Dialogues with Artists
Ross Simonini

Included

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Not included but also available and under consideration for the book:

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Paul McCarthy

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Wolfgang Laib

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Keegan McHargue

Lena Henke

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Susan Cianciolo

Growing up, Susan Cianciolo was a runner. Now, as an artist, running has become her philosophy. Here is a natural animal activity that pretty much anyone can do, and yet within that fundamental movement is struggle, risk, visceral exhaustion, ecstatic peaks and the freewheeling sprint of liberation.

From 1995 to 2001, Cianciolo produced 11 collections of her defiant, innovative RUN clothing line, as well as a pop-up restaurant under the same name. (She's also made RUN structures, RUN money, a RUN Library, RUN Church and on.) The clothes were raw, handmade and tender, and had just the right amount of naivety – all uncommon qualities in high fashion. Every strip of fabric expressed its own idiosyncratic personality, its own movement across the body, and its own complicated history. She sometimes commissioned materials from seed to cloth, but more often, her fabrics are recycled, gifted, found.

Likewise, her runway shows played like performance art, staged in parking garages and galleries, and her models, primarily women, were often nonprofessionals or children or, on one occasion,

aerialists. Since then, she has referred to the RUN project and its community, lovingly, as a 'cult' and she too has achieved a certain cult status from its legacy.

In 2001 Cianciolo experienced psychological burnout and left the fashion industry along with her life in New York. She began focusing on her visual art, which had been quietly running in parallel to her fashion career all along. The art overlapped with her fashion, both in sensibility and content, and her shows seemed casually to ignore any distinction between the disciplines: dreamlike films of women in her clothes, fashion sketches, magazine collages, geometric watercolours and exhibitions of the clothes themselves, which she often referred to as costumes.

Cianciolo also began showing her signature DIY kits (originally called Fluxus boxes). These ragged cardboard boxes were like care packages filled with fragments from her life and work – a doll, a Polaroid, a moment from a scrapbook, a child-like sculpture of popsicle sticks, a page from her actual diary. Cianciolo has said her work is often inspired by her memories, and these modest vessels play with nostalgia, their contents recalling precious keepsakes discovered in a grandmother's attic. In fact, like much of Cianciolo's work, the items in the kits are intended to be used, and the clothing can be assembled at home.

Home is another significant word in Cianciolo's body of work. Raised in the inner city of Providence, Rhode Island, in relative poverty, Cianciolo learned craft early, making her own clothing whenever possible. These days, she works mostly from home and often involves her ten-year-old daughter, Lilac Sky, in performances and in the making of objects. With designer Kiva Motnyk, she also created RUN Home, a line of housewares that includes quilts, cushions, tapestries, table linens, ceramics and furniture. Like the artists Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Alison Knowles, Cianciolo elevates domestic labor and humbles the luxurious pretense of fine art.

In 2015, at the age of forty-six, Cianciolo presented her first exhibition in New York in over 12 years: *if God COMes to visit You, HOW will you know? (the great tetrahedral kite)* at Bridget Donahue on Manhattan's Lower East Side. With bare walls and an austere grid of kits on the floor, Cianciolo created something simultaneously delicate and unrefined, sacred and mundane, inviting and mystifying. The show received a waterfall of long-deserved attention and stimulated a new period in Cianciolo's career, which has included her second iteration of *Run Restaurant* at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and a screening of her films in MoMA PS1's 2015 survey *Greater New York*.

I spoke to Cianciolo as she was preparing a new performance and a solo show in Los Angeles. She spoke softly, and found her words through long thoughtful pauses. Her answers were profoundly, refreshingly honest, and afterwards I felt much like I did after seeing her work: I had just experienced the very centre of a human. Later, in an email, she revealed to me that she has never discussed "this part of [her] story" publicly.

ROSS SIMONINI: Would you say that you walked away from the fashion industry in 2001?

SUSAN CIANCIOLO: Yeah. When I speak to doctors and healers about it, they say I had a mental breakdown. But it probably was just an overload, too much overstimulation for too long without any breaks.

RS: Did it feel like a mental breakdown to you?

SC: Definitely. Something went – the wiring was not right when I hit that point.

RS: What did you do to get yourself back to some kind of balance?

SC: Well, being such an extremist – and I don't know if this was right – I just cut all my ties completely. Shut down the studio. Let everyone go. Separated from my husband. I moved out to the Albers foundation for three months and lived completely alone on 75 acres, right outside of Yale. Then I went to London and didn't come back for a year.

RS: What were you doing during that period?

SC: Making films and a lot of work. But by myself. I didn't have the big studio any more. I was travelling and making shows. I stopped working with my agent, but I was still making clothes and presenting them through exhibitions. I was making the kits at that time, which included clothing, but I was calling them games.

RS: Was there a moment when felt that you had moved past the breakdown?

SC: Well, I moved back to New York in 2003 and I was a little bit homeless for a while until I settled in Brooklyn. But then an unexpected thing happened. I died and came back to life. I flatlined. And that changed my life forever until today. Nothing has been the same.

RS: How did that happen?

SC: I was walking through Prospect Park and I was scheduled, the next day, to have an exhibition of my collages at Sears-Peyton Gallery. I had everything laid out in my little studio in Brooklyn, and I went for a walk in the morning, just to step out of the studio. And that was it: I was knocked down by this guy on a bike. And he beat me to death with a bicycle chain, and strangled me, and raped me. And from that day until now, I've had to work towards recovering. Mentally, physically – I've never been the same. It took years and years and years to walk down the street, to function. And my brain never really recovered. So when I say my 'doctors and healers' – that's why I have so many. I've worked with the best acupuncturists in the world.

