

**OVER-
BELIEFS**

**Collected
Writing**

**2011-
2018**

Gordon Hall

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GORDON HALL

The essays, interviews, and performance scripts included in *OVER-BELIEFS* represent seven years of creating language in and around my sculptures and performances. The entries have been presented in many disparate locations and formats—in print, online, and some appearing only on my website. It is extremely meaningful to me to have them compiled in one volume, enabling them to circulate in the world as a group. Many of the texts have been responses to invitations—to write for a catalog, create a performance, or be in conversation in relation to a specific theme or event. Through these directives, the texts flesh out a shifting but, I think, relatively stable way of understanding objects, embodiment, gender, abstraction, ritual, spoken language, and art history, among many other topics. I hope that my ideas will be useful to others, especially to other artists mired in the often murky experience of making and contextualizing their work, as I have often been. In one way or another, each of these texts helped me figure out how to move forward artistically and intellectually, creating a structure in which I can make, think, and be. I look forward to continuing this work in the decades to come, guided by my reflections on what I have and have not yet done.

All the texts in this book can be found elsewhere in their original contexts and formatting, often including more images, videos, hyperlinks, and other information that was by necessity left out of this book. The performance scripts, in particular, are incomplete without their accompanying sculptures, movement, and collaborators, meant to be experienced as live events. Notwithstanding, I did want to include the scripts because of their importance as forms of writing within my practice, and because they represent my excitement about the diverse possibilities for engaging in research, writing, and speaking to others.

There are more people deserving of gratitude for their work on this book than can possibly be named here. Primarily, I am incredibly grateful to everyone at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, without whom this text would not have come to be. This book was a dream I thought would not be realized for years to come, and PICA made it happen now in conjunction with our exhibition, *THROUGH AND THROUGH AND THROUGH*. My deepest thanks go to Kristan Kennedy and Roya Amirsoleymani for initiating it, and to Spencer Byrne-Seres and Ellena Basada for their truly tireless work compiling and organizing its contents. Their belief in making this book is what made it happen. Many thanks as well to Gary Robbins at Container Corps for designing this book and to Paul Maziar for copyediting. I am incredibly grateful to Sarah Workneh, a friend and colleague whom I admire deeply, for offering her insight into the

significance of these words. I also would like to acknowledge the contribution of Evan Fusco, who advised me to organize the entries along a thematic thread rather than chronologically or by category, an insight that struck me immediately as deeply right and that has directed the entire team's editorial work from the beginning.

Each text in this book has a sizeable list of people who contributed their feedback and worked to bring each piece into the world, and I know I will not mention them all here. In order of appearance in the book, I want to extend profound thanks to Movement Research; Savannah Knoop; Edie Fake; Paul Schmelzer and the Walker Art Center; Corin Hewitt; Elizabeth Orr and Kristin Poor; the curatorial team of *Next Time*; *Artforum*; Daniel Quiles; Karsten Wales Lund and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; the faculty and students I worked with at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Visual and Critical Studies Department; Colin Self; the editors of *Randy*; Aay Preston Mynte, Latham Zearfoss, and the rest of the team at Chances Dances; Lorelei Stewart and Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois Chicago; RJ Messineo and Katherine Brewer Ball; the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives; Susan Richmond, Jillian Hernandez, College Art Association, and *Art Journal*; Ruba Katrib and SculptureCenter; Maggie Ginestra; Megan Heuer and Whitney Museum of American Art; Alexandra Truitt; Chris Domenick; Matt Morris and Contemporary Art Center Cincinnati; Brian Droitcour and *Art in America*; Ralph Lemon; Lydia Okrent; Orlando Tirado; Kent Fine Art; Sean Horton; Robert Blackson and Temple Contemporary; Kristin Chappa and Art in General; Emily Zimmerman and Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic; Alec Smyth; Nancy Lupo; Kendall Buster; Donna Lynas and the Wysing Arts Centre; Jesse Darling; Yuri Stone and MIT List Visual Arts Center; David J. Getsy; Elizabeth Atterbury and Meghan Brady; Steel House Projects; The Kindling Fund administered by SPACE Gallery; Andy Warhol Foundation; Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; and Matthew Steinbrecher. Numerous others provided images included in this book and are acknowledged throughout.

Additionally, I need to thank the countless friends, artists, and interlocutors, who contributed in innumerable ways to the development of these texts, and especially to all of those who gave feedback on the drafts and supported me in uncountable other ways over the years as I wrestled with each text as it came to be. I am especially indebted to the members of my New York-based critique group, as well as Joseph Lubitz, and my partner Octavius Neveaux who enables this work in so many ways. And finally, my deepest gratitude to Judith Hall, the best editor I have ever known.

AN EXERCISE IN THINGS

ROYA AMIRSOLEYMANI

When you sit on a wooden chair long enough to feel a familiar ache, and you begin to shift slightly in your seat, eager to reconfigure your body against this thing that holds you uncomfortably in space, doing its job, but not well.

When you recline on a hard surface and sense a cold but satisfying heaviness, a domineering demand for an adjustment to your comportment should you wish to remain, until a dull pain hits the arch of your lower back, and you effortfully arise, bend your knees, and breathe.

Gordon's arm just fits the width of the bench they embrace, as if made for each other, a literal and figurative attachment. In a sense, there is nothing made for us more deliberately or completely than furniture, which seeks to hold our whole body, ornamentally and functionally, closely and intimately—arms on arms, backs against backs, asses in seats. In turn, a *piece of furniture* (a *piece of*) is to be looked at, gazed upon, used. We envision ourselves on, inside of, or under it, bound for both pleasure and pain. An exercise in objectification. An erotics of design.

A complex relationship between abstraction and objectification runs through Gordon Hall's making and thinking and writing. Hall's sculptures reference familiar objects, or their pieces and parts. They are made both for and against us, confident, sure of themselves while we question what is in front of us. Where do our relations with (these) objects begin and end? How do they (be)hold us, as we (be)hold them? How do we find them, arrive at them, encounter them, read them, feel them, understand them, submit to them, use them? No matter our capacity to clasp or cling to them—or the impulse to covet or cover them—they lie just beyond our reach, riding the tension and directing the attention in the room.

Hall configures objects and choreographs movements much like they arrange language—with precision, devotion, a careful selection of parts. The perfect position, but not the *only* position. The perfect gesture, but not the *only* gesture. The perfect word, but not the *only* word. Or just this side of imperfect. Intentionally inexact. In other words, there are other possibilities. Ones we can never perceive but only imagine. Ones we can only notice but never know.

Hall's sculptures and performances formulate fragments of sentences written and spoken—enunciation, punctuation, utterance, interrogatives. Conversely, their words on a page are sculptural, structural, almost systematic, marked by decisive spaces and silences, a depth of surface, a balanced weight. Yet the consistent crispness of Hall's concepts across mediums simultaneously clarifies and confuses, forcing an epistemological rupture by belying our logic, challenging our presumptions, and destabilizing how we think we come to comprehend things. Whether upon gestures or sculptures or words, our gazes fall softer, and our bodies linger longer. We second-guess ourselves. We take a second look. We are reminded vaguely of what we cannot place or recall. A subtle strangeness, a hint of difference, an all-over ambiguity lies in the before and after—the between and around, and the inside of the things we cannot know. But then, we already knew that.

Published on the occasion of the artist's solo exhibition at PICA, this compilation of writing layers Hall's works and words on top of each other, until they are indistinguishable, until they are each other, through and through (and through). They are all of it, Hall's practice. They are all of it, the publication. They are all of it, the show.

This book is a body is a bench.

COMPANION PIECE

KRISTAN KENNEDY

This book is a solid block.

A codex as we know it is a manuscript in book form. The word itself emerged in the 16th century from the Latin *caudex* meaning “block of wood” although the form itself—“book making” goes back to the pre-Colombian era. At one point, the codex came to mean “a collection of statues.” Such a curious transition, but one can imagine it—small carved figurines emerging from the timber. Bodies as pages, before pages existed. Bodies as surfaces that hold fictions and facts. As time passed, the meaning of codex morphed again, as “blocks of wood” (or stone, or whatever would last) were split into singular tablets—each one holding important texts, drawings, and other meaningful data. Later, the slabs were pounded into thin “leaves” and were eventually bound together by a single spine. Spine being related to the body, the thing that holds us up.

Imagine that! How satisfying to shave thin, even slices off of something solid, to burnish them clean and smooth, to tint and temper them with words and symbols, and to press them back together in a binding—with new purpose. It is in this way that Hall's texts seem to have emerged from solid forms. We can imagine their evolution from a bag of dust and bucket of water into a block of concrete, then molded into a rounded lump, then hardening into a sculpture, then becoming a family of objects in an exhibition, and then formulating into a collection of writings. Block becomes body—becomes book.

These texts belong together not only because they are by the same author but because they complete each other. They are the keystone that holds up the arch of Hall's practice and politics. They are theory-enacted.

As beings amongst things and ideas, we don't passively receive information from our environment. We co-create it. Language forms society / society forms language. Hall co-created this book with his sculptures. One could not happen without the other; there is no better expert than the maker.

When Hall assembles an exhibition, he is intentionally elusive about his sculptures' origins, he is resistant to attributing language to them, he is loathe to wrap them in a political agenda or identity. He wants the things to be able to rest for awhile in the space without language draped upon them. He wants them to speak for themselves. He wants them to become familiar to you, or to become something you might recognize but can't quite place. To become things you accept despite their tricky orientation.

The sculptures' audience is asked to become their companions, to stick around for a while and look at them, with empathy, with curiosity. Hall often employs performers to move in, on or around the sculptures, to touch or press or surround their surfaces and edges. These same people might be engendered to shout or whisper some scripted poetic dissonance into the exhibition space, perhaps channeling the sculptures' stoic voices. Hall also tests the work with his own body, measuring the distance between form and meaning by leaning into the thing. Once the artist and audience have spent time with the work, Hall narrates their origin stories, their rally calls, their hyper-specific positions, their teachings and his learnings. Through interviews, performance texts, and essays, the artist links his sculpture to a lineage of other object-makers, thinkers, queer party spaces, laws, codes and approaches. He is evaluative of his own process, and over the eight years of inquiry reflected in this book, we can follow multiple and recurring loops of logic towards lucidity.

On these pages, Hall writes about objects as teachers, as clocks or measures of time, as silent sitting things waiting to be understood, as lovers, as bodies in conversation with other bodies, as recognizable only in their proximity to difference, as politically charged, as sexually charged, as energetically charged. This book is an object and therefore carries with it all of the aforementioned skills and designations. Hall has taught us that we can learn as much from it as it lays on a table or rests on a shelf, but in this moment he invites us to permeate the surface, to take the block in our hands and crack it open.

FOREWORD: Receptivity is Not Passivity; What Can a Body Do; The Non-Utilitarian Nature of Our Activities; The Object That is More than the Sum of Its Parts; I Want to Relearn How to See; I Can't Always Know What I Am Looking At; Can I Make Sculptures that are Dances?; Useful Objects / Useless Objects; No Real Bodies; This is What We See; Bodies Are Always Also Ideas About Bodies; We Learn From the Things Themselves; The Possible in Excess of the Real; Is My Body a Thing, Is It An Idea?; My Body is Ready to Learn; Maybe the Objects Can Help Teach Us; Politics is Something You Do With Your Body¹

I am in a particular place. Geographically and emotionally (though the emotional particularity is here and elsewhere, and truthfully nowhere). But here, in Maine as I start this, I stand on a particular scar on the land, made inadvertently (or purposefully?) by Gordon Hall when he was at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in 2013.²

This particular mark, and there are many ways to consider the meaning of it and the language used to describe it, is located in a field that is maybe the size of a football field. A huge expanse of grass ringed on all sides by forest—it is an enormous wash of fairly consistent green, but as one wanders around—me, me writing this piece, me thinking about Gordon, me thinking about 2013, me thinking about this site—one begins to notice slight variations. Dips, changes in color, dead grass, living grass, grass versus other types of ground cover—then this mark begins to reveal itself. It is not a natural shape; it is too specific to have been made by the chaos of nature—it is an octagon. A distinct yet subtle variation with a boundary, with a physicality.

There's a funny thing that can happen when you are looking at things that are similar—you begin to notice the things that are different.

For those of us who exist outside of structurally determined norms, that differential carries many meanings—threats, oppressions, pressures, invisibilities, but also potentialities, solidarities, opportunities for gathering, and freedoms. The intentional or unintentional trace of Hall's 2013 intervention in the field performs the same function as many of his sculptural works included in the exhibition that accompanies this book. Six years later, it is an exceedingly minimal gesture, an unexplained encountering that first engages an opportunity for sight—for seeing what can almost not be seen (or in Hall's words, "Just because we don't notice something, or can't see it, doesn't mean it is not there"), and it subsequently offers a space for consideration.³

As I read through the writings in this collection and think about *that* mark, think about my own body, think about what is available for seeing and what is available to me as being seen, I understand that there is an undetermined space before the defining as threat, oppression, pressure, invisibility, potentiality, solidarity, opportunity for gathering and freedom—the moment before something is consumed by the eye and defined by the brain. And there is also a space between these two groupings, which we can call the "but also" space (we will come back to this).

I elected to use the list of Hall's draft titles for the book for the title of this essay as it serves as a kind of accidental poetry that encapsulates the whole or the parts or more nuanced—the "gestalt sensation" of his sculptures, writings, and performance scripts.⁴ These used/unused titles serve as a guide to a body of work that moves from concrete (physical or expressed) to Hall's larger, more molecular thinking that takes

up the relations between bodies/politics, utility/non-utility, objectification/subjectification, precognitive sight/naming and most important, resistance/provocation.

It is counterintuitive to use binaries to describe a proposition that is urgently non-binary. In many of the writings in the book, Hall teases out ways to elide definition. When I was initially approached to write this piece, my job was to talk about the words and the curators would talk about the works, but as I have thought about the meaning and intention of Hall's varied practice, his resistance to even the binary of words vs. works, or works vs. words is the rigor and the joy, the inward breath and the outward breath.

In the essay "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture," Hall engages the work of Robert Morris and John Cage (among others) to propose a different approach to looking at objects—where classification, or impulse to classify on sight is stymied, troubled, transmuted.

Referring to Morris's minimalist sculptures, Hall states that the blankness of those surfaces open a space for a "non-narrative, nonsymbolic" physical experience where the surfaces "reveal nothing, and as objects can tell us nothing. They do not speak in any language but that of their presence in space. They are physical embodiments of an ethos of silence, telling no story."⁵ This is a luxury that neither Hall's body, nor my body has been offered. Do I want to be seen? I do. Do I want not to be seen? I do.

In following the description of Morris with a quote from Cage's 1959 "Lecture on Nothing," Hall draws the boundaries around the limitations of our structured thinking both linguistically and in terms of envisioning embodiment. He provocatively and importantly states, "we cede authority to the questions posed, not only to provide an answer, but to provide an answer that makes sense in terms of the question as it is asked."⁶ Once the question is formed, the answer is pre-determined by those specific terms.

In many ways, and my guess is that I am not alone in this, that sentence seems to describe some significant portion of my own existence. And so if, as in the case of Hall's work, the object in many instances is a stand-in for a body or an idea of a body, and even specific bodies—what is the implication of making oneself intentionally hard to read? Does it transcend that predetermination? What is the implication of a demand for strategies of reading bodies that refuse to be definitively named and what are the new freedoms that exists within that? From an object perspective, "[i]f it is possible to learn from objects how to see bodies differently, can they teach us to see gender differently to shift the ways we perceive nonnormative genders?"⁷ How they might enable us to see everything else? Or as Hall articulates later in the same essay "what

would it be to allow a body to be silent, fully present without telling us anything?”⁸ Hall’s body is not the same as my body, and my body is not the same as Hall’s. Our experiences may have similarities, but are importantly (and beautifully) different. Hall’s argument for refusal isn’t an attempt to flatten any of these realities, but to offer a sort of non-naming reading practice as a strategy of resistance employed by and for non-normatively bodied people.

In “Making Messes for the Future,” Hall recalls the exercise of counting to ten in moments of rage—he writes, “we hope that during this counting we are able to connect with the source of our anger, to pause and articulate for ourselves what the problem is, preparing us for the work of repairing a situation or building a new one. What if the making is the counting?”⁹

And so Hall counts, counts in essays, counts in objects and by the time the essay “Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See,” is published three years after “Object Lessons” (and think of those three specific years), Hall’s demand for presence without telling or perhaps presence without being read moves beyond discursive consideration and claims its intention as a challenge to “hegemonic methods of taxonomizing, cataloging and controlling bodies,” BUT ALSO to “imagin[e] more expansive forms of embodied life.”¹⁰ Legibility and a resistance to legibility are at the heart of many of the writings and deeply present in the objects. But neither acts (the act of making or the act of writing) simply rest in that particular binary.

This compilation in its non-chronological state (yet another act of resistance) and its parallel material investigations and activations allow for a simultaneity of seemingly oppositional ideas—do I want to be seen? I do. Do I want not to be seen? I do. I exist in both states at the same time, and so too do the writings. In the endnotes to “Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See,” Hall buries another complication that even with my particular excitement over his proposition for considering blankness, nothingness, silence, non-legibility, still feels very real—that “it feels bleak to be fighting for something that isn’t even what one wants.”¹¹ Do I want to think about this stuff? I do. Do I want to think about this stuff because of my body? I do. Do I want to have to think about this stuff because of my body? Sometimes maybe not so much.

After the long list of... let’s call them “on hold” titles..., Hall eventually settled on *OVER-BELIEFS*. We discussed the many possible reads of those two words together, but in the end, he explained that he chose it because sometimes you believe in something that exists in such sharp contrast to the rest of the world that you have to over-believe in it in order to believe in it at all. This is not a defensive position, this is a reality—one in which we have to propose so many modalities for questioning, so many ways of understanding the

past (present) as way to see potentialities, as a way to see so many futures.

I want to return, briefly, to the BUT ALSO because regardless if it is achieved through pre-empting “the material conditions of thought, and of speech,” or it happens alongside of it or because of that struggle or happens all on its own, it is actually the point—the critical inversion.¹² In a few of the later writing pieces in this volume, in particular in “Party Friends,” Hall begins to pose an idea of reparative objectification that first resists a body’s classification, but then in its resistance offers a different kind of potentiality, solidarity, opportunity for gathering and freedom—one that changes seer rather than the seen. In reference to Mark Aguiar whose life moved so many but who was also affected by the limitations of so many others, Hall writes:

*I found myself thinking about some other reparative process, one that countered this kind of damaging objectification with an even more powerful objectification. I wanted to treat each other like objects in profound affirmation, to learn to see each other, to look at one another as bodies and say YES... When we learn together how to see, [we] do it with a vengeance.*¹³

As I sit here in Maine, and I think of that slightly off and yet defined green patch in the enormous field just up the path from me, though I have seen it no less than a hundred times at this point, I can’t remember what it looks like totally—what the differential is in the greens that allow it to be seen. I am in a particular place that allows me to do particular work, that for nine weeks each year allows for an experiment in seeing. And sometimes—actually, most of the time—we fail, but we count to ten.

Gordon is right—politics is something you do with your body. Whether that something is interacting with a purposefully non-defined sculptural object or existing in space with strangers or with party friends; whether it is reparative or how you have to move through the world regardless, the premise, the puzzle, the question, the high stakes reality—it is worth the over-belief. Do I over believe? I do. And so should you.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Email from Hall of “alternate book titles (unused).” May 17, 2019.
- 2 Gordon Hall *Not one but many silences*, 2013. To-scale recreation and relocation of octagonal fire pit used as the site for twice-daily movement workshops, bleached canvas, 19 by 19 feet. Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Madison, ME.
- 3 “Among Things” *Art in America*. December Issue, 2018.
- 4 “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture,” *Art Journal*, Volume 72, Issue #4, Winter, 2013.
- 5 Ibid, pg. 48.
- 6 Ibid, pg. 50.
- 7 Ibid, pg. 47.
- 8 Ibid, pg. 51.
- 9 “Making Messes for the Future” Catalog for *Stand Close, It’s Shorter Than You Think*: a show on feminist rage, curated by RJ Messineo and Katie Brewer Ball. Artist Curated Projects at The One National Gay & Lesbian Archive, Los Angeles, CA. April-May 2013, pg. 14.
- 10 “Reading Things—Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See” Walker Art Center’s “Artist Op-Eds” series, web and print publication. August 2016.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 “Read me that part a-gain, where I disinherit everybody” Lecture-performance commission presented at EMPAC, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY. April 2014.
- 13 “Party Friends” Essay for exhibition catalog for *Making Chances: Ten Years of Chances*, Gallery 400, University of Illinois, Chicago. 2015.

DIFFERENTIATION

2012. Performance script for two voices. Originally performed by Gordon Hall and Savannah Knoop in the 2012 Movement Research Festival at West Park Presbyterian Church, New York, NY. Words included sourced from *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* by Catherine Bell, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, "Of Other Spaces" by Michel Foucault. Revised and re-performed by Gordon Hall and Edie Fake in *The Dragon Is The Frame: Inspired by the Life and Work of Mark Aguhar* at Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois, Chicago

INTRODUCTION

SHINING THE SPOT-LIGHTS AROUND THE SPACE IN THE DARK, WE TAKE TURNS, POINTING, AND THEN MEETING THE OTHER'S POINT. WE CONTINUE DOING THIS AS WE BEGIN TO SPEAK, ONE LINE PER POINT.

ILLUSIONS

HALF-TRUTHS

BLINDNESSES

RATIONALIZATIONS

THE NON-UTILITARIAN NATURE OF OUR ACTIVITIES

THE STYLE OF OUR DOING

ACTS THAT DO NOT ENCOURAGE EXPLAINING

IN AN EXACT SERIES

SELF-CONTROL

DIFFERENTIATION

DISTINGUISHING THIS PLACE FROM OTHER PLACES

NOT ONLY PLACES, BUT

OBJECTS

BUILDINGS

PEOPLE

NOT THE SAME AS OTHER BEINGS

A QUALITY OF SPECIAL-NESS

THE OBJECT THAT IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

THE OBJECT THAT POINTS TO SOMETHING BEYOND ITSELF

RHYTHM

REPETITION

SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

THE UNIFICATION OF PAST AND FUTURE

IGNORING THE PASSAGE OF TIME ALTOGETHER

THE IMAGE

OBJECT

IDEA

ILLUSIONS

HALF-TRUTHS

BLINDNESSES

RATIONALIZATIONS

THE NON-UTILITARIAN NATURE OF OUR ACTIVITIES

THE STYLE OF OUR DOING

ACTS THAT DO NOT ENCOURAGE EXPLAINING

IN AN EXACT SERIES

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DISTINGUISHING THIS PLACE FROM OTHER PLACES

NOT ONLY PLACES, BUT

OBJECTS

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PEOPLE

NOT THE SAME AS OTHER BEINGS

A QUALITY OF SPECIAL-NESS

THE OBJECT THAT IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

THE OBJECT THAT POINTS TO SOMETHING BEYOND ITSELF

RHYTHM

REPETITION

SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

THE UNIFICATION OF PAST AND FUTURE

IGNORING THE PASSAGE OF TIME ALTOGETHER

THE IMAGE

OBJECT

IDEA

CONCLUSION

*THE SPOT-LIGHTS ARE OFF AND WE START BY POINTING OUR LIGHTS AT ONE ANOTHER.
LIGHTS SHINE ON ONE ANOTHER THROUGHOUT.*

A PLACELESS PLACE	I SEE MYSELF WHERE I AM NOT
THAT SPACE THAT OPENS UP BEHIND THE SURFACE	I AM OVER THERE
A SHADOW	I COME BACK TOWARD MYSELF
RECONSTITUTING MYSELF WHERE I AM	THE SPACE THAT I OCCUPY
ABSOLUTELY REAL	AND
ABSOLUTELY UNREAL	PASSING THROUGH THIS VIRTUAL POINT
WE DO IT EVERY DAY	WE HAVE TO
OVER-BELIEFS	ARRANGING THESE OBJECTS
WITH SUCH CARE	AND PRECISION
LIKE ATMOSPHERE	YOU SURROUND ME
THAN	CLOSER TO ME
OWN	MY
IN YOU	BREATH
AND MOVE	I LIVE
IT IS STRONG	I STAND IN YOUR PRESENCE AND TALK WITH YOU
AND HOVERS OVER ME	SOOTHING
WE HAVE	A HABITUAL SENSE
OF ONE ANOTHER	IN THE WORLD
YOU	I FEEL YOUR CONTINUOUS BEING
THROUGH	UNINTERRUPTEDLY AFFECT ME
AND THROUGH	AND THROUGH
I SEE MYSELF WHERE I AM NOT	A PLACELESS PLACE
I AM OVER THERE	THAT SPACE THAT OPENS UP BEHIND THE SURFACE
I COME BACK TOWARD MYSELF	A SHADOW
RECONSTITUTING MYSELF WHERE I AM	THE SPACE THAT I OCCUPY
ABSOLUTELY REAL	AND
ABSOLUTELY UNREAL	PASSING THROUGH THIS VIRTUAL POINT
WE DO IT EVERY DAY	WE HAVE TO
OVER-BELIEFS	ARRANGING THESE OBJECTS
WITH SUCH CARE	AND PRECISION

YOU SURROUND ME	LIKE ATMOSPHERE
CLOSER TO ME	THAN
MY	OWN
BREATH	IN YOU
I LIVE	AND MOVE
	I STAND IN YOUR PRESENCE AND TALK WITH YOU
IT IS STRONG	SOOTHING
AND HOVERS OVER ME	WE HAVE
A HABITUAL SENSE	OF ONE ANOTHER
IN THE WORLD	
I FEEL YOUR CONTINUOUS BEING	YOU
UNINTERRUPTEDLY AFFECT ME	THROUGH
AND THROUGH	AND THROUGH
AND THROUGH	AND THROUGH
AND THROUGH	AND THROUGH
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AND THROUGH	AND THROUGH

READING THINGS: ON SCULPTURE, GENDER, AND RELEARNING HOW TO SEE

2016. Essay commissioned by *Walker Reader* for the Artist Op-Ed series and published online and in print.

I.

I'm sunbathing on the beach on a cloudless August day in the Rockaways. It's blindingly bright and I have a T-shirt draped over my eyes to block the sun. I am overhearing a conversation between some of the friends around me and someone new who has walked across the sand to us. Whose is this voice I don't know? I think it is man, someone I've never met. I uncover my eyes and see that it is one of my friends—a woman, a transwoman whose female-ness I have never questioned, whose voice I had always heard as a female voice. Had I never heard her before? How can my ears hear two different voices, depending on whether or not I know who is speaking? As I puzzle over this, I start thinking of other instances in which two or more versions of reality butt up against each other, two contradictory sensory experiences that are somehow both real to me, depending on how I encounter them. What is going on here?

II.

On March 23, 2016, the North Carolina House of Representatives passed the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, widely referred to as House Bill 2. The bill prohibits municipalities in the state of North Carolina from passing policies intended to protect LGBT people from discrimination, setting a minimum wage, and regulating child labor, and it dictates that transgender people must use the bathroom that corresponds to the sex printed on their birth certificates in all public facilities.¹ The bill was met with massive opposition from individuals, corporations, and numerous other states that as a result banned non-emergency travel to North Carolina to protest the law. On May 9 the US Department of Justice filed a lawsuit against North Carolina on the grounds that the bill violated several federal laws, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. At the time of this writing the case is still open and House Bill 2 remains the law, although a lawsuit challenging its constitutionality will be heard at a trial scheduled to begin November 14, 2016.

III.

This winter I delivered an artist talk at Virginia Commonwealth University, where I've been

teaching, about my investment in objects with open-ended or ambiguous function—things that cause one to ask, “What is this for?” I discuss the studio as a place where I aim to make objects that frustrate even my own attempts to know them, once and for all, as one thing and not others. I make things that ask for nuanced, open-ended forms of reading that can accommodate these objects of ambiguous functionality. Over coffee the following morning, one of the other faculty members in the department, Corin Hewitt, excitedly wanted to know if I had heard of a beloved object known as the “slant step.” I had not, but since then an image of it has been following me around—in the studio, on the train, in and out of bathrooms, while reading the news. The slant step is a small piece of furniture that was purchased in a second-hand store in Mill Valley, California, in 1965 by the artist William Wiley and his then-graduate student Bruce Nauman. Costing less than a dollar, this wood and green linoleum, one-of-a-kind handmade object struck these two artists as puzzling and fascinating, primarily because its function was a mystery. Though reminiscent of a step stool, the step part of the stool sits at a 45-degree angle to the floor, making it impossible to step up onto it, hence the name, the slant step. This unassuming ambiguous object resonated not just with Wiley and Nauman, but also with a whole range of Bay Area artists in the 1960s, inspiring more than one group exhibition themed around it, a catalogue, and numerous articles as well as extensive use as a teaching tool by the painter Frank Owen. It is now in the permanent collection of the University of California Davis.²



The Slant Step, 20th century. Gift of the New York Society for The Preservation of the Slant Step, The Fine Arts Collection, University of California, Davis. Photo courtesy The Fine Arts Collection, University of California, Davis.

IV.

In 2012 I wrote an essay called “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimal Sculpture.”³ In it, I proposed a way of reading

sculpture as a form of embodied pedagogy—sculptures as objects from which we learn. Instead of thinking about artworks symbolically, metaphorically, representationally, or autobiographically, I wondered about the possibilities for treating objects as teachers who might be able to assist us in developing different ways of understanding and experiencing our bodies. Sculptures as dance teachers? As gym coaches? As lovers? I was particularly interested in our tendency to understand art that relates to non-traditional genders and sexualities primarily in terms of representation, seeking evidence of LGBT subjects or authors in the work through depiction. Queer art tends to be thought of as art that announces itself as queer through a variety of tropes, ranging from documentary photography to material references such as glitter or leather. The “object lessons” framework was intended to eschew these tendencies in favor of an interest in phenomenological relationships with artworks, particularly sculptures, which could produce new, odd, or altered states of embodied being that might enable us to better develop, recognize, respect, and cultivate different forms of gendered living. Can objects help us rethink gender on a bodily level? Further, does the maker of an artwork have to be known to have been queer for their work to be meaningful in these terms? In whose art, both historical and contemporary, can we find beauty and sustenance, even if the artist did not explicitly frame their work as having anything to do with gender or sexuality? Since that essay's writing, I have come to think of the object lessons described therein as ways of approaching our variously felt struggles against hegemonic methods of taxonomizing, cataloging, and controlling bodies, as modestly offered resources toward imagining more expansive forms of embodied life.⁴

In being asked to write something in response to the North Carolina Bathroom bill, I found myself returning to this work and wondering if this way of thinking might have something to contribute to our conversations around it.⁵ I have written pages and pages of furious ranting prose directed at the many groups and individuals who support bills like House Bill 2 based on what is, in my opinion, an ignorant, cruel, and fear-motivated set of beliefs about transgender people's bodies and lives, only to realize that they don't care what I think. I am not real to them, and they very probably aren't reading artist writings commissioned and released by the Walker Art Center. These pages of writing will remain private, because what I actually do feel able to contribute, if anything at all, are some reflections I have had about the capacities for objects to teach us different ways to see. In this sense, I am not speaking to those that support this law, which, cynically, considering the adverse economic impact it has had on the state of North Carolina, and less cynically, the national trajectory to full legal equality for transgender people, will likely

be struck down. It isn't a foregone conclusion, but what feels extremely sad to me is that the very necessary laws and legal protections that the government has to offer us do not have terribly much to do with changing the ways that we see, interpret, and react to one another's bodies.⁶ What we require is a large-scale rearranging of the ways that bodies are classified and hierarchized along gendered and racial lines. This is largely a question of reworking our vision so that in the moments we encounter one another, we are actually able to see differently than the way we have been taught.⁷ This is a form of aesthetic labor—relearning how to see and identify what we are looking at—and it seems to me that some of our best teachers might be things themselves.

