it, what a doctor would call it, and that’s what these outside people would see it as. But that might not be what she calls it. It might no longer have a name, or it could be a clitoris, part of her pussy, or another word that is not traditionally coded as male. So you might think that this is just semantics, it’s just renaming, even though we all know what that body part is, what it “really” is. But, and this is what’s important here: it’s not just semantics, not just a question of re-naming. Because, over time, this renaming can result in a re-seeing, a revision of the way that body is understood *in the moment of seeing or touching it*. Both to that woman and to those that have an intimate relationship with her, or who exist around her in a community. She just doesn’t have a penis anymore, even though technically nothing has changed. But things can look the same and be totally different, it just has to do with how they’re situated in the world and understood by the community that surrounds them. Beliefs can become true in a perceptual way. Things can change, we can learn to change them, even without changing them. Am I making sense?

BP: Yes definitely – naming is powerful.

GH: These experiences are a kind of virtual reality. Bodies are both real and virtual. Matter is animated by convictions. And this is the case for everyone in different ways. Transgender people might just be experts at it.

But, and this is also important, especially for cis people to know: these transformative processes can be very unstable because when venturing out of one’s community it can be hard to hold onto ways of seeing that no one around you shares. Our vision always risks disappearing, being overwhelmed by the authority of the doctor, or the TSA agent, or the yelling person in the bathroom. This is why being mis-gendered is a big deal to many people, why it hurts. Because in the battle of beliefs, of perception as an exercise of beliefs, the person doing the mis-gendering has the entire world on their side, and they are able to shatter a person’s ability to see themselves, just like *that*, and then we have to spend the rest of the day putting it back together.

It might seem that I have strayed from talking about art, but these ideas are central to how I make and view sculpture. Like bodies, objects make requests to us about how they want to be viewed socially. And when you are really there with someone or something, you view it or them within their own parameters, their own logic. This can be really powerful – objects that teach us how to see. Even if this revision only lasts a few minutes.

Cinema does something really similar. You know when you go to a movie and you go to the bathroom and you look in the mirror after the movie? You look really weird to yourself.

It’s not just because you are sitting in a dark room – it’s because, for two hours, you’ve been in an alternative perceptual framework, looking through someone else’s lens. You physically learned their way of seeing.

BP: Yes, that perception of reality is about light, colors and objects that are being rendered, and also about time. Going and looking in the mirror is suddenly returning to this kind of embodied time, which is jarring.

GH: Yes. Anything you engage with, in a detailed way, is basically putting forward a kind of a logical structure. When I read certain kinds of texts and then I sit down to write – I’m sure you’ve had this experience – the way a text is constructed can influence your own writing because you start to borrow its logical structure.

I mean, that’s why reading can be nourishing when you’re working on writing – it gives you a tool, not just in its content but

also in its form; how to construct a sentence, how to organize an argument, how to think. To me, that's really incredible and it's a physical thing.

BP: Maybe to close, I can ask you about favorite shows you've seen recently, in New York or elsewhere?

GH: I loved the most recent show at Sculpture Center: "Searching the Sky for Rain", curated by Sohrab Mohebbi, which takes up this critique of identity and representation in really smart and beautiful ways. Sohrab writes in the press release that the artists in the show "defy the fracking of particularities into niche-marketed, T-shirt formulations of "identities" for institutional meaning and value production." !!! I'm cackling – I love this strong language, and I really hope other curators pay attention to this show and its critique of what they are doing.

One of my most memorable art experiences from this year was seeing John Zorn perform Cobra, which is a system for controlled improvisation that he invented in 1984 for a group of musicians and a prompter. Basically, it's 15 musicians in a ring, each with their own instruments, and Zorn is standing in the front holding up these cardboard signs with handles that have codes that only the musicians can interpret. Zorn keeps changing the signs and the musicians are constantly making eye contact with each other and with him to make music.

I didn't expect it but I was crying halfway through. Just seeing people so present with each other, so committed to this collective practice, making music together that is different every single time... Everyone in the group has consented to exist within the system, and are completely focused on it as long as they are there.



Kneeling Object III (Poplar), 2019

Waxed carved poplar

16h x 5 1/2w x 16 1/2d in





Closed Box with Painted Top, 2019

Cast concrete, poplar, latex paint

12h x 18w x 11d in



OVER-BELIEFS, 2019

Cast concrete

27h x 21w x 38 1/2d in





Three-part Stool (Cream, Beige, and Green), 2019

Cast concrete

20h x 16w x 14d in



Sitting (Brick Object) (III), 2019

Carved brick

22h x 18w x 18d in





Installation View *USELESSNESS* at DOCUMENTA, 2019





STAND AND, 2014

Wood, hand-dyed fabric, pigmented joint compound, mosaic, and off-site performance

Performers: Chris Domenick, Ariel Goldberg, Gordon Hall, Andrew Kachel, Millie Kapp, Colin Self, Orlando Tirado

Performance duration 60 min. Sculpture dimensions: 66 x 36 x 77 in.