RS: Has anything helped?

SC: Meditation. I don't know if people notice, but all my work is connected to spiritual theories.

RS: What's it like to be alive after dying?

SC: It's as if I am on a strange middle plane of always knowing I already died, so there is nothing to be afraid of – and also being so afraid to know it can happen again, at any moment.

RS: How could you stay in New York after that experience?

RS: The only reason I'm still here is because I didn't want to let it beat me. It took me ten years to have the courage to move back to Brooklyn. Now, my daughter and I have been here for six years. But still, it's just constant flashbacks all the time. Just little things. Like, when I had my solo show with Bridget [Donahue] in Manhattan two years ago, that was the first time I had a solo show in New York in 12 years. Because my brain believed that I would just die if I did it.

RS: Right, the association.

SC: And when I did that, I was like, *I've made it!* I've learned so much about the tricks of the mind. I've always been prayer-based, even before all this, but now it's the main part of my life. I've come to learn that I don't even know myself.

RS: Has this experience radically affected your work?

SC: I think that's why there's so much isolation now. To get to the work, I need an extraordinary amount of time alone.

RS: That's surprising, because the work seems so communal – the performances, the collections.

SC: Yeah, it's true. And I even just brought an intern on. And I have another project called RUN Home, and that's my outlet for community. Anytime someone contacts me, that's how I work with them, through RUN Home. But it's true, my shows are performance-based and community-based. That's why I have to make sure I have enough time alone. To get into a meditation. My certain zone.

RS: Lilac is also collaborating on some of the work now.

SC: And it's a constant question: did I make the right choice to have a child? Should I bring her into this life? Because I'm obsessed with my work and that's the world she's been placed into. And yeah, she ends up helping with a lot of work. There are a lot of times when we are stuck in the house for endless days and nights, so whatever I make, she makes. I told her yesterday that I titled an edition she worked on as being created by both of us. And I told her she has to sign 100 editions. But she wouldn't do it.

RS: How has motherhood affected you as an artist?

SC: I don't meet many other artist parents. I feel very alone on this island. And it's busy. I have to make muffins today. And I decided to throw [Lilac] this surrealist birthday. It's so much work. I'm

always asking myself whether I should have brought her into this world. It's different, how we do things, and I hope that's okay. I did a *Run Restaurant* piece for the Whitney Biennial with her, and she's coming to LA with me for my upcoming show at Overduin & Co. I try to separate, but it all gets mushed together. I wonder if she'd be better doing normal kid things. Even the birthday party, I tried to do something normal, but we both ended up wanting to do this wild, surrealist thing at my friend's studio.

RS: I've read you talking about your poverty as an artist. Not eating for weeks at a time.

SC: We were poor. Oh, we were. And that must have really affected her. She's been my whole inspiration to have a good income. It was horrible. She was three, I think, when I finally took the job at Pratt [Institute]. Now I'm on a full-time tenure track.

RS: What do you teach?

SC: I was hired to teach the senior thesis collection, but I also teach an untraditional class I developed at Parsons [School of Design] about fashion drawing.

RS: The format of the DIY kit seems to connect with your teaching. Have the kits always been a part of your work?

SC: Always. And that's funny, because I've changed, but in some ways the work hasn't.

RS: Do you remember how the kits started?

SC: Those early RUN collections got more and more complicated, and the pieces started coming apart. I wanted the audience and customer to use their own creativity and intelligence to put it back together. That was fascinating to me. The early ones were the do-it-yourself skirt kits, and I made a film about them. Then the collections all became kits: 9, 10, 11. Then, in London, I started showing them as exhibitions.

RS: I've heard you say that these collections come from visions, or insights.

SC: I try to track myself back to my twenties, in my Canal Street studio, Chinatown. Back then, with all those people around me, those collections were based on visions, but it was different. Now the format is so much clearer. With meditation, it's not as if I press a button and it appears, but there are moments where *something* appears, you know? I don't know what it is, or how it works, but my teachers tell me that I work with spirits. So that's what I follow and, every day, what I pray for – that I can be that vehicle. I mean,

it sounds so arrogant to me to put it into physical words. Who am I to even know? But that's why I need more isolation when I'm making the work.

RS: Would you say you're more able to experience those insights now?

SC: Well, there's a show up now at Bard [Fashion Work, Fashion Workers at Bard College's Hessel Museum] of my early work, and when I look at it, it still feels meaningful and intuitive and raw, so I can't say what I do now is better. I still wake up every day and don't know if the next day will come that I'll hear the answer. I go into these shows not knowing if it will even work out. I really believe that if I don't hear the voice to tell me how to do it, I can't make the work. I can't install that show. Like, right now, I had to put a performance on hold because I haven't heard the voice. People keep asking and I don't know. I can't go forward.

RS: Is that frightening?

SC: Yeah. It's always been scary. Every time. I've learned to have a blind faith in the work. It's the only thing I live for. And that's the concern of bringing a child into it.

RS: Do you still go to an ashram?