V.

Object Lesson: Slow Reading

The bathroom provision of House Bill 2 aims to “protect” nontransgender people from the experience of sharing a bathroom with someone of the “opposite sex.” In this sense, it seems primarily targeted toward nonpassing transgender people—those who are visibly transgender and gender nonconforming.⁸ It would also be impossible to analyze the effects of bills like House Bill 2 without thinking through ways that they are likely to disproportionately affect non-white transgender people for a variety of reasons. First, an intersectional analysis of gender policing acknowledges that fear is not doled out equally, and that a person of color is already more likely to produce anxiety for a nervous white person in a bathroom.⁹ Being a nonpassing trans person and a person of color works in tandem to increase the possibility of being read as a threat.¹⁰ Many transgender people do not seek to pass, or do not identify as either one of the two available gender options. In situations in which a person does desire to fully transition, medical transitions are expensive and time consuming. It is a luxury to pass. Even when insurance will cover sex reassignment surgeries and access to hormones, it isn't necessarily an option for everyone to take weeks or months off from work to heal. Or people find themselves situated within community structures that they rely on, yet who will not accept them if they were to transition. There are numerous reasons why low-income transgender people are less likely to pass as the gender that they know they are. And in the United States, the legacy of slavery, segregation, redlining, and lack of access to quality free education has made it vastly more likely that people who are low-income are also people of color.¹¹ We must acknowledge that it is likely that many of those most adversely affected by laws such as House Bill 2 are both transgender and people of color.¹² We know that the legal changes of the past 60 years resulting from the civil rights movement have not led to the shifts in perception that we so direly need, with frequently deadly consequences. One of post-civil rights racism's main playing

field is in the often unconscious perceptual patterns of white bodies and ways that these play out in the mundane daily activity of interacting with and responding to strangers, both within our institutions and on the street.

Supporters of bills such as House Bill 2 widely refer to them as “common-sense legislation.” This moniker is, to my ear, accurate, insofar as those who deploy it rely on a particular version of common sense that puts its faith in biological essentialism. Much of the rhetoric used in defense of this kind of bathroom legislation seems to me to hinge on intense anxiety around the threat transgender people's bodies pose to this way of understanding sex and gender in which one can know what one is looking at. When I analyze this dynamic in this way, I am actually able to feel compassion for those who oppose the presence of transgender people in bathrooms that “match” their self-professed gender identities, because the idea that a person's gender could be self-determined and believed by others as a matter of faith is a legitimate shift into another perceptual system literally incompatible with one rooted in biological essentialism. We are telling you that what you see isn't true—a person may look like a woman or a man to your eye, but that does not mean that they are. This does go against what has long been widely held as common sense, a principle on which most of our medical and legal systems still rely. While the struggle for rights and recognition for transgender people is a legal battle, it is also a battle over whose perception is “real”—whose ability to read, interpret, and translate whose bodies should we consider credible? Given this, the functioning of our senses becomes a field of social negotiation, an ongoing push and pull around whose mode of seeing we want to put our faith in.¹³

I find that in the circles in which I move, I don't often encounter people who overtly espouse views on gender that disavow the realities of transgender lives. Most don't believe in biological essentialism in relation to gender and reject traditional roles for men and women while supporting transgender people's right to use any bathroom they want to. I wonder, though, if despite this, many of us are still relying on this same version of common sense about gender as those who actively support bills that mandate bathroom access based on sex as assigned at birth. We wouldn't say it out loud, but we do it all the time—reading people as male and female, assigning them genders without their consent, expecting that we know something about each other based on these assignments. What would it look like for us to truly untether our genders from these original assignments that were given us at the moment of our births? So much has changed so fast, I'm told, people need time to catch up... For me, the time has arrived and it goes way beyond arguing about bathrooms. I want to relearn how to see.

In the midst of all this urgency, the figure of the slant step comes to my mind. I feel embarrassed about it because what could this remote object have to offer when we are in need of such concrete changes? A useful object with no apparent use. A handmade thing of unknown origin, producing more questions than answers. An object that modestly requests a more effortful type of reading than what we normally engage in. We identify things in terms of their function and move on, reading passively. We learn only as much as we need to know. This object, compelling to so many in the past 50 years, is compelling to me as well, insofar as it encourages me to read more slowly. It makes me want to see it as more than one thing at once, or as many different things in quick succession. Looking to the slant step as a teacher, I want to learn what it seems to already know—I can't always know what I am looking at. Clearly already well used in the mid-1960s but for an inscrutable purpose, the slant step speaks of bodies without being able to name them. It has always seemed wrong to me to say that we see what is before us and then interpret it, because the idea of “interpreting what we see” implies an inaccurate linearity to this process and suggests that the things themselves are fixed while our understandings of them remain malleable. Rather, we understand what we are seeing at the same moment we see it; perception is identification. Understood in this way, changing our interpretations is literally synonymous with changing the functioning of our senses, initiating a pulling apart of the instantaneous act of assigning meaning to what we see. This slowness to assign identification in the moment of encounter lies at the heart of the slant step's curious appeal.

VI.

Object Lesson: Object Kinship

On an overcast August day in 1995, Tyra Hunter, a hairstylist and black transgender woman, got in a car accident while driving in Washington, DC. Adrian Williams, the emergency medical technician at the scene who began to cut away her clothing to administer urgently needed aid, is reported to have said, “This bitch ain't no girl... it's a nigger; he's got a dick!” Hunter lay on the ground bleeding as Williams and the other EMTs joked around her, and died later that day of her injuries at a nearby hospital. A subsequent investigation into the events leading to her death concluded that it would very likely have been prevented had treatment been continued at the scene of the accident.¹⁴

In the fall of 2014, a grand jury in St. Louis County Missouri decided not to indict police officer Darren Wilson for the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown. In the spring of 2015, the US Department of Justice also cleared Wilson of all civil rights violations, deeming the shooting to be an act of self-defense. In Wilson's testimony in his grand jury hearing,

he recounted looking at Brown in the moments before shooting him six times, and described him as having “the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked.”¹⁵

It’s hard to stomach these statements, but I write them here because I am noticing the ways that both of the speakers managed to transform the person they were about to kill from a human being to a thing in the moments before their deaths. By a probably less-than-conscious twist of verbal gymnastics, both killers shift from using a pronoun generally used to refer to people (he/she) to using a pronoun generally used to refer to inanimate things: it. If murder is the act of permanently dehumanizing another, then it is as if in order to give themselves permission to kill these two individuals Williams and Wilson had to preemptively transform them from people into things. “It’s a nigger...” “It looks like a demon...” Did these statements make it possible to turn a human being into a corpse? Maybe so, as a person turned nonconsensually into a thing is already a person dangerously close to death.

At one of the many protests in North Carolina over House Bill 2, at least one has ended with dancing. A video has been circulating on the Internet of an activist and transgender woman named Micky Bradford, vowing in front of a line of police officers guarding the North Carolina governor’s mansion. The jostling cellphone video, taken by an unidentified member of the crowd, shows Bradford standing still in front of the line of police officers, seemingly lost in thought. She shifts slowly, taking off her bag, and gradually begins to dance for the crowd of demonstrators, who with their voices and a couple of drums provide an enthusiastic rhythmic soundtrack for her movements. The officers stand with blank faces as Bradford travels gracefully back and forth in front of them. For three minutes she dances, an outpouring of energy at the end of many hours of protest. Bradford recounts, “I was tired. The most I could do was dance away my anger, frustration, and sadness...”¹⁶

In the 1966 slant step show, William Wiley, the artist who originally bought the step from the thrift store, made a metal casting from it that bore the following inscription: “This piece is dedicated to all the despised unknown, unloved, people, objects and ideas that just don’t make it and never will, who have so thoughtlessly given their time and talent to become objects of scorn but maintain an innocent ignorance and never realize that you hate them.”¹⁷ For Wiley, the slant step was both an intriguing object of ambiguous functionality, while also serving another purpose as the object of certain recuperations. To treat a discarded object with care, to focus on it, show it to others, make copies and homages to it—to, in a sense, treat it with love—had a value for him on its own account. A small act of treating an uncared-for thing with care as an articulation of an ethos for encountering one another. Frank

Owen, one of Wiley’s friends and an original participant in the slant step show, used the step as a model in his life-drawing classes for decades—producing innumerable depictions of its likeness and encouraging his students to think deeply about it through the slow and close looking necessitated by drawing. “This was its job—to pose on a model stand patiently (which it is very good at) and be drawn while also posing its eternal question: What is this thing, what is it for and why do we attend to it?”¹⁸



Mark Aguilar. Via markaguilar.tumblr.com. Courtesy Michael Aguilar.

I am writing this essay in the days and weeks following the mass shooting at Pulse, the gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in which 49 people were killed and dozens more seriously injured.¹⁹ I read about it obsessively, as if knowing more about it could undo it, or at least help me understand it, make it make sense. My grief about the present has woven its way into the writing of this piece, feeling rocked by the collective experiences of often unbearable vulnerability felt by many in my community, not just since this shooting but long before it. Recurring in the many posts, essays, and articles I have read are descriptions of the crucial importance that dance floors in queer nightlife settings have in mitigating these pervasive feelings of being threatened, marginalized, or objectified. Dance floors, at their best, have provided innumerable gay and transgender people with a momentary inversion of the conditions that govern their day-to-day lives—we can show off our bodies without shame. We can have a glimpse of what it feels like to be seen and recognized and celebrated, even if it is just for a moment in the midst of all the confusion and anxiety inherent to mixing with strangers. While thinking about this, I have revisited a piece of writing I did last summer for the catalogue of a retrospective of the Chicago-based DJ and art collective Chances Dances, whose parties I attended throughout the years I lived in that city. In it, I propose something called “reparative objectification” in which we collectively counteract the damaging effects of being objectified through mutually objectifying each other—interfacing with one another as bodies, but doing so in a way that supports rather than tries to destroy one another: “I found myself

thinking about some other reparative process, one that countered this kind of damaging objectification with an even more powerful kind of objectification. I wanted [us] to treat each other like objects in profound affirmation, to learn to see each other, to look at one another as bodies and say YES.”²⁰ This is much of what we do on the dance floor—embrace rather than disavow our object-ness in a space that allows us to do so without the risk of dehumanization that usually accompanies objectification. My thinking about this emerged in the months following the suicide in 2012 of our friend Mark Aguilar, who, moving through the world as both a transgender person and a brown person and a fat person, contended with a level of publicly expressed disgust, objectification, and policing that most of us can’t imagine. Mark was unapologetic about her existence, and she arrived at the club looking gorgeous and ready to dance, which she did, incredibly and with conviction. I really sincerely hope that we were able to offer her some respite in these spaces, looking at her twirling body in a way that helped her live.²¹

In the months before she died, Mark took to tending to houseplants—usually small potted succulents that she arranged in artful compositions with decorative rocks and unique pots of different shapes and sizes. She had a special fondness for a plant called the ponytail plant, described by the artist Aay Preston-Myint as “frilly and frondy, and reminded Mark of her own ponytail.” For an exhibition organized by Aay, Mark contributed a group of potted plants and an ornate candy bowl filled with multicolored round hard candies (an homage to Felix Gonzales-Torres’s candy spill pieces from the early 1990s). Mark did not think of these pieces as artworks, per se, but referred to her work on them as “object styling.” A post from her blog from 2010 titled “HOW TO STAVE OFF SUICIDE FOR ANOTHER COUPLE HOURS” consists of a list of 14 points, including “cuddle with your friends as often and for as long as they are willing to stand you,” “remember that you are worthy,” and “consider the reality of hormones.” She also added a note to “buy beautiful plants that remind you of yourself and that need careful attention.”²²

In thinking about Mark and her succulents, I am wrapping myself around the sustaining potential of relations of care with non-human things. I wonder about the role that the cultivation, protection, and recuperation of things might play in the day-to-day processes of healing necessitated by living as a body that is objectified, misread, or unrecognized. Can attending to objects with care be a labor of self-sustenance for us as well? Can the things of our lives be our companions, our children, our comrades?²³ What can we know or feel about our own bodies through the ways that we relate to objects? I want to propose the possibility that our relations with objects themselves might function

as a means of remodeling our own often-fraught bonds with the materiality that is our own lived bodies. I sometimes joke that all I am doing in the studio is making friends. This joke is feeling more real by the day. I am thinking now about all the gorgeous non-traditionally gendered people I know coming back to their apartments exhausted from the daily labor of moving through the world and carefully watering their plants.

VII.

I was disappointed to discover that the group of artists originally dedicated to the slant step does seem to agree about its original intended use. Both the poet William Witherspoon and Marion Wintersteen, the curator at Berkeley Coop Gallery that hosted the first slant step exhibition, have stated that they believe the most likely original purpose of the object was to assist one while on the toilet, a footrest designed to create the ideal posture for having a bowel movement.²⁴ As much as I wish for the slant step to remain completely open-ended in its utility, and as embarrassing as it is to discover that it was probably original made for use on the toilet, it also seems only right that it would have been placed in the bathroom, which at present is probably where we need it the most.

*Since writing this essay, North Carolina's House Bill 2 was partially repealed after massive protests and boycotts on the part of individuals, organizations, politicians, and perhaps most important, corporations. Governor Pat McCrory lost his bid for re-election to Roy Cooper, who oversaw a reversal of the aspects of the law pertaining to public restrooms. This partial repeal of the bill kept in place the sections of the bill that forbid local nondiscrimination ordinances that extend to sexuality and gender identity until 2020. When I wrote this piece in the summer of 2016, I was feeling optimistic about the future of transgender people in the United States. Now, in March of 2019, it is harder to feel hopeful. Since the election of Donald Trump there has been a large scale reversal of civil rights protections for gay and transgender people, most notably a Justice Department memo from 2017 that instructs its attorneys that federal law does not protect transgender workers from discrimination, a 2018 Department of Education announcement that it will dismiss all complaints from transgender students regarding exclusion from sex-segregated facilities, and the still-evolving ban on transgender people serving in the military. For a growing list, see the National Center for Transgender Equality's website, <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This requirement is included in the law despite the fact that laws regulations governing the change of a sex marker on a

birth certificate vary widely state to state. In North Carolina, such modifications are only allowed after the completion of sex reassignment surgery, which many transgender people either cannot access or do not want.

- 2 For a more complete history of the slant step: Breir, Jessica. "The Linoleum Symbol of a New and Coming Faith." *Art Practical*. September 12, 2013. <https://www.artpractical.com/feature/the-linoleum-symbol-of-a-new-and-coming-faith/>.
- 3 Read my essay "Object Lessons" (2013).
- 4 For a book-length art-historical exploration of some of these themes and a thorough bibliography, see David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture and the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- 5 I have a troubling mix of conflicting emotions about being asked to write about House Bill 2. I both relish it and resent it. I think about gendered bathrooms quite a bit but also feel that I already think about them too much and am exhausted and humiliated by how I can't seem to get away from this very unglamorous topic. Simultaneously, I have thoughts that I want to share, so here we are.
- 6 As well as our own bodies, insofar as transgender people ourselves are often mired in an ongoing, and exhausting, labor of holding on to our own understandings of our bodies while living in a world that largely doesn't acknowledge or respect them, and often at best corners us into pathologizing ourselves in order to access the medical and legal services we need.
- 7 I'd like to add that this whole debate feels depressing to me because what is at stake is not even the outcome that I want, which is the abolition of the two-gender bathroom system and a general loosening of a world structured around the false idea that there are two genders, that same-gender spaces are "safe" and desexualized havens, and that all we need is to allow transgender people who clearly identify with one of the two options to go into the bathroom that "matches" their gender identity. What about gender-nonconforming people? Disabled people with other-gendered caregivers? Parents with children? But what I want is apparently so radical I am foolish to even hope for it in my lifetime. So we will continue to agonize over who counts as a woman and who counts as a man and how we can continue using an outdated system. It feels bleak to be fighting for something that isn't even what one wants.
- 8 This is one of the reasons why some activists objected to the trend of passing trans men posting selfies of themselves in women's bathrooms to protest House Bill 2.
- 9 Mullainathan, Sendhil. "Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions." *The New York Times*. January 03, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/upshot/the-measuring-sticks-of-racial-bias.html>.

[nytimes.com/2015/01/04/upshot/the-measuring-sticks-of-racial-bias.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/upshot/the-measuring-sticks-of-racial-bias.html).

- 10 Stafford, Zach. "Transgender Homicide Rate Hits Historic High in US, Says New Report." *The Guardian*. November 13, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/13/transgender-homicide-victims-us-has-hit-historic-high>.
- 11 Patten, Eileen. "Racial, Gender Wage Gaps Persist in U.S. despite Some Progress." Pew Research Center. July 01, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/01/racial-gender-wage-gaps-persist-in-u-s-despite-some-progress/>.
- 12 It has been striking to me that some civil rights leaders have condemned the link made by Attorney General Loretta Lynch between racial segregation and denying bathroom access, as in Pastor John Amanchukwu's statement that "a person's ability to self-identify as something they are not has nothing to do with civil rights."
- 13 Butler, Judith. "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back." *The New York Times*. March 20, 1999. <https://archive.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage-950CE5D61531F933A-15750CoA96F958260.html>.
- 14 Account of Tyra Hunter's death found in Richard Juang, "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, vol. 1, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 712.
- 15 Calamur, Krishnadev, writer. "Ferguson Documents: Officer Darren Wilson's Testimony." Transcript. In *The Two Way*. National Public Radio. November 25, 2014.
- 16 Rivas, Jorge. "A Beautiful Act of Resistance in the Face of a Terrible Law in North Carolina." *Splinter*. July 24, 2017. <https://splinternews.com/a-beautiful-act-of-resistance-in-the-face-of-a-terrible-1793855827>. Video of Micky Bradford voguing in front of police officers protecting the Governor's Mansion in North Carolina.
- 17 Hackett, Regina. "William T. Wiley – Objects of Scorn." *Another Bouncing Ball*. December 09, 2009. http://www.artsjournal.com/anotherbb/2009/12/william_t_wiley_-_the_consolat.html.
- 18 Jones, Dave. "The Slant Step Comes Home for Good." UC Davis. January 24, 2016. <https://www.ucdavis.edu/news/slant-step-comes-home-good/>.
- 19 During the editing stage of this essay, a series of additional fatal police shootings of black individuals set off massive responses—including Paul O'Neal in Chicago, Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, and Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There were also two large-scale fatal shootings of groups of police officers, occurring in Dallas and Baton Rouge. The frequency of these tragedies prevents us from thoroughly responding to each one individually, and causes them to

fade into the past much faster than can be justified. I mention these new events here to acknowledge that they took place, but that they did so after this piece's creation.

- 20** Read my essay "Party Friends" (2015).
- 21** Joon Kwak, Young. "Mark Aguhar." *The Brooklyn Rail*. July 08, 2016. <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/07/criticspage/mark-aguhar>.
- 22** Aguhar, Mark. *Calloutqueen*. Edited by Juana Peralta and Roy Pérez. Chicago, IL: Gallery 400, 2012.
- 23** The Russian Constructivists sometimes referred to objects as "comrades" as described in Christiana Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions, The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).
- 24** Knight, Christopher. "Has Art's Slant Step Mystery Finally Been Solved?" *Los Angeles Times*. June 09, 2014. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-slant-step-mystery-solved-20140609-column.html>. and Plagens, Peter. "Mystery of a 50-year-old Nauman Art Object Solved | Art | Agenda." Phaidon. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2014/june/11/mystery-of-a-50-year-old-nauman-art-object-solved/>.

IS THIS FOR A PERFORMANCE

2013. Conversation with Elizabeth Orr and Kristin Poor published in *Next Time*, on the occasion of the Next Time Symposium at Envoy Enterprises, New York, NY.



UP ON, 2012. Concrete, paint, mosaic, projector, projector screen fabric, 2012. Performance: 15 min 18 sec. Performers: Corrine Fitzpatrick, Gordon Hall, Jonah Groeneboer, Savannah Knoop. SculptureCenter, Queens, NY. Images by Megan Mantia.

GORDON HALL I invited you both here to talk with me about some thoughts I have been having about sculpture. Recently, I have been noticing that when people come into

my studio and look at my sculptures one of the first things they say is: "Is this for a performance?"

KRISTIN POOR And do you think that's because they have a particular idea of what it is that you do? Or is it something that is coming from the objects themselves?

GH I think it does come from what I do-making sculptures that I often then use for performance-but it is something else as well. It clarified for me something about what I want the objects to do on their own-to suggest the possibility of future or past action, even if that action is never actualized. The ghost of action... Does this make sense?

ELIZABETH ORR I have a similar thing happen, with people asking if the work is for a performance. This seems to be a question of activation, of objects' potential to be activated and in what ways. I oftentimes want both an inactive object and the potential for activation.

KP Right, and there is a possible distinction between kinds of activation as well. Is physical activation always what we mean or are there other possibilities? (This is of course a bit rhetorical... as if anything can really just "sit there.")

GH This might seem like a weird reference, but I love this section of John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, about how "receptivity is not passivity" when we truly experience objects. It makes me think about the possibility that specific static objects can, I don't know, activate themselves ... through the way they are made combined with a highly engaged mode of viewership. I keep coming back to this: can I make sculptures that are dances? By virtue of the ways they suggest possible physical uses, whether or not these uses ever occur? I started thinking that maybe this question, "Is this for a performance?" is exactly what I am after with my objects-creating a viewership experience rooted in uncertainty around a sculpture's possible use-value, actualized or latent.

EO Yes, and thinking about theater and the history of props is also important here. And should it matter to make these distinctions between art and theater? Two artists who I immediately think of in terms of how they negotiate inactivity and activity in their sculpture are Guy de Cointet and Lili Reynaud-Dewar.

KP I'd love to hear more about how you two think about theatrical props in relation to the objects you are producing. How, for you, does a theatrical prop function in a way that is different or not?

EO The obvious question here is that of furniture/stage/ props vs. sculpture/performance. In the distinction of the cultural history and economy of these practices, I see a difference in how the objects are treated.

GH I came to sculpture through dance, and the first objects I made were costumes and props for the dances I was making. Gradually these objects got more elaborate, until they started to ask me to grant them independent lives. Simultaneously, for reasons both personal and political, I became interested in ambiguity, and in making objects that refused to rest on a single read-are they sculptures or props or furniture or ritual objects or useful objects? Things that are constantly rotating in their signification, every time you think you know what it is, you look again and it is something else. Objects in which one read can never dominate.

EO The thing I love the most about studio visits with artists is seeing them physically move the pieces. At that moment the piece is taken out of a sort of precious standstill. This particular moment is what informs my thinking about the activity and inactivity of objects.

GH Absolutely. For me it's about body relations with the work, instead of thinking about art through representation. Not what the piece means, but what it does, physically. To some degree I am still on board with Morris and Judd's ideas around Minimalism and phenomenology-you know I love my Merleau-Ponty.

KP One formula that I have used to describe this is: object + body + movement = artwork. When the elements are separated, they have a different status than when they are all together, and there can also be a change in status before and after activation. Is this something that resonates for you or is this a bit reductive?

GH I like that formulation. Maybe I would nudge it a little-in the work I am excited about making it would be something like: object + body + potential for movement/interaction. But yes, for me art has always been all about my whole body-one of the reasons I have sometimes been confused by the odd physicality of painting, and why I've never made anything to hang on the wall-very much a dancer's approach to visual art.

EO Based on this conversation we are having, the formula for me is turning into artwork = body + object + movement - the after effect (or affect) of the artwork. Not what is necessarily infusing the artwork from the process, but what the artwork produces, post production.

KP That is very interesting to me because I've been trying to think about what these objects enable or make possible-either for the viewer or the audience, or for the performer or maker-which I hadn't really articulated in terms of that "after effect" but I like thinking of it that way.

EO While Gordon is coming from a dance background, my background is in video which in and of itself is a moving picture, movement

in a frame. Instead of “hanging something on a wall,” (that Gordon was referring to earlier), I’m interested in video work that doesn’t assume that it has a form or frame.

GH Yes! I started making work out of speakers and projectors and other AV equipment because I was wanting to make sound and video work but I realized that I needed this technology to be taken seriously in its sculptural presence... Hence the mosaiced projector stands and polygonal projector screens and speaker-chairs-bringing all that, everything, into the work itself and into these actual and potential body relations.

KP I am also thinking that furniture in its relation to the body and use is something we could talk about a bit more.

GH I think so much about furniture—the space between a chair and your body, that tiny space, that makes you... not sure how to explain this, but it’s all about how these questions of design, arrangements and platforms produce and disable possible outcomes. The capacities that objects make possible, and impossible, for our bodies and our lives.

EO I am thinking of the difference in economy between the theater prop and furniture with its use-value in daily life. For instance, the potential of the moveable backdrop, its impermanence in theater which sets a stage. Thinking of both sculpture and theater as the involvement of the whole space in the specific activity of the artwork.

GH Indeed. As a way of finishing this conversation, which surely produced more suggestions and questions than answers I would love to each provide a short list of artists who are thinking about it in relation to these questions, the beginnings of a resource compilation, yes?

EO Guy de Cointet, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Jutta Koether, Georgia Sagri.

KP Franz Erhard Walther, Robert Morris, Jean Tinguely, Joan Jonas, Lygia Clark, Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, Franz West, Robert Rauschenberg, Charlotte Posenenske, Andre Cadere, Paul McCarthy

GH Wonderful. I would add: Richard Artschwager, Scott Burton, Imi Knoebel, Richard Tuttle, Simone Forti, Mike Kelley, Dan Finsel, Math Bass, and of course Merce Cunningham’s collaborations with Rauschenberg, Nauman, Warhol, and Paik.

TOUCHING FURNITURE

2018. “500 Words” interview conducted by Daniel Quiles.
Published in *ArtForum*, May, 2018.



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. Image by Cassandra J. Rodriguez, Stealth Visuals, with additional photo support by Ethan Skaates.

The show at the List Center, which includes sculptures, a letter, and a performance, is quiet and slow. I think of it both as a space of grief and a space *to* grieve. The performance features four people in their seventies and eighties, who sit on and use a concrete bench in a variety of ways.

A couple of years ago I saw a picture of a beautiful and weird bench in my friend’s grandparents’ yard in Clinton, New Jersey. I went there to look at it, finding it even more compelling in person. My friend’s grandfather told me that he bought it from an artist in the 1980s, and that it was an artwork. It took me several months to find out that the artist was named Dennis Croteau. Through research and speaking to his friends, I learned about his life and death from AIDS in 1989. So, this project, in which I make replicas of this found bench sculpture, became one of getting to know an object as well as a person. I had already been thinking about furniture, bodily vulnerability, and our reliance on platforms and structures generally and also in the work of Scott Burton specifically, another casualty of the AIDS epidemic in that same year, whose furniture sculptures and performance works interrogated the legacy of Minimalism. The title of this work—*The Number of Inches Between Them*—originated from a quote from Scott Burton about the experience he desired for the seated audiences of his “Behavior Tableaux” pieces, “...what I want people to become aware of is the emotional nature of the number of inches between them.”

While I was developing this project, Congress was attempting to repeal the Affordable Care Act. I kept hearing politicians say, “If you get sick, you’ll need health insurance.” This word *if* really hung in my ears, *if* and not *when*, as if illness and disability were exceptions and not facts of

all lives—a fantasy of eternal able-bodiedness and autonomy. I was already asking myself questions about what kinds of responsibilities we have to each other, physically, symbolically, and societally, in terms of supporting each other. The intimacy I established with Dennis’s bench became a way of reflecting on support while physically making an object of support. I remade the bench twice, assembling one of them like the original and leaving the other in its component concrete parts leaning around the gallery’s walls, a body taken apart and put together.

Alongside my elder performers, I also perform with the bench, draping my body over it in a memorized and repeated series of poses. All of it is orchestrated to slow down our attention spans. I’ve always been committed to that. Especially this past year, a deep perceptual fatigue and an inability to process what is happening have made me more committed to making work that does not mimic that kind of pacing or attention economy. I don’t want to bore people, but I am interested in pushing viewers right up to the edge of boredom to see what is possible when there are just a few elements and the piece is moving along slowly. I ask my audience to do some work in order to have a meaningful experience—this work isn’t intended to entertain.

In *Brothers and Sisters*, a recent performance at The Renaissance Society, I performed a repeated phrase of movements with slight variations, moving among and interacting with a group of my sculptures that were arranged around the gallery space to create a path for my movements. Each phrase originated in one of the sculptures, and then I strung them together into a sort of body-sentence, writing with objects and movements. I am curious about what it means to be watched by others, to present my non-traditional body to the gaze of strangers. I have thought about this in a few ways, including in terms of what I have called “reparative objectification” in “Party Friends,” an essay that I wrote about the years I spent partying in Chicago and the life and death of the artist Mark Aguhar. There is also an erotics in the way that I (and the viewer, I hope) relate to the objects—a bodily relationship that aims to produce intimate, hard-to-recognize body feelings. I came to sculpture through being a dancer, and so I make the objects with my body and then figure out what to do with them using my own and other people’s bodies.

I have a lot of faith in our ability to change the way we understand what we are looking at and feeling. With this project in particular, the rather futile act of recuperating just one largely unremembered life by getting to know this artwork and piece of furniture feels important. The scale of the loss is so great that it’s more of a gesture toward attempting to enter that loss somewhere, with someone—and to do this by getting close to an object, understanding its

design and developing a relationship with it and with the past as a result.

I make sculptures that are meant for actual or imagined movement with bodies. The space between, where the furniture meets your body, that little gap that closes when you sit down or touch something—that's what I get excited about. With this object, I didn't go out searching for a bench. It's like having a crush on someone or the way you can imagine exactly what the body of someone you've slept with feels like even when they're not there.

