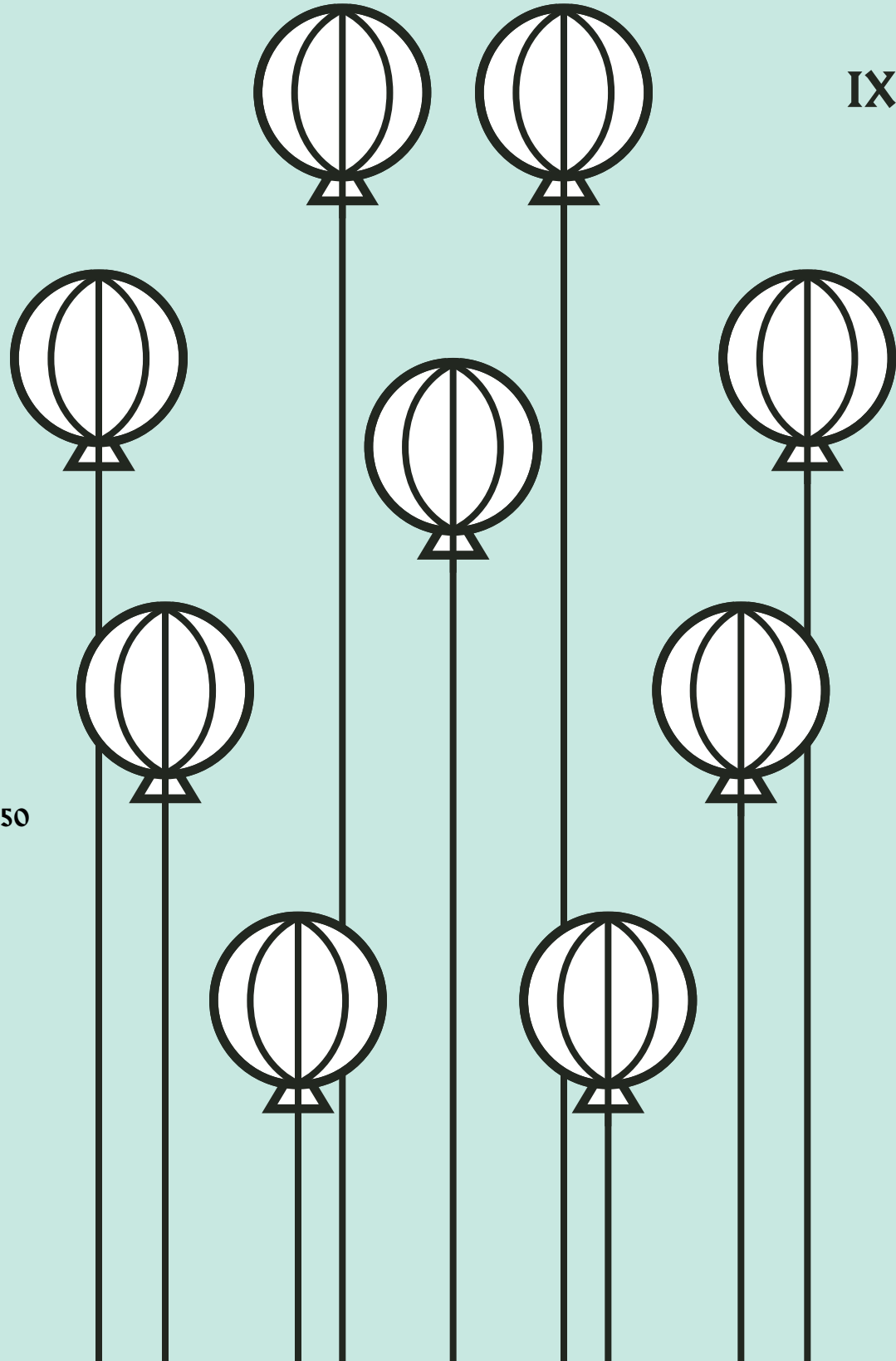


IX

Gordon Hall



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Party Friends

September 6, 2015 | Brooklyn, New York

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.

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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

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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 Aguhar'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.