SC: That was a place you could bring a child from the day they were born. With most yoga studios, you can't bring a crying baby. You can't even bring a ten-year-old. Yoga studios will tell you, don't ever come back with that child! [laughs] But at the ashram, they let her in. And I started doing the kundalini yoga all the time, and it pushed my psyche, and it informed a lot of my work. But now I don't go to any classes. That's not what my meditation is these days.

RS: Do you see your work as sacred?

SC: Yes. Yes.

RS: Are you informed by looking at other historical, sacred work? Do you see your work in that tradition?

SC: It's a good question. I've been asking my teachers about this, because recently I've been *seeing* physical manifestations. It will be at the most random time and place. And so I draw those things. I think the work is just made for god.

RS: Everything?

SC: Yeah. One of my oldest and closest friends was born and grew up in Jamaica. I've visited her many times and every time I go, I learned about more of the artists from there. For many of them, that was the sole purpose of their work. That was their only living purpose.

RS: Making art as a form of worship, ritual.

SC: That's how I think of the performances. I went to see the show of my older work at Bard and I heard a voice that said, *you have to do a performance*. But I didn't know how, or what. I had to start studying my old performances to understand. But I know it will be a ritual, a celebration.

RS: Do you think a viewer has to experience the film, the clothing, the collage – all of it – to know the full experience? Or is your whole project contained within each object?

SC: It's all contained within each piece. But really, one show is one piece for me. That's how the fashion shows were. And the exhibitions are just a background for the performance. It's all based on visions. It's all one thing. But in those two-and-half years since I've submerged myself into the artworld, I've really had to learn how shows have to break down. How it sells. It's a business now. I mean, I was so freefloating for so long. I don't even do titles

or anything. When you start breaking down each thing from a show, it's so tedious. Bridget [Donahue] usually just makes up the titles, the numbers. That stuff doesn't interest me.

RS: How has the artworld treated you?

SC: I just try to not overthink it. I don't want to know what's going on. I can't get to shows. It makes me feel too uncomfortable to leave my child. It may seem, from the outside, like we're in the artworld, but we are so out of it. Every night, when there's something going on, we're just making the same cookies, over and over again. That's the truth.

RS: It seems like you used to be a pretty public personality, though, in your twenties.

SC: When I was married to Aaron Rose [gallerist, filmmaker], that was somewhat true. But really, I was always the person who said no and worked.

RS: In the future, do you think you'll be continuing the same path as an artist?

SC: No. The show I'm working on now [for Overduin & Co] and it feels new and different. It's wooden geometrical sculptures that

came to me in a vision. There's furniture. There's a sound component of my [meditation] teacher, because I finally got the courage to ask him if I could use his recordings. It feels like a breakthrough. But is that a cliché? That term? Maybe on the outside it looks the same, but I don't care what it looks like to anyone else. To me, it feels new.

Adriano Costa

Over 24 hours, I emailed with Adriano Costa in a flurry. We volleyed messages quickly with little time to consider what had just been typed. I responded on my phone throughout my day: at the doctor's office, the market, in my parked car and my studio.

The process seemed appropriate. To experience Costa's art is to step into the ongoing catalog of his looking, the ticker tape of his wandering attention. His primary work, however, is arrangement. From humble objects, he builds environments of variation, walk-in closets of permutation, constellations of ephemera. He builds a hermetic culture of his own.

His work is a cascade of choices and chooses with an anarchistic, punk freedom — of form, material, sensibility. He can be simultaneously tight and sloppy, highly formalist and crassly lowbrow, and often slips subversive humor into his gestures. He engraves the phrase: "I see a penis" into a chunk of marble. He casts ratty door mats into gold, and treats receipts with the same respect as bronze.

Born and Based in São Paulo, Costa has the observational wit, and haptic sensitivity to material that has come to define much of contemporary Latin American art. He shows often with Mendes Wood, Sadie Coles, Nuno Centeno, Supportica Lopez, and most recently Kölnischer Kunstverein, which was the show he was making during the following correspondence.

In the moments between our missives, I scrolled through Costa's Instagram account. Multiple times a day, he posted images of underway work that would soon make it into the show, usually accompanied by little phrases, and possible titles for pieces. His writing often makes its way into his work in poetic philosophical poetics, absurd declarations and jokes. In our interview, his communication felt intimate and open, but with a peculiar, abstract overtone. His blazingly typed, second-language English always required that I slow down, re-read and decode whatever he had just sent my way. "Man," he wrote at the end of our rally, "I go buy some bread is 7:10 Rewe [supermarket] is open. Speak later. Where are you?"

RS: I've heard you use the term "pre-sculptoric" to describe what you do. What does that mean?

AC: This pre-sculptoric thing comes from a peculiar moment from my work, around my first series of "carpets", when I was living a very delicate period of my life. I was just going out of my first crack crisis (yes, I was addicted to crack) without a single penny and I suddenly started —I don't know why, exactly — paying attention to the organization of clothes, blue clothes, pieces of paper, etc. It was extremely beautiful.

And so: in a very meditational, serious, reverential way, I spent every single morning from 2013, I guess, making geometrical compositions with all sorts of things I found in my house, my friend's house and my parent's house It became a kind of delicious obsession. Every day, even if I tried really hard it was absolutely impossible to repeat the same forms and dynamics . I went deep into the peculiar sensible geometry from the Brazilian artists from the late 60's and 70's when art was really close or completely close to meditation or therapy. Those things don't interest me that much nowadays, but when I look to them, I cry. It is so sophisticated, human, honest. C'mon. Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica are still playing with our heads like kids, making fun. Hahhaa. Love them.