EXTREMELY PRECISE OBJECTS OF AMBIGUOUS USE

2011. Lecture presented in conjunction with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Masters of Fine Arts exhibition, Sullivan Galleries, Chicago, IL.

In a 1983 interview with Michel Foucault, the interviewer Stephen Riggins asks:

One of the many things that a reader can unexpectedly learn from your work is to appreciate silence. You write about the freedom it makes possible, its multiple causes and meanings. For instance, you say in your last book that there is not one but many silences. Would it be correct to infer that there is a strongly autobiographical element in this?

Foucault responds:

I think that any child who has been educated in a Catholic milieu just before or during the Second World War had the experience that there were many different ways of speaking as well as many forms of silence. There were some kinds of silence which implied very sharp hostility and others which meant deep friendship, emotional admiration, even love. I remember very well that when I met the filmmaker Daniel Schmidt who visited me, I don't know for what purpose, we discovered after a few minutes that we really had nothing to say to each other. So we stayed together from about three o'clock in the afternoon to midnight. We drank, we smoked hash, we had dinner. And I don't think we spoke more than 20 minutes during those ten hours. From that moment a rather long friendship started. It was for me the first time a friendship originated in strictly silent behavior. ... I think silence is one of those things that has been dropped from our culture. We don't

*have a culture of silence... Young Romans or young Greeks were taught to keep silent in very different ways according to the people with whom they were interacting. Silence was then a specific form of experiencing a relationship with others. This is something that I believe is really worthwhile cultivating. I'm in favor of developing silence as a cultural ethos.*¹

In silence we are still here. Silence is not nothing, but something. Something else. It can be a way of spending time with someone. It is a mode of communication, a presence, an invitation to diverse practices of perception. When we don't speak, we will hear different things. Or maybe we will be able to say different things.

Jonathan Katz, the art historian and co-curator of the last year's highly publicized exhibition *Hide and Seek* at the National Portrait Gallery, has written about John Cage's uses of silence, in his compositions, essays, interviews, and personal life, as a historically specific form of queer resistance during the Cold War. Cage never publicly acknowledged his sexual preference, despite having numerous visible long term relationships with men throughout his life, including the choreographer Merce Cunningham. (When asked about this relationship, Cage once answered only: "I cook and Merce does the dishes."²) Katz understands Cage's closetedness to have a double and contradictory significance: On the one hand, it kept him safe in the highly restrictive McCarthyist political climate, a strategy employed by many closeted gay men at that time. But, Katz also understands this silence as part of Cage's larger aesthetic politics as manifested in works such as 4'33" and lectures such as his 1959 "Lecture On Nothing"—an aesthetic politics which understands silence as a possible remedy for political oppression. Katz describes Cage's politics of silence as an evasion of a politics of opposition—a form of non-oppositional resistance. Oppositional resistance, as a strategy, will in Cage's words "only make matters worse."³ Katz writes: "Repeatedly, Cage most powerfully objects to modes of redress which make active opposition to entrenched authority their hallmark. What silence offered was the prospect of resisting the status quo without opposing it." Katz certainly sees this mode of non-oppositional resistance described and enacted by Cage to be a historically specific and non-transferable strategy. There are obviously many subsequent political scenarios in which such silence is not an option.

But I am drawn to this understanding of silence as a non-oppositional form of resistance. Can keeping quiet allow for a space with different possibilities?

Someone asks you a question. Is it this or this? A or B? A B C or D? Your answer: (((?gesture))) none of the above. Wrong question. "Well then," they will ask, "if you don't like how it is, then

how would you have it be?" Again, ((?gesture)) I am not sure how it will be. But it will be different than this.

This resounding and repeated no is as negative as it is affirmative. It is a refusal that moves toward the future. Its impulse is as reparative as it is destructive. It is mournful and it is celebratory, neither positivity nor negativity—or both, at the same time. Theorist Shoshana Felman calls this "radical negativity"—"not simply negative, it is, in a very complex way, positive, it is fecund, it is affirmative—it escapes the negative positive alternative."⁴

How are we to speak when the questions posed, even the questions we ask ourselves, are formulated so as to exclude from the realm of possible answers the very answers we want to, need to give? How are we to claim a position, when the very position we want to occupy is not one that we want to be able to clearly designate or articulate? Non-oppositional refusal. A place without a name.

I am interested in silence. I am also interested in ambiguity. A productive and principled ambiguity. Silence as a kind of ambiguity. Ambiguity or vagueness.

In preparing for the MFA show, the self-formed group of which I am a part along with Benjamin Chaffee, Orla McHardy, and Casilda Sanchez was very happily put under the curatorial leadership of Bryce Dwyer. In an initial meeting about our work, Bryce called our attention to the chapter titled "Exactitude" from Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* as a possible jumping off point for a curatorial structure.

In sitting down to read this text (5 lectures about literary attributes that were about to be delivered at the time of his death), I discovered that it resonated with what I am trying to do in my work in a magical way. In "Exactitude," Calvino writes about the way that in the work of the Italian Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi, vagueness is an attribute of beauty, and beauty is a product of exactitude. Leopardi, writes Calvino, "maintained that the more vague and imprecise language is, the more poetic it becomes."⁵ He continues: "I might mention in passing that as far as I know Italian is the only language in which the word *vago* (vague) also means 'lovely, attractive.' Starting out from its original meaning of 'wandering,' the word *vago* still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness as with grace and pleasure."⁶ For Calvino, Leopardi asks us to savor the beauty of that which is vague and indefinite, which requires a highly exact and meticulous attention to the minute composition of details in each image. "The poet of vagueness can only be the poet of exactitude."⁷

My most recent objects aim to embody this combination of exactitude and vagueness.

They are artifacts, they are tools, they are sculptures, they are ceremonial objects. I intend for them to waver, uncertainly, between functionality and formalism.

They are exactly as they need to be, but they do not tell you why they need to be that way.

Their specificity is a matter of faith.

Faith in something, even if we do not understand what it is.

They imply a ritual.

They are extremely precise objects of ambiguous use.

What are these things?

What are they for?



The Observants, 2011. Stereo equipment, paint, wood, fabric, performance, sound. Performance 19 min. Performers: AJ Durand, Edie Fake, Rami George, Gordon Hall. Image by Oli Rodriguez.

A ritual is precise. It is repeated. And it has to do with belief. It is a precise repeated material practice of belief. It is formal and functional. Its use is its appearance, the feeling of watching it, the feeling of doing it.

In many instances, rituals do not merely symbolize a set of beliefs, narratives, or transformations. Instead, they create change, are agents of action and transformation. Rituals *do*.⁸ In this sense they are not just performances but are performative—reifying, reiterating, transforming, making change. And, while some rituals are explicitly considered by those involved in them to be rituals, other rituals acquire a feeling of obviousness, inevitability, or naturalness as being simply a logical response to a particular space or context. Governed by the logic of tradition and appropriateness, we do not see many of the rituals we engage in as anything other than what one does in a given situation.

Catherine Bell, one of the foremost scholars of

ritual, remarks: “Ritualization quietly creates an environment within which quite distinctive symbolic behaviors can appear to be proper and effective responses.”⁹

This is why gender can be thought of as a question of ritual. Following Butler, gender performativity is the ongoing process by which we must continually and repeatedly cite a gender norm in order to effectively “be” the gender that we “are.” As she writes: “Sex acquires its appearance of naturalness through the effect of sedimentation of reiterative ritual practice.”¹⁰ We do it again and again until it is not something that we do with intent—it is no longer what we do; it is what is done.

Gender is also a question of how we understand materiality. Butler frames her project in *Bodies That Matter* as a reconsideration of the materiality of sex. For Butler, matter is not a biological given onto which gender is placed. Rather, the matter of sex is always materialized; it is the result of a process of materialization. This does not mean that there are no real bodies, but that when we think about the realness of bodies as these purely objective zones or natural facts, we are actually already forming ideas about these bodies. “...There is no reference to a pure body that is not at the same time a further formation of that body.”¹¹ There is no facticity to bodies that is not also an ideology about bodies.

And so a question arises for me: If the citation of gender norms must be ritually repeated in order to maintain the power of those norms, can we invent other rituals by which we repetitively cite different genders? If, in order to properly “do” one’s gender we must do it again and again, can we do it differently again and again? And, if gender is a question also of how we understand matter—the materiality of bodies, how can we develop new modes of understanding it? If matter is always materialized, how to materialize it differently?

For me, the creation and sustenance of an increased variety of genders is a question of transforming matter. In one sense, this transformation could refer to the cosmetic, surgical, and hormonal interventions by which transgender and gender-variant people literally change their bodies. But, gender variant people also engage in another type of material transformation that is not visible in the manner of these types of physical procedures. Bodies and body parts change, but not objectively. Your breasts are still there, but they are no longer feminine—they are your chest. Your penis is a large clitoris. Your husky voice is no longer a male signifier. Your body is the same, but in very crucial ways it has changed. These types of changes are a question of belief. Belief in a material form. They are about the creation of new modes of perception by which the same thing appears completely different. These bodies are a mixture of the real and the virtual—in such a way that the two terms are not opposed.

Realness is virtual; virtuality is real. What Brian Massumi calls, after Foucault, “incorporeal materialism.”¹² These bodies are both real and imaginary—fleshy reinterpretations of the gendered significance of their physical parts. Transforming gender is a question of transforming matter, but, more than that, it is a question of how we understand what matter is, especially the matter that is our physical bodies. Gayle Salamon, the author of a fascinating book that reads transgender through the lens of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, describes the body in general, but the transgender body in particular, as “a mixture or amalgam of substance and ideal located somewhere between its objectively quantifiable materiality and its phantasmatic extensions into the world.”¹³ Or, as Merleau-Ponty asks: “Is my body a thing, is it an idea?”¹⁴

Is there a way to understand materiality that can account for the complex relationships between the real and the imaginary proposed by gender-variant bodies? What is it when a body looks exactly the same but has transformed into something completely different? “He sees mountains as mountains, but it does not follow that he sees them as mountains just as he saw them before.”¹⁵

Most religions have processes by which things are consecrated. Objects, structures, foods, people, places, images and much else are, in various ways, transformed from one category to another, namely, from the ordinary to the sacred. The etymology of the term—“com” stemming from the Latin root meaning “with” and “sacrum” meaning “sacred”—com-sacrum—with the sacred” embodies this process by which a material object becomes linked, permanently or temporarily, with an immaterial sacredness or divinity.¹⁶ The resulting object becomes a hybrid object: part material and part ethereal. A real virtual virtual real.

A ritual of consecration delineates and differentiates, linking the formerly profane object to the realm of the sacred, resulting in an object that is more than the sum of its parts, an object that, while still very much itself, points to something beyond itself.¹⁷ The sacred object is what it is while it is also more than what it is, exceeding itself, overflowing.

David Morgan is a contemporary scholar of religion who teaches at Duke University. He does not write about gender, but he does write about the ways that we might understand religious practices as material practices, to think about belief as a type of embodied ritualized engagement with physical objects and spaces. In the introduction to an edited volume published last year called “Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief,” he explains that anthropologists who study religion have primarily approached it in terms of the ideas, ideologies, and teachings of the religion. His aim is to suggest an alternate model for thinking about religious practice in which belief is defined less in terms of dogmas or

teachings and more in terms of ways of physically engaging with the material world. “What if,” he asks, “believing were not fundamentally different from seeing or smelling or dressing or arranging space?”¹⁸ Morgan sees belief as physical, temporal, and communal:

“Forms of materiality—sensations, things, spaces, and performance—are a matrix in which belief happens as touching and seeing, hearing and tasting, feeling and emotion, as will and action, as imagination and intuition.” Morgan is approaching religious practice from the point of view of an embodied phenomenology, seeing the material and the ideological as equivalents. “Belief,” according to Morgan, “is what I know with my body.” Or, in the words of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, in ritual, “not only is seeing believing, doing is believing.”¹⁹

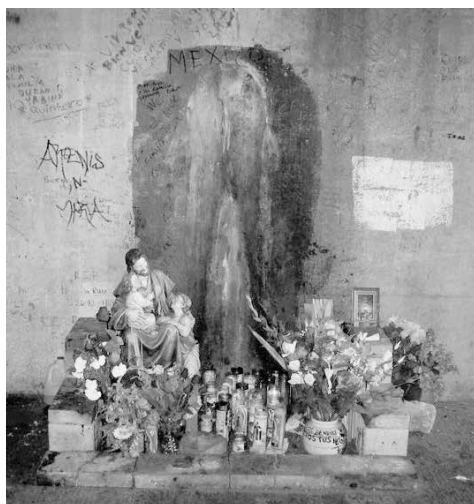


Image from the *Chicago Tribune*, published April 2006.

In 2005, a woman named Obdulia Delgado was driving home on Fullerton Avenue in Logan Square when she noticed something miraculous. On the concrete wall of the underpass where Highway 90 crosses the avenue, a stain had appeared on the wall that bore a remarkable resemblance to the Virgin Mary. It was that kind of salt and slime stain that forms in dimly lit concrete environments, but the likeness was unmistakable. She called her friends and told them what she had seen. By the next day hundreds of people were showing up at the underpass, an inhospitable area that doubles as an “Accident Investigation Site” for any nearby accident victims to assess the damage and hash out their feelings and insurance statuses. The visitors, a combination of the faithful and the curious, took pictures of the stain, lit candles beneath the stain, praying and leaving notes. Within a few days, the area was thronged with visitors. The candles and flowers and notes multiplied. Over the course of the months and years that followed, “Our Lady of the Underpass” as she has come to be known, has continued to be honored, despite, or in the face of, occasional vandalism. Now, six years later, the concrete wall surrounding her is still busy with handwritten proclamations of faith and earnest personal requests to the

Virgin. Candles and flowers continue to be lit and delivered each day. For the faithful, this image of the Virgin exists as living proof of the grace and presence of God. It is nothing short of a Miracle.²⁰

Here is a situation in which people have created a shared community of belief that goes against prevailing reason. For the unfaithful—the idea that a dirty wall drip would be proof of divinity is ludicrous, even offensive. But for me, it speaks to our ability to create communities in which we give ourselves the authority to say: This is what we see. This makes sense according to our system of beliefs. We cannot prove it, but we know it to be true.

And, combined with Morgan’s description of faith as a material practice—“Belief is what I know with my body”—these communities of shared belief need not necessarily be thought of in terms of shared ideology (although that could be part of it) but in terms of what people feel proof of with their bodies. *Not only is seeing believing, doing is believing.*

What does it do to think about queer communities as communities of shared embodied knowledge? And what if we think of this shared embodied knowledge as a form of faith, a set of beliefs?

If groups of people are able to collectively develop new modes of perception, they do so in part through repeated formal or informal rituals. One does not become a Christian by going to church once. And one’s gender does not change by getting dressed up for the evening, contrary to many mis-readings of Butler’s early work on gender transformation as somehow simply a matter of personal volition. It takes an ongoing and shared embodied commitment to believe things that contradict common sense. It is about the creation of a Discipline.

The word discipline has a double meaning, one that I am very interested in. On the one hand, discipline is the tool of organization, control, subordination, oppression. Think prisons, schools, the military, the camp. But a discipline is also a field of study, a domain of knowledge, a practice, a self-imposed solitary or shared system for doing things. Solitude is a discipline. Flogging is getting disciplined.

In Foucault’s early work on discipline, he emphasizes discipline’s close relationship to precision and detail. Chronicling the shift from a pre-modern Western culture of grand spectacles of public torture to a panoptic mode for disciplining, Foucault unpacks the close relationship between discipline and detail, in which subjects are formed on the level of the precise and minute details of everyday life and function:

“A meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men, emerge through the classical age bearing with them a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and knowledge, descriptions,

plans, and data. And from such trifles, no doubt, the man of modern humanism was born.”²¹ “Discipline is the political anatomy of the detail.”²² Subordination is a question of exactitude. How and where you sit. How loud you speak, using what language, to whom. What you wear and how you groom yourself. When you are awake and asleep. What you eat. And, although detail is often the mechanism of subordination, it simultaneously has a long history of association with diminished subject positions—women, queers, children, and the insane have long been linked to a preoccupation with details as evidence of their inability to function as full subjects, as discussed in the wonderful book *Reading In Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, by Naomi Schor.²³ Exactitude and detail are the tools of coercion, while little suspected as such—to care too much about little things is to be lost in a sea of the infinitesimal, unable to discern the part from the whole. Can this logic be reversed? To the degree that it is still the case that we are formed out of the cumulative effect of these minutiae, can we think about resistance also as a question of exactitude?

Artist Andrea Zittel, famous for creating precise self-contained living spaces has remarked: “The only way you can be free from external rules is to create your own rules that are even more rigid, but because they are your own, you feel completely free.”²⁴

And Foucault himself, in his final works Volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality* that he worked on while losing his life to AIDS-related illnesses, as well as in interviews from this period, turned to the possibility that precise self-imposed discipline may be a method for political and social transformation. Foucault was hoping to find a model for thinking about discipline that differed from the ways he discussed the operations of power over the individual in his previous books. Foucault was looking for opportunities for resistance, and he found it in the possibility that one could transform oneself through a self-imposed disciplinary system. He turns to an examination of ancient Greco-Roman culture and its notion of an *aesthetics* or *stylistics* of existence—a phenomena that he refers to as “asceticism.” Foucault saw the self as a strategic possibility, laboring to discover and exploit possibilities for freedom, contained within the present moment. In the words of David Halperin:

“Foucault referred to the arduous activity of cultivating, fashioning, and styling the self—of working on the self in order to transform the self into a source of self-sufficiency and pleasure—as ‘asceticism’ (*askēsis* in Greek), ascetics, or ethical work. Asceticism, then, as Foucault conceived it, does not signify self-denial, austerity, or abnegation; rather, it means something like ‘training,’ almost in an athletic sense. Foucault defined ‘asceticism’ as ‘an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being.’”²⁵ In writings

and interviews with the gay press, Foucault explicitly aligned this late work about ancient Greco-Roman ascetic practices with gay political struggles. For him, political activism involved articulating a utopic vision of how the world might be, and in doing this we involve ourselves in a process of self-transformation, pushing ourselves to imagine and enact different ways of living, being, and loving. In this sense, political activism was for Foucault, above all, a method for transforming the self, what might even be described as a spiritual practice through which we challenge ourselves to realize our possibilities ever more fully.²⁶

Freedom, in this estimation, need not be the opposite of discipline. Freedom may be simply this: the creation of our own systems of belief, methods for transforming ourselves, modes of perception, disciplines for living, and collective rituals.

Foucault, during this same period, also came to discuss philosophy, and the work of the philosopher, as a parallel type of practice of self-transformation. He came to see work as a way not simply of communicating our ideas to the world, but of challenging our own positions and changing our thinking. And in this way, Foucault identifies the work of the philosopher with that of the artist, in which the process of doing our work has the capacity to change us, artistic practices that are not just communicative but self-transformative. In the same 1983 interview with which I opened this lecture, Riggins posed the question to Foucault: “Is there a special kinship between your kind of philosophy and the arts in general?” Foucault answers: “Well, I think I am not in a position to answer. You see, I hate to say it, but it’s true that I am not a really good academic. For me intellectual work is related to what you could call aestheticism, meaning transforming yourself...I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That’s the reason why, when people say ‘Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,’ my answer is, [Laughter] ‘Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not be changed?’ This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?”²⁷

ENDNOTES

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SO FUTURE

2013. Conversation with Colin Self published in *Randy Magazine* Issue No. 4 published by Capricious, NY.

GORDON HALL Hello Colin!

COLIN SELF Hey Gordon!

GH Should we do this as a text discussion?

CS Yes ... build a document together.

GH Great. Very futuristic. Not really, actually. Future would be telepathy.

CS We are on our way—

GH Or dancing for each other to communicate our thoughts or something -

CS That happens.

GH It’s true.

CS I have experienced it before.

GH In fact, maybe we should start there. With being dance floor friends in Chicago, before we knew each other.

CS Oh yes.

GH We would always see each other at Chances Dances. You were such an amazing and enthusiastic dancer.

CS Yeah, Chances really was a huge awakening for me about the power and operation of community—and how a queer space can harbor such strong energetic growth and as a result create families. I guess all of my ideas about family as an adult have sprouted from Chances, meeting you and everyone there—watching progression before my eyes.

GH Totally. It feels important to remember that we met and first got to know each other (“know” each other) not through art or school or anything like that but through dancing together and vibing so hard and realizing we were spirit animals. We both had bowl cuts back then. And then we got to know each other better in these other contexts and discovered all of these power-ful resonances between our work. But at first we loved each other without knowing each other’s names.

CS That’s very true! I think that was the first time in my life when I realized how I, along with everyone, was already carrying all these codes without intentionally doing so. I also remember that being the first time in my life where people really couldn’t specify my gender, and I was also meeting people who I was uncertain about too—and it became this inviting platform for what I believe you take into your work as that “specific ambiguity,” right? Both in the means of work and life—we forged a spirit connection over that, yeah? Or you should talk more about what that means, or how I am interpreting it.

GH Indeed. “Extremely Precise Objects of Ambiguous Use” was the name of a performative lecture I presented towards the end of my time in Chicago. It’s an idea that I come back to over and over—an approach

to making art and making and arranging things in everyday life, and also a way of thinking about my own body and my gender. It's an investment in exactitude and self-discipline in the interest of creating a better future reality, a rigorous means of creating and sustaining spaces of openness. I am trying to work out these ideas—physically producing something that is both confusing and extremely specific. I am wanting freedom not through tropes of counter-cultural chaos but through self-imposed rules and precision that originate from within myself—and my community. And, of course, this connects to my interest in religion and ritual—the specificity inherent in that sort of investment in symbolic objects.

CS Congruently so to where I've found myself in recent work—I realized that this investment in self-discipline has been an organic operation of my spiritual and emotional well-being. The belief system I live in, and its liturgy are simultaneously disciplinary and liberating. Maintaining my attention to these energetic fields makes me realize that even when my work is manifested through chaos, it is intentional. I'm really learning this year to focus on precision—and that precise results form as families, ceremonies, and conversations—these have actually become the work. Material practices have kind of transgressed into these communal and liturgical forms. I realize now that they are natural habits of actualizing myself and positioning who I am within a queer family structure. Especially with a family like Chez Deep, we are able to traverse our variables of personhood to focus on our core understandings of a greater power and the politic that unites us. The aesthetic and performance becomes auxiliary to the real work—our relationships. I kind of see this coming further into fruition for myself and others, that relationships and their values can be cited as artist works. At the end of the day, our performances are a self-contained public, yet interpersonal, situation. The audience may be watching but it is not for them, it is for us and ourselves and would exist the same without an audience. I feel like this is related to "Extremely Precise Objects of Ambiguous Use," and how having reverence for identifying our ritual differences help us obtain specificity. If religions have historically posed themselves in opposition to one another, I feel like new queer forms of ritual and ceremony at least operate consciously appreciating each family's differences.

GH Yes, I love the way you describe that—a situation in which the audience stands witness to some event or performance or ritual that is not primarily for them. I see exciting potential for the basis of a politics, an approach to encountering otherness, both in one another

and within ourselves. Let me see if I can explain... once I went to Catholic funeral, and, since I am not a Catholic I understood almost nothing of the rituals that I saw, but I could see that there were very specific things happening with very specific objects. The space was not like other spaces, normal temporality was lifted. And I had an experience of confused awe, I didn't understand what was going on but I understood that it was special and very particular. And this feeling of respect for that which does not present itself in its entirety for my understanding is very important to me. I try to create it in relation to my work, both my performances and my objects—a feeling of interest and respect for things that one doesn't fully have access to and thus can't fully understand or have ownership over. I feel like this is a good way of approaching one another, and of conducting politics, especially in relation to rare or confusing bodies and identities. Transparency and comprehension shouldn't be the criteria for respect and social support.

CS I love that reformation of social criteria. I always experience this feeling in public when I come into contact with religiously-adorned individuals. Whether they are a group of Mennonite women, a Buddhist monk, or a Catholic nun; my automatic response is a deep sensation of respect and admiration for their outward devotion.

I might look totally crazy in comparison but I always feel the urge to show gratitude for their dedication. Just the performativity of these individuals and their willingness to express their discipline in public resonates with me. Even when coming up against a lot of systems of oppression—I believe that demonstrating respect for ambiguity is a powerful way to disarm. I think about the peaceful affirmations I receive for ambiguous gender performances in public and how even one interaction can be so powerful.

GH Yes. Those affirmational moments are so powerful. This brings this back around to what I was describing about the feeling of witnessing rituals that do not include you. People and communities shouldn't have to self-identify in order to gain rights and the cultural support that enables their life. I am so interested in these moments of refusal to identify oneself, or silence or blankness or vagueness as possible modes of resistance to an identity-based assimilationist political structure. There has to be room to not answer a question, or change the subject, or make a gesture instead of speaking and so on. Obviously I think about this through the lens of indeterminate gender, but it is bigger than that, really an ethos for encountering the Other in the many ways that we do. This is part of my love of minimalism, monochromality, repetition, and certain kinds

of simplicity—finding resources in these aesthetics for saying what I need to and, more importantly, not saying what I don't need to. And this brings me to something I wanted to talk with you about, which strikes me as a main point of divergence between our work—minimalism vs. maximalism. Do you identify as a maximalist?

CS I've never thought of myself as a maximalist and have this aggravating relationship with the term! I don't know why I feel a strange sense of irresponsibility with maximalism and its identification. I remember living in Olympia and hanging out in these communities where this Junk Culture was really powerful and systemic. Everything was flamboyant and repurposed and it was carried by this very democratic behavior of queer reclaim. It was like, by gathering all this shit together and making a mess—it was disruptive, playful, taking apart the economy of objects and identities. I think the colorful gay history of maximalism was a dutiful step in discovering myself, digging through this phase of materiality. As I get older, I am trying to teach myself how to communicate minimally. I think my personality will always take form as flamboyance even if I end up building fleshtone concrete shapes or something, I could see myself moving only into light and sound installations. You went through this too—your caves, your band, etc. Do you think there is something about minimalism and maturity? Or minimalism and seriousness?

GH Ha, yes, it's true. I wasn't always like this. Early on, Paper Rad was a huge influence, that kind of layering and fast pace and over-stimulation. I'm not sure I think of myself as a minimalist, and I need to be open to the possibilities that I could make anything in the future, things that have totally opposite aesthetics to what I am making now. And there are continuities between the two in terms of their focus on surface-making objects that are all surface, is maybe how I would describe it. And while I am aware of the connotations between minimal aesthetics and maturity, professionalism, the white cube, and so forth, I have to believe that my interest in it is not beholden to those things, but more as the result of a process of finding out what I have in me to make. I had a turning point a bunch of years ago, where somehow I started feeling like I don't have a lot of choice about it anymore. I stopped saying things like, "maybe my work should look like this, maybe my work should look like this." I mean, I can do my work well or I can do it badly, or I can not do it at all or do it a lot, but that in a broader sense, all I can do is approach in good faith my own process of becoming whatever it is I am at a particular time. And

apparently that is most often a person who wants to make only black work for years and then only white work for years. It feels like a fact that I have to learn to accept, rather than something I have full control over. I feel this way also, finally, about doing my work in all the different ways I do it, and doing them simultaneously making objects and performances, writing essays and lectures, curating and running the Center for Experimental Lectures. So far I have not figured out a way to feel fully engaged when these are not all operating in a balance. I need to do them all, apparently, in order to exercise the diversity of my capacities and not feel like I am neglecting myself.

CS Yeah! I think that the only way I can live and work is in a trans-disciplinary lifestyle. I think we somewhat align here with our politics. I don't decide on the work I am going to make as much as it is just what comes out of me. My relationships and the work that exist in relational/communal form are not things that I set out to do/make/be. I believe that we can operate as vessels for energetic transactions but ultimately our work and behavior is predetermined. Not to reduce my responsibility or intention in making, but when I think of queer phenomenology and the history of resistance, I see that my presence and voice is not just my own, but an echoing continuity of generations past. If my work is primarily performance or community-based, then my work is inherently energy-based and I am responsible for bringing forth reminders of our energetic pasts. Do you see this in your relationship to mixing life and work as well?

GH It's interesting to hear you talk about energetic pasts, because it seems that I might think more about the future than the past. I am, of course, so beholden to those that carved out ways to live and work before me, and the relative ease with which I move through the world would, of course, be impossible without them. But most often I am in a mode of super optimistic and generative criticality—turning my dissatisfaction with the current terms of our existence into projects, relations, ways of thinking that aim to challenge not just what the norm is outside me, but inside me as well. I am in this to transform my own thinking.

PARTY FRIENDS

2015. Essay originally commissioned for the exhibition catalog for *Making Chances: Ten Years of Chances* at Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois, Chicago, IL.

I moved to Chicago just before my 24th birthday, into a one-bedroom apartment in Logan Square. I didn't know anyone and had no sense of direction; I had to look at a map just to find the train

to school and it was one of the only times in my life I can remember being so starved for human connection that I chatted (too much) with wait-staff and baristas. I spent my birthday that year watching *The Sound of Music* in Millennium Park with a group of people I met that day and didn't ever get to know. I felt like I was starting over.

Eight years later in my studio this summer I made a pair of six-foot high three-dimensional wooden parentheses that I intend to use in a performance. These parentheses are possibly the culmination of my ongoing focus on what I have been referring to as "asides." Asides include the words and sentences that are placed inside the little word-closet that is the parentheses, but also the unnoticed parts of rooms (corners, holes), the backs and bottoms of sculptures, professional asides like the artist talk, artists that don't neatly fit into circumscribed art historical periods, and all the aspects of living that I call work-not-work—the myriad things we do that enable our work but do not show up in a clear way in the final product. All these endeavors that aren't quite "the real thing" hold a special appeal for me—little pockets of possibility because they don't really matter, or they are hard to find and often missed, or they are down on the floor underneath someone else's more interesting art in a group show.

At some point during the fall of that first year in Chicago I started going to Chances. As I recall, I just showed up and stood around until someone would talk to me. If no one did, I perched myself somewhere with a good view and watched. Over the next five years, a handful of the people I met at these parties became friends with whom I developed long-lasting relationships of substance, with give and take, conflict, resolution, and love. But right now, my attention is drawn not to the friendships that originated in those years of Chances parties, but on the people at these parties who didn't become my friends. All of these unknown or hardly-known individuals who filled up the dance-floors, clogged up the bars, stood in the bathroom lines. These people aren't strangers, at least not in the way that people on the subway or at jury duty are strangers. These are a self-selecting group of mostly queer people who hoped there was some fun to be had at a Chances party. They aren't strangers, and yet they aren't friends either. These are the people that made these events public, the people that comprised the long tail of "the community." While many of these individuals remained nameless and unrecognizable for me, some of them became familiar over time. Maybe we danced together a few times. Maybe we learned each other's names, or something about what we did or who we came with or what songs we particularly liked. Almost surely we complimented each other—our looks, our hair, our outfits, our dancing. We made passing comments—often drunkenly doled out and just as easily forgotten in the swirl of the evening. These

are the people I am thinking about now—these supposedly inessential relationships with people I never saw during the light of day. These asides I call *party friends*.

