

IN CONVERSATION  
Gordon Hall and B. Ingrid Olson



FIG. 1  
Level 1 of the  
Carpenter Center  
for the Visual  
Arts, Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

GORDON HALL I'm curious about your experience getting to know the Carpenter Center over the past four years. What was your process of making work for this space?

B. INGRID OLSON During my first site visit, I was immediately attracted to Corbusier's use of materials, both the solidity of the cast concrete and the accentuated transparency of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Many aspects of the architecture seem to privilege form over function, which led me to think of the building as a kind of sculpture. This recategorization posed the problem of how to exhibit artworks in such a distinctive space that doesn't recede. Coincidentally, prior to beginning work on these exhibitions, I had already been engaged with a loose thread of Corbusier's narrative in his defacement of Eileen Gray's E-1027 house. So I knew right away that I wanted to address his occupation of her building, specifically the uninvited murals he painted on her walls.

GH It's special to be able to enter this narrative in such a physical way, making your work specifically to go inside one of his buildings. Has your thinking about it changed over the stretch of time you worked on these exhibitions?

BIO It has been a process of filtering and attenuating my responses to the building, and to Corbusier. I reconfigured my ideas for this project numerous times, the aim being to make a show that functions as a sort of transparent overlay of my work onto the space rather than making work that is explicitly, or solely, about the building, its history, or the architect.

GH You think about the space of the exhibition in a very relational way. The space and the work are in dialogue, each of them responding to the other. The building shapes the way one experiences your work, and your work, while it's up, shapes the way people experience the building. This is, of course, always the case when we put our work in an exhibition space, but this context makes it so much more explicit.

BIO Yes. I like thinking of the building and the artwork as being in a conversation, or even a relationship. If the dynamic is going well, both are highlighting things about each other and drawing out new things from one another.

GH Did you feel weighed down by the presence of such an iconic designer?

BIO It's easy to be overwhelmed by the significance of the building or Corbusier's persona, but I have tried to take what I need from the space, using it as fuel. Any conceptual weight has also been paralleled by the restrictions of working within a historically preserved building. For example, in the first-floor exhibition space, there is a large wall that is permanently painted a primary shade of red, and it is usually prohibited to install artwork on the walls, in order to preserve the "pure" experience of the architecture. Given my preexisting interest in the narrative of Gray's E-1027, I felt it was important to skirt the restrictions, and I decided to paint a white-toned mural over the wall (figs. 1, 2). This is the most direct address to the architect in the exhibition, yet it comes in the form of an almost blank wall.



FIG. 2  
Installation view,  
*Little Sister*,  
Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts,  
2022, showing  
*White Wall*, painted  
for Gray, 2022.  
Latex paint on  
a Le Corbusier  
wall, dimensions  
variable. Includes  
proof of *Note*,  
Gray (*Kiss the  
architect on the  
mouth and paint  
a black stripe  
laterally across her  
forehead*), 2018,  
gelatin silver print,  
staple



FIG. 3  
Rendering by  
B. Ingrid Olson,  
showing siting  
of the two  
exhibitions at  
the Carpenter  
Center, 2022

GH That's beautiful, and such an unexpected reversal—the white wall as a defacement. It's so subtle someone could miss it if they didn't know to look for it. I won't even ask how you got permission to do that!

BIO I think it would be an instance of asking forgiveness rather than permission, but I am not asking for either.

GH Your exhibition has branched into two, *History Mother* and *Little Sister*. Why did you feel it was necessary to break it up in this way?

BIO Early on, when I had just started working on the project, a friend sent me the book *Meander, Spiral, Explode* by Jane Alison.<sup>1</sup> In it she writes about narrative structures that are alternate to the standard narrative arc, such as collages, radials, or networks. The Carpenter Center's two exhibition spaces are separated by an entire floor, and are accessible to each other only by way of a stairwell or a large outdoor ramp (fig. 3). Thinking about the physical distance separating the two galleries and the noticeably different feeling of each space, as well as there being no predetermined hierarchy between them, I knew the exhibition had to be split into two. What started as a nominal idea became a way to exaggerate disparate qualities in my own work as well as in the architecture.

GH How would you describe the distinction between *History Mother* and *Little Sister*?

BIO Overall, *History Mother* has a more archival, distanced, even retrospective sensibility. *Little Sister* has a more present feeling—its works are site-responsive and particularly attuned to the experience of being a viewer or voyeur in the space.