Part of the exhibition FLEX at Kent Fine Art, curated by Orlando Tirado

September 5-October 31, 2014

Performance took place on October 25th 2014, 2-3pm at the handball court in Chelsea Park, New York

Images courtesy of Elyse Harary and Amy Mills.





Brothers and Sisters, 2018

Installation view

The Renaissance Society

Chicago, IL

Performer: Gordon Hall

Singers: Colin Garon, Michael Harrison, Louisa Richardson-Deppe,

and Kenya Senecharles

Recorded music: Johann Sebastian Bach, Ich ruf zu dir Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 639, composed 1708-17, performed and recorded by Ivan Dolgunov, 2017

Curated by Karsten Wales Lund

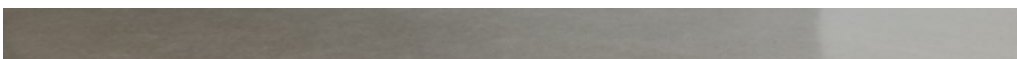


Brothers and Sisters, 2018

Installation view

The Renaissance Society

Chicago, IL





Seat (Yellow and Beige), 2016

hand-glazed tile mosaic

20h x 18.5w x 12.5d in

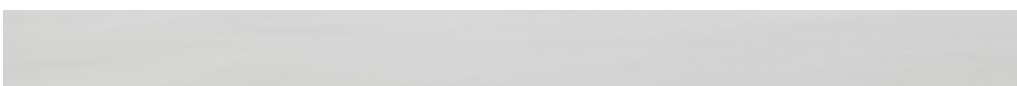




Brothers and Sisters (I), 2018

cast pigmented concrete, unfinished poplar

11h x 14w x 11.5d in





Performance still

Performer: Gordon Hall

Singers: Colin Garon, Michael Harrison, Louisa Richardson-Deppe, and Kenya Senecharles

Recorded music: Johann Sebastian Bach, Ich ruf zu dir Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 639, composed 1708-17, performed and recorded by Ivan Dolgunov, 2017









The Number of Inches Between Them, 2017–2018

Pigmented cast concrete, two-sided color poster multiple, performance 39 min.

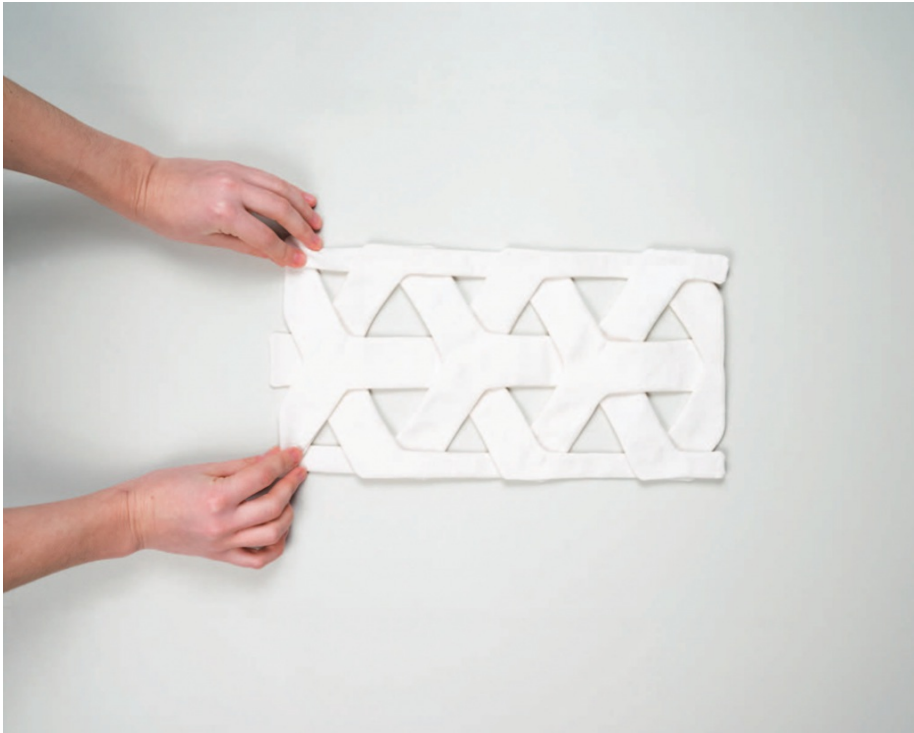
Performers: Mary Bok, Gordon Hall, Mike Peterson, Danny Harris, and Lou Desautels

MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 17–May 20, performance April 28, 2018

Curated by Yuri Stone.







AND PER SE AND, 2016

Wood, joint compound, wood filler, cast cement, colored pencil, acrylic and latex paint, denim, hand dyed cotton, modeling clay, tile mosaic.

Performance with projected video and sound 58 min.

13h x 23w x 36d in

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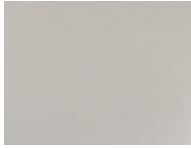
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