Vision is a collective process. It isn't just that the people we spend time with provide us with interpretive frames that shape our understandings of what we see. This happens, but it is more than this. What is visible to us and what is invisible, what we recognize and what we don't even notice—these choices are made in concert with others. Vision is something we learn together. Through osmosis, we teach each other not just how to understand what we see before us, but to see something there at all. This collectivity is one of the reasons why I continue to defend the existence of semi-closed public spaces where an overwhelming number of outsiders are not necessarily a welcome addition. Past a certain point, a community's shared perceptual abilities are disrupted by those who don't or won't recognize what is there. This is one of the services provided by Chances parties—creating the right combination of openness and closedness to welcome newcomers while maintaining the parties as zones of collective vision that recognize non-normative sexualities and genders. To be surrounded by strangers and almost-strangers in these semi-closed spaces is to temporarily exist within a different perceptual scheme than those which govern life outside. This is an inside that is worth defending, because for many of us it is the only public space in which we can be seen. I think this is what the Chances organizers mean when they talk about their parties functioning as "safe spaces."

Last week, I returned to Chicago from Brooklyn, where I now live, for five days of intensive work with Elijah Burgher on the stage that will host the performances at Gallery 400 for the exhibition *Making Chances*. The night after our first day of work, I arrived in a cab to a friend's apartment to sleep in the extra bedroom. I knew I was in Logan Square, but I didn't understand precisely where I was until the following morning when I stepped out of the house into the blinding sun, to realize I was half a block away from my first apartment. The one I showed up to utterly disoriented, where I lived alone for my first two years in Chicago. This was the apartment where I looked at my body and was able to recognize it in a wholly new way. This was the place where I began to feel myself as a much more complicatedly-gendered person than I ever had previously. My true self? I don't think in those terms. But I finally became able to embody a mode of perception through which I could see myself, both my image in the mirror and my embodied extension into space, quite differently. During these two years I had learned to see, and seemingly out of nowhere, that a different mode of living felt possible for me. Last week, as I retraced my steps around the city, I puzzled

over how this had happened. Who and what had taught me to see differently?

In the months following Mark Aguiar's death I thought a lot about objectification. Mark had a complicated gender and she embodied it without apology. I witnessed Mark moving through the world and I saw people objectifying her—staring or pointing or making comments as if she didn't have thoughts and feelings and personhood, as if she couldn't see them or hear them, as if she was an object. I felt heartbroken and furious about this aspect of Mark's lived experience, and I thought about what we, in our shared spaces, are capable of doing to counteract this kind of objectification, to repair some of this damage for those of us who experience it the most. I thought, of course, about what might be the opposite of objectification, which I suppose I would call subjectification—creating contexts in which we bear witness to each other's ideas and affects and sensibilities. We can (and do) make spaces in which we invite each other to be subjects—to get to know each other, to develop intimacy, to hear each other. This is very valuable work, and yet I wasn't fully satisfied with this as a response. I found myself thinking about some other reparative process, one that countered this kind of damaging objectification with an even more powerful kind of objectification. I wanted to treat each other like objects in profound affirmation, to learn to see each other, to look at one another as bodies and say yes. To counteract the shattering effects of discriminatory objectification not by striving to convince the public that, "yes we actually are subjects," but to be objects for one another, and to get so much better at objectifying one another. We can excel at being ever more complex and nuanced objects—so much so that we learn together how to see, and do it with a vengeance. When Mark came to a Chances party she ruled the dance floor. She sewed her own looks, she was the best dancer, everyone would turn to look, and the word for what we saw was yes.

If there is any substance to this theory of reparative mutual objectification, it relies on the presence of people we don't know, or don't know well. If I am to be recognized, it needs to be not just by my close friends and lovers, but by some sort of public. The room has to be full of people and they can't all be in my close circle. This is the invaluable role of "party friends" and I am so thankful for their presence at these events. We may never have seen each other in the light of day, we may have been a little too drunk every time we spoke, and we quite possibly don't have enough daytime things in common to be able to hold a conversation over coffee. But we both know that we don't have to sit across from each other at a table in the afternoon sharing our life stories in order to be valuable parts of one another's lives. That impulsively-uttered compliment you gave me as you passed by the bar may have made my life feel possible. The way you

objectified me without destroying me gave me the courage to get on the train the next morning. We are responsible to (and for) the people we party with, even, maybe even especially, the ones we never get to know. Because these alternate publics we collectively produce for each other might be the keys to surviving in this at-best indifferent world.

MAKING MESSSES FOR THE FUTURE

2013. Essay commissioned for the exhibition catalog for *Stand Close, It's Shorter Than You Think: a show on feminist rage*, curated by RJ Messineo and Katie Brewer Ball at Artist Curated Projects at The One National Gay & Lesbian Archive, Los Angeles, CA.]



Photo courtesy ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

This is an image of the "Eclectic Object Room" at ONE Archives, a place for the things that don't seem to belong anywhere else. It is the archives' overflow, its unclassifiable, its mess. What is this document? Who did this object belong to? Why is it valuable? As we try to preserve and make sense of the past, our efforts encounter an edge—I'm not sure what to do with this. Our systems of classification only reach so far before the excesses of material life foil us. Most of us have spaces like this in our homes and studios—a table by the door, a chair in the corner of the bedroom. Is that item coming in or going out? Is that shirt dirty or clean? Where does it belong? Did it ever have a place, in the first place?

RJ Messineo's recent work navigates the feminist politics of messes. From an organizational point of view, the great thing about making a mess in the studio is that in the end, the work leaves the mess behind, gallery-bound—the white emptiness of the exhibition space a dream of pristine orderliness. As a painter, and co-curator of this exhibition, Messineo is feeling increasingly skeptical of leaving her mess behind. After all, messes are mixed up with gender, sexuality, and race. Everyone's mess is not equal. (Cue your mental image of a woman crying, hysterically, with her hair falling in her face.) Socially speaking, the more marginalized the identity of the actor, the more unacceptable

their loss of self-control. Affect is a politics of credibility. For Messineo, it is just this anxiety about inhabiting the role of the marginalized and out-of-control queer artist that is fueling the creation of paintings that approach this domain: the articulation of an indecipherable logic, materials from the studio floor finding their way back into the work, or, the co-curation of a show on the subject of feminist rage not destined for a typical empty exhibition space. This is an exhibition that shares its space with the archive itself—a system of classification that, no matter how perfectly executed, will always encounter its own precious and unclassifiable items.

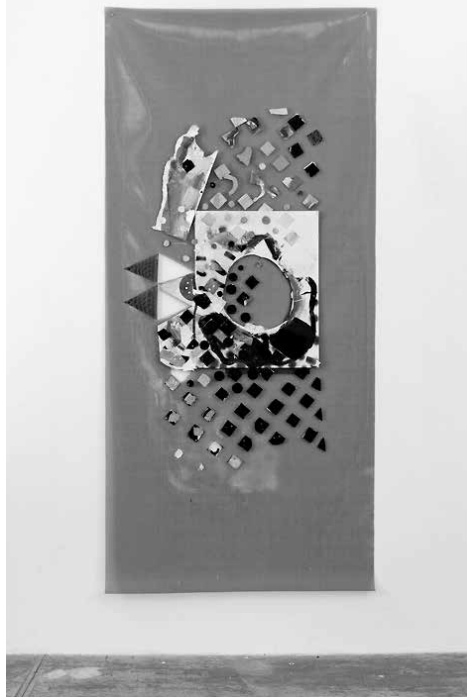
In the dream of a perfectly ordered world, our efforts are routinely frustrated by all that exceeds our systems, overflowing the plans we conceived of as all-encompassing. In trying to stuff everything in, something always comes popping out the other side. Materially, organizationally, but affectively as well. Our feelings put their feet down. The expression of rage tends to be just this sort of overflow. It happens suddenly—we spring a leak. Messy and disorganized, rage is an eruption of anger, violence, stubbornness, refusal. This is all wrong. I will not walk another step. We tend to define rage by the event—that moment when I lost my temper, when I realized how angry I was, when all the years of injustice finally became clear to me. Rage as the moment of understanding just how very wrong things are and it explodes out—all mouths and fists. Thinking about feminist rage, or political rage more broadly, conjures just these kinds of images—hands raised to the sky in solidarity, faces exploding with emotions marching in a rally. Or, in artistic expression, the subject of feminist rage immediately conjures the overtly political projects of artists such as Martha Rosler, Yoko Ono, or the Guerilla Girls. I had figured the relation between artistic production and feminist rage as one of self-expression and political statement. However, emerging from conversations about *Stand Close* and Messineo's painting practice, I have been thinking about rage from another angle. What are the possibilities for rage as a process and not a product? What could be its relation to abstraction? Without letting go of the importance of these moments of eruption and expression, I am wondering about thinking feminist rage as a method of making and a mode of desire.

While we tend to think of rage as synonymous with anger and expression, there is another less common usage—rage as desire, as in the expression "all the rage," or—as a verb, now largely obsolete—"I rage for you."² I am drawn to thinking rage as passionate desire, because it poignantly reflects the interweaving of feminist rage with the social, political, and artistic task of building a future in which conditions are better for us—a future whose present nonexistence is the source of our rage in the current moment. Present conditions fill us with rage, and out of

this grows a rage for the future, a future that we will not have to respond to with rage. Rage as a way of wanting, and a process of building that which we want, rather than an act of expression. Rage that makes the work, rather than that which is represented or expressed in the work.

In a moment of losing one's temper, it sometimes helps to slow down and count to ten. Instead of acting violently, we learn to control our instinct to outburst by simply forcing ourselves to wait, ten, twenty seconds, a few breaths. Where does our anger go in this time? What happens while we are waiting? Ideally, the purpose of this strategy is not to merely pacify ourselves, an exercise in acquiescing to current conditions. We hope that during this counting we are able to connect with the source of our anger, to pause and articulate for ourselves what the problem is, preparing us for the work of repairing our situation or building a new one. What if the making is the counting? Is it possible to think of the studio as this sort of holding chamber, the place where we have time and space and quiet, while working, to process our feelings, think through our grievances, imagine different future conditions? What if the rage is not in the work as expression, but as the conditions for its creation? The site of production becomes the space we so desperately need for reflection, our space for counting while our hands and eyes and bodies are occupied with the production of our work. Messineo's paintings speak—of formlessness, of imitation, of illogical decision-making systems, of power sharing, of color and formal relationships, of confusion between their surfaces and edges—but, it seems to me, they do not express feminist, trans, or queer rage in any clearly decipherable way, at least not in their content. This rage, however, is present, as the work's origin story. In this sense, it is the scene of their making rather than the expressive content of the works themselves that provide the tools for survival.

When this point of origin appears in the finished work, it is in the ways the piece tells us about its creation. *Sweet Teeth Queen* (2012), for example—a large wall piece made of painted paper, aluminum, and window screen—tells the story of it making: Messineo in her studio in a former industrial area of Holyoke, Massachusetts, finding and making the time it takes to produce and arrange these painted paper shapes, aluminum pieces, and careful folds of the screen back into itself. My encounter with the piece is contradictory—simultaneously invited in and closed out, I know there is an order to the final position of each component of the work, and yet I cannot access it. The piece is highly specific while being almost entirely opaque about its rationale. I get the feeling the work is not talking to me in a language.



RJ Messineo. *Sweet Teeth Queen*. 2012. Oil, enamel, and spray paint on paper, aluminum, and window screen. 96 × 48 in. Image by Adam Reich.

I know and yet I feel drawn to it regardless as the result of a valuable process. The action is in the past and the finished piece is a mysterious relic of the time, energy, and emotion that created it, animated by a logical structure that is fully present while remaining largely unreadable to me. I wasn't there for the rage, all I can see is the evidence of its processing.

However, if this is the case, it isn't the whole story. Messineo's work is abstract and her decisions are determined by a process of formal intuition—this just goes there. Is there a feminist politics to be found in this practice of abstraction? Feminist and LGBTQ movements have been particularly wary about embracing abstraction as a political strategy, as it has been largely dominated by men and patriarchal politics and regularly used as a means of abdicating responsibility for occupying positions of power. When real change needs to be made, can we afford to be abstract? Isn't survival a question of being as articulate as we can? Don't we have to voice our demands as clearly as possible? In some instances, of course. And yet, there is a rich history of avant-garde movements that have responded to political and social injustice in just this way—turning to abstraction as a refusal to make sense according to prevailing modes of understanding, abstraction as a possible path around the structural logics responsible for unacceptable socio-political realities. From surrealism, to dadaism, to minimalism, abstraction has been offered up as a possible strategy for reframing our thinking, transforming our perception, and mobilizing us to imagine a different set of possibilities. Abstraction, in this figuration, can also be described as a mode of desiring a different future, what Jan Verwoert describes as an embodiment of “the potential reality of all

that is presently not given in actuality ... all the possibilities that lie beyond those already actualised within the dominant mode of thinking and acting.”³ Abstraction becomes, in this sense, not a political message, but a means of articulating our desire for political transformation through offering us a glimpse of another, as yet unintelligible, way of perceiving the world.

This is not to say that all abstraction is inherently capable of doing political work. But things that look the same can be very different from each other. Just as all messes are not created equal, not all abstraction is either—two things that look similar, or even identical, can have very different meanings and political effects, a phenomena made very clear by queer and feminist embodiments that reimagine the gendered significance and function of the physical body. Not all breasts are feminine, not all cocks are masculine, and abstraction alone is not necessarily an indicator of an investment in a political project. While there are no guaranteed outcomes to embracing abstraction as a political strategy, its unique offering is one that we cannot afford to refuse. Now more than ever, the primary enemy of feminist politics is not only the adverse conditions on the ground for people of all genders, but the limited and limiting models we have for thinking gender in the first place.

We struggle to imagine different possibilities for gendered personhood that exceed the impoverished conceptions that dominate our cultural imaginary of women, men, and, increasingly, even transpeople. Feminism must be geared toward understanding, seeing, and experiencing gender differently, pushing against our own perceptual and conceptual boundaries in order to transform ourselves and, by extension, our broader political condition. As such, it is at just these points where our logical systems fail us—in our creative experiments, our messes, our eclectic object rooms—where we might find the tools for a future feminist project, the scope of which we are just beginning to be able to understand.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Theocritus, *Idylliums*, tr. Thomas Creech (1684), 98, as quoted on “rage, n,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, last modified December 2012, accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157438?rskey=-JSPtsS&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.
- 2 “rage, v,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, last modified December 2012, accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157440?rskey=wiZqmb&result=3&isAdvanced=false>.
- 3 Jan Verwoert, “Exhaustion and Exuberance,” published in a pamphlet for the exhibition *Sheffield 08: Yes No and Other Options* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum, 2008), 95.

*If formalism entails pure visual exploration
devoid of context or content,*

Blankness, monochromality, and consistency of surface are hallmarks of minimal sculpture. Robert Morris described the importance of this blankness of surface as originative in the way it permitted the viewer to experience the physicality of the sculpture as whole, to create strong gestalt sensations. Without excessive color or ornament, the viewer, he believed, would not be pulled into an inanimate interaction with the object, but would instead remain focused on the experience of the shape, light, and surrounding architecture. These are nonnarrative, nonsymbolic sculptures—their surface reveals nothing, and as objects they can tell us nothing. They do

John Cage, in his 1959 "Lecture on Nothing" articulates this nonnarrativity in the following passage:

Michel Foucault, throughout his scholarship, had an ongoing interest in silence—he probed the possibilities of silence as a tool of political and social resistance. One example of this line of thinking was his skepticism of solid and unified personal identities based on sexuality. For Foucault, sexuality—meaning the amalgamation of desire and personal identity into a stable and “truthful” feature of an individual, the “truth” of one’s identity—was a tool of social and self regulation, an answer to a leading set of questions.

Just because this notion of sexuality has enabled us to fight [on behalf of our own homosexuality] doesn't mean that it doesn't carry with it a certain number of dangers. There is an entire biologism of sexuality and therefore an entire hold over it by doctors and psychologists—in short, by the agencies of normalization. We have over us doctors, pedagogues, law-makers, adults, parents who talk of sexuality!... It is not enough to liberate sexuality; we also have to liberate ourselves... from the very notion of sexuality.³

genders as well, produce legible self-identification as their price of admission. As we gain visibility we are expected to identify ourselves, to make ourselves legible according to terms that continue to multiply—our acronym just keeps getting longer. Silence may, indeed, equal death, but now I am tempted to say that there may be something valuable in an embrace of silence and blankness as strategies of resistance to this imperative to answer. The term “queer” gets used in so many different, incompatible ways that its meaning has become confounded, thus losing much of its usefulness. But I periodically return to David Halperin’s defense, in his book *Saint Foucault*, of the term in its original manifestation, stemming as it did from Foucault’s skepticism of the type of self-regulation we engage in by making ourselves legible. Halperin describes queerness as a creative and generative refusal to clarify oneself and one’s position—“not a thing but a resistance to the norm” which, ideally, enables us to uncover for ourselves a space of concrete freedom in the possibilities for our own self-transformation. Gayness was, for Foucault not an identity but a relational position toward ourselves and one another, one that was accessible only through problematizing our faith in the normativizing discourse of sexual and gender identity.

We can, of course, read queer significance into Cage’s work because we know that he loved men (as Jonathan D. Katz has elegantly done regarding Cage’s relationship with Merce Cunningham). Or see queer content in Morris’s early sculptures because of the gay themes that emerged in his later work. (See, for example, Morris’s 1974 poster for his exhibition at Castelli-Sonnabend, in which he is pictured naked to the waist, clad in steel manacles and a studded collar.) But I don’t think it’s necessary. Might it be enough to let the blank surfaces of a wide variety of Minimalist sculptures teach us how to see bodies without demanding explanations of them? To pause before we expect a narrative of all gendered bodies, resisting our imperative to decipher where they came from and where they are going? What would it be to allow a body to be silent, fully present without telling us anything? Abstraction may be a valuable resource in thinking beyond the terms that are readily available to us in the present, what Judith Butler calls “the possible in excess of the real.”⁴ Nonnarrative surfaces can point toward a future that is different from our present conditions, what Jan Verwoert, in his incredible essay “Exhaustion and Exuberance” expresses by saying, “On the contrary, the insistence to speak—or make work in any other way—about that which is neither readily understandable nor immediately useful is in itself a strong claim to agency: I Can speak or make work about what I Can’t speak or make work about. While this in a more general sense applies to any form of art or writing, it may have a special bearing on abstract work.”⁵

poetry

and I am saying it

as I need it

I have nothing to say

and that is

John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” 1959.

Object Lesson II: Virtual Bodies

Judith Butler, throughout her work and especially in *Bodies that Matter*, gives what still feels to me to be a stunning materialist account of gender.⁷ Butler counters the distinction between sex and gender—that is, the distinction between the physicality of bodies and the immaterial realm of our ideas about bodies—by arguing for a return to the notion of matter itself, to rethink the very terms with which we understand bodies as gendered. Matter must lose its status as an a priori and unconstructed surface onto which gender is applied, in lieu of an examination of the ways in which the materiality and materialization of sex itself operates. There are not bodies first and then ideas about bodies—bodies are always also ideas about bodies.



Fred Sandback, *Untitled (Two-part Vertical Construction, from Ten Vertical Constructions)*, 1977–79. Dia Art Foundation; Gift of the Fred Sandback Estate. Copyright The Fred Sandback Archive. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York.

Understanding the gendered body in this way involves a fundamental shift in our thinking, in which the real-bodies, body parts, sex characteristics—is not distinct from the immaterial-gender, identity, fantasy. Gendered personhood is—to borrow the term from Maurice Merleau-Ponty—an irreducible intertwining of the actual and the immaterial. People of nonnormative genders embody this nonopposition between materiality and immateriality in a particularly salient way—testing the limits of our ability to see ourselves and one another according to this shifted framework. Dominant narratives of transgender people—the trapped-in-the-wrong-body experience—rely on this problematic opposition between sex and gender, and potentially limit our ability to theorize our gendered embodiments as simultaneously and profoundly actual and virtual. Gayle Salamon, in her book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, wonderfully explores this intertwining of the

material and the immaterial in trans-embodiments through the work of Merleau-Ponty, arguing that these genders “unsettle the question of subject and object, of material and phantasmatic.”⁸ Numerous other queer and feminist thinkers have articulated diverse yet strong calls for an understanding of the body as irreconcilably wavering between the real and the imaginary. Theorizing gender-variant embodiment is a matter of reexamining the relationships between these fundamental categories.

The majority of Fred Sandback’s sculptures consist of lengths of acrylic yarn in different colors stretched taut in the gallery space from floor to ceiling or wall to wall in order to create various lines, shapes, and planes. *Untitled* (from *Ten Vertical Constructions*), for example, a work from 1977, consists of two red strings stretched in the same formation side by side, each string creating the shape of a box without a top, a large angled U-shape, originating at the ceiling and stretched straight down to the floor, then across the floor several feet, and then back up to the ceiling where it is fastened and cut. This creates a body-scaled environment in which the viewer moves around the elements of the works that appear both to be exactly what they are—taut strings—and to create the sensation of a transparent wall or plane floating in space.

Curiously enough, there are remarkable parallels between Butler’s understanding of the sexed body and Sandback’s descriptions of his sculptures. While Sandback had no apparent interest in gender, he regards his sculptures as embodying the same confusion of the distinction between materiality and ideology that Butler employs in her emphasis on the materiality of sex. For both, the impetus to distinguish the ideas from the thing from the material face of the thing itself is ill conceived, leading to an incomplete understanding of the ways objects, bodies, and ideas operate and have power in the world.

Sandback talks about his work in terms of an indivisible unification of material and idea. In his writings and interviews he denies a separation between the form of his works and their content. For him, the distinction itself between the objects and the ideas that they represent is mistaken; one entity encompasses both. “I’m full of thoughts (more or less). My work isn’t. It’s not a demonstration of an idea either. It’s an actuality. Ideas are also actualities. The notion that there are ideas that then take form, or ideas that can be extracted from the material substratum, doesn’t make any sense.”⁹

This understanding of the way objects make meaning is manifested in Sandback’s creative

process. Although his work has been associated with geometry and systems of measuring, he insisted that it had nothing to do with these. In order to make one of his pieces, Sandback would take his string and enter the gallery space and make decisions, slowly and carefully, about how the string should be hung, based on the feeling of the architecture of the space. The idea for the work came into being at the same moment that the work was materially created. For Sandback, his visible work and its invisible meanings are one and the same thing: "Ideas are executions ... My work is not illusionistic in the normal sense of the word. It doesn't refer away from itself to something that isn't present. Its illusions are simply present aspects of it. Illusions are just as real as facts, and facts just as ephemeral as illusions."¹⁰ Sandback's sculptures manifest the same confusion of terms that is necessary for a rethinking of sex and gender: In light of this reformulation, I see them as capable of teaching us to differently perceive our own and one another's bodies.

virtual object is effectively the same, yet formally different. A virtual body does even though it isn't.



Richard Artschwager. *Book III (Laocoon)*, 1981 Formica on wood, metal handles, vinyl cushion. 48 × 28 × 41 in. Copyright 2014 Richard Artschwager / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Looking at a group of sculptures by Richard Artschwager, for me, conjures just such a virtual body as a response to the ambiguous presence of the works. Artschwager came to art-making through a career as a builder of commercial furniture. His last furniture commission before his transition to sculpture was to construct a large batch of church altars—which, by his account, catalyzed him to finally focus on making sculpture—a progression, in a sense, from more to less useful objects, from function to form, marked by the middle point of the ritual object. Artschwager frames his artistic project in terms of this progression from use to non-use, explaining that "by killing... the use part, non-use aspects are allowed living space, breathing space."¹²

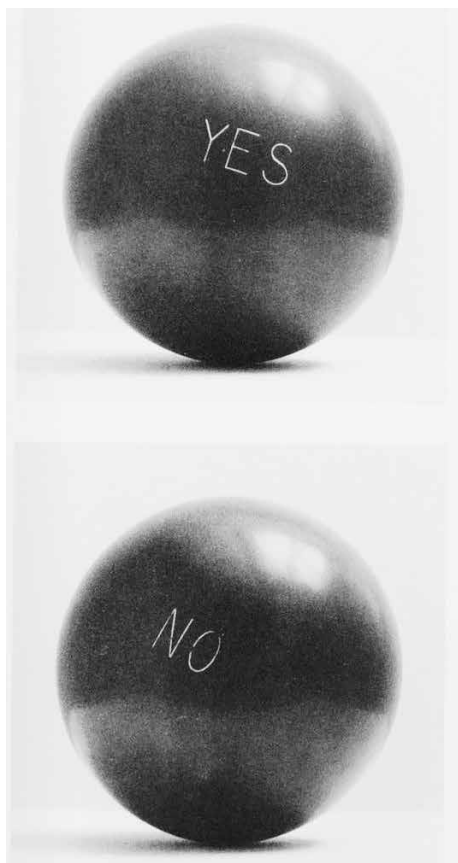
I am interested in Artschwager's sculptures featuring stairs, handles, and other usable surfaces and attributes which, as sculpture, have been rendered nonusable by the human body. If furniture conjures a real body—one that sits in a chair or opens a drawer—what kind of body do these useless furniture sculptures conjure? When I approach one of these sculptures, I experience my own body in a relationship of use to the piece—I imagine myself stepping up, sitting down, grabbing hold, while standing perfectly still in the gallery. Artschwager writes of these works: "When I instruct through a work to touch, sit on, open, these—both the instruction and the execution—still tend to be acts of the imagination rather than acts of the will."¹³

Can I say that these sculptures, through their noninteractive representation of typically interactive situations, produce for me a virtual double of my body? An imaginary experience of my own body based in the experience of a material object? And why does this allow me to conceive of myself, my own gendered experience, in these terms, with this level of ambiguity

between the real and the virtual? Ambiguity abounds in Artschwager's work—these "objects of non-use" as he calls them, that waver between furniture, sculpture, architecture, ornament, optical illusions, and jokes. As Jerry Saltz commented in an essay on a recent show of Artschwager's work at the Whitney Museum, this is his permanent aesthetic condition: "The coexistence of yes and no, almost, in between, not quite, both, and neither."¹⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 Daniel Luedtke and Joel Parsons, *Lifestyle Plus Form Bundle*. Press release for the exhibition *Lifestyle Plus Form Bundle*. Beige Space. Memphis TN. November 16. 2012.
- 2 John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence* (1961: Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 95–96.
- 3 Michel Foucault quoted in David M. Halperin, *Saini Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford, UK, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95–96.
- 4 Judith Buder, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.
- 5 Jan Verwoert, "Exhaustion and Exuberance," in Sheffield oB: *Yes No and Other Options*, exh. brochure (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum, 2008), emphasis in original.
- 6 Cage, 109.
- 7 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.
- 8 Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 65.
- 9 Fred Sandback, "Untitled," in *Fred Sandback*, ed. Friedmann Malsch and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 96. Sandback originally wrote the notes in 1975 for an exhibition catalogue published by Kunstraum. Munich.
- 10 Fred Sandback, "Notes. 1975," at www.diabeacon.org/exhibits/sandback/sculpture/notes.html, as of July 26, 2009.
- 11 Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 11, emphasis in the original.
- 12 Richard ArtSchwager, "Jan McDevitt—The Object: Still Life" (1965) in *Richard Artschwager: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Dieter Schwan (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum and Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 9. The essay was first published in the 1968 catalogue for *Directions I: Options* at the Milwaukee Art Center.
- 13 Ibid., 28.
- 14 Jerry Saltz, "How I Came to Embrace Richard Artschwager's Weirdness," *New York Magazine*, November 19, 2012, at www.vulture.com/2012/11/saltz-on-richard-artschwager-whitney.html, as of December 27, 2013.



Richard Artschwager. *Yes/No*, 1968–74, plastic ea. 8.5 in. diam. Copyright 2014 Richard Artschwager / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

How shall we consider the projected bodies and corporeal capabilities that manifest in transgender and gender-nonconforming people? How can we recognize these virtual bodies and body parts, simultaneously actual and imaginary? The media historian and theorist Anne Friedberg in her book *The Virtual Window* offers a compelling definition of the virtual, as that which appears "functionally or effectively but not formally" of the same materiality as what it represents."¹¹ A

THE POSSIBLE IN EXCESS OF THE REAL

2013. Performance script for two voices published in *What About Power? Inquiries Into Contemporary Sculpture*, published by SculptureCenter and Black Dog Publishing. Adapted from Gordon Hall, "Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Through Minimalist Sculpture" published in *Art Journal*, Volume 72, Issue #4, Winter 2013.

NOT WHAT WE SEE	IN
THE SCULPTURES	BUT HOW
THE SCULPTURES	MIGHT
ENABLE US TO SEE	EVERYTHING ELSE
OBJECTS	CAN TEACH US HOW TO SEE OTHER
OBJECTS	AND HOW TO SEE OTHER
BODIES	AND HOW TO SEE OUR OWN
BODIES	RECOGNIZING
RENEWED	POSSIBILITIES IN ONE ANOTHER
AND OURSELVES WHAT	IS ACTUALLY
HOW	AND
WE LEARN FROM	THE THINGS
THEMSELVES	SHAPE
LIGHT	ARCHITECTURE
BLANKNESS	SILENCE
IS A TOOL	TO UNCOVER
THE POSSIBLE	IN EXCESS OF THE REAL ABSTRACTION
TRANSFORMATION	I CAN MAKE WORK ABOUT
WHAT I CAN'T MAKE WORK ABOUT	SEEING
BODIES	WITHOUT
DEMANDING TO KNOW	WHERE THEY CAME FROM
OR WHERE THEY ARE GOING	THROUGH WHICH
A TRANSPARENT WALL	ARE
IDEAS	AND EXECUTIONS
ACTUALITIES	FLOOR
CEILING	DOUBLE
A VIRTUAL	AS REAL AS
DOUBLE	FACTS
ILLUSIONS	ILLUSIONS
FACTS	A RELATIONSHIP OF USE
AS EPHEMERAL AS	NO
BETWEEN ME AND THE OBJECT	
YES	

(Repeat, with roles reversed)

NO REAL BODIES

2014. Interview by Maggie Ginestra published in *Temporary Art Review*, December 2014.



STAND AND, 2014. Wood, hand-dyed fabric, pigmented joint compound, mosaic, and off-site performance at the handball court in Chelsea Park, New York. Performers: Chris Domenick, Ariel Goldberg, Gordon Hall, Andrew Kachel, Millie Kapp, Colin Self, Orlando Tirado. Performance duration 60 min. Sculpture dimensions: 66 × 36 × 77 in. Part of the exhibition *FLEX* at Kent Fine Art, curated by Orlando Tirado. Image by Amy Mills.