GH And the shows include a combination of preexisting and brand-new work, yes? Which of the new works did you begin first?

BIO I started by working on the multipart sculpture *Proto Coda, Index*, which is the first work you encounter in *History Mother* (fig. 4). In some ways, this is like starting with the end. When writing, you index something after it has been written. But on the other hand, you also have to find your notes and references prior to writing. So, it is a kind of thought-circuit: beginning with an ending and ending back at the beginning.

GH Right. For a research-based piece of writing, one might compile all your research and then figure out how to put it into a narrative. In *Proto Coda, Index*, you are reproducing and combining several years of your wall-relief sculptures and installing them together in one space. How does it function as an index for you?

BIO *Proto Coda, Index* includes a newly carved MDF version of every relief-form I have made up to now combined into one artwork. Each form in the

<sup>1</sup> Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative* (New York: Catapult, 2019).



FIG. 4 B. Ingrid Olson, *Drawing for Proto Coda, Index*,  
2021. Graphite, ink, grease pencil, wax, vinyl paint,  
paper, 9 × 12 in. (23 × 30.5 cm)



FIG. 5

B. Ingrid Olson,  
*Of a curve, re,  
 dust on the surface*,  
 2010–14.  
 Dye-sublimation  
 print on  
 aluminum, inkjet  
 prints, acrylic,  
 transparency,  
 textile over  
 matboard,  
 aluminum, screws,  
 Plexiglas frame,  
 20 × 16 × 1 in.  
 (51 × 40.5 × 2.5 cm)

installation refers to a different body part and is installed on the wall at the height of its bodily referent. However, the hanging heights are measured to the proportions of the body of the person installing the work, who is not necessarily me. In this way, the installation functions as an indexical mark of an absent body, potentially a different body each time it is shown. But I also like the idea that as a comprehensive review of the relief series, this set of forms can function as an informational index. I have gathered all of the existing information together as a summary, but with no clear chronology, order, or set pacing.

GH All these bodily references, collapsed through time, coexisting in the same space . . . It reminds me of your layered photographs—seeing one image framed by another (fig. 5). A time within a time. How do you choose which images to use in your work? And once you’ve chosen them, how do you decide which go together and in what order they are layered?

BIO I usually pull aside an image when I have a feeling of surprise. The surprise might be that there is an unexpected aberration that occurred in some part of the photographic process, or, alternately, a feeling of openness that I get from the image itself.

GH What do you mean by openness?

BIO That there is room for more information to be put into the image. The factor of time also affects how I understand the images, allowing me to see an older image as though I were seeing it for the first time. Sometimes I haven’t been able to deal with an image or an idea right away. When I return to it later, it’s like opening up a box that was put away in a closet for a long time. It becomes like a time chute, instantly taking me to a different space in a different time, with different trash on my floor.

GH I’m intrigued by this experience of not being ready for an idea. I often read my studio notes from years ago and I find ideas there that I have had recently and thought were new. For whatever reason, I couldn’t make sense of them or commit to them in the beginning. The conditions weren’t right, around me or inside me. It’s funny that I forget about an idea and get excited about it when I have it again, thinking it’s brand-new.

BIO When you realize you’ve circled back to a previous idea, do you think of it as one continuous thought, or as though you are reapproaching the previous idea from a totally new perspective?

GH I think of it as a continuation of the same thought, but apparently there were other things that had to happen first in order for me to be ready to take it seriously and move forward with it. One of my work’s central questions regards the capacity of objects to create—what can an object make? And I answer it in different ways. When I am working on sculptures for an exhibition, the pieces make one another—each subsequent work comes from the others I’ve already made. And once the group of sculptures is complete, they “make” the movement that happens on and around them (my performances) (fig. 6). Or they “make” writing or speaking or invitations to other people to respond to them. So to answer your question, when



FIG. 6

Gordon Hall,  
*The Number  
 of Inches Between  
 Them*, 2017–18.  
 Pigmented cast  
 concrete,  
 two-sided color  
 poster multiple,  
 performance, 39:00  
 min. Performers:  
 Mary Bok  
 (pictured),  
 Gordon Hall, Mike  
 Peterson, Lou  
 Desautels, Danny  
 Harris

I rediscover an old idea perhaps what has happened is that the work that is the condition of possibility for its existence has now happened, whereas before it hadn't. Am I making sense?

BIO Yes, completely. Aside from reading studio notes, are there any other rituals or methods that you follow as you begin new work?