So, my carpets were completely free, without anything to make them fixed. That was the reason I called then pre-sculptoric. Anti-speculative works . Stillborn works . Some collectors bought them.

My position was and still the same: do what you want. They live without me. Hahaha.

RS: Why did you lose interest in meditation and therapy?

AC: I still thinking the spiritual way is THE WAY, the only way for changing something deeply, including the arts , I just don't know how to do it and I am sure the way all those shows, big shows have been doing it, calling it "shamanism" is pure, outrageous bullshit . At least they are trying, perhaps. We are humans. We do bad things. Me, myself : I go for sculptures and paintings and drawings and videos. No messing with the Gods for now. Too many problems here in my kitchen. So many predators.

RS: What "big shows" are you referring to?

AC: All the *should see* shows from the last 4, 5 years have one or two works or a "segment" dedicated to spirituality in Europe, in Brazil. In my country, it is a shame because the curators install indigenous houses inside of museums and galleries, but actually did not contribute or try to make something against the genocide — physical and cultural — that the indigenous communities are victims. Seriously, they will disappear SOON REALLY SOON. It's terrible. Once I made a group show at the Modern Institute in Glasgow and the work was hundreds of white t-shirts printed with

the word “ayahuasca" cause I was so mad with the exploitation of the tea from the white middle-class people. This was 2014. After this, someone [Noah Baumbach] made a movie [While We’e Young] of Naomi Watts and Ben Stiller drinking the tea in Williamsburg in a pretentious and stupid hipster New Yorker commune. Hahha. In 2017 the tea was at the Venice Biennale. I am not judging any artist or curator. I’m just asking why the magic, the hallucination, the exoticism is so interesting but talking about and counting how many indigenous people (the owners of the Amazon forest where the plant, the tea grows) were killed today is not permitted. Closing our eyes to the pile of bodies is very easy. Again: we are humans, we do wrong, but c’mon, leave the forest, leave the indigenous alone.

RS: How did crack affect your work while you were using it?

AC: Crack as all other drugs (as I am addicted to all of them) don't have any direct effect on my work, as I do respect my profession I don’t mix the things. When I am high I prefer not even look to my babies. They don’t deserve my evils.

RS: Do you find that your work has changed significantly while living in different places, such as Berlin or Brazil?

AC: I love working in different places . Confronting myself with different realities, going to shops, always buying the wrong kind of glue cause you don't understand Flemish. It is really nice to not have a house. I don't have one. Just the planet.

RS: What function does Instagram have for you as an artist? You post a lot of work. Are there certain pieces you wouldn't post?

AC: I post everything on Instagram. Absolutely everything. I always have to hear friends saying, *hey, keep your works secret blah blah blah*. I don't give a fucking shit. This is about sharing. What's the point of having diamonds if you can't go to a gay club, take MDMA and shine with them?

RS: Do you think much about the perception of you as an artist?

AC: Ross, people are mean, 'specially the close ones. Hope it is different with you. I was a DJ and "owner" of a venue in São Paulo called Torre do Dr Zero. An amazing, surreal, barbaric place. Really wild. All Thursday, every week, for 12 years, we had the amount of cocaine that even Miami cannot imagine. It was beautiful. I'd guess 75 percent of the artists , the good ones from Brazil were there. We were all friends. I went to art school. I quit. I almost died. As soon as I started working properly, selling, living just with art, being the first one and only South American punk

working with Sadie Coles, for instance, I had lost almost all my former lovely friends. Brazilians are jealous. They have so many fears. They don't like people like me cause I am openly mean. I might be aggressive. They prefer working behind curtains, making gossip, spreading all the middle-class cowardice shit behind your back. So what can I do? What can I expect from Instagram? What can I receive from people that are supposed to support me mentally, give me love? Man, it is a tough life. Come in front of me and talk. Be a real person. I am very patient. Seriously, I am up to hear it. As a typical Gemini you can convince me. But you can make me just fucking hate you if you bitch me.

RS: Would you rather people pay attention to your objects than the idea of you as the artist?

AC: Idea is an object.

RS: After a show, do you destroy your work? Do you keep it? Do you recycle it into new work?

AC: No , I have *hojerizah* of destroying my stuff . Loosing it. It feels like failure. I am obsessed about keeping pieces of drawings and paintings, small parts of metal, wire. Sometimes I find them again 4 years later and they change my life. Such a feeling. Very

special. My studio in Sao Paulo is one of my favorite places in the world. It is magic there. But I hate studio visits.

RS: Why is that?

AC: In general, curators, collectors, "visitors" they come to my place to see themselves. Or something that fits in their bags or curatorial projects, as they call them. A french woman, for instance came to my place cause she was, I guess , curating a biennale somewhere. She was late, almost missing her flight. I invited her to leave 'cause her face was scary. She broke my vibe.
I'm also horrible in visiting other's people houses.

RS: Why do you resist terms like "found" and "trash" when talking about your work?

AC: I don't use found materials. As soon as they are part of a sculpture, painting, video etc. they are *another thing*. If you take a look to my production for the last 4 years, the most significative part are constructed, or at least, transformed. My production changes a lot and I don't really want to repeat myself as I am alive so: my work supposed to be the same . I don't do object trouvè [found]. I do sculptures in bronze, fabric, concrete, paintings and. I don't care about the difference between an oil painting or a piece

of fabric my poodle used to put in my schoolbag when I was going to college in São Paulo. They are all magic.