GORDON HALL The piece we did at the handball court on Saturday—for whatever reason, it's satisfying to produce a movement score for people, friends, where really all I'm doing is creating limitation and then allowing them to do whatever they are doing. A friend of mine who came to the performance, when we were talking about it afterward, commented that it was interesting to see all the participants being their own selves. Everybody's movement quality was different. Orlando Tirado's leaning was cruisy in this way that Colin Self's wasn't, which makes sense. I guess I could say that feels like compassion. It's choreography, but it's not about getting people to do what my body does. It's creating objects and space and a set of rules in which we can each explore our embodiments. Oh! Actually, yesterday, for whatever reason, I decided I came up with what seemed like a reasonably good definition of queerness. Would you like to hear it?

MAGGIE GINESTRA Lay it on me.

GH OK. Queerness—

MG Is—

GH Is an orientation toward ourselves and one another in which we make the bare minimum of assumptions about the uses and definitions of our own and one another's bodies and body parts. Queerness is not assuming things about other people's bodies. And queerness is not assuming things about your own body either. What you want to use it for. How you want it defined. What you want to call it. How you want to have sex with it. Any of it. I'm not sure, it's a work in progress. But I feels like it's about compassion because it's allowing people to have openness to define and to use their bodies and their body parts as they

will without saying this is what sex is or this is what sex you are or this is what this body part is called.

MG Or what having sex need or might imply socially.

GH Definitely.

MG I love that because it's super inclusive. I also like how it makes your pedagogical work to create spaces to endure ambiguity and curiosity. Those things are in direct... they make a little lean-to.

GH Most of the things I'm doing come back to in some way thinking about gender and sexuality, but in ways that are more about modes of approaching, or ways of seeing things, rather than content. So I never know when to bring those things explicitly into the conversation, or whether I want to, because people are really used to talking about gender and sexuality in terms of representation, metaphor and symbolism, and I'm not very interested in that. I'm more interested in producing a mode of perception that has an openness to ambiguity, which is related to gender and sexuality, but related to a lot of other things too, like design and organizational structures. It shifts the conversation from one of outcomes to one of approach. To me, how people have sex is irrelevant. What's more important is how they arrived at that way, and where they are going with it, and how they're feeling about it, and the process of doing it, the level of consent that's going on...

JUST NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE

2015. Performance script for two voices performed by Gordon Hall and Chris Domenick with Anne Truitt's "Triad" (1977) at Whitney Museum of American Art as part of the series *99 Objects*. Words sourced from: Anne Truitt, *Daybook—The Journal of an Artist* (1982); Edmund Husserl, "The Real Nature of Perception and Its Transcendent Object" in *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913); James Meyer, "The Bicycle" in *Anne Truitt—Perception and Reflection* (2009); and Helen A. Fielding, "Multiple Moving Perceptions of the Real: Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and Truitt" published in *Hypatia*, 2011.



JUST NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE, 2015. Performance for two people and two wood boxes, with Anne Truitt's *Triad* (1977). Performed by Gordon Hall and Chris Domenick. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Image by Filip Wolak.

blue green yellow orange and red yellows
red and green yellow red and green thin
white blue-monogrammed sand multi-
foliate greens green shades purple small
and white black white pencil and white
paint semidarkness light-boned golden
brown mostly white yellow purple pink
palest yellow pallid grey white pur-
ple apricot-violet mist heavy black plum
gold-bordered translucent white violet
pink grey honey white shadow pale copper
apricot prune pewter bronze blue blue
grey violets yellow yellow blue-black
silver reddish orangish purple blue black
slate dark purplish transparent mauve
shallow orange mauve soft white white
brown white yellow dark green blue
orange gold-rimmed yellow maroon gold
violets and blues and yellows grays blue a
most specific blue black blue paper white
palest pink and blue filtered greenish gran-
ite blue green chartreuse glowing green
chartreuse, purple, and blue pigeon grey as
white as themselves yellow filter red and
green only saturated yellow blues concen-
trated yellow red-green blue light yellow
marble dust melon dark pit blue and white
spacious white very dark brown all black
blue white green and golden peach soft
brown dim red and white red pale, pale
greys curled white silky blue grey tiny
pearl light grey-blue darker grey-green red
copper gold lemon dawn white yellow
still-green blue and white fine grey black
and white pale clear green impeccable white
sneakers

THE

GOT
FOR TO
WENT TO
BELOW HAVE
AN IT
WELL THIS
MY
WHICH THEN
DAY NO
OF SEEM

We start by taking an example.

Keeping this table steadily in view
I go round it
changing my position

all the time.

This one and self-same table

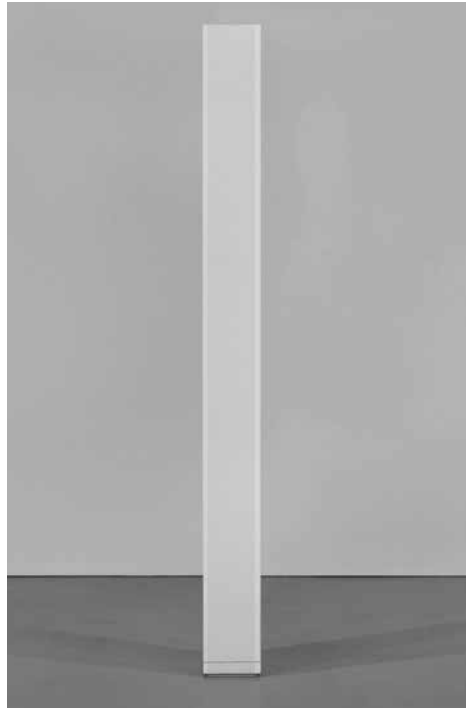
changes continuously, it is
a continuum of changing

I close
I open
Let us be more accurate.
Under no circumstances does it return
Only the table is the same,
the recollection.
The potential only,
inactuality,
without changing at all.
Constantly
ever passing
over
into the just-past
a new now
simultaneously
gleams forth
and so on.
all its parts, aspects, phrases
The colour
The *same* colour
continuously ever again
“in another way”
ever-differing

when I heard that bats operate by radar, I knew
exactly how they do it
in meetings and just-not meetings
Slightly to the left or right
I walked up and down
Color as vibration as
the least material
The lowest portion
upper edge
It is necessary to crouch
get down on our hands and knees
Suspended just above the floor
kneeling

The ---- that holds together the parts of the
sentence is cumulative
when you combine a noun and a verb into a
-----.

A sentence is a ----- the parts of which -----
only after the sentence has been spoken
You connect the details accretively, as they ---
one after the other.
A succession of views
that “oozes ‘at the edge of words’”
I weigh each ----- in my hand
Each of the four sides
they are of the same tuft



Anne Truitt, *Triad*, 1977. Acrylic paint on wood. 90 $\frac{3}{16}$ × 8 × 8 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Ann and Gilbert
Kinney 2006.33 © Estate of Anne Truitt / Bridgeman Images.

COUNTING BACKWARDS FROM THREE

2015. Essay commissioned for the exhibition catalog for *The Perfect Kiss (QQ)** “questioning, queer”—Matt Morris with
James Lee Byars, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, OH.

*philosophy is news.*¹
—James Lee Byars

First, a triad. Through the ruched violet-grey translucent curtains and to the right of the sphere of red roses, there is a photograph mounted on a diagonally protruding section of wall. The unattributed photograph, taken in Venice around 1980, depicts James Lee Byars dressed in a pale pink cotton pajama-like costume with a matching mask and holding up a curtain of the same hue, obscuring most of what appears to be a domestic interior. The photograph has been attached to the wall with a small piece of tape with a kissy lips print on it. This composite object—the photograph, the piece of wall, the tape—is not attributed to an artist on its corresponding wall label, which simply lists its components as I have done here. So who made it? I’m going to attribute it to a three-way collaboration between Matt Morris, James Lee Byars, and the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC): Morris conceiving it and overseeing its production, Byars staging and appearing in the photograph, and the preparators at the CAC crafting this

diagonal “wing” of wall, as Morris refers to it. (But who operated the camera, printed the photo, mixed the paint, designed and manufactured the kissy tape and, and... quickly this triad is becoming a crowd.) Morris tells me that the photograph is printed at the precise dimensions of this catalog, which you are now reading, a charming premonition of the exhibition’s eventual life in documentation. In an exhibition that is, at its core, a participatory, collaborative, and sincerely sentimental archive, it seems fitting that this piece welcomes you upon arrival.

The second three has to be the other photograph in the exhibition, this one mounted on the wall and attributed to Morris, who titled it “I’ll be wearing ribbons down my back this summer.” In the photograph, one of the CAC’s preparators disappears behind a cement column in the gallery. He is naked except for Byars’s pink silk tail. While looking at the photograph I am aware that this tail is right behind me, on a plinth next to a pink silk Balenciaga coat. Also pictured in the image: a cordless drill, a level, part of an open cardboard box, a moving blanket, and a piece of PVC pipe. The wall label informs me that the preparator is named Reid Radcliffe, and Morris tells me a photographer named Taylor Dorrell shot the image, developed the negative, then scanned and printed it.



Matt Morris, *I’ll be wearing ribbons down my back this summer*, 2015. Photograph made in the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH, on May 4, 2015 with preparatory Reid Radcliffe, Inkjet print, 8 × 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.

When I came to Cincinnati to see *The Perfect Kiss (QQ)** “questioning, queer” I also gave a lecture called “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture”² in which I try to think through some possible ways that we can learn modes of embodiment from sculptures, in a way that might make gender-variant bodies more possible. After the talk, Steven Matijcio, curator at the CAC, excitedly asked me if I was planning on developing more “object lessons” in the future. I said surely, of course, at some point, and made some excuses about writing being so haaaaard. Maybe this list is an effort in this direction. I am trying to learn from this show.

Another three would be that it seems worth pointing out that the entire exhibition is pink, white, and grey, or mixtures of the three (is

not the redness of roses just a darker and more saturated pink?).

I'm going to say that perfume is a three-way: between the wearer, the maker of the scent, and those who smell it. In this case *Amour Nocturne* Eau de Parfum by the perfumer Bertrand Duchaufour, worn by the CAC staff during the run of the exhibition. Smell is the hardest sense to describe, remember, or articulate. This one is said to smell of cedar, hot milk, caramel, gun powder, and orchid. And as "an explosion of love."³

In the middle of the week in which I labored over this text, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. The cyclone of opinions and emotions this historic event produced in me and around me has lent an added layer of urgency to this writing, as a taxonomy of possible relationship formations that are NOT the stable romantic couple. As relational structures embodied in the exhibition and its artworks, let this serve as an effort to cultivate and honor a rich constellation of relational life—throuples, quick fucks, communities of affiliation, intimacy with strangers, extramarital affairs, siblings, best friends, temporary soul-mates, platonic life partners, writing buddies, roommates... May they (we) not be "condemned to live in loneliness," to use Justice Anthony Kennedy's deeply conservative (and discriminatory?) phrasing. It is so ordered.

Elevated just above the floor, a horizontal photographic image of two rose quartz spheres, just touching, given to Matt Morris by his twin. Morris photographed the crystals, just inches across, and blew up the image to the exact dimensions of James Lee Byars's *This This*, a pair of basalt spheres currently being weatherized in the yard of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Korman in Fort Washington, PA (and thus unable to travel to the show as originally intended). Morris titled his photograph *This This Him Them*, a reference to his twin's use of the non-gendered pronoun "they" (which I also use). The two (or other plural number) of siblings—that relation of laterality that forms between beings that emerge so different even while originating from the same genetic material—is of critical importance to Morris as an overlooked register of intimacy and intercorporeal being. With so much pink fabric in this exhibition, the phrase "cut from the same cloth" seems an appropriate articulation of the horizontal companionship of sibling relations (a coincidental parallel for me in experiencing this show, as my siblings are my life partners).

These exhibition labels are so complex—detailed information in some cases and mysterious lack of information in others; quotes by Virginia Woolf Clarice Lispector, and D.W. Winnicott; a full list of the origin of every vase in Morris's vase collection; every occasion *The Rose Table of Perfect* has ever been exhibited... I'm relishing the confusion this exhibition produces about what is the work and what is the surrounding contextual material—the wall text,

catalog, the work of the installation... Is Matt Morris the artist or the curator? I'm losing track of what these terms even mean. Where does "the work" begin and end? Accumulation in the form of many lists—this essay among them.

The two of parting. The opening of the ruched grey voile curtains of Matt Morris's *Festoon*, through which I enter the exhibition. Echoing the parting of various forms of lips and cheeks, the two of anonymous, rushed, or sudden sexual acts. Getting to the thing you want.

A news item just surfaced in one of my feeds: a story about a gay couple in the 1970s in which the (significantly) older partner legally adopted the younger partner as a way of ensuring that his boyfriend inherited his money when he died. The story gets framed as a "look at the ridiculous things that gay people used to have to do before we had gay marriage" type of nostalgia. I feel excited about the idea that adults could adopt each other.⁴ Michel Foucault was as well.

This two will be for things that are not as they appear: in this case two lines that appear to cross to make an X when in fact they never meet. Matt Morris's *Cerebra* (Yvonne) and *Cerebra* (Lucinda) are punctuation at the end of the show—two ruched satin pipes that diagonally bisect the back of the gallery without meeting. We often don't know what we are looking at. I regularly think I know more about what is going on between people than I actually do. Looking at things only from the front will do that. The two of the X that isn't actually an X—just a visual overlap caused by unclear depth of field. Relationships are not what they seem; what we believe is going on between people shapes what we see them to be doing.

An unanswered letter. What else could that be but a 1.5? James Lee Byars wrote countless letters to curators and other artists, daily and throughout his life, many of which did not get replies from their recipients. Perhaps this whole show is a 1.5—an unanswered, unanswerable letter to James Lee Byars from Matt Morris. A collaboration with someone who is not alive to give consent to it. Archival spelunking without permission.

Last summer, I attended one meeting of a summer theory reading group hosted by a friend who is working on a dissertation in New York University's Department of Performance Studies. The assigned reading was Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and it was requested in advance of the meeting that we each pick a sentence or passage and memorize it. The phrase I chose is "Brutality toward things is potentially brutality against people."⁵ The phrase resurfaced in me as I viewed *The Perfect Kiss* (QQ)*⁶ *questioning, queer*, I think because the opposite of brutality is care, and care is the approach that dominates this project. Not just as an emotion felt toward others (caring about people) but also as an orientation towards objects, regardless of their value defined according to conventional standards.

Matt Morris cares deeply about Byars's work, but also about the objects of his own life, and the exhibition is marked by an attention to nuance and detail that is utterly excessive. No one will appreciate the thoroughness of Morris's care as much as he does, because it is, frankly, overwhelming. But the feeling of "everything being attended to" is pervasive, and in it I see not only a way of making an exhibition, but the basis of a politics of living and encountering one another. To shamelessly treat one's objects with excessive care is to treat the world un-brutally, cultivating what might be described as a materialist ethics of care, which I am grateful to have witnessed.

This is the one of the dot, of which there are many in Morris's series of five watercolor drawings on tissue paper, *The Good Enough Kiss*. More than the dot as a singular entity, I am interested here in the process of drawing not as an act of expressing the inner self of the artist, but one of consolidation through time in the process of repeating a single act (the making of the dot). I'm curious about the things that occur when one makes one's work in a monotonous and quiet way for hours and hours on end. It's less like painting and more like embroidery, knitting, or sewing—traditional craft activities that keep one's hands busy while one's mind (and heart) wanders. Does this inner life make it into the stitches? The dots? Non-representational handmade objects that are products of a body at work over time. Art making as waiting, as passing time. Dot after dot after dot.

There are two versions of James Lee Byars's performance *The Perfect Kiss*. In one, two women kiss each other in a gallery in Brussels in 1974. In the other—originating around the same time and of which Morris organized re-performances throughout the run of this exhibition—a single person delicately parts their lips. That's all. And that's the one with which I want to finish this list, this tiny performance, a mere glimpse, this solitary auto-erotic open gesture. The perfect kiss.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Excerpted from James Lee Byars's "statements" published in the exhibition pamphlet for *The Perfect Kiss* at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, March 1–March 31, 1978.
- 2 Also published as: Hall, Gordon. "Object Lessons—Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture" *Art Journal*. Volume 72, Issue #4, Winter 2013.
- 3 "Explosions D'Emotions—Amour Nocturne" on luckyscent.com, accessed July 1, 2015.
- 4 "Long Before Same-Sex Marriage, 'Adopted Son' Could Mean 'Life Partner'" Part of StoryCorps on National Public Radio, aired June 28, 2015.
- 5 Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: The Athlone Press Ltd., 1997. p. 232.

AMONG THINGS

2018. Essay commissioned by *Art in America*, December 2018.

Every once in a while I get an artwork stuck in my head. Bruce Nauman's *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* (1965–68) was one such work. For years, while sketching new sculptures or gabbing in a studio visit, I would remember it, though I'll admit that for the first few years this happened, I didn't consistently remember who made it. I didn't pause to figure it out. The sculpture just made intuitive sense to me and bubbled up every once in a while.



Bruce Nauman, *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*, 1965–8, concrete, 17 1/2 × 15 1/4 × 14 1/4 in.

A couple of years ago, I did some research about a legendary piece of found furniture called the “slant step” while looking for an example of an object that was beloved because of, rather than in spite of, its ambiguous functionality. I was surprised to learn that the slant step had been purchased for Bruce Nauman in 1965 at a thrift store north of San Francisco by his graduate school mentor, William Wiley. Nauman, Wiley, and others in their Bay Area artistic circle latched onto the slant step as a sort of icon—a model for art-making or even a way of living. They organized an exhibition called *The Slant Step Show*, published a book, and created a wide variety of artworks dedicated to it, including Nauman's *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* (1966), a rough copy of the object in plaster with a groove down the middle. After that I stopped forgetting who made *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*. It was logical to me that the artistic sensibility drawn to the slant step would also have produced this sculpture.

My excitement about the slant step originated in my pursuit of furniture and furniture-like objects that appear both functional and ambiguous, objects that refuse my efforts to easily identify them while also asking me to speculate about their possible uses. This way of thinking about objects leads to particular questions: “What is this object trying to teach me?” Or

the more specific but weirder-sounding: “What does this object-body want my flesh-body to understand as a result of our encounter?”¹ I am drawn to sculpture because it speaks the same language my body does, in three dimensions, in size, weight, and movement. When I stand with it or move around it, it offers its guidance to me directly. What does *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* have to teach me? And why couldn't I forget this modest block of concrete?

Most obviously, *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* embodies a space I seldom, if ever, think about. By making a positive from the negative space that our bodies hover over while seated, the sculpture pushes us to remember that the spaces we inhabit are far richer, more complex, and more nuanced than we usually experience them to be. I am reminded that my typical way of perceiving the world is exceedingly narrow. I only think I know what is going on around me, or even beneath me.

This kind of phenomenological prodding out of our habituated spatial schemas can be a pleasant but unimpactful perceptual exercise. But it can also have crucial implications when taken seriously: Just because we don't notice something, or can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't there. The world is full of overlooked areas of possibility that we can learn about by attuning ourselves to how our bodies share those spaces with other bodies—both the bodies of sculptures and the bodies of other human and nonhuman beings. We always have the capacity to learn to perceive what we previously overlooked.

I am reminded of a related Nauman work from the same period, *John Coltrane Piece* (1968), a three-foot-square and three-inch-thick aluminum slab with a mirrored face. Nauman put the piece on the floor with the polished mirrored surface facing down, obscuring it completely. Made shortly after the death of John Coltrane, who was known for his reticence to speak publicly about his music, Nauman's sculpture asks us to think about the non-visible places where objects touch the floor.² It relies on our belief in the existence of the mirrored surface. While some viewers and critics found this obfuscation irritating, even antisocial, Nauman has said that he did not intend it that way: “To me it seemed that hiding the mirror was a positive thing, because it made for an entirely different kind of experience—the mirror reflecting and yet not being able to reflect the floor.”³ This makes sense to me, and I appreciate being asked to do this kind of perceptual act of faith on behalf of an object. I value the viewing of art as a means of retraining our perceptual faculties to work in less normative ways.

When I read each word of the title *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*, the one that sticks out is “my”—as in “my, Bruce Nauman's, chair.” Nauman, a cute white guy in his mid-twenties who had recently completed a free MFA at University of California Davis and was teaching

one day a week, who had a studio near San Francisco and a lot of free time on his hands. This description of young Nauman isn't meant to be accusatory; rather, I offer it as a fulfillment of what I understand this sculpture to be asking of me. It wants me to consider the numerous events, decisions, and allowances that enabled him to be sitting in the chair that the cast space was under. Wherever there is someone sitting in a chair, there are the conditions of that person's arrival in that chair—the web of social, financial, institutional, and interpersonal events that led to a chair holding the person's body up in a specific space.

Throughout Nauman's career he was given the benefit of the doubt. It's as if the people in power around him said, “Let's get this guy a seat at the table. We may not understand what he is doing but it seems like it's probably important.” Nauman was taken seriously, even while making work that was confusing, or difficult, or self-contradictory, or non-archival. He is someone who tends to have a chair pulled out for him to sit in. Now, after five decades of Nauman's charmed career, I can experience the sculpture as urging us to think through the conditions of being welcome in institutional and cultural settings, not just for Nauman, but for any of us. How did this chair end up under me, supporting my body in this place? Or, why do some kinds of artists find themselves offered a seat right away, while others have to wait, or are refused a seat altogether? *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair* is a material provocation to consider the infrastructure that holds each of us up, and to feel how this system holds some of us up better than others.

During the period of free time and experimentation in his studio in the mid-to-late '60s, Nauman also produced one of his best-known works, the performance video *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968), which is being re-performed by a rotating cast of dancers at the artist's retrospective, *Disappearing Acts*, currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art and MoMA PS1 in New York. In the original video, Nauman earnestly plods through a long series of body positions that span his studio's wall and floor, pausing for a few seconds between each pose. The matter-of-fact quality of his untrained movement and the decisive smack of his hands and feet on the wall or floor as he arrives at each new position contribute to the sense that I am watching someone attempt to be a sculptural object.

Indeed, Nauman framed *Wall-Floor Positions* and other performance works of this period as “using my body as a piece of material and manipulating it.”⁴ This is not to say that the result is devoid of feeling. For me at least, it is the opposite: the becoming-object of Nauman's body produces a feeling of tenderness for him and for the vulnerability displayed in his effort to hold the more gymnastic positions, which are interspersed among moments of rest in the less taxing ones. My voyeuristic gaze at his exertion

and introverted stillness, combined with the perhaps inadvertent sexuality of many of the poses, adds a quietly erotic undertone to this seemingly straightforward set of movements within the most basic of architectures.

I am reminded of a line from a review of Nauman's 1966 exhibition of sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute: "As one looks at these things one feels that they were not designed to be looked at."⁵ Though written about sculptures, this could also describe the effect of watching *Wall-Floor Positions*. I feel that I am witnessing Nauman attempt to keep himself company with a private challenge to feel the vulnerability and pleasure of becoming an object for the gaze of an unknown number of others. Judging by the crooked angle, the gap between the poorly constructed wall and floor of the studio, and the presence in the frame of the edge of some fabric-covered object he didn't bother to move out of the way before filming, I would wager that one aspect of this video's ongoing appeal is its casualness, and the feeling of intimacy that arises from watching someone do something while not really thinking that so many people would end up watching it.



Bruce Nauman, *Untitled (Wall-Floor Positions)*, ca. 1965. Re-created during the exhibition "Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts," 2018–19, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018. Performed here by Lydia Okrent. Image by Gordon Hall.

I admire Nauman's effort to produce confusion around the distinctions between objects and bodies in *Wall-Floor Positions*. This mixing of categories animates many of his other early sculptures, including lesser-known works such as *Device to Stand In* (1966), a steel triangular ramp with a slot in the back where feet can be inserted. Nauman described this work as "choreography for a dance in which the viewer is invited to participate within very narrow boundaries."⁶ Nauman continued this line of thinking by describing his interactive works such as *Performance Corridor* (1969) as props for videos and performances that also exist as sculptures. *Performance Corridor*, two freestanding walls facing each other to create a narrow hallway just wide enough to walk down, originated as the set for the video *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968). If I think about these works as teachers, letting my body follow their lead, I feel myself learning from

them how to take up Nauman's casual confusion of boundaries and fully inhabit my object-hood. These sculptures invite me to understand myself as both a person and a thing.

Many of us have lived through numerous experiences of being nonconsensually objectified by others, and recent political events have stirred up the visceral sense of harm that objectification of this kind can produce. For me, working through these experiences has involved a dedication to taking objects seriously on their own terms, and on taking my own bodily materiality seriously as a source of healing and power. Rather than devoting my energy to being seen as a convincing subject, I have sought to make work and build a life that closes the gap between my body and the lives of objects. I have desired to become ever more objectlike, working within my communities to develop ways to objectify one another with respect and dignity. These practices of reparative objectification are multiple and shifting, from making and caring for sculptural objects to pursuing sexual practices that find pleasure in consensual objectification to developing relations with the material world that might include things like investing in the joys of fashion and nightlife, or watering one's houseplants, or caring for one's possessions, or pursuing a smaller ecological footprint. I feel kinship with others who have been damagingly objectified within a culture whose underlying logic remains largely Cartesian—dividing the mind from the body and valuing the former over the latter.

There is something reparative for me about finding a resource for this project in the work of Bruce Nauman, the straight art-dad par excellence. We must hold onto our ability to find nourishment wherever we can, even when it comes from people who do not represent us, and who may not have been thinking of us as a potential audience. Finding a way into work that one might initially write off as irrelevant to one's experience is one way of exercising this capacity. The artist and choreographer Ralph Lemon elaborated on this possibility in his 2003 work *After Bruce Nauman's Wall-Floor Positions* (1965), in which he restaged *Wall-Floor Positions* with another black performer at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. What are the stakes for different kinds of bodies experimenting with "becoming-object," especially when those bodies look like ones whose historical equation with objects has been genocidal? Lemon inserted himself into the body-object relation that was so casually taken up by Nauman, claiming it as his own in spite—or because—of the precariousness of this identification.

When I first saw that MoMA would be presenting a Nauman retrospective both at its Manhattan location and at PS1 in Queens, I thought: "Really? This year, with the fog of toxic white masculinity we have been slogging through?" I want a New York art world that is as

diverse as the city itself, and a Bruce Nauman retrospective is not contributing to this effort. I wish for shows that correct the historical record, not reify it. I wish that museums would invest in all different kinds of people making a wider array of artworks, and not in a tokenizing, checking-off-the-box way that does little to sustainably support artists as they develop.

However, I cannot overlook Nauman's work. I want art that is difficult, hard to place, or even hard to see. I want art that frustrates our attempts to say what it is "about," that makes us feel ridiculous for trying to translate it into any easy explanation or summary. I seek experiences with art that are destabilizing and strange. And I need artworks that give us space to notice and feel and grieve without telling us what to think.

All of these desires draw me to Nauman's work. And so I feel some trepidation as I am moved by these sculptures and performances, knowing that I am out of step with our moment's enthusiasm for identitarian allegiances based primarily on artists' biographies. I will not use an artist's identity as a prerequisite for caring about their work, or finding something of myself within it. Just as I do not need to identify with all work made by people who are like me, I also do not think that any artists or artworks are beyond my ability to find something of personal and political use in them. I find that Nauman's early works still have something to teach me. My body is ready to learn.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I have addressed these issues in two previous essays on sculpture: "Reading Things: Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See," *Walker Reader*, Aug. 8, 2016, walkerart.org; and "Object Lessons—Thinking Gender Variance Through Minimalist Sculpture," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4, Winter 2013.
- 2 The contextualizing information for John Coltrane Piece comes from the pamphlet for *Bruce Nauman: Inside Out*, a traveling exhibition that was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from March 1 to May 23, 1995 ("Bruce Nauman," exhibition pamphlet, Star Ledger, Newark, N.J., 1995, p. 7). There seems to be some confusion about Coltrane's biography in relation to the work's title. In a 1994 catalogue raisonné, the notes for this work say that Coltrane "sometimes played with his back to the audience." But as Ralph Lemon pointed out to me in an email on Oct. 15, 2018, Coltrane was not known for doing this; it was Miles Davis who is famous for facing away from the audience while performing. It is unclear whether it was Nauman or the author of the notes to the work in the catalogue raisonné who was mistaken.
- 3 Bruce Nauman quoted in Willoughby Sharp, "Nauman Interview, 1970," *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed.

- Janet Kraynak, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2003, p. 129.
- 4 Ibid., 122.
- 5 Knute Stiles, "William Geis and Bruce Nauman," *Artforum*, December 1966, p. 65.
- 6 "Device to Stand In (1966)," in *Bruce Nauman: Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Joan Simon, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1994, p. 200.

NEW SPACE EDUCATION AND HOW IT WORKS

2014. Conversation with Orlando Tirado published in the folio in conjunction with *FLEX*, a group exhibition curated by Orlando Tirado at Kent Fine Art, New York, NY.

ORLANDO TIRADO How do you understand the relationship between the [Center for Experimental Lectures] and your sculptures and performances? For example, the works we find surrounding us now.

GORDON HALL I have spent the past few months exploring this, and the answer is a long one that sought to articulate in the lecture-performance I made with these objects at EMPAC last spring. Essentially, I understand my organizational work and by sculptural work as parts of the same project. I am not very interested in making clear distinctions between conceptual things and material things. I don't want to divide the world into the things you perceive and the ideas you have about them. To me, visible things and conceptual things are not different. I think all objects are virtual and all ideas have material and physical forms. Ideas are highly gestural and embodied. I am making these shapes, crafting them around the scale of my body referencing different objects like milk crates and soap boxes, podiums and stairs, and increasingly abstracted polygons like a triangle, a rectangle, a cylinder. And then I am sitting on them and moving around them and speaking on them and with them and to them, I am exploring these objects as platforms in a way that is the same as the way I am thinking about the lecture as a platform that can be explored and taken up and gotten up onto in various ways. If you have a podium, you are going to deal with that in a particular way, because the podium is teaching you how to be in relation to it. Architecture and objects are teaching us how to be and how to speak and how to move. And formats like lectures produce certain kinds of speech and logical structures and ways of formulating an argument, modes of writing, and modes of spectatorship, which—unless we intervene—will continue

perpetuating themselves. Established formats are platforms like chairs...

OT How do you see the body and voice as related? Also, what are your thoughts on the difference between voice and noise—and on the parameters of how meaning is constructed?