GH I wouldn't say I have any particular method, other than to just go to the studio and try not to leave before the end of the day. On the one hand, beginning a new body of work is so fun and exciting because anything feels possible and all ideas are on the table. On the other hand, I often feel unmoored, floating around and grasping for anything solid. I try to follow my authentic interest, attraction, sense of humor, intuition for beauty—whatever you want to call that desire to bring an object into the world. I almost never know why something is compelling to me, not until after I make it. I try really hard not to translate content-type ideas into artworks—they almost always turn out boring and one-dimensional. For example, right now in my studio there is a shoe-fitting stool—the kind that's chrome with a vinyl upholstered top and inverted mirrors below—and a concrete seated lion from a store near my house that sells cast-concrete animals for people's gardens. I don't know what I am doing with either of them yet, but they are the beginning of my next show. I'll take it one step at a time.

BIO It is an incubation process, right? A lot of my photographic work comes from that midpoint of figuring something out. When I present multiple images or materials together, the activity around sifting and compiling material is part of the work itself. In order to make one of my photographic works, I begin by combing through all of the images I've made, ranging from when I first started to take photographs in 2012 up to now (fig. 7). There are thousands to cull from.



FIG. 7  
Test prints in  
B. Ingrid Olson's  
studio

GH You are using your own photographic archive almost as found images. I believe the only found objects in either show are the light fixtures in *Little Sister*. What made you want to use those?

BIO Earlier this year, I came across the first photographs I'd ever taken. In 2012, when I was working at the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago, I made a number of close-up images of the light fixtures in the libraries' private stacks. The form of the fixtures feels out of time: the design was patented in the early 1930s, but it feels like it could be from closer to now, or even from the future. The metal shades are shell-like, or flower-like, and they also look like the imprint of some bodily crevice, which is aesthetically related to my reliefs (fig. 8). At the same time that I was revisiting these old images, I had already been thinking about replacing a single, purely functional, outdoor fixture at the Carpenter Center that was installed on an outdoor wall like a sconce. I wanted to change it into something more sculptural and ornamental, like an interruption of Corbusier's building. Remembering the library lights, I realized I could transpose an element of my past into the present exhibition. I eventually decided to replace all of the lights on the first floor, inside and out, with these library light fixtures. By doing this, I am making elements of the building that are almost invisible—or at least marginal—more pronounced, peculiar, and

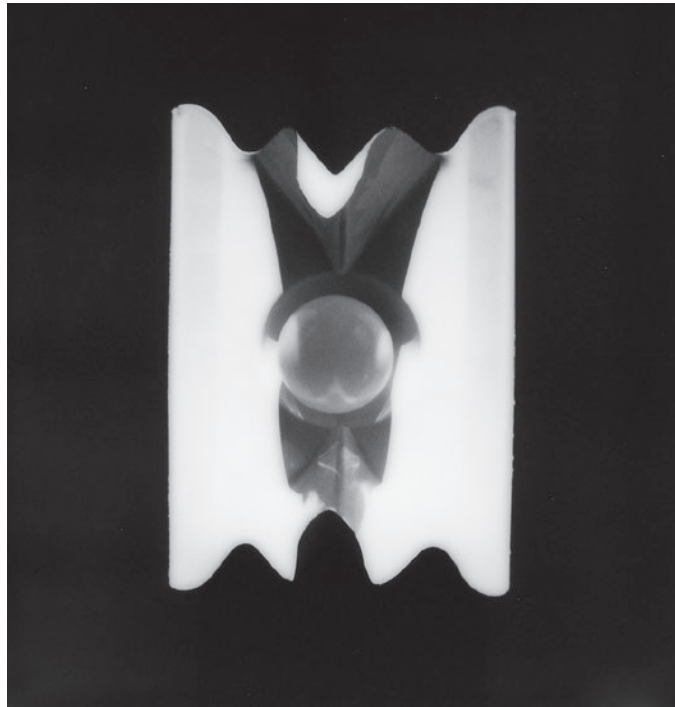


FIG. 8 Detail of B. Ingrid Olson, *Umbra (Bulb and Holder 03)*, 2021. Internal dye diffusion transfer print, binder's board, powder-coated aluminum frame, 16 × 12 ¼ in. (40.6 × 31.1 cm)



FIG. 9 Gordon Hall, *Brothers and Sisters*, 2018. Twelve sculptures, dimensions variable, performance with movement, live singers, recorded sound, 34:00 min. Commissioned by The Renaissance Society, Chicago, Illinois. Movement arranged and performed by Gordon Hall

central to the experience of the space. The details of one institution are grafted onto another.