RS: Why don't you want to repeat yourself?

AC: Artists have a duty. I feel myself so blessed for being an artist. We don't need to be a good person. We can be boring . But it is a show. Never forget we do shows. Ha ha! I just love it.

RS: Do you have a style? Or do you reject that.

AC: I don't have any problem with style. I have style. Mine is free. I suffer and fight a lot but I work essentially with freedom. That is my base.

RS: When did you stop thinking about objects as temporary and start thinking of them as heavy and permanent?

AC: Well, I guess was a natural very natural progression and obviously, it changed when I had the money to pay someone to cast something in bronze. Or to cut wood in a good way. I am not a tool guy. I am very stupid with things like money (people love that), sex (people love that), drugs (people love that) hahha and tools . Last month I bought a drill —that machine that makes lots o' things! — and I am enchanted cause I hate asking another

person for making things to me. (It is a very difficult move to find a partner, in all senses. And there is a important thing : I like touching my stuff . The temperature of concrete, steel, bronze, or a pair of Nike sneakers turns me on. I am gay clichè.) Perhaps this progression is related to the fact I just crossed the border. I am living the second half of my life. From here to death.

RS: Has aging affected the art making impulse for you?

AC: I think everything affects me. You know that old question who's who: artist x creation ? It is a jelly of just everything getting dense with the everything on the top of it . You plus you. I am making a show next week in London in a gallery in a basement of a pub in Haggerston, East London. I never met the guy and probably I won't very soon. He invited me from Facebook saying he likes my stuff. The name of the show is THIS ME ME ME IS US. I think it gives you an answer. It is so delicate cause the artist has to deal not just with their own evils but the viewers' also. That is pure beauty. You affect me. Art breaks barriers . It doesn't look like it, sometimes, but c'mon, last year during the Documenta opening week in Athens, I was doing *Pane Per Poveri*, a project with Supportico Lopez' crew from Berlin and we were dancing with refugee people, having fun, connected with the city, the city Gods. This me me me is us.

RS: When do you consider something to be finished?

AC: The work is never finished. Even when it's in your house or the Guggenheim, it is not finished. When it is good, it is an endless journey. Imagine a greek pot. Is it finished? No.

Anicka Yi

When Anicka Yi began making art in her late thirties with no formal training, her entry point was unusual: a self-directed study of science. She doesn't fully identify with the term "artist." The art world was not her destination but simply a receptive venue for her ideas, which she culls from the experimental corners of cuisine, biology, and perfumery.

The Korean-born Yi, who studied at Hunter College in New York, produced her first artworks in 2008 with a collective called Circular File, numbering among its members artist Josh Kline and designer Jon Santos. Around the same time, she took an interest in natural fragrances, which led to early, self-directed tests with tinctures and olfactory art. One of her first projects in this vein was a scent named Shigenobu Twilight, after Fusako Shigenobu, leader of the radical left faction Japanese Red Army. The fragrance blended cedar, violet leaf, yuzu, shiso, and black pepper.

Yi's work is characterized by unorthodox combinations of esoteric ingredients. She often uses materials that are—or were recently—alive, which can make her sculpture volatile and difficult to archive. She deep-fries flowers, displays live snails, grows a leathery fiber from the film produced by brewing kombucha, and cultivates human-borne bacteria. For her 2015 exhibition "You

Can Call Me F" at the Kitchen in New York, Yi asked one hundred women to swab their microbe-rich orifices, cultured the samples, and used the resulting green-brown growth to paint and write on an agar-coated surface set in a glowing vitrine. The final work had an overwhelming smell, with notes of cheese and decay, both corporeally familiar and sensorially challenging. The equally noisome sculpture Convox Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path (2011) is a boiled stew of recalled powdered milk, antidepressants, palm tree essence, shaved sea lice, and ground

Teva rubber dust, among other ingredients. The scent suggests a psychological narrative of off-the-grid seaside living. In an age of long-distance digital exchanges, Yi works with scent to sensitize herself to the oldest, most animal forms of communication, and she hopes her art encourages us to do the same. We are a conservative culture when it comes to the nose, a limitation that mutes our experiences and our interactions. Yi wants to provoke us, but she also wants us to inhale more deeply, to experience smells before judging them offensive, and to consider the social role of disgust.

Yi fabricates her smelly objects in multiple sites. Her base studio in Bushwick is a small, no-nonsense space where she develops prototypes, but much of the production happens in laboratories and through the mail, as she exchanges vials with forensic chemists and Parisian perfumers. She was also a 2014–15

visiting artist at the MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology and the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In the last year, Yi's work has received a significant spike in attention. The 2017 Whitney Biennial includes her new video, The Flavor Genome, an episodic narrative informed by science fiction, cultural ideas of taste, and the anthropological beliefs of indigenous Amazonians. As the recipient of the 2016 Hugo Boss Prize, she has a solo exhibition opening at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York on April 21.

When I spoke with her in January, she discussed the conceptual framework of the exhibition as "ethnicity and the perception of odors," but declined to reveal anything specific about the physical form the work would take, since it was likely to change. Her experiments often fail, she explained, so while her ideas are consistent, their manifestations are unpredictable.