GH I don't have my thoughts on this fully fleshed out, but I have encountered ideas that have challenged how I think and how I've been taught to think about the relation between the body, voice, and spoken language. One example being Merleau-Ponty's, "The Body As Expression and Speech" from *The Phenomenology of Perception*. His argument is that there are not ideas and then words that are signs for those ideas—the idea and the word are intertwined, and the word is fundamentally a spoken word, and a spoken word is spoken as gesture, with one's entire body. So, when I speak a word to you, my entire body is saying a word to your entire body and that is how the meaning is constructed. For Merleau-Ponty, writing is an extension of language as gesture. This is how I try to think about it, which is challenging to hold onto because it is not what I was taught and not how our language is structured, such that it tends to separate things that have to do with the body and things that pertain to the mind.

We can say things like, "I have a good relationship with my body." But who is the "I" that has a relationship with "my" body? I don't believe in that, so why am I always producing sentences like that? Although, it can be very hard to say anything else...

OT You started using the pronoun they...

GH I use it because it is the only gender-neutral pronoun (that I know of) that is already a widely used word. It is grammatically incorrect, which bothers me, although there exists earlier precedent in the English language for using it singularly. I don't think it is a perfect solution, although I sometimes enjoy that I get to become plural, we all contain "multitudes." [Laughs.]

OT So, do you conceive plurality in a post-feminist, post-colonial way?

GH I can't give myself that much credit. It is really just an imperfect solution to a stupid problem.

OT I am interested this new generation of queer and trans artists who are inspired by these minimalists from the 1960s and '70s, and how this past generation of artists have given way to new post-minimalist strategies employed by these artists. What is being problematized here, in terms of work that speaks about the body, but through the absence of the visual representation of the body, how this absence speaks to that form without totally erasing the body? Why do you think this is happening after so much time has been devoted to

representing the self and identity in physical ways, in the 1980s for example?

GH Indeed. There is a group of us doing this, and theorists who are thinking about these questions, like the art historian David Getsy, who was one of my mentors in Chicago. It seems to me that for a long time, the accepted verdict on minimalism/abstraction/formalism was that the assumed viewing subject of this kind of work is a universalized subject, and as such this work can't deal with particularities such as gender, race, and class, and so effectively erases or ignores these differences, which is bad politics. According to this logic, the way to make queer work is to utilize one of three strategies: make work that is autobiographical from a queer subject position, show things that are metaphors or symbols for this positionality that the viewer will be able to recognize (what I refer to elsewhere as the "glitter problem"), or make work that displays queer bodies directly. I am not opposed to these strategies, but I do think there are many of us who find them to be excessively limiting. I am interested in work that teaches me phenomenologically how to move through the world and how to perceive differently, in ways that will make queerness and gender variety more possible. How can you change your mode of embodiment? I think we might conceive of it as a process of self-transformation that happens in relation to objects. I am thinking about objects pedagogically. Social politics happens on the level of objects. It is the way things and buildings are organized. If we think of objects as that from which we learn, could we learn less oppressive or different things from different objects? Or less oppressive or different things from the same objects? This is really what I am excited about. A phenomenological and embodied relationship to objects that does not use representation as its primary mode of address, and rather employs physical relationality as its mode of communication. This line of thinking frees up space to make work that might appear to have nothing to do with gender, race, or politics. But it can have to do with all these things, and deeply so. I am cautious about instrumentalizing art, about demanding that it make concrete political propositions. But I think this approach leaves space for abstraction to operate in more subtle but still potentially mobilizing way, through internalizing objects' non-conventional logics with our bodies.

OT In terms of neutrality, these objects are ones that you would not spend time with because they are so rudimentary in their shape and form. What happens to a bodily relationship to time when it comes to these simplified forms?

GH I think our culture associates attention with entertainment. It teaches us that the things

we should enjoy looking at are pretty and complicated and immediately gratifying. I think a lot of this work we are discussing goes against these values of attention. Math Bass's steel pieces, for example, and the fences, ladders, etc. are interesting and engaging but I think it does involve going against the pace at which we tend to look at things and the ways that we assign values to things and decide they are worth spending time with. I don't want to bore my audience but I do want to push them right up against the edge of boredom, in the interest of slowing down perception, or giving them less to look at as a way of helping them look closer. I think that people can have two experiences with the kind of objects we are describing: You either look at it, recognize what it is, and walk right by, or you can take a moment, pause and be with the thing and because it is not giving you very much to look at; you maybe are able to become more involved with it—with your body, as a shape, a relation. All minimal work always immediately loses half of its viewers because they are the ones that say, "That is a _____," and walk by. I don't blame them. We have to do that all day. Walking down the street in New York you can't engage with a bench in a meaningful way. You have to say, "That is a bench. I can either sit on it or walk past it." The problem is never that there is not enough interesting stuff; the problem is that there is way too much interesting stuff everywhere. We can't deal with it, so we close down. We recognize the thing as opposed to perceiving the thing, as John Dewey would say. We do a lot of that same kind of reading with people: "That's a woman, that's a gay man, that's a black man..." and that, in my mind, is related to saying, "That's a triangle." But if we stay and we look at something or somebody longer there is a lot more complexity there. If my work can teach people to look closer at an object and tolerate a higher level of productive ambiguity, then maybe they would look at me or each other or themselves with that level of complexity and ambiguity as well?



FLEX, Installation view, foreground works by Math Bass. Kent Fine Art, New York, NY. 2014.

another—challenge definitions, static value systems, or the ability to name something a certain thing?

GH The world I would like to live in is a world where there are lots and lots of different genders, many of which would be readable and many of which would be less readable and yet people would be comfortable with this unreadability. In the world that we live in now there is a kind of perpetual perceptual conflict; if you can't be read clearly as a particular gender or sexuality people often get very upset. They then decide they know what you are and assert that. Or potentially get so uncomfortable that they thought that you were one thing and it turns out that you are something else that they actually are violent towards you. That is a reality of trans life, this constant need everyone has to know what you are, and the ramifications of this not-knowing. What could this possibly have to do with abstract sculpture? The kind of multiplicity, ambiguity, and subtlety that one would need to employ in order to have a rich experience viewing the work we are discussing is the same kind of comfort with multiplicity and ambiguity that would make a more livable world for people with more complicated genders or sexualities. I've heard numerous trans people say that they started to transition thinking they would enjoy existing as a middle gender but instead ended up keeping going with it so they could pass as a readable gender, because it was so impossible to live in the middle, it made people so uncomfortable and made moving through the world so complicated. There are many people who transition in order to pass, and I don't discredit this experience at all. But I think there are many other people, including myself, who would really enjoy it if indeterminacy weren't made so exhausting by people's discomfort with it.

OT You're talking about a utopic vision for gender—but there is resistance to that, which I think comes from a general cultural standpoint that is invested in very stable, old-world identity politics. How do you read these minimalist artists who have foregrounded this kind of post-minimalist queer work? How do you read their notions of sexuality and gender, and how do you negotiate that history in the context of your own practice? Do you think that Artschwager, for instance, was thinking about these issues?

GH [Pause] Artschwager was thinking about ambiguity, formalism, and functionality and confusing our ability to distinguish between those things. He was thinking about surfaces in an interesting and complex way, and mimesis; a lot of things that are potentially very useful for thinking about gender and sexuality. I don't know definitively, but as far as I can tell there are no records of him

specifically addressing anything about gender or sexuality. And I think that's okay. I think we can read these canonized artists in the ways that make sense to us, regardless of an artist's original intent. One thing I am interested in is the way art history lumps together artworks into a style or movement based on how they look formally. I wonder if there are other ways to unite artworks into histories, based more on interests than visual similarities. I want to say that my work has more in common with the work of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt than that of Donald Judd even though my work often looks more like Judd's. Just because things look similar does not mean that they are doing the same thing. That is something that is very useful for thinking about queerness. Imagine two couples having sex in the exact same way with the exact same body parts, and yet somehow it is completely different because of how they understand what they are doing, how they reached that place, or situate it in the world. Things that are the same as each other can also be completely different. While it is historically important to group things together along formal criteria, I think that there are other ways of doing histories which would group together very visually dissimilar work based on a shared set of concerns. There are artists that I feel connected to whose work looks nothing like mine, such as Amber Hawk Swanson, for example. There are many people in my community who think about many of the same things I am thinking about when we make our work, but the work itself looks incredibly different.

OT Nevertheless, I don't think minimalist artists ever intended for queer people to take on these particular strategies. I am surprised by it...

GH Well, the minimalists were quite different from each other as well, and didn't necessarily want to be lumped together in the same group either. Some didn't even didn't like the word minimalism. Robert Morris, who I've been thinking a lot about this year, started making sculpture by making dances and works for theater. His objects, which have often been theorized as these disembodied monolithic shapes, were, in the beginning, objects for dance. These histories get really oversimplified and things get forgotten. Some of my writing about Fred Sandback and gender came from having a really powerful experience with my body with his works, an experience that felt relevant to gender that I needed to articulate, even if he was not thinking about these questions explicitly. He was thinking about facts and illusions as not oppositional, and he was thinking about creating these virtual windows that are also radically material when approached. This non-oppositional relation between virtuality

and materiality is useful for thinking about trans embodiment, regardless of the fact that he didn't situate the work in this way.

- OT** Let's go back to what you said at the beginning of this conversation, and address the visibility of the transgender body: When one is made visible what happens to language? How would you describe the relational that takes place within the body-language-representation dynamic?
- GH** One thing that is troubling to me is that the dominant way that transgender experience has been theorized and understood by psychiatrists and doctors and trans people themselves is as an experience of being trapped in the wrong body. This implies that your gender is an idea that you know in your brain and your body is just this material that lines up with that idea, and that you have to modify in order to feel like your body-object is a good representation of your gender-concept. It blows my mind that we would be so reliant on such a deeply Cartesian way of describing ourselves. That is such an old idea! It is crazy to me that this is the predominant way it gets described. Which is not at all to say it is not true to people's experiences, but I also think that how we understand ourselves is a product of the concepts and language available to us in our culture.
- OT** You didn't have that experience of feeling like your body wasn't the "right" body?
- GH** I have made some modifications to my body, but I don't think of wanting to do these things coming from feeling trapped in the wrong body. I am a cyborg, this is my experience, the modification is part of my embodiment. Any idea of naturalness doesn't feel useful. We are all alive by virtue of numerous technological and medical interventions into our bodies that have kept us alive and changed us in lots of ways. I view my body more as an ongoing transforming situation, in which I make choices about how I want to feel and move through the world.
- OT** That perspective sounds very fluid, which also means chaotic and unpredictable, yet it seems to give you great stability...
- GH** I feel pretty stable... most days. [laughs] For me, living as a feminine woman proved to be untenable. Dishonest, but also impossible. In this world, at least. I deeply wish there were more and different options for gendered life that felt accessible to more people, that felt accessible to me earlier in life. Many people think that things have gotten better. In some ways. But I still see so many possibilities that remain unimaginable. Also, I'd like to note that my embrace of abstraction in my work took a long time to get to, and I really had to sweat it out. It felt so scary at the beginning, to try to make my work do rather than speak. And it coincided with the shifts in my gender towards greater ambiguity—the abstraction

of the work helped sustain me in embracing the abstraction, or ambiguity, in myself and in my body. The objects became lenses through which I could see differently; they supported me.

- OT** One final question about something I believe is important to address, for those of us who may not be used to the awkward quietude of minimalist aesthetics. In the stark, rudimentary shape of minimalist sculpture, what happens to emotions, feelings, passions, and desires?
- GH** They well up inside you and hover in the room between you and the object and the other people and objects in the space! And follow you out onto the street when you leave! At least for me they do. Feelings are everywhere in the minimal work I love. I don't see an opposition between emotion and non-representational forms. I think that's something we have been taught that it's time to unlearn. And maybe the objects can help teach us.



STAND AND, 2014. Wood, hand-dyed fabric, pigmented joint compound, mosaic, and off-site performance at the handball court in Chelsea Park, New York. Performers: Chris Domenick, Ariel Goldberg, Gordon Hall, Andrew Kachel, Millie Kapp, Colin Self, Orlando Tirado. Performance duration 60 min. Sculpture dimensions: 66 × 36 × 77 in. Part of the exhibition *FLEX* at Kent Fine Art, curated by Orlando Tirado. Image by Amy Mills.

AND PER SE AND: A LECTURE IN 23 TUFTS

2016. Lecture-performance originally commissioned by and presented at Temple Contemporary, Philadelphia, PA and re-presented and published as a book by Art in General, Brooklyn, New York, in conjunction with the exhibition *Shifters*.



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. 13 × 23 × 36 in. Temple Contemporary, Philadelphia, PA. Image by Stephanie Lynn Rogers with additional support by Drew Beck.

1.
The ---- that holds together the parts of the sentence is cumulative
when you combine a noun and a verb into a -----.
A sentence is a ----- the parts of which ----- only after the sentence has been spoken
You connect the details accretively, as they ---- one after the other.
A succession of views
that "oozes 'at the edge of words'"
I weigh each ---- in my hand
Each of the four sides
they are of the same tuft
2.
Seeing myself in photos, my hand up in a claw, my talon, resting, grasping. Putting my phone in there just to give it something to hold onto. Always gripping, holding on holding on.
3.
"Another interpretation is that the ball symbolizes a polished river stone being held firmly by a crane, who stands diligently over her nest. Resting on one leg, with the stone held in mid air by the other, the mother crane watches over her young and would quickly awaken if she were to fall asleep and drop the stone."

show is so weird—it's really interesting, first of all I can't tell what gender of person made these things, and also, it's just, my body feels funny, like, sort of sex-ual, but I can't for the life of me say why—there isn't anything apparently erotic about these SHAPES..."

6.

hi Willy

can we talk more about
thumbing?

yes

what are you thinking about

what it means

I'm making a show of hand-
held sculptures

so I'm thinking about my hands
and the things they hold and
utilize a lot

yeah

that word for me came out of
thinking about speed reading,
which describes specific hand
motions over the surface of a
text to maximize reading speed.
so thinking about...a touch that
skims a body. the casualness
which with we use our hands for
labor, but the sensitivity of the
hand/touch too. so yeah now
thinking what it entails to make
something scaled to the cup
of our hand. something about
control and mastery but also
tenderness -- not that those are
necessarily opposed. I like the
vagueness of the word feeling:
touch and affect.

I want to see yr small sculptures

5.

"So like I'm sitting in my room writing something and I'm in conversation with Donne and Shakespeare and Baraka and Mama and my grandfather and, you know, Louis Armstrong and Charlie Patton. And all these people, they're in my head and they're in my body, you know, they're sort of animating my flesh, disrupting the body I guess I thought was mine, but there's another kind of sociality that's given in the close quarters of the living, I guess you could say, that I would like to try, that I would like to do, to fade into. And it might not even manifest itself, ultimately, in any kind of published text; maybe a bunch of writing held in practice, a writing

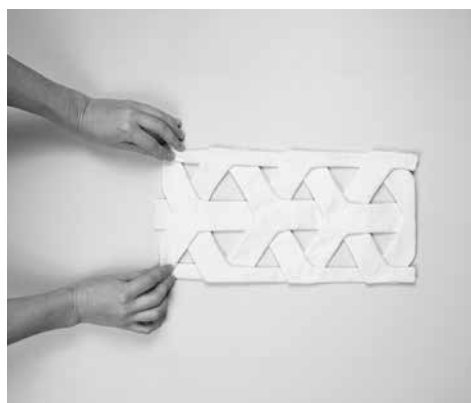
that is and that also documents the practice but that might very well disappear, be deleted where deletion just means a different kind of dispersion or disbursal, just getting in the air in a different kinda way, a memory of talking and studying together, that gets told or retold or untold, as the case may be."

4.
I GIVE YOU MY WORD

3.
"Another interpretation is that the ball symbolizes a polished river stone being held firmly by a crane, who stands diligently over her nest. Resting on one leg, with the stone held in mid air by the other, the mother crane watches over her young and would quickly awaken if she were to fall asleep and drop the stone."

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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. 13 × 23 × 36 in. Temple Contemporary, Philadelphia, PA. Image by Stephanie Lynn Rogers with additional support by Drew Beck.

ENDNOTES

1 Excerpt from Gordon Hall, *JUST NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE*. Performance with "Triad" by Anne Truitt (1977) at the

Whitney Museum of American Art, May 2015.

- 2 Text by Gordon Hall.
- 3 Excerpt from: "Ball and Claw Motif" on the website of the Bienenstock Furniture Library, accessed December 31st, 2015.
- 4 Text by Gordon Hall.
- 5 Excerpt from interview with Fred Moten conducted by Adam Fitzgerald for Literary Hub, August 5th, 2015.
- 6 Transcript of text messages with Willy Smart, October 23rd and 28th, 2015.
- 7 Text by Gordon Hall.
- 8 Excerpts of quotes by John McCracken, quoted in essay by Edward Leffingwell in the catalog for his 1986 Retrospective at P.S. 1.
- 9 Text by Gordon Hall.
- 10 Word game by Donald Warner Shaw III and Sarah Gordon, circa. 2001.
- 11 Gordon Hall quoted at Art Basel Miami 2015, Salon "Transgender In the Mainstream (The Panel that Shall Not Be Named)."
- 12 Text adapted from the Wikipedia entry for "Desktop metaphor": accessed December 31st, 2015.
- 13 Excerpt from Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).
- 14 Excerpt from Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation* (1990/1997).
- 15 Text adapted from the promotional descriptive text released by the Temple Contemporary about *AND PER SE AND* by Gordon Hall, December 2015.
- 16 Scott Burton quoted in "Behavioral Minimalism: Scott Burton's Behavior Tableaux" by David J. Getsy in *News from Sector* 2337, No. 3, Fall 2015.
- 17 Text by Gordon Hall.
- 18 Excerpt from Ursula K. Le Guin discussing the research of William Condon in "Telling Is Listening" published in *The Wave of the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (2004).
- 19 Excerpt from Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" published in *Image Music Text* (1972/1977).
- 20 Excerpt from the Wikipedia entry for 'Brackets': accessed December 31st, 2015.
- 21 Text adapted from Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). 22. Text by Gordon Hall.
- 22 Text by Gordon Hall.
- 23 Text adapted from the Merriam Webster video "Ask The Editor," Ampersand: 2012.

"READ ME THAT PART A-GAIN, WHERE I DIS-INHERIT EVERYBODY"

2014. Lecture-performance commissioned by and presented at EMPAC/Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY. Adapted and re-presented at The Brooklyn Museum in the exhibition *Crossing Brooklyn*, Fall/Winter 2014–2015.

A decade ago I am sitting at a desk in the library of my college. It is a carrel desk, the kind with short walls on three sides, to close you in and minimize distractions. There is a window to my right, out of which, if I lean back in my chair, I can see the campus green and buildings, and beyond the mountains of Western Massachusetts. I am spending a lot of time in the library that year. And a lot of time in my studio, across campus. Most days are long and halved between the library and the studio, separated by a curved path.

I had become obsessed with an essay by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty called "The Intertwining—The Chiasm."¹ I had read it and understood nothing, which seemed like a good place to start, reading it dozens of more times until I felt able to decode it. The essay, its impenetrability partly explained by the fact the Merleau-Ponty died suddenly while still editing it, outlines his notion of "the flesh" which is, in his formulation, an elemental principle that describes the intertwining of the material and immaterial attributes of both the human body and objects in the world. We know the world because we are of it—thing ideas like the objects around us.

Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology allowed me to elaborate my own theory of what I called "spatial violences" as well as "spatial resistances." How to explain the ways that certain physical spaces can prevent us not only from saying or doing particular things, but even from thinking particular thoughts, or feeling particular feelings? How can we account for the ways that architecture and furniture have the capacity to so thoroughly arrest movement, speech, and ideation? And, on the reverse, how could resistance take form, aesthetically and physically? How could making things and building things, alone or in concert with others, be a way of figuring a different world? How is social transformation a question of materiality?

Or, as I found myself half yelling to my own undergraduate students recently:

"POLITICS IS SOMETHING YOU DO WITH YOUR BODY!"

I have lots to say about this, which I partially articulate in some recent projects that think through the possible resources to be found in abstraction, and minimalism in particular, for a feminist and transgender politics. But to return to the library. Or let's go first to the studio. I was working on a project that involved a lot of braiding, braids of six, seven, eight strands. One night, I decided that since my studio was all filled with fabric anyway, it was comfortable enough to fall asleep on, and I decided to stay the night in the studio. As I slept, I dreamed that the strands of the argument of my paper about Merleau-Ponty's "Intertwining—The Chiasm" were strips of fabric that I was braiding together, and in so doing resolving the impasse I had come to with the writing earlier that afternoon. My ideas have become materials that I could manipulate with my hands.

Back in the library, I had started feeling like my location in the carrel was crucial to my ability to formulate my thinking. At the end of each work day, I would leave my desk and my train of thought, right there in the chair, facing east with the window to my right. That the location of my body in that exact spot, oriented in precisely that way, was crucial to my ability to continue to think and work. Thinking is something you do with your body.

Three years ago I started working a project called the *Center for Experimental Lectures*. Reflecting on it now, it has become clear to me that these experiences helped shape its motivating questions about the ways we embody knowledge and the many norms that govern its dissemination. I'm going to extend a real invitation right now, to the Berlin-based writer and curator Jan Verwoert:

Dear Jan Verwoert,

My name is Gordon Hall; I am an artist based in New York and the director of the Center for Experimental Lectures, which is an artist project in the form of an ongoing lecture series that aims to investigate the possibilities of the lecture format, inviting artists, academics, writers, and performers to produce new lecture-performances and present them to the public. The Center for Experimental Lectures in an extension of my art practice consisting of sculpture and performance, posing questions about the capacity of platforms, both physical and organizational, to produce and foreclose outcomes. Founded in Chicago in 2011, the Center for Experimental Lectures has organized ten events at a variety of venues, including MoMA PS1, Recess, and the Shandaken Project in upstate New York, and is was hosted by the Whitney Museum of American Art, re-imagining their Seminars with Artists program during the 2014 Biennial. I am currently planning my events

for 2015, and as a deep admirer of your work, and would like to invite you to produce a lecture for the series. You would create a new or significantly revised 45-minute lecture on a topic and in a format of your choice. I can offer logistical, intellectual, and financial support to the process of developing your contribution. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions you have about the invitation, and I very much look forward to hearing from you!

*Sincerely,
Gordon Hall*

I imagine that many of the people creating, organizing, and writing about lecture performances and the pedagogical "turn" in curating and artistic production, became interested in this because they had the same baffling experiences I had at countless artist talks and academic conferences: It would seem that artists, curators, and art historians would have internalized an understanding of form and content as inextricably interwoven—WHAT you can say is entirely dependent on HOW you say it. And yet, the same chronological procession of slides, the same anonymous academic language and turns of phrase, lecture after lecture. Discourse that cannot do justice to the beauty and complexity of artists' and academics' work and thought.

My thinking about public lectures emerged from these observations. And in other questions I was struggling with years later in yet another library in another city. Who am I writing for? Whose voice am I writing in? Constructing a lecture that organizes its sections like sculptures distributed around a room. First, I look at this one, now this one. Walking through the text. The text in my mouth as language.

Lectures are and aren't the work. Lectures are born from the work, but also free from the work. A crevice of space in which things feel abnormally possible. Somehow not quite the real thing.



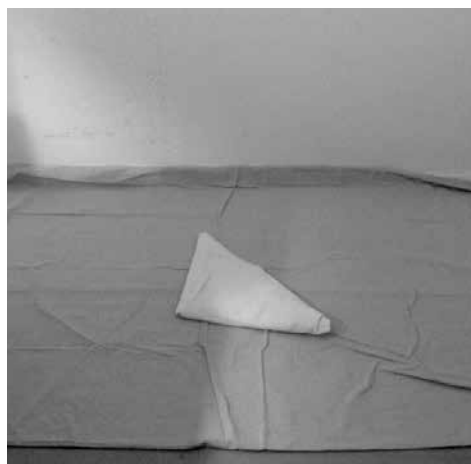
While at the Fire Island Artist Residency in 2012, I made a poster with a beachy gradient

in the background and the words WORK NOT WORK in large block letters. This phrase has become a sort of guiding principle since then, in what I have now counted to be its five interpretations:

- 1 Doing one's real work encompasses many things that don't feel like work (like talking politics on the naked gay beach, going to things, having friends, taking care of yourself and so forth...)
- 2 Striving to do one's own lifework instead of someone else's work for money, recognition, or some other motive. My work not your work.
- 3 Doing all one's work with style and precision—"WERK" not work. Being fabulously stubborn when it matters.
- 4 Making things for which it is unclear whether they are "the" work or not: lecture-performances, overly aesthetic stands and plinths, this poster.
- 5 And finally, when it comes to a project like the *Center for Experimental Lectures*, or making a sculpture, or a performance, everything that goes into it is part of it, even the things that aren't necessarily visible in the final product—like the bottom and back of the object, all the conversations and emails that went into thinking it through and planning it, the source of the materials, the conversations you had with your assistant, the clerk at the hardware store, and so forth. I can count at least two dozen people who helped shape this thing that I am doing in front of you now. If you'd like to have one of these posters, there's a pile of them in front here, feel free to take one home.

We are about half way through now, and in a moment we will take a short intermission. But before we do, I'd like to tell you about one more thing, which starts where we already are, which is on Fire Island. While at the residency, I didn't have a bedroom to myself but I did have a little studio to myself, which I loved, with yellow stucco walls. A friend of mine had come to visit and left behind a yellow piece of cotton fabric that he had been using as a beach blanket. It ended up in my studio, where I absentmindedly folded it into a triangle and put it on the ground, which was covered with a canvas tarp, took this photo and then forgot about it. The following summer I was in very rural Maine, making a 19-foot wide bleached canvas octagon, which was a duplicate of an octagonal patch of gravel that used to be the site of a gazebo, but which we now used for bonfires. I was leading movement workshops in a remote field on the canvas octagon. Because of this, I had a large amount of canvas scraps around my studio, and I was experimenting with fiber reactive cold water dye. Without thinking about it very much, I sewed a piece of canvas into a long strip, dyed it yellow,

folded it up into a triangle, and put it on the floor of my studio. Only then did I realize that I had remembered the yellow triangle from the summer before. Or I had remembered it, but with my body, by sewing, dying, and folding a near perfect replica.



We will now take a four minute intermission to listen to George Benson's *Give Me The Night* in its entirety.²

Experimentation with the public lecture format has a long history. While there are various historical precursors, such as the lecture-demonstration in dance or the 19th century travelogue, it seems generally agreed upon that the mid 1960s could be said to mark the beginning of a sustained interest in the project of rethinking the possibilities of public lectures among artists and within art contexts. Robert Morris's *21.3* from 1964, which I will also discuss more in a moment, and Joseph Beuys's *How To Explain Pictures To a Dead Hare* from 1965 are often cited as marking the start of an engagement with the collapse of the difference between talking about art and making art. I would say that the beginning could be marked nearly 25 years earlier, with John Cage's non-traditional public lectures that were emerging from his interrogations into sound and music. Cage's "Lecture On Nothing," which contains a quote from which the title of this lecture is borrowed,

was first presented at the Artists Club in New York in 1949, and he had been producing similarly experimental lectures since at the least the late 1930s.³ Jarrett Earnest, a friend of mine who also researches lecture performances, has suggested that artists in the mid-20th century were, for the first time, engaged on a broad scale with teaching in colleges and universities, and it was this cross-pollination between pedagogy and performance that prompted these artists to start thinking about the act conveying information as extending from or taking up residency within their art production.

I will now offer you an alternate and non-chronological history of lecture performances, organized into four chapters:⁴

Chapter 1. Getting Down

In 1982, Adrian Piper had recently graduated from Harvard with a PhD in philosophy, and was teaching in a variety of different contexts. She began producing what turned into a two-year series of interactive lecture workshops, which she called "Funk Lessons" in which, as the title indicates, she taught mixed audiences of mostly white art students about the histories of African American funk and soul music, and, with great specificity, endeavored to teach her participants how to dance to this music. While designed as get-down-and-party-together affairs, she has written that she was interested in countering fears of otherness, as well as exemplifying through these lessons the ways that race is performed with the body in ways that are, potentially, malleable and not innate.⁵



Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, (1983–84). Documentation of the group performance at University of California, Berkeley, November 6, 1983.

Chapter 2. Getting Up

There is a rich social history to the practice of soap boxing—impromptu public speech usually on political topics performed by an orator on a raised platform. In the first two decades of the 20th century, which has been referred to as the golden age of soap-boxing, throughout the US and the UK speakers, largely associated with labor unions and socialist organizing, raised themselves up above their peers on wooden shipping crates (the kind used to ship soap prior to the invention of corrugated cardboard) and through this act of getting up claimed for

themselves the right of authority on a given topic or position. Folklore historian Thomas Walker ascribes soapbox oratory with a “radical significance in the first decades of the twentieth century as a social practice that created its own legitimacy, built its own platform, metaphorically, in the very act of speaking.”⁶ Soap-boxing as a widespread form of public discourse has largely disappeared due to numerous factors, not the least of which includes legal prohibitions on public gathering and policing of public speech, but there still remain some contexts in which getting up on an object performatively claims one’s right to speak, such as London’s Hyde Park, though the physical soapbox has given way to the chair, milk crate, or ubiquitous step stool.

This is the sculptor John McCracken, standing on this step stool gazing out into the desert.⁷



John McCracken in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Photo by Gail Barringer.
© The Estate of John McCracken.

This is me at MoMA dressed entirely in mustard and beige silk standing beside a cotton candy pink John McCracken sculpture reading from the anthropologist Catherine Bell’s book on Ritual, *The Attributes of Ritual Behavior*⁸ as part of AK Burns and Katie Hubbard’s “Poetry Parade for a Permanent Collection.”⁹



Chapter 3. Making Things to Get Up On and Get Under, or, Sitting Next to a Cereal Box

When Simone Forti moved from California to New York City in the spring of 1959, Forti began working by sitting on the floor next to objects: “I’d do things like placing a stool in the middle of the room, and a roll of toilet paper over by the wall, and then sitting somewhere on the floor, and from time to time moving something... Bob [meaning Robert Morris] had stopped painting. He was actively trying to do nothing, but actually he was reading voraciously.”¹⁰

Forti was understanding the human body as a material object among the objects of the world, a cereal box, a fingernail brush. Her 1961 show at the Chambers Street loft of Yoko Ono, *Five Dance Constructions and Some Other Things* presented five new dance pieces arranged around the room and performed in succession by a variety of performers to an audience that moved around the pieces. I will read to you Forti’s account of one of these pieces from her 1974 book *Handbook In Motion*. This dance construction is called “Platforms” and it is:

... a dance construction and a duet for whistling. It requires two platforms (wooden boxes without bottoms) and two performers, preferably a man and a woman. The platforms should each be long enough and high enough to hide a person, but they should not be exactly alike. They are placed in the room some distance apart. The man helps the woman get under her platform, walks over to his, and gets under it. Under the platforms, the two gently whistle. They can easily hear each other, for the boxes act as resonating chambers, making the sound clear and penetrating. It is important that the performers listen to each other. Their whistling should come from the easy breathing of a relaxed state of easy communion. Each inhalation should be silent, and as long as in normal breathing. The piece goes on for about fifteen minutes. The man should wear a watch, so that he knows when the designated time is up. He emerges from under his platform, and helps the woman from under hers.”¹¹



Simone Forti, *Platforms* (1961). Loeb Student Center, New York University. Photo: Peter Moore © Estate of Peter Moore/ VAGA, NYC.