GH I love how you describe those fixtures as being decorative in an unexpected, almost ahistorical way. And I imagine a visitor to your show would not necessarily know right away that these aren't just the fixtures that are always there. I've long been interested in the idea of architectural details as these feminized and devalued elements that powerfully shape our perception of buildings. What is your own experience coexisting with your exhibitions in a particular space?

BIO That depends on whether I am alone, with people I know, or walking around the exhibition alongside strangers. When I am alone, I am often thinking about the unanticipated outcomes or noticing new nuances in natural light based on the time of day or the season. I tend to reexamine the work's relationship to the architectural details that I've forgotten about. For me, there is usually a big gap between remembering a space and physically being in it. Even with floor plans and images to refer to, my memory of spaces becomes more and more exaggerated and abstracted with time.

GH I have definitely experienced that—a gallery growing and shrinking in my head while I work on a show. Do you ever watch people looking at your work?

BIO Yes. Anytime I am in one of my exhibitions with other people, I usually hang back and just watch them looking.

GH What do they do?

BIO The first thing that comes to mind is an opening where the gallery was full of people. Someone pressed their face into one of my reliefs and sniffed it, as though it might smell like something.

GH I just smelled one myself! It smelled good, like wood.

BIO Do people touch your sculptures?

GH They sometimes do. It doesn't bother me that much, because most of the work is pretty durable even if it's not "interactive" in a conventional sense. I understand people's desire to touch or try out the functions of my sculptures (fig. 9). I'll admit, it sometimes feels like a conundrum—making work that looks so obviously usable when I'm more interested in my audience imagining possible uses than actually acting them out in the space of an exhibition. But, simultaneously, I can't stand getting scolded by museum guards for doing something I'm not supposed to do, and I don't want my viewers to experience that. Perhaps there is some way to resolve this that I haven't thought of yet . . . How do you feel about people touching your work?

BIO I think there is a latent invitation in a lot of the work, in the recessed forms that might accommodate a body or the photographic images that offer the possibility of sharing the first-person perspective. These qualities



might prompt the questions, How close can I get? Can I touch it? Could I press myself into that space?

GH Yes, I agree. But your work is not explicitly interactive. You aren't hoping for people to engage with it physically.

BIO That's right. But what do you think about being encouraged to physically engage with a work, like when someone working in a gallery tells you, the viewer, that you can sit on or walk over something?

GH I often find explicit invitations of interactivity to be a bit hokey and programmatic. And, oddly, I think that sometimes the invitation to sit, or to touch, ends up actually shutting down the attention we give to a work. I'm asked to do something and I do it, and that's sort of the end of it, short-circuiting the full contemplation of the work. I'm much more interested in how we think about a potentially functional object when we are not using it, when we are looking at it and imagining its possible uses. I think we share this interest in projected use—the use not realized, or the tangible thing you can't touch. There's desire in this relationship, and prohibition, and certain power dynamics. I'm curious how you think about that. Why are you more interested in imagined action than realized action?

BIO It has to do with capacity. I didn't have the language to describe it until I read David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies*.<sup>2</sup> In thinking about containers, potentiality, raw material, and beginnings, the idea of capacity perfectly names a spatial quality and also an ability. I want to think about ideas and images that are not finished, resolute, or full. They have the potential to hold something else, and there is a multiplicity of things that can happen within that indeterminate space.

GH David's thinking on capacity has been influential for me as well. Would it be right to say that making objects with unrealized capacities is part of a broader value of keeping things open?

BIO Yes, that sounds right. But I am now also wondering about capacity in terms of specificity and generality. In your text "Why I Don't Talk About 'The Body': A Polemic,"<sup>3</sup> you address how a particular phrase—"the body"—is used almost exclusively as a stand-in for all bodies, which effectively restricts and flattens our perception of the particularities of any one body, or, for example, a given artist's work and their subjecthood. I wonder if you consider openness and specificity to be at odds? Or, more specifically, do you think that generality and openness are synonymous? And if so, what does specificity do to capacity?