ROSS SIMONINI You've said that the most radical artistic statements are being made in the world of cuisine.

ANICKA YI Cuisine is the amalgamation of performance, sculpture, painting. It has everything. And what it has to do, consistently, is appeal to our sense of taste. It's uncharted territory for art. There's a time pressure. A work on your plate might last only a few minutes. It's ephemeral. And it's mutually transformative. It gets transformed physically, in the way it's

masticated, metabolized, and expelled from the body. But as the person who is sampling the work, you are also transformed. That's how it becomes activated. That, to me, is radical.

SIMONINI Have any culinary experiences transformed you?
YI It was a dream of mine to go to the restaurant El Bulli in Spain. I went in 2009, two years before it closed. I don't think I've ever really come down from that meal, and I hope I never do. It was so startling. You had to drive forty-five minutes through grape vineyards and up a mountain. Or you could take a yacht. And then you walked into this richly textured setting, like something from a Luis Buñuel film, and you knew you were going to have an experience that would change your chemicals in irreversible ways. There were forty-two courses. It was a seven-hour meal. A staggering orchestra of research and composition went into creating each dish. But the thing is, it wasn't all pleasure. That's what I really appreciated about it. People don't always talk about this in polite circles, but molecular gastronomy can be downright painful. Because the food was not intuitive. It wasn't bread and butter. It was highly avant-garde conceptual food, and, ten courses in, you start feeling that. Most bodies experience a degree of incompatibility metabolizing this stuff. And that's what I loved about it. It was kind of torture, as mellifluous and diaphanous and beautiful as it may have tasted. The texture, the ocular experience,

the haptic, the sonic. . . . Your body had to reconcile all these concepts, and my body, in particular, was not very receptive to it.
SIMONINI You got sick?

YI I had stomach pains halfway through the meal. I was eating a lot of chemical-based flavorings. There were so many new textures and forms. (But you can also get stomach pains from too much pizza, so it's not just a hazard of avant-garde cuisine.) It was all-consuming. I can now divide my life into two periods: before and after El Bulli. It changed my relationship to food, to art, to how I dined with other people. It was a performance, and as a diner you didn't have much agency. There was a set menu. You couldn't make substitutions. You couldn't just use the restroom when you wanted to. There was a flow and a rhythm to it. I'd never experienced anything like it before, and I don't really want to again.

SIMONINI Have you had any other experiences with other art forms that matched the intensity of dining at El Bulli?

YI Well, I don't know that I could qualify any visual art as allconsuming, in a way that encompasses the metabolic and the physical. So in that sense, no, I haven't. But I've experienced that kind of demonic possession of all the senses with certain films and with fiction. But cuisine is its own category.

SIMONINI Is it a goal of yours to insert your art into someone?

YI Well, using smell is a way to take communication a little further. Smell can prompt a transference of environment, of time, of memory. And that's part of my intention.

SIMONINI Did you have any training as a perfumer?

YI I did not go to perfume school. I'm completely self-taught. I just had the audacity to try it. It certainly helps to have a knowledge of chemistry and strong command of notes and scents, but I had no training.

SIMONINI How did you begin?

YI Around 2008 I started making tinctures. I didn't even buy anything. I just put everything around me in alcohol for three months to see what would happen. "I write a lot of backstory for my sculptures, as if they're characters in a novel or screenplay."[/pq]I read everything I could on the subject. I had a friend who worked for one of the largest perfume companies in the world, and we'd smell things together. Later on, a friend in the fashion industry asked me to create natural perfumes for her. I invited my friend Maggie Peng, an architect, to the event and she got excited

about the perfumes, so we created Shigenobu Twilight together. We wanted to create a series of biographical fragrances based on living women. I wanted to challenge the culture around perfume, which is very stodgy and quite unimaginative in terms of the images it offers: the fashion house, the actor, the pop star, the athlete. They all promote conventional aspirational lifestyles. After millennia of human beings exchanging oils and fragrances, it's disappointing that the perfume industry is limited to this paltry set of narratives.

SIMONINI Is there a large culture of avant-garde olfaction?

YI Completely. A young perfumer called Zoologist just sent me a group of scents based on animals: Panda, Bat, Beaver. I tend to like extreme scents. But it's a hard area to be experimental, because people won't wear unfamiliar smells. And that says a lot about our society. We haven't gone very far outside of polite smell, which has everything to do with social constructs around smell and power relations. People are afraid to smell strange. It's a problem that we refer to smells only as good or bad. We don't have a sophisticated language around it. We have a limited palate.

SIMONINI Are we averse to smell because it's more animalistic than other senses?

YI There's a larger social context. I grew up in a Korean-American home and my mother cooked Korean food. Our house was labeled by other kids as the stinky home. If you talk to Korean-Americans about smell, many of them associate early memories of smell with shame and rejection. And now Korean food is everywhere. There's less of a stigma. I wish there were more tolerance and openness to smells. Any person who eats curry smells like curry. Turmeric will seep out of anyone's pores. We have a mythology around ethnic smells, that certain people smell a certain way, but really the main factors are diet, environment, and an individual's unique, genetic smell. A lot of that uniqueness has to do with how much bacteria you produce in your gut. Economics is also a factor. If someone eats McDonald's all the time, that affects his body odor.

SIMONINI There's racism and classism in smells.

YI Each person has a unique olfactive identity, determined by genetics. Chemists call it the human bar code—a reference to the biometric technology that is used to identify individuals. Generalizations about the odor of an ethnic group can't be supported with evidence.