Not long after, Forti produced a new set of dance constructions, including “Book” a slide lecture, which she describes as follows:

“This was a showing of a set of thirty-five black and white slides prefaced by a song. The song was a combination of two songs. I played the Beatles’ “Fool on the Hill” on a record player, and at the same time I sang a very old Tuscan folk song. The two made a harmonious and amazing blend. The set of slides was an essay of brownie snapshots, made sometime earlier, mainly of images from my home with [Robert] Whitman. The original format for the snapshots had been a notebook with one picture per page, presenting the images two by two. I projected them two by two, very large.”¹²

Douglas Dunn, who had been one of Forti’s dance teachers when she first moved to New York, contributed this text to a 1975 book on Merce Cunningham made by his collaborators:¹³

Talking is talking Dancing is dancing	Dancing is talking Talking is dancing
Talking is talking and not talking Dancing is dancing and not dancing	Dancing is talking and not talking Talking is dancing and not dancing
Not talking is not talking and not not talking Not dancing is not dancing and not not dancing	Not dancing is not talking and not not talking Not talking is not dancing and not not dancing
Talking is not dancing Dancing is not talking	Dancing is not dancing Talking is not talking
Not talking is not not dancing Not dancing is not not talking	Not dancing is not not talking Not talking is not not talking
Not talking is not dancing Not dancing is not talking	Not dancing is not dancing Not talking is not dancing
Talking is dancing Dancing is talking	Dancing is dancing Talking is talking

Robert Morris’s first abstract sculpture appeared the same year as Simone Forti’s *Dance Constructions*. *Column* was a sculptural dance work performed in a theater on a stage. In it, an eight foot high and two foot square grey column stands vertically on an empty stage for three and a half minutes. It falls over, lays on its side for two and a half minutes, and the piece is over. It is worth mentioning that *Column* was intended as a performance in which Morris stood inside the column and then pushed it over from the inside. Though, in the actual performance he had to rely on a string pulled from off stage due to a head injury sustained during the piece’s rehearsal.¹⁴

Robert Morris’s sculptures have their origin in dance, and specifically in the sculptural understanding of dance articulated by Forti. His 1964 exhibition at Green Gallery is a profound visual echo of his soon to be ex-partner’s output from three years earlier.

Nearly a decade later, Morris’s produced an exhibition at the Tate Gallery called *bodyspacemotionthings*, an immersive interactive environment of plywood sculptural constructions, some of which are, unacknowledged, nearly exact replicas of Forti’s *Dance Constructions*. Morris’s sculptures, however, are not for performance, but for use by the audience itself; he described this piece as “an opportunity for people to involve themselves with the work, become aware of their own bodies, gravity, effort, fatigue, their bodies under different conditions.”¹⁵

As I mentioned, Robert Morris also created a widely cited lecture performance, called *21.3*, in 1964, the same year as his exhibition at Green Gallery. Here I quote Eve Meltzer's description of the performance:

"*21.3* commenced with the dimming of the lights as Morris, dressed in suit and tie, walked to the center of the stage and stood behind a podium as any art historian would, only instead of delivering a live lecture, he lipsynched his own previously recorded recitation of an excerpt taken from the beginning of [German art historian Erwin] Panofsky's well known [1939] essay [Iconography and Iconology] ... Intermixed with Panofsky's text, the tape included other superfluous sounds: Morris pouring water, drinking it, moving about, exhaling, and so on. There on stage, the artist also performed these gestures, each in fact premeditated: "right hand on stand," "fold arms," "finger in collar," "slow shift of body left"—he noted to himself in the lecture notes.

But Morris had carefully choreographed these movements so as to be not so much in, but rather out of sync with the recording, sometimes slightly, almost imperceptibly so: his mouth forming words just a bit too late. At other times, the disjuncture was more pronounced."¹⁶



Robert Morris, *21.3*, 1964. Performance with recorded sound.

This lecture was a dance of a lecture—an exercise in embodied speech and gesture, the disjunctures in his lip (and body) synching were mechanisms for drawing attention to the performed aspect of public speech. The title of the lecture, *21.3*, is the course listing of an art history course that Morris had recently taught at Hunter College, in which he almost surely would have assigned Panofsky's then canonical essay. Morris's lecture performance is an exploration of the performed dimensions of public speech, in which the medium itself must be grappled with physically as one would climb up on one of Morris's later interactive sculptures and Forti's early dance constructions.

Abstract sculpture, minimalist aesthetics, post-modern dance, and lecture performances share their point of emergence in this group of artists in ways that have been largely forgotten in current historical narratives.

Chapter 4. Backing Up

Like Simone Forti, Scott Burton is an artist who is too often overlooked by many contemporary artists, for a set of reasons that might include the incredible diversity of his output, the fact that he passed away of AIDS related complications in 1989 at the age of 50, and that, by his design, despite being in numerous public museum collections, many of his sculptures are made to go undetected as art at all—you might be sitting right on one and not know it.

I was introduced to the work of Scott Burton by the art historian David Getsy, who recently undertook the project of editing a collected volume of his writings, including his *Lecture on Self*, which until then had existed as handwritten sheets of paper sitting in a box in the MoMA archives.¹⁷ Burton's sculptural output of the late 1970s and '80s consisted almost entirely of chairs. The first one, *Bronze Chair*, was a cast bronze replica of a Queen-Anne revival style chair, here I quote from Getsy: "...it was useable as furniture (hence literally a chair) at the same time that it was (through the associations of bronze with figurative sculpture) a realist sculptural rendering of a chair... The bronze chair asks to be used, and it incites actual bodily contact. To sit in the Chair is to bring one's body in to the sculpture's arms, turning away from it, and backing onto it."¹⁸



Scott Burton, *Bronze Chair*, 1972 (cast 1975). Bronze. 48 × 18 × 20 in. Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

From this point Burton went on to make long series of artworks in the form of public seating—primarily stone and marble works installed in public spaces. For Burton, this subtle insertion of his sculptures into public life as objects of use was the ideal dissolution of art into life. The work's viewers become its users, structured in their seat by the embrace of the work itself.

Scott Burton's *Lecture "On Self,"* given to a group of students at Oberlin College in 1973, was promoted as "a solo performance of about one hour, [in which] Scott Burton will give an illustrated critical lecture on the performances of Scott Burton, who will then appear for questions."¹⁹ Disguised in a suit and wig, Burton's lecture assessed the emerging

field of performance art and detailed his own performances, referring to himself only as "this young American artist," until naming himself at the very end of the lecture, at which point he disappeared and reappeared with his own long hair wearing a pair of decorated overalls with the addition of an obviously protruding large dildo as an accessory. He then proceeded to take questions.

In the *Lecture on Self*, Burton offers a series of descriptions of his performances that read as scripts, for example, in *Disguise*:

Disguise. (Likewise,) the artist's intent in clothing as a variety of applied assemblage is prefigured in an early street disguise piece in which his intention was to create an invisible performance by going unrecognized among a group of people to whom he was previously known. He appears in the very unobtrusive guise of a woman shopper.²⁰

Like his chairs, Burton's performance of drag aimed to barely register, or mix into the background entirely. Instead of the flashy over the top aesthetic of conventional drag—meant to announce itself as a performance—Burton's lady going shopping drag, like his public chair sculptures and his lecture, view the platform—whether furniture, speech, or gender presentation, as something that we get up on, or, as he would have it, back up onto.

In a recent printed conversation between David Getsy (the editor of the Scott Burton book) and Jennifer Doyle, she tells the story of visiting Andy Warhol's former estate on Long Island and finding:²¹ "...built-in bookcases throughout the houses on the property." She continues:

All of the books lining those shelves, however, were turned so that the spines faced the wall. Walking into a room to see a wall of books that had been treated that way was bracing. It was a slap in the face. For, of course, those walls were beautiful—you instantly got it, the seriality of books as objects. It was a redeployment of books as home decoration, against their use as cultural capital. The gesture is a brutal thing, a total rejection of a certain kind of discourse on culture and value. Someone said Warhol did that because when he bought the house it came fully furnished: he had no relationship to those books so he flipped them because they looked nice that way.

Getsy responds:

What's fascinating for me in this is that the rear of the book still establishes a physical relation that makes it a sensuous object. Which is more tactile: the spine or the tips of the leaves? Indeed, the back-facing authorizes a kind of touching that one might never have imagined or privileged before. It also produces a kind of

anonymous cruising in that the relation with the object occurs in willful ignorance of the book's title, author, and cultural positioning.

Jennifer Doyle replies:

Absolutely. That turn to form, which can sometimes change what you think form is or can be, and the "poetic" can be that tactic, that signal. Take Walt Whitman's relationship to Leaves of Grass, for example. The first edition [1855] is a gorgeously crafted thing. Its embossed green leather surface is meant to be fondled. He worked on revisions of this book as long as he was alive, and across all of the book's editions you will find an awareness of the book as a material object embedded into his writing ("Whoever you are, holding me now in hand") ... Queer readings of Whitman have taken us, interestingly, to considering his relationship to publication itself as part of his poetic practice: each edition of Leaves of Grass is a living thing, a manifestation of the poet's desire and an occasion for intimacy.

I interpret this understanding of intimacy with the printed book as an acknowledgment of the material conditions of writing and reading, what the Russian Constructivists might have been referring to when they spoke of the object as comrade, the "comradely" object.²²

The material conditions of thought, and of speech.

My voice exits my body and enters in simultaneously, I am a thing, I hear myself from within and without.

I'd like to end where I began, which is back with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the paper about politics and spatiality. I have an embarrassing confession: There was a section at the end of the essay that I didn't understand, and so just left out of my summary entirely. It is the section that has to do with spoken language. He writes: "...In a sense, to understand a phrase is nothing else but to welcome it in its sonorous being, or... to hear what it says. The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of "psychic reality" spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear. And conversely, the landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth but a variant of speech before our eyes..."²³

I now gather that for Merleau-Ponty, thought is not prior to language, and language cannot be understood as expressive of thought. For him, we are expressive, fundamentally, the articulation of the idea is the idea itself. Speech and thought are, he used the word "intinvolved." Spoken language is, for Merleau-Ponty, an extension of gesture. It is as bodies that we know the world, that we express ourselves, and that we listen to each other. Even written texts are forms of

corporeality, in reading or listening, we take up the orientation of the speaker—"speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it."²⁴

Speech accomplishes thought.

"The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread..." He writes: "I reach back for the word as my hand reaches towards the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment. I have only one means of representing it, which is uttering it, just as the artist has only one means of representing the work on which he is engaged: by doing it."²⁵

And now I am asking myself questions about various ways I might have gone about doing this, or how I might do it again. How would it be different if I wrote the lecture in the same space as the objects themselves, sitting on them, piling my books and papers on top of them, leaning against them? What might happen if I was somehow able to do all the work on it in this space where you are seeing it, and not in various different rooms in numerous different buildings, a dozen in all by my count, over the course of the last year?

I always reach the end wishing I could begin again, now changed by what I have said and done.

Thank you.

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- 3 See: Cage, John. *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997.
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A DOORKNOB ON THE LANDSCAPE

2016. Catalog essay commissioned for *Disassembling Utopias* by Kendall Buster in conjunction with her exhibitions at Commune.1, Cape Town and Stellenbosch University Stellenbosch, South Africa.

When architects design new buildings, they, I suppose logically, design the biggest elements first—the building's footprint on the earth (as seen from above), the building's height, shape, and interior divisions. At the end of this process the small things get decided—all the things we touch when we use the space—the floors, windows and doors, buttons, and handrails. I can't help but wonder what would emerge from reversing this. I'd like to know if it is possible to design an entire building around a single doorknob.

This is a section of a text I wrote recently in conjunction with the production of a series of small table-top sculptures.¹ I was trying to understand more about the ways we experience architecture with our bodies, focusing in particular on the many odd and overlooked intimacies of these relations—living inside the body of the building, wrapping my hands around the architectural details and pressing my feet against the floors. All of these instances of tenderness with this built structure, and disquieting moments too—the loose doorknob comes off in your hand like the house losing a tooth. Like tripping, or forgetting a word you know you know. I am living inside buildings as a body inside other bodies.

My observations about the ordering of the architectural design process come from an unlikely series of events that led to my participation in designing a large-scale residential building during the years I was in graduate school. My father, an academic philosopher and SDS leader turned global warming activist turned real estate developer, spent the first decade of the 2000s working with a series of architects to design a Passive House apartment building. I drifted in and out of this process over these years, and as a non-designer I was struck by the top-down movement of the design process—biggest to smallest, from the outside to the inside. Past a certain point of scale, the architects were generally no longer concerned with the decisions—they became known as “architectural details” and thus became the purview of the feminized role of “interior decorators,” or, barring that, the decisions of the contractors or developers perusing the finishes in big box hardware stores like Home Depot.² Meanwhile, the architects looked at renderings of the building from above and far away, impossible or nearly impossible vantage points from which to view the building. In these God’s eye view AutoCAD renderings, tiny people regularly appear, doing typical human things in neat contemporary outfits—sitting on benches, walking down the sidewalk, easily navigating a ramp in a wheelchair—a rainbow of races and ages. These figures exist in a world of efficient yet leisurely mobility, without pain, disease, homelessness, gender ambiguity, red-lining, or segregation. These renderings are perfect examples of Michel Foucault’s “heterotopias of compensation,” spaces which are “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.”³ They are fantasy spaces offered as comfort for the ways human life unfolds in the actual built environment.

Kendall Buster originally encountered the archive of 1950s to 1970s photographs of International Style buildings in Southern Africa by accident. She had gone to the Built Environment Library at the University of Cape Town on a research trip in search of additional source material for her miniature model city sculptures, and inquired in person about past

decades of architecture periodicals. She was led to a locked room of floor-to-ceiling architecture magazines, the images from which Buster found to be compelling in a way that bordered on obsessive, and she returned with a scanner to capture hundreds of these magazine pages that came to comprise *Modern World*. This video slide show confronts us relentlessly and increasingly rapidly with these black and white photographs of the geometric shapes of modernist buildings against the backdrop of the Southern African landscape, interspersed with a smattering of International Style structures from other parts of the globe. In these photographs, the cement and steel and glass buildings seem to exist in a world without people, their scale and form dwarfing all surrounding life. The buildings sit on the landscape like objects that fell from the sky fully formed, stark white against the complexity of the muddled world around them. It is hard not to feel that these buildings were designed to be photographed, and that it is these magazine images, and not the buildings themselves as used by the inhabitants of their landscapes, that is their truest form. They are buildings that are made to look like their picture.



Kendall Buster. *Modern World*, 2016. Video projection, 15 min. 35 sec. Image courtesy of the artist.

As these images build momentum and cycle in front of us at a disorienting pace, Buster aesthetically builds a convincing case for the symbolic violence of these buildings. They feel not intended for human life, built at a scale most moving bodies can’t comprehend, disrespectful of the already existing design language of the local structures, ecologically misplaced, and intended for audiences of design professionals and international onlookers in a way that renders their development stained with the logic of colonialism. The way they so perfectly replicate the architectural renderings from which they were built in turn produces these images of them from distant disembodied vantage points, turning the buildings into photographic objects. *Modern World* posits this damning interpretation of these buildings, but to analyze the piece in terms of that critique alone does not feel to me to thoroughly account for Buster’s connection to

these images or her handling of them in the work. These photographs of modernist buildings are also beautiful, and Buster’s position in relation to them is marked by the ambivalence of a viewer who is both drawn to and critical of the object of their vision. I don’t think it is wrong to say that Buster, in a way, loves these images, and loves them despite the many real problems that the buildings pictured in them pose. What is the nature of this attraction to these images?

The answer to this question lies in what might be an incompatible yet coexisting underside of the God’s eye view of these photographs. From these distant vantage points, the modernist buildings appear as objects visible in their entirety. As mentioned previously, this arguably produces feelings of mastery and ownership, a way of understanding the world without inhabiting it. These photographs embody the luxury, or misogyny, of existing on the outside—pry to a big picture analysis not accessible to those within, the gaze of eyes without a body. However, this distance simultaneously produces an inversion of scale between my body and the buildings. The way these structures appear on the landscape as abstract forms, I can hold the whole of these structures in my eyes at one time. The buildings become smaller than my body, objects I could wrap myself around, sit on, or cup in my hands. This is no longer the realm of the architect, and I am not a tiny CAD figure living a sanitized life in someone else’s creation. In this reversal of scale, the buildings have entered the feminized realm of the decorative—they appear like doorknobs, furniture, bookends, and cakes. An entire building reduced to a shape I could grab with one hand. Feelings of mastery get replaced by corporeal companionship and the potential for touch—I am of the same species as the building in the distance. In some sense we are both abstract shapes.

Is it a contradiction that distance can produce feelings of intimacy, turning buildings into hand-held objects? And is it possible for the pleasure of this kind of pictorial intimacy with buildings to coexist with the dehumanization of the architectural rendering of from-a-far magazine photographs? In *Modern World*, Kendall Buster gives herself permission to inhabit both of these positions simultaneously, in a disidentificatory recuperation of these troublingly compelling photographs. Buster followed her attraction to this accidentally discovered trove of images, and in doing so produced an artwork that embodies this ambivalence about what feelings are possible when we look at buildings from afar. This ability to find new ways into old tyrannies is, in Kendall Buster’s world, a tool for sustaining ourselves. She gives us permission to find unconventional intimacies in places that don’t welcome us, to hold that which we cannot even reach.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Written in conjunction with Gordon Hall, U, joint compound, plaster, balsa wood, acrylic

paint, colored pencil, aluminum, tile mosaic, paper, denim, 2017. Made for *Mene Mene Tekel Parsin* curated by Jesse Darling at the Wysing Arts Center, Cambridge, UK, 2017.

- 2 For a compelling account of the detail as a gendered concept, see: Monique Roelofs, "A Pearl's Perils and Pleasures: The Detail at the Foundation of Taste." "The Lure of the Detail: Critical Reading Today." Special Issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3, 2003, pp. 57–88.
- 3 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 22–27.

U

2017. Text written in conjunction with *U* and presented at The Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, U.K., as part of the exhibition *Mene Mene Tekel Parsin* curated by Jesse Darling.



U, 2017. Joint compound, plaster, balsa wood, acrylic paint, colored pencil, aluminum, tile mosaic, paper, denim. Image by Paul Allitt.

(This text was written during the fabrication of "*U*," and each section correlates with one of the objects on the U-shaped plinth. The order of the sections of text was determined by the arrangement of the objects, which was decided on at the end of fabrication.)

When architects design new buildings, they, I suppose logically, design the biggest elements first—the building's footprint on the earth (as seen from above), the building's height, shape, and interior divisions. At the end of this process the small things get decided—all the things we touch when we use the space—the floors, windows and doors, buttons, and handrails. I can't help but wonder what would emerge from reversing this. I'd like to know if it is possible to design an entire building around a single doorknob.

The best object to provide scale on a photo showing a small object is:

(written by user ambrus) on March 01, 2011 at 11:14 UTC

Pen(cil) 7%

Coin 27 %

Ruler 38%

Credit card 8%

CD 4%

Floppy disk 2%

Door key 1%

Keyboard 1%

Thimble 1%

Drinking glass 2 %

Human hand or finger 8%

556 total votes

plaster, joint compound, balsa wood, acrylic paint, colored pencil, aluminum, tile mosaic, paper, denim.

You are 173 cm tall. Your bellybutton is 109 cm off the ground when you are not wearing shoes. Your hands are 21 cm long, from the base of your palm to the tip of your longest finger. You say, "I was always embarrassed of my hands, for being so long and feminine. Do you think they are feminine?" I say, "I do, but, also, the way you use them when you talk."

Torahs are hand-calligraphied documents written on scrolls of parchment in which the complete accuracy of every word, line, and mark are of absolute importance. Each scroll takes approximately a year and a half to produce, written by an expert scribe, and a single error will make an entire scroll unacceptable for use. The scrolls themselves are extremely fragile and care must be taken not to touch the parchment or writing itself with one's bare hands. When reading from the scroll, in order to keep one's place in the dense text, a tool known as a "yad" is used. A "Yad," meaning "hand" in Hebrew, is a silver or brass rod around the size of a long pencil with a miniature sculpted hand on one end, its fingers folded back so that is always points with its index finger at one's spot in the text.

I've always had a barely conscious body-habit in which I make line drawings with the muscles in my legs, back, and shoulders. In this private game, I minutely contract and relax the muscles as if I am controlling the nib of a pencil that is attached to my frame. I don't think anyone can see me doing it. I draw flowers, or write out simple words and sentences like Hello I am no one.

He said, "Maybe you should get me some leather gloves."

A brick that ends up in the ocean, if it manages to get washed ashore, will eventually be made round, its hard edges worn away from the impact of the waves grinding it into the sand as it rolls back and forth in the moving water.

A plumb bob is a pointed, tapered brass or bronze weight which is suspended from a cord for determining verticality. The plumb bob when used correctly will always tell its user exactly which way is down.

The "plumb" in "plumb-bob" comes from the fact that such tools were originally made of lead (the Latin for lead is *plumbum*.) The adjective "plumb", meaning properly aligned, developed by extension, as did the noun "aplomb," from the notion of "standing upright," which we now use to mean self-possession, especially under duress.

She asks me, "How am I supposed to change when I can't describe how I want to be? How can I desire something I can't name?"

He made me a calzone to eat on the train, wrapping it in plastic and putting it in a bag with a paper napkin. On the seven hour journey, I ate it halfway there, guiltily slightly hoping to make the stranger next to me jealous.

I have always been decent at spelling. I can see and feel the words, usually, handwritten or typed, and know what order of letters looks right and what looks off. I am still mad at my second grade teacher for correcting, with her red pen, my un-capitalized spelling of my favorite name, Emma—OF COURSE I KNOW THAT NAMES ARE CAPITALIZED, but if written in cursive, all in lowercase letters, it just feels so good to write, all those loops and curves, and it looks better too. I remember awkwardly attempting to explain this to her.

a sandwich. a telephone. toilet paper. a down coat. a window. a chair. a mug. a bookend. a houseplant. a paper weight. a soap dish. an earring. a champagne flute.

SLOW BONDS AND THE INTIMACY OF OBJECTS

2018. Conversation with David J. Getsy, introduced by Yuri Stone, on April 28th 2018 at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Published in the exhibition catalog for *The Number of Inches Between Them*, edited and designed by Gordon Hall and Brian Hochberger.

YURI STONE I think a good way to start this conversation would be to ask Gordon to walk us through the different elements of the exhibition that is on view in the Bakalar Gallery.

GORDON HALL *The Number of Inches Between Them* has four main components: two sculptures, a stack of posters, and the performance. As you may have gathered, the sculptures are two different forms of the same object. One of them is assembled into a finished bench, and the other one is comprised of the eight panels that make up

the bench, separated, and leaning against the wall on the left side of the gallery. The posters that you see stacked on the shelf on the right side of the gallery show a photograph of the original bench that my sculptural replicas are based off of. They are exact to-scale copies of that bench you see in the image. On the other side of the poster is a letter, an undeliverable letter from me, to Dennis Croteau, the artist who made the bench who passed away in 1989. The fourth component of the exhibition is the performance that you saw today, with five performers including myself.



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. Image by Cassandra J. Rodriguez, Stealth Visuals, with additional photo support by Ethan Skaates.

DAVID J. GETSY As I've just seen the performance for the first time, this is not a full-fledged analysis, but I'm going to just go ahead and lead with an initial idea and then I'll unpack it. What compelled me most about the performance is how you offer—and this is going to sound grand—what we might call a “poetics of the interpersonal.” By that I mean that, throughout the performance, we slowly and carefully get to know this unique sculptural object in a way that mirrors your own process of research. In getting to know something in all its uniqueness through the actions of the performers, one learns to ask what are the relations it can offer us? What are the resistances it can offer us? Where does it accommodate us? All of this seems to be a way of thinking about not just a set of physical relations but also as a modeling of an ethics and a poetics of the interpersonal. That is my initial response to it, but I'd love to talk about the history of your encounter with Dennis Croteau's work. There was a lot of melancholy associated with the performance for me as well, because of that history. How did you get to know Croteau and the object?

GH This piece started out as a continuation of my series of works that are replicas of found pieces of furniture. This series of replica sculptures is governed by rules: I have to encounter the object by accident, I can't go shopping or looking for it, it has to be handmade and one of a kind, and I have to be

unable to figure out who made it. This project started out this way. My friend had a photo of the bench, and I asked her to bring me to see it person in the yard of her grandparents' home in Clinton, New Jersey. Her grandfather explained that the bench was a sculpture which he had bought from the Boston-based dealer Joan Sonnabend in the '80s, but he couldn't recall the name of the person who made it. Over the next few months, with the help of various members of the family I learned that the bench was a sculpture made by a largely unknown artist named Dennis Croteau who worked during the '70s and '80s. I got into researching him and learning everything I could about him, speaking with some of his friends. I learned a lot but there were other things I couldn't find out, like what the bench is called and when exactly he made it, and how. I found out that Dennis passed away from complications related to AIDS in '89.

DG Your earlier replica series—just for the audience who might not know—are much simpler objects.

GH And smaller.

DG And smaller. They share certain traits but not at this scale. It's interesting to hear how your research process necessarily had to expand in order to try and fill in what you could about the person who made the bench. But again, I feel like that process is also built into the structure of the performance, with its actions repeated again and again. You walk us through as viewers, helping us to get to know this bench. For example, there's the moment when you're saying, “1:00, 2:00, 3:00...” giving us the position on the edge as one would with a clock. I started thinking, “OK, the positions should all be equally spaced,” and then I began to see that your body was placed in different positions and spacings necessitated by the bench's angles. It's a way of teaching us to get to know this thing. If I asked those of us in the audience to describe the bench now, as opposed to at the beginning of the performance, we could do it a lot better because we've been staring at it and watching the ways that bodies relate to those angles. I love the slowness of that getting to know. It's mysterious, opaque, odd, particular, all of those things, but it's also... We have an intimacy that has been established through the performance. But I want to step back from the performance to talk about how this works when the performance is not happening—for viewers looking at the sculpture who have not seen the performance. I think this dynamic is still there. Could you talk a little bit more about how you see the installation when it's not being activated?

GH I primarily make sculptures, and about half of them have performances that originate

in them and happen with them/on them/around them. I feel stubborn about not putting documentation of performances in the exhibition with the sculptures. I have a variety of reasons for this, but part of that is what you are pointing to, which is that I set out to make the objects themselves do the much of the work of the exhibition. The performances can elaborate, deepen, refocus; but my hope is that a lot of it is already there in the sculptures. Perhaps if I go to the beginning and ask myself, “What is behind this desire to replicate a piece of furniture?” The answer is that, for me, making a copy of something is the best way to get to know it. Because you have to get close enough to it to understand how it fits together. For me there's no other way. I think the closest parallel would be, for people who draw, drawing a portrait of something or someone. You actually look at the thing, possibly for the first time (although I don't draw so I don't know a lot about this). And so in this exhibition I have tried to reproduce that process, in having the two different versions of it where you can see how it comes apart and fits together. When you look at the assembled version you can put together, sort of, which pieces are which and so you start flipping them around in your mind, right? Upside down, and horizontally, and vertically. I'm trying to push the viewer to do some perceptual work that involves becoming more acquainted with, intimate with, knowledgeable about this object in a way that mirrors and condenses how I did.



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DG What I love about your work is that it so quietly distills this process down for viewers, but it also demands time. For example, there are those odd shapes that are all along the wall—unorthodox shapes that we are not used to seeing. They appear arbitrary if it

were not for the meaning that has been given to them by Croteau and you. And so, we slowly unpack their particularities and their relations, and they start to increase in recognition and particularity as we see that one is a support, the other is supported, here is where they lock, and so on. All of that is kept on a formal level but it's a way to distill the slow way we actually get to know something—and how the thing gains meaning through its repetition. But, all of this greater knowledge of the sculpture comes also through the use, its parts, its repetitions, and everything working together. This does take some time. It's not a quick exhibition to go through, right? I had to start to compare and contrast and look deeply in order to situate myself—both alone in the installation and also when I was viewing the performance. The things that I thought were merely odd at first and confusing or perhaps a little mute began to speak, slowly. I started seeing how they relate to each other and everything else in the room. Even when just considering the installation alone, we must go through a process of finding particularity through recognizing repetition and its variations. That back and forth between different ways of trying to understand the same object is crucial not just to the performance but also to the installation—especially with the gesture to a space and time outside of the gallery through the back and forth between the image on the poster and your sculpture. We start to compare and contrast, seeing a glimpse of the life of this form in other places.

GH Can I interject something?

DG Sure!

GH I was just reflecting on this in relation to the performance that just took place. This work, in particular, is probably the most pared back thing I've made. There are just a few elements in the show, the formal language is quite reduced, the performance moves along slowly, and there is a lot of repetition in the objects and the movement. I'm not sure how it comes across to the viewer, but for me it's an ongoing battle to try to resist my temptation to give more to look at, to make it more entertaining. I'm not interested in boredom, exactly, but I am interested in providing a pace which feels really different from the pace of the surrounding world, especially right now. So much stuff is constantly happening, a million things at once, visually and in every other sense. For me making work and seeing work has become a way of retraining my own perception so that I can move more slowly, or look more closely at things. This show, I think it does ask a lot of the viewer: the silence of the performance, the repetition, and concrete sculptures. Perhaps to the viewer this reduction could

seem like a forgone conclusion, but for me it's a constant process of remaining committed to it, despite often feeling some type of pressure to give more.



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DG That reticence, that slowness that you impose on the viewing situation is part of the politics of the work. It demands from the viewer commitment, to get to know, to understand what one can understand from looking and thinking and spending time. For me that's one of the lessons of your work more broadly—to think about how a commitment to viewing the work is rewarded by the objects that at first seem opaque or that have their back turned to you. This is what I was talking about when I used this grand phrase “the poetics of the interpersonal.” It's like friendship or love—the longer one spends getting to know the object of that love, attention transforms towards intimacy. And this getting-to-know takes time, and I feel like that's the deliberate slowness you produce in the work. You refuse to be simply pedagogical with the work or to fully illustrate your research practice. Many other artists use an array of tactics to quickly reveal everything so that it can catch fleeting and distracted attention and be immediately categorized (and consumed). Your work, however, seems to me to be quite intentionally moving away from that. You are creating this ethical situation with formal objects as a way of teaching us how the ways we look at unfamiliar art objects can model the ways we relate as persons to each other. Maybe we can talk about the title of the work?