GH In that essay, I am rejecting the term "the body" because, like you say, it creates a normalized singular body that stands in for all the different kinds and ways of being bodies. But I go on to say that I do not think that

2 David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

3 Gordon Hall, "Why I Don't Talk About 'The Body': A Polemic," *MONDAY Art Journal* 4 (March 2020): 95–107.

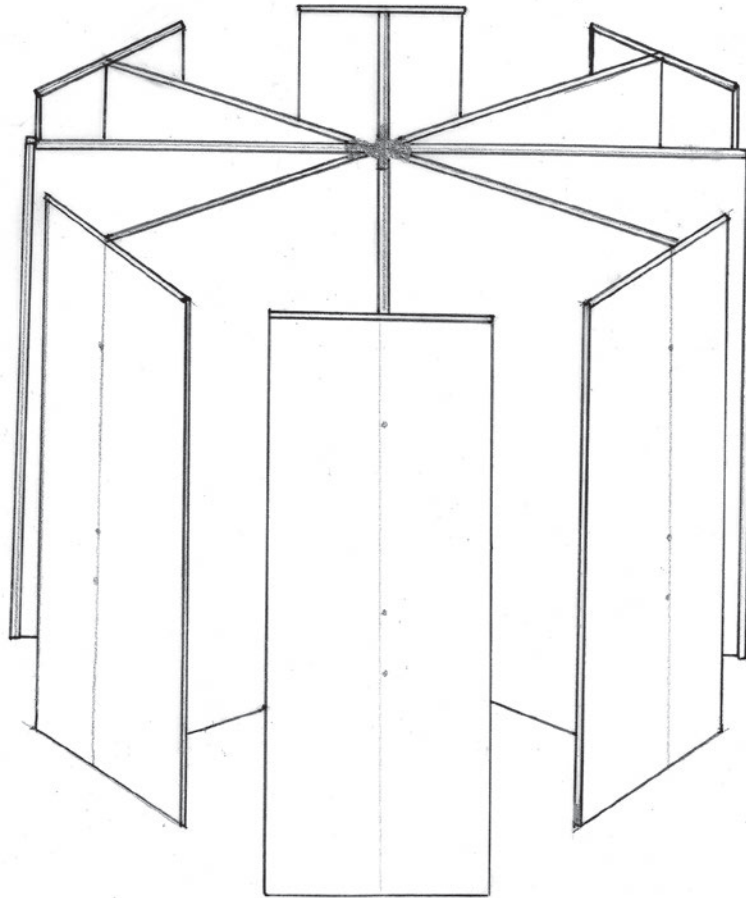


FIG. 10 B. Ingrid Olson, *Drawing for Why does my vestibule hurt?*, 2021.  
Graphite, ink, paper, 8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm)

a good response is to make the term “the body” more specific by saying things like “the female body,” “the trans body,” “the Black body,” and so on. These terms offer specificity in a way that actually erases difference in an even more forceful way. It seems like just semantics, perhaps, but I think the meaning of “bodies” and “the body” is actually quite distinct. For example, we could say that your work “examines our bodies’ relationships with architecture.” And we could also say that your work “examines ‘the body’s’ relationship with architecture.” The first phrasing is radically more open—because it offers the possibility of many different kinds of bodies relating to architecture in uncountable different ways. There is room in there for multiple ways of being bodies, and also for commonalities to be found across identity categories. It’s very important to me to speak in such a way that holds this capacity for difference, even when specifying—“female bodies” as opposed to “the female body,” for example.

BIO Speaking in the plural is not only more inclusive, but it allows for situations that are more conversational or discursive. How does plurality operate in how you make and stage your work?

GH Maybe it’s because I am a middle child, but everything I make is relational—the sculptures relate to each other, to the spaces they are in, to our bodies, to our memories and projections, to the things that happen around them, like writing and speaking. My work models modes of relation that are always plural.

There are many places in your work where the photographic collapses into the sculptural, and also where the bodily collapses into the architectural. In this show, several of the works turn a building into a body, or a body into a building. I love the title *Why does my vestibule hurt?* (fig. 10). Do you think of bodies as having doors and windows?

BIO Yes. The holes, orifices, and sphincters of a human body function like the doors and windows of a building, selectively letting things enter and exit. The vestibule is an interesting space because, while it is a point of entry, it is more interstitial than a door. It is a holding zone between the outside and the true inside. Being able to see a body as having doors and a building as having orifices is an act of belief, an embrace of metaphor. If an eye can be a window, a vestibule can experience pain. Even though metaphor is primarily seen as poetic or surreal, it also functions by making structures, rules, and parameters more elastic.

Chicago, July 10, 2021