SIMONINI Do you have a heightened sense of smell?

YI I think so. But it comes from a will and desire to develop my

perception. I don't close myself off to new smells. I go on smelling journeys. When something smells strong, I don't reject it. I try to get past my initial reaction and take in the subtlety of the smell. I may have shown a little promise with smell, but I've really had to cultivate and practice it. So much of who we are is made through sheer discipline.

SIMONINI Making art is all about developing a sensitivity.

YI It's a self-education, a special ability to get rigorous and be in the world. Through art, I've learned more about my body, my relationship to other organisms, and that's part of my job: to engage myself with intensity.

SIMONINI Your video The Flavor Genome deals with the complicated ramifications of flavor. How do you approach that through the medium?

YI The work is all about perception. There's a fictional aspect that drives the narrative. A flavor chemist goes to the Amazon in search of a mythical flower in order to extract a compound and synthesize a new drug from it. And if you take this drug you can perceive what it's like to be a pink dolphin or an angry teenager. It's not a technology we have yet, but it relates to virtual reality, which is becoming more prevalent in contemporary art and in

culture more broadly. But my idea is not about placing myself in a coral reef, as I would with VR, but actually feeling what coral feels, and creating empathy.

SIMONINI Do you write fictional narratives around your sculptures?

YI Writing is one of my primary tools. I often discover my thoughts about the work through writing. Syntax, sentence structure . . . these things really help. I write a lot of backstory for my sculptures, as if they're characters in a novel or screenplay. I share this writing with friends, but no one else sees it. I'm not really a visual person. I don't think in images. I don't sketch things. I don't use visual references as much as I should. It's a huge handicap for me. My writing doesn't capture the idea for the work as a sketch would. So maybe I'm not working in the most productive way. My starting point is verbal.

SIMONINI You think of your art as fiction?

YI To use a term coined by Caroline Jones, a scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, my work is bio-fiction. I want to fuse the writing of life—the notion that all living things have their own stories, contexts, perspectives, and histories—with the study of life, which also now includes an embrace of

nonhuman perspectives. “I don’t close myself off to new smells. I go on smelling journeys. When something smells strong, I don’t reject it.” The concept of nonhuman persons is found in the indigenous Achuar people in the Amazon, who believe that all life is a person, whether a plant person, an animal person, or a human person. This way of thinking is also shared by other Amazonian tribes, as well as by the Inuit and other native peoples of North America. Humans aren’t necessarily at the top of the hierarchy of life in these belief systems.

SIMONINI You adapt the theories of science to art.

YI I loosely sample scientific procedure in my work. But my science is not one that’s of value to anyone, not that I think something has to be useful to be science. I don’t want to be disrespectful to science. Fiction can be true.

SIMONINI Your work is like science fiction.

YI Making the work is a kind of world-building. I’m always thinking about where my objects fit into the world I’m creating. And usually, I need to create the world first before I can give the objects movement, context, function, identity. Without that, sculpture seems rather empty to me.

SIMONINI Do you have a model for the linguistic and visual worlds you're building?

YI I think film is a really good medium for that. Certainly the canonical science-fiction films, like 2001: A Space Odyssey [1968] and Tarkovsky's Solaris [1972]. Chris Marker's films are hugely successful at merging his language with images to create a world. His Sans Soleil [1983] was a major inspiration for The Flavor Genome. It's a masterpiece of the film essay. Adrian Piper is also really great at generating written language around her work.

SIMONINI Earlier you mentioned literature as one of the more potent art forms for you. Do you read much nonfiction?

YI My love is definitely fiction but I fortify myself with non-fiction. I read books about scientific theories in biology and anthropology, because they support the work that I make and the fiction that I read. In the last few months I have read Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Cannibal Metaphysics and Philippe Descola's Beyond Nature and Culture and Gregory Bateson's Mind and Nature. I read The Last of the Tribe by Monte Reel and A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans by the biosemiologist Jakob von Uexküll. I read a lot, and I read many books at once. I like to cross-pollinate discourses. I'm lucky that my job allows me to read.

SIMONINI Do you think about art as a job? Do you have a nine-to five schedule?

YI I would love to have a nine-to-five schedule. I usually work twelve to sixteen hours a day. I haven't had a day off in months. I have a punishing work schedule. Forty hours a week is a very light week for me. After you and I speak, I will go watch the Blu-rays for The Flavor Genome, to make sure everything is calibrated. Then I have to write proposals for new projects. It's a large mound of work to sift through.

SIMONINI This is quite recent for you, the professional art life.

YI I repressed it for a long time. I didn't go to art school. My goal in life was to be a vagabond. I wanted the opposite of a credentialed existence, much to the chagrin of my parents. I belong to Generation X and our goal was to drop out.

SIMONINI Did you succeed at that?

YI I survived, but it was absolute torture. It's not for everybody. You have to have a tremendous amount of fortitude. The world we live in is so focused on vocation. If you don't have that business-card attitude, people don't want to talk to you, especially in New York. You're invisible. A plague. And for a really long time,

it was lonely and alienating. My education was just the texture of life.

SIMONINI And you ended up as an artist because . . .

YI I say that I'm an artist only for logistical reasons. I have anxiety around identifying as an artist. Art just happens to be the medium I can use to say what I want to say. I was familiar with the community and it embraced me because I had a lot of friends within it. I always thought I'd find my voice in film. I worked as a fashion stylist and copywriter.