GH The title comes from a quote from the artist Scott Burton. Would you be so kind as to give a short summary of who Scott Burton was for people who are not familiar with his work?

DG Gladly. Scott Burton could be described as polyglot in the art world. He started as an art critic and wrote some very important art criticism, and then for 10 years was a performance artist who, in this time, also started to make sculptures of furniture

that functioned as furniture. In the late 70's and early 80's he pivoted to public art, motivated by his belief in trying to make an anti-elitist, open, and accessible form of artistic practice. The Atrium of the Wiesner Center has at its center the benches and the balustrade that Scott Burton designed for it. It's a sculpture that we've all been sitting on and walking through. The works are intentionally camouflaged, invisible, hard to see, but they are based on Burton's own long-running investigation into behavioral psychology, the cybernetic study of body language, the dynamics of how to use space in different ways. All of this, again, is a kind of slow research practice that ends up in these fairly simple, reductive, geometric forms that are meant to provide spaces for you to relate, to linger, to engage. He's another artist whose move into functional sculpture came from a real investigation of performance practices, but also the everyday performances that we do when we relate to each other nonverbally. The other thing that's important about Burton's work is that he was a critic of minimalism and also one of the primary post-minimal artists. He was working along the same lines as the female post-minimalists who explored the formal reduction of minimalism not as a way to create universals but, rather, to make space for difference. Minimalism's idea is that you take something and reduce it to its simplest forms intentionally in order to bore you into paying attention to the way you're relating to the space and the object. So that's the cliché of what a minimalist cube is supposed to do. But artists such as Scott Burton, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Jackie Winsor are part of an alternate history of trying to take that shift from the artist to the viewer and introduce into it the possibility of the personal, of difference, and even of resistance. But the story of this work has been downplayed or sidelined in the kind of heroic art histories of minimalism into post-minimalism into contemporary art. In Burton's case, part of that is because of the AIDS crisis. That connects up with the themes of your work for the List. More generally, this alternate history of one tendency within postminimalism reminds us of the ways in which the idea of formal reduction had all of this potential that was explored by artists who were interested in questions of difference. With the distance of history those politics are harder to see immediately, however, I know.

GH I'll just indulge a little bit and say Burton's work, there's a sexuality to it. There are various coded, sexual ways of relating via objects and interpersonal relationships. You introduced me to Burton's work and your research on him has been so valuable for me in understanding these layers. For

me, as an art student during the late '90s through the 2000s, the version of minimal and post minimal work that included Scott Burton was largely written out of what we were taught. I got the impression that as young artists, if we were interested in identity we should be interested in *those* kinds of artists, and if we're interested in formalism we'd be interested in *these* kinds of artists. And of course all of this is based on the presumption that the political and the formal are clearly identifiable and discrete categories. Ultimately for me this version of art history didn't compute. Scott Burton has been very important for me, not just because I'm really excited about the work itself, but also because I am interested in why certain artists are remembered and historicized and other ones not. How are these stories told? Who got to be the authority on this particular cannon? Why then as a young queer student of art did I feel like the work I was interested in was not the work I was supposed to be interested in? That's why I was excited to learn about this alternate history and Burton's way of making. At any rate, the title—I had to go all the way around... Burton had a series of three performance works in the '70s called the *Behavior Tableaux* performances. In these performances, groups or individual performers were moving in slow motion and silence, sometimes naked, sometimes clothed, often wearing platform shoes, in relation to furniture. And then the audience was made to sit 80 feet away from the performance, so not only was this thing extremely silent and slow and long, it was really far, quite far away. And all the chairs, a little bit like today, all the chairs are put ttt,ttt,ttt,ttt,ttt [gestures to describe close proximity of chairs] so you're basically touching the person next to you in the audience. So there is all of this potentially awkward, or maybe not, you know, whatever that is, accidental touching. And in an interview Burton was asked what his intention was in organizing the audience for these performances in this way. His answer was that "in the *Behavior Tableaux* what I want people to become aware of is the emotional nature of the number of inches between them." He was talking about *these* inches. [Gestures at shoulder] So for me that little phrase, "the number of inches between them," popped off the page as a way of talking about the both physical and symbolic space between people, but also in the work itself; all of the measurements of bench, the way the pieces of it fit together, the way it relates to the other objects that are lined up against the wall, and the distance between them as well. And so, it just turned into a way of talking about this question of distance between various things, both literally and in a more expanded

sense. Further, the fact the Scott Burton and Dennis Croteau both died from AIDS in the same year, 1989, helped me feel that there was some connection between them, perhaps a mysterious, or eerie, one. I did learn that Burton and Croteau were acquaintances, but I haven't been able to find out more. I had already been thinking of, I mean I've been working with furniture, different kinds of platforms, and things that hold up people's bodies, but this bench had taken on extra significance for me in terms of thinking about bodily vulnerability, the kinds of dependencies we have on each other, what support means, both physical support and symbolic or metaphorical, or infrastructural or emotional support. And so the AIDS crisis announced itself as part of this project in a way that resonated with what I was already thinking about while beginning to make it.



Scott Burton, *Pair Behavior Tableaux*, February 24–April 4, 1976. © 2007 Estate of Scott Burton / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

DG The *Behavior Tableaux* performances were based on Burton's interest in behavioral psychology and body language but also in his experience of street cruising and of silent signals of desire. Cruising signals are conveyed by people who are also looking for them from others underneath the veil of normal movements and gestures on the street. Burton was trying to produce an analogy between the performers' movements and the either awkward or exciting relations that are established amongst the audience members at the same time. So, these dynamics go back and forth. I think one of the things that's useful about Burton as a kind of analogy is that he also drew from an experience of sexuality and queer culture to make work that sometimes figured these themes. But he also was trying to think about how this relationship to the normative—to the rules that we're told about how we're supposed to be—actually allowed one to think about a larger politics or ethics of relations among people. It starts with questions of sexuality and moves to questions of sociality, and that dynamic is played out in part because the private—the so-called private realm of sexuality—is always highly legislated. He realized that just by thinking about the power dynamics of that situation he could think more expansively. One of the things,

just to pivot back to your performance, that I find so interesting is, for me, the context of Dennis Croteau dying in 1989 of AIDS seemed to me to have kicked the performance into a certain set of emotional questions, at least for a viewer like me, in which the life of the bench was being thematized by the different relations that happen through the performances. With the first performer, we are looking at someone basically looking at us, but they are also feeling their inside, thinking about their own body. Suddenly we move to the kind of rapid succession of the other two performers who are seated with their backs toward us. It would be so easy to stop with that and have us have the same kind of identification, to look over the shoulders of those performers and think, "oh this is that pastoral moment" where someone is looking into the distance. But you didn't give us that. No, it was just the repetition of these movements, and I suddenly thought, in the middle of this, that this was a way of thinking about all of the different relations in this bench's life. The movement around and the repetition started to get a different rhythm to it, and then when the time signatures are put in: "1:00, 2:00..." the passage of time, and the bodies came back in relation to the bench, and the ones who left. All of that playing out in my experience of the performance. When we think about the erotics of this work, it's not a simple figuration of the erotic, but rather the build-up through a body over its many different stages in relationship to the other bodies that come in contact with it. And so, it has this beautiful way of containing these moments that spoke to intimacy and eroticism, but always using that to push toward this larger question of getting to know this object's particularities. It also staged the ways in which this bench produced its intimacies and relations through its odd angles and forms. Relatedly, and you didn't know this since this is a really obscure Scott Burton thing I'm going to tell you: The Wiesner Center benches were Burton's attempt to be pedagogical. When you go outside you'll see this lower curved bench and behind it is this settee with a back and behind that is the balustrade which blocks off the stairs, the railing. It was his way of showing how one form and function could become another. There is a side story of the building codes he had to navigate so there are some things that don't look exactly as he wanted to... but the idea was that that bench and that settee are both the same form and different. It's illustrating a transformation, and he said this is like a dialectic—it's one plus two equals this third term that has both of those things in it. So that's what's going on outside in the Atrium. But it's the same kind of syntax that you offer with the

work in the gallery in which these forms gain their meaning through their relations and repetitions with each other and then begin to transform with their uses. I love that by having this formal reduction and structural unpacking of this object, you prompt us to get to know these forms by showing us what they do in relation to each other. There are all of these connections on the themes of transformation and use that connect with the Burton works that are right outside of the door. So I love that. Sorry to geek out on this.

- GH** I'm just realizing, reflecting on what just happened and hearing you talk about it, that perhaps there are two main affectations in the performance. I'm not sure I set out for them to be there, but I see them now. One of them is grief and grieving. And I guess I separate them that way because thinking of the performance—the moment when they're doing this round of sitting and one of the performers finishes before the other one, there's perhaps a lot of grief in that—leaving and having to finish something by yourself. But then also I have thought about the performance, but also the exhibition overall, as a space of grieving provided for the viewers, whatever grieving there is to do, as a quiet space. The way this gallery doesn't have any windows and is always exactly the same, and the wooden bench by the door that we made for the exhibition for there is a place for the viewers to sit and look and read the letter, and it is the same height as the concrete bench. So, both grief and grieving. Then there is an erotics, or a sexuality, playing out between the performers, the way we move together and watch each other move, and in the way the audience is asked to watch our bodies. But also, and perhaps more importantly to me, there is an erotics of relating to an inanimate object. I was thinking about all of the intimacies one has with furniture in one's life, and especially in illness or as we age, this intimacy gets amplified as we become more and more reliant on the objects of your life in order to be sustained. So, in this work there is grief and there is sexuality, and I am thinking of them as very intertwined in this work. Perhaps the pin that holds them together is something about objectification. When does a body go from being a subject to being an object? What are the different ways that bodies can be objects in some very damaging ways and some very reparative or pleasurable ways? What is it to be looked at by other people, to have your body looked at? How is it different for different people to have our bodies looked at?
- DG** These strands do come together, because when you think about a life... it's all about the series of intimacies and relations that make it up. This is a way of thinking about something like love: It's always painful

because it will always end. Because two people together cannot always be together. And the two—erotics and grief—are closely related, and I think that gets played out in these moments in your performance when the performers get out of synch with each other. The movement of the performance enacts moments of support, intimacy, and also being past and getting out of synch. This happens with the performers both physically with the object and interpersonally with each other. This leads me to a question: Would you talk a little bit about your decision to cast your performers as older people?

- GH** Yes. There are a number of reasons—the main one being that I wanted to have the bodies in the performance be bodies that are already in a relation of reliance on various kinds of support and assistance. There is a vulnerability to aging that feels like a crucial ingredient here. But also, personally, it has been a way to just get to know, even a little bit, people who are in different parts of their life than I am. It has really been special. And it has helped me think about what is to come, what happens in a long life, and about parts of life many people didn't and don't get to experience. So it's about the performance but then it's also about the relationships that go into making it.

- DG** One of the impacts of the AIDS crisis, for everybody, is that it made certain kinds of intergenerational contact and friendships very difficult. When a huge segment of the population is suddenly removed from it, that affects everybody individually and the culture more broadly. There's a lot of work that is being done to reestablish these kinds of intergenerational friendships. And it does take work but that's also part of the research that went into your piece, too. After all, this bench is such an opaque object because of the AIDS crisis. People and memories have been lost. And that's part of our duty to repair those gaps. But I hope that we can end it on a happier note with some audience questions, especially since the performers have joined us in the audience. Does anyone have any questions for Gordon?

AUDIENCE Earlier you said something about three categories in the replica sculptures. Why those three things?

- GH** I think the first time it happened, it happened by accident. And then I noticed that there were guidelines actually built into what I did, so thought I'd try to do it again. More generally speaking, perhaps if I make the criteria for my decision making very narrow I can be creative within them.

AUDIENCE But why not polka dots? Why those three things? You know what I mean, why those three things exactly?

- GH** Why furniture? Why handmade? And why anonymous?

- DG** I can see from your pause you've got too many answers to each of these questions. If you'll allow me, I can offer an answer based on my external perspective on your work and our previous conversations.

GH Go ahead.

- DG** Well, furniture because... furniture is a really powerful form; it's anthropomorphic. It's made to be in relationship to our bodies. Chairs have arms, legs, back, feet—all of these things. And so furniture is always a way to conjure a body, and it is empty without us. Furniture always evokes the bodily relation. So, it seems to me that for an artist who's thinking about questions of the interpersonal, and the social, and the bodily—and how we think about the particularity of bodies—furniture does seem like a natural choice. The particular or odd object is also about these same kinds of thematics. When you encounter something that seems to be like nothing else in the world, the only way you can understand it is by taking bits of other things and saying, "this looks kind of like that, this looks kind of like that," and trying to make sense of it. But the more time you spend time you force yourself to get to know something for itself, rather than for the category that it's in.

- GH** Yes! Getting to know a specific object instead of a category of objects. Perhaps the recreating of these objects is a way of caring about them... the world's filled with objects we don't pay attention to and this is a way of providing some care for them.

- DG** And the handmade... I think just like because of the intimacy in that—being able to see something as an intentional object, one where you can see the ways the person who made it put it together... to accommodate for the messiness of the material, which gives it its own history.

- GH** Hearing you say that makes me realize that maybe the answer is that all three of these things are ways that bodies are present even when they are not present. Every piece of furniture conjures a ghost, the presence of a body that uses it.

AUDIENCE Earlier you were talking about the way in which minimal form, at a moment in high modernism, was essentially kind of didactic. The way in which it was really set on asking the viewer to consider themselves in relation to this very minimal thing. And then as you've been talking that seems to be returning, in my mind, especially in relationship to the didactic nature of asking us to remember specific people during a specific time, making specific objects for specific purposes. It feels as much like you're teaching yourself these things as much as it does about eventually maybe teaching an audience? And those are definitely not the same thing. Like I see autodidacticism as

sort of an auto-erotics in you putting this show together. I'm wondering if you can speak to the difference in those two things. In the difference between the experience of teaching yourself maybe as a person from a particular generation and the experience of, maybe, imagining an audience and imagining maybe that you have something that you can teach them.

GH That's a really good question. It makes me want to start by saying that, perhaps, I think of being an artist as a way of learning things. Including learning how to do things with my body that I didn't know. Like how to make stuff out of concrete. But also in the processes of self-transformation that are part of realizing each project. I have an uneasy feeling about trying to teach viewers. Why do I have this feeling? I think I'm more interested in providing a space that has some possibilities in it. Some of which are more logical and open up easily and others of which are harder to find. That feels like all I can do.

AUDIENCE I was struck by the many systems that announce themselves as ready-made invitations to intuit the entire system. Like the clock starts and we know where it's going. You do one pass through your choreography, and when it comes back we know what's going to happen. The shapes are like tangrams that we can fit together in our minds and reorganize them. So it does feel like an invitation to teach ourselves, not just an invitation to be told what to pay attention to.

DG I agree, that's very much part of it. Because then the second time you do that series of movements without saying "1:00, 2:00, 3:00" we've learned what it means, which is the same way that we learn what those odd polyhedrons start to mean the longer we look at them. Maybe the word that is kind of hanging us up on this is the idea of the didactic. I always think that for me, the best recent art models a relationship with the world. The viewer engages with that modeling, and can choose to take it on themselves and to learn from it or to reject it, but it's different from teaching it, in a one-directional, didactic way. It's actually about how Gordon's performance itself goes through this process of getting to know the Croteau object as a way of modeling for us what that might look like with something or someone else.

AUDIENCE I want to agree with that. As a gallery attendant in the gallery talking about this process with some people who come in who have a variety of interactions with the work. Once they learn the story of the work, and see and feel the appreciation and fascination that you have with the original sculpture enough to make two whole sets of sculptures of it. Often, I try to point out the pieces outside in the atrium

that are also sculptures that they may have walked by or sat on, and didn't realize were sculptures. I have the hope that they are able to mirror that process with whatever objects, furniture, they have in their lives. Especially knowing that the piece is found in an authentic way and whatever they happen upon they might mirror that process.

YS I want to bring up something that didn't come up in the conversation that I really love. David, you mention this idea of friendship and this sort of interconnectedness and I thought, Gordon, maybe you could talk about how this piece is sort of unique for you in terms of the other objects that you've made, and not only the weight of this work, physically, but also sort of the means in which it's erected.

GH There's a bunch of things that make this unique. Primarily, this is the first work that I've ever made that explores the work of a particular other artist, and that's because of how it happened, and it might never happen again. So there is an interpersonal part to this that is different from other works of mine. And then, these sculptures are obviously very heavy and hard to move around. I kept chuckling because I always had this kind of assumption that "making heavy sculpture is really macho," but also, it is really vulnerable, because I can't do things by myself. I'll be in my studio, and I can't lift any of the panels except for the little triangular one. Once they go into the molds and cure into a solid, I can't do anything with them by myself. I have to get someone to come and help me get it out of the mold, and help me flip it over, help to wrap it, help to put it in the truck, and then to put the bench together takes seven people. Some of these people in this room now have been through this with me. The seat has to go down onto the legs, and it weighs 320 pounds, and everything has to be in the exact right location for the notches to line up to hold it together. For me I really found this whole experience to be one of vulnerability, of finding myself in position that felt powerless in relationship to the weight of this work and having to ask for so much help from people. I found this vulnerability to be really difficult. I'm the kind of person who likes to do things by myself and not feel reliant on others. But the process of making this work ended up teaching me some of the stuff that the work was about, weirdly. Because I found myself in the position of needing support and needing help even to just do basic stuff like putting one part of it into my car. It was very moving for me, when the rage and powerlessness I felt gave way to feeling like I was embodying the logic of the work in my own emotions as I went through making it and showing it. It

taught me about bodily vulnerability and the necessity of relying on the care of others.

YS I suppose I ask for you to bring it up because as the curator, maybe a little behind the curtain; we had seven preparators to help construct this bench and one of our preparators didn't make it that day, called out, so I stepped in to help. For months prior I had been thinking about, and writing about, and talking to Gordon about these systems of support, and ideas about vulnerability, and all of these ideas felt somewhat abstract, or distant, but it wasn't until I was holding the top of the thing, shoulder to shoulder with John the other preparator, and there's Ariana, and our registrar and other members of staff holding different pieces all together...

GH And everyone started bickering!

YS We were sort of running around and checking because it also had to be level. I had to laugh because I'm standing there holding this incredibly heavy concrete slab and it felt like such a natural execution of these ideas that we had been talking about for so long.

GH It's making me realize that it's such an embodiment of the role of the curator. In doing this show together you have been in the role of holding my work but also my thoughts and feelings and the life that I put into making it. And that holding became literal. And very heavy!

YS What I love about this exhibition is that there are so many layers that slowly reveal themselves—I continued to discover new aspects—as they slowly revealed themselves over the course of the work being on view and now the performance has added yet more to consider.

NEW FORMS OF KINSHIP

2018. Conversation with Orlando Tirado for *Critical Correspondence*, published by Movement Research.

ORLANDO TIRADO It is interesting that we are talking about family. Gordon, I consider you my family, partly because I have seen you through so many changes and evolutions, the way I have seen my own brother and sister, and because you have been there when I (beat) didn't know I needed you.

GORDON HALL It is true that we are a kind of family, even as we drift further and closer together over the years through all our changes. I have been thinking and reading about kinship, about what it means to create long-lasting relations outside of the biologically reproducing family, and how to exist within these relationships over time I think these have always been urgent questions for people, especially gay people, but I also

think that as a world we need to be thinking about how to better care for each other, how to better care for all the people on earth, and to be pursuing modes of kinship that don't necessitate the creation of new lives. So this kind of expanded thinking about kinship feels very necessary to me right now, which includes kinship with non-human beings and inanimate objects. I am really excited about a new book co-edited by Donna Haraway and Adele Clarke called *Making Kin not Population*, which takes up these questions in a variety of beautiful and politically urgent ways.

OT When I think of the word “family” I think about caves and evolution of the species, about that primitive survival instinct before we had language for objects, but we were creating tools. I say this because in hindsight, your work seems to be located between object, kinship, and language to me. Where in the past, you called attention to certain postures to reveal a kind of politics and you undercut the utility, value, or place of rudimentary objects (like shims or benches) to show how they support, adjust, and altogether delineate how our bodies inhabit space. You called attention to interiority and exteriority with an underlying concern for the welfare of the body. But *Brothers and Sisters*, the group of works you made for the Renaissance Society last year, feels very personal. The objects here are your collection. And this is the moment you have chosen to share them with us. And somehow we feel special because of that. Why did you choose to title the performance *Brothers and Sisters*? Can you talk more about your choice and what “brothers and sisters,” or siblings, means to you?



Brothers and Sisters, 2018. Cast concrete, poplar, colored pencil, hand-dyed fabric, and carved brick. Performance for one mover and four singers, 34 min. Commissioned by The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, IL. Photo by Meg T. Noe.

GH The title *Brothers and Sisters* came from learning about the Shakers, the millenarian Christian sect that flourished in the US in the mid-1800s. Shaker society was celibate, and all the members of the groups lived in houses together as “brothers” and “sisters,” often in identical but mirror-image rooms across the hall from one another. I feel admiration for many aspects of Shaker life, especially their devotion to craft as a form of worship. And

it's interesting that the dwindling of Shaker society was, at least in part, brought on by increasingly conservative laws around what kinds of relationships can be considered families and who can adopt children, which is a really interesting intersection with queer politics in this otherwise utterly traditional setting. So I wanted to honor and reference the Shakers, but I also wanted to point to the kind of lateral, different-from-the-same relationships that are indicative of sibling-hood, because those are the kinds of relationships that I am trying to produce between the sculptures, as well as between the sculptures and my body in making them and using them in performance. I feel that in some sense the sculptures are brothers and sisters with one another, and also with me. And finally, even though the phrase “brothers and sisters” is very gendered, it leaves open the possibility that a single being could be both, or one and then the other, as I have been. And, as you know, I am very intertwined with my own biological brother and sister.

OT Thank you for that. I have become increasingly more interested in the many ways relationships with objects transcend the material. We have theorized the “transitional object,” but I am still fascinated by how meaning is embedded in the primal fantasies that create a bond, a bond that is always in crisis, a bond that is almost always a projection with the objects we love-hate. How do you differentiate between a real can of soda and the can shaped object you doted upon as part of your performance?

GH I think what I am interested in is the way that a functional object, when stripped of its function, becomes perceivable as an object in its own right. When I don't know what to do with something I stop trying to use it in the right way and feel invited to use it otherwise. Like resting my hand on the concrete can, or throwing one of my concrete mugs through a glass window. Just kidding, I've never actually done the latter, but I feel enthusiastic about this moment of weirdness with a thing when it is both recognizable and unfamiliar.



Mug (white), 2018. Cast concrete, 4½ × 4½ × 4 in. Photo courtesy of Document, Chicago.

OT When I met your family for the first time, I got the impression you grew up around

erudite people who were fundamentally interested in language, meaning, and culture in a way that I found to be very fun. Will you explain what happens to an object when it is perceived and language becomes an integral part of our understanding of that object, or perception?

GH Coming from a very academic and language-focused family, and coming up in our education system that separates the linguistic from the spatial, it has been important to me to figure out ways to bridge the gap between language-use and object-use. I am guessing you can relate to this, because anyone who finds themselves straddling disparate ways of working, or disparate kinds of academic departments, feels the chasm that gets set up between these realms, when there are really so many points of overlap. For example, a pair of parentheses have a linguistic meaning, (the creation of an aside) but they also have a spatial function (the creation of a little word room in the midst of the sentence.) I couldn't help but wonder about what would happen if I could hold the parentheses on my hands, and stand inside them as if I was the word. A whole world opened up for me when I started relating to language with my body, in the studio, and as a writer. Do you have thoughts about this institutional and experiential gap between the linguistic and the aesthetic, given your work in philosophy, studio art, and film?

OT I often think about the challenges that change the original meaning of certain symbols and gestures through appropriation. As a collagist and filmmaker, the question of what can be said through images that cannot be said out-loud, for whatever reason, is always at the forefront of my thinking. As a cut-and-paste collagist, I've learned the hard lesson that repeating the aesthetics of Fascism does not disempower them; nevertheless, I feel the important impulse as an artist to reinvent, confront, and de-stabilize dominant aesthetics. Yet, some shapes seem very stuck in their -ness, like a +, or a phallus, or the acronym S.O.S. In your opinion, are these shapes and objects lost or can we reclaim them?

Your work suggests we can.... Should we? If so, how?

GH This is an interesting question, and I'm not sure about the answer. I need to believe that no symbol, image, or word is beyond our ability to challenge, even if the effort is futile. For example, it is fundamentally important for many transgender people to use words that are different than the ones that everyone else uses for things that seem commonsensical, like pronouns, or names for gendered body parts. But, even if people try to make us feel like we are speaking nonsense, we need to keep asserting that just because everyone

uses a particular name for something, it doesn't mean we need to call it that too, if that makes sense. So, while I don't think it is always possible to maneuver within extremely sedimented ways of understanding, looking, or naming, there are situations where we have to just keep trying.

OT In the *Brothers and Sisters* performance, the sweat that formed a UU-shape on your shirt at one point led me to perceive the shape on the painting behind you. The moment was fleeting, yet there it was, a shape that is alphabetic and part of a universal grammar that means a few different things. That quandary, or epiphany, led me to think about the vantage points in the space and how a multitude of meaning was being created by connecting sounds, gestures, and object-shapes. We learn to do this as children and it's how we become very logical and logistical. In learning to read we open a Pandora's box, but we bury the most primal creativity we are born with. As in: This is this and that is that. Your work seems to want to undo that a bit, so we can perceive differently...

GH Yes. Although I don't find language to be the problem, because I believe that we are fundamentally linguistic creatures. I think the problem is that language is separated from bodies and things and then elevated above them, used to explain, and, often, explain away. There are other ways to think about language as an extension of gesture, and not as a translation of meaning. One of my favorite essays is Merleau-Ponty's "The Body as Expression and Speech" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. I love the way he describes language as a fundamental capacity of bodies.

OT Recently, I was a participant in mandatory Sexual Harassment training, and the presenter kept referring to the word "gesture" as "guessture," and although I think it was just an unconventional pronunciation, it similarly it made me think of the relationship between gestures, guessing, and meaning. As you know, I have a deaf brother and I know ASL. You are learning ASL right now. The sign for "family" is one of my favorites because it cannot be mistaken for any other sign. How has learning ASL changed you?

GH Well I am feeling sheepish right now because I have not been practicing as much since last spring, just because it has been feeling hard to make time for everything I want to do in life, and I have been trying to not spread myself so thin all the time. And I also hesitate because there are so many tacky examples of hearing artists using ASL in their work in ways that are tokenising or inaccurate. So I won't be using ASL in my work in this way. But it has affected what I am doing and how I experience the relationships between language, expression, bodies,

and objects. I started learning because of the artist Joseph Grigely, who co-founded the MA in Visual and Critical Studies that I attended at SAIC, and who I worked for as his studio assistant while I was in school, and also because of an event I organized with Christine Sun Kim at Recess, through which we became friends. Really I just wanted to be able to talk with these two amazing deaf friends. I have so many thoughts about ASL but the main thing is just that it is quite possibly a superior language than spoken English—more expressive, detailed, and economical, and I wish it were taught in all K–12 schools so that we were all at least bilingual. This would be great for deaf people, but also for hearing people to communicate better, to converse in noisy places, and also for people who lose their hearing as they get older—if everyone spoke ASL we could seamlessly shift into this stage of life together without the isolation produced by late in life hearing loss. So, basically it is incredible, and also very humbling to learn a new language and fumble along as I learn.

OT To my mind, your performance brings human interpretation to the most base level, and though the art looks clean and all the gestures are tethered, careful, and slow, we are forced to perform mental gymnastics that are rather labored and uncomfortable. It is a point of critique that I too have faced from people who go see performance or film and expect entertainment, immediate gratification, and hate living in confusion. But in my experience, the confusion I get from your work becomes such an embodied part of me that I realize something about your work years after my initial encounter. For example, I was in the performance *STAND AND*, in which we enacted a movement score that was all about various kinds of leaning, but I only understood what leaning truly meant when I started working behind a counter at a French cafe, doing service work on the clock, which made me understand that the performance was not merely whimsical, but socially conscious, even political. I wonder if it is just me, or if others have felt that... How do you think about the people who interact with your work? What is your wish for them?

GH My work is certainly slow, and quiet, and a little bit stubborn. It wants you to look at it but isn't necessarily going to look back. I want the viewers to feel like witnesses. My wish is for people to see something that is beautiful but in a way that feels unfamiliar, or familiar from a distant future or past time. I hope the work helps slow down their viewing, so they can relax into looking and being in the space with objects and other bodies. I need my work to do these things for myself also—I make it because I learn from it how to stay in the perceptual mode I want

to be in. So it is as much for me as it is for the viewers. I don't see these things as opposed. And it would be incredible if anyone was still thinking about something I made years afterwards. I'm very amazed to hear that being in that work affected you in this way.

OT Tell me, why have you chosen such a challenging mode of address for the viewer?

GH Art-making has been so crucial to living for me because it holds open the possibility that there are modes of sense-making that are not discernible to us at present, but might be. Abstract languages, whether in movement or objects or images, point towards another time and place in which different modes of sense making could prevail. And this belief is a really important part of surviving the day-to-day, in my experience. I find it always a welcome challenge to continue to try to see art and make art that is not immediately reducible to the ways of thinking we currently have available to us as a culture.



Gordon Hall and Octavius Neveaux, *Kneeling (Brick Object) (II)*, 2018. Brick and mortar, 10¼ × 11½ × 16½ in. Part of *Brothers and Sisters*, commissioned by The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL. Photo courtesy of David Zwirner New York.

THE UNSET

2016. Script for two voices presented as part of *The Unset*, Gordon Hall's "Frieze Frame" solo booth with Night Club, Chicago, IL, presented at Frieze New York, Randalls Island, NY. Composed from language found in booth planning emails between Gordon Hall and Matthew Steinbrecher of Night Club. Read once per day before rearranging the sculptures in *The Unset*.

what would you like me to be sitting on?
a folding chair

I think you need both a table and a chair
actually two chairs I think,
or a bench

to be arranged
in an infinite number of formations

if I build the furniture
if I move this extremely heavy round white marble table

a sort of floating

a set of two
in the future

coming out from one of the walls
two of the walls

the exact dimensions
of the meeting

we could do it together

if you want to bring things

to be respoken
or read aloud

very small still dances

like three people
a resting formation

leaning on each other with their eyes closed
for 5 minutes
after they leave



Seat (Yellow and Beige), 2016. Hand-glazed tile mosaic, 20 × 18½ × 12½ in. Originally presented as part of *The Unset* at Frieze New York, and re-presented in *Brothers and Sisters* at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, IL.

COLOPHON

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–Roya Amirsoleymani, Kristan Kennedy, Curators

PICA