SIMONINI Because you came to art in your late thirties, do you think you had a clearer sense of what you wanted from it than you would have if you had started in your twenties?

YI I forget who said it, but there's this phrase: nothing ever really happens until you're forty. And I feel that way. I love being in my forties. You're still young enough to do what you want, but you have experience and a sense of humor around what you do. You don't take everything so seriously. I don't have the anxiety about my age that many people I know feel, maybe because I'm still a young artist. It energizes me. It keeps me light on my feet.

Joe Bradley

For years, every time Joe Bradley made a show of new paintings, they appeared to be the work of a new artist. When he showed his stacks of colorful, modular panels, they suggested affable robots and regal sailboats and the whole lineage of geometric, monochromatic painting.

Later, he made a group of "schmagoo" paintings—big canvases with single, crude grease-pencil drawings of the most dumbeddown icons—a fish, a cross, a Superman logo, a stick figure— completed in what appeared to be a matter of seconds. Other shows have included screen prints, doodles on scrap paper, spartan collages, and blank tan canvases with painted frames.

More recently, through hopscotch experimentation, Bradley has settled into a more consistent style of abstract-figurative painting. Using oil-paint sticks, he draws on raw canvas with the abandon of a feisty child searching for a subject. Intermittently, he'll drop the half-finished pieces onto the floor and let them roll around until they accrete a patina of "shmutz," as he calls it. Sometimes he'll stitch together multiple in-progress canvases in an effort to further "glitch" whatever techniques he accidentally acquires. In this way, he's become undeniably skilled at making the unskilled mark, and the results are transcendent: standing in front of his new work stirs up a visual

epiphany of lowbrow wisdom.

For this interview, I visited Bradley twice: once at his old studio in the Greenpoint neighborhood of Brooklyn, and later at his current, exponentially larger space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The new studio has allowed his paintings to expand in size, and the entire multiroom complex was covered—floors and walls—with drawings and paintings, near ready to be shipped off for a European show. As we spoke, we flipped through his piles of art books and Bradley smoked more cigarettes than I could count. A few days later, I ran into him in my neighborhood, where his boy, Basil, was buzzing around the block, and we discovered that we live only a few feet from each other. The below transcription captures the beginning of the conversation that now continues, every so often, on the sidewalk in front of our homes.

I. Grandma Moses

ROSS SIMONINI: So we have seventeen hours left on this recorder.
JOE BRADLEY: I don't know if that's going to be enough.
RS: You want to talk about paintings?
JB: Or…
RS: Or let's talk about your love life.
JB: Well, seducing a woman is an art unto itself… [Laughs]

RS: The first works I ever saw by you were the monochromes. What were you doing before those?

JB: It's always been painting in one form or another. For a while it was intimate little abstract paintings, objectlike paintings. Sometimes it would just be a piece of fabric, stretched. The sort of "sleight-of-hand" painting that seems popular today. They looked a little like Blinky Palermo, although I was unaware of Palermo's work at the time.

RS: And was that at RISD [the Rhode Island School of Design]?

JB: That was in New York. At RISD, I was making landscape paintings.

RS: Traditional landscape paintings?

JB: Kind of. I was looking at the worst of the genre, Thomas Kinkade and that kind of sentimental, nostalgic landscape painting you might come across in calendars or postcards, but I was also thinking about Marsden Hartley and [Albert Pinkham] Ryder and these guys. We see so many images of sunsets. It's an image that has been so abused that it's kind of lost all its meaning. But then it's also a beautiful thing, and it has the potential to be very meaningful. So I was doing that, working on these things, for probably four or five years, and then I moved to New York and somehow the interest in that stuff just dried up for me. It didn't feel right, living in my little hovel in Bushwick, trying

to paint like Grandma Moses. I had been making these abstract paintings as a side dish, and those just ended up being more interesting to me.

RS: Abstract being the monochromes?

JB: They weren't all monochromes. But the monochrome was appealing to me because it seemed so dull and sad. I had no interest in monochrome painting, and I didn't really care why other people made them. I knew that it was supposed to be about painting, but I thought it might be interesting
to approach making them on an emotional level.

RS: What do you mean, "an emotional level"?

JB: Just out of frustration. Out of being bored and frustrated and not feeling comfortable putting one color next to another.

RS: The ones I've seen always appear to have been stacked or arranged. Did you think of them as one big painting?

JB: The stacked monochrome paintings came after. Initially, they were conventional single-panel things. I had been thinking of them as having personality, or hoping they would have personality. I liked the idea of a painting having a sort of ambience, giving off a vibe. Like you could look at one out of the corner of your eye like you would a stranger in the room. And

so making these kind of schematic figures was just kind of a really dumb way of handling that, an obvious way to amp it up.

RS: A really reductive figure.

JB: Yeah, and I thought it was just a funny idea and a good idea. It actually came to me in a dream. I woke up one morning and it was there. But the reaction to those things—I think they were read as a critique of minimalism. Kind of taking the air out of it, which was troublesome. It wasn't really where I was coming from. My big idea at the time was that you… rather than emulate or respond to the work that I love, and attempt to expand on it, I would pick up on something that I felt no real connection to, and hoped that by working with this foreign stuff my sensibility would pop up in some interesting and unexpected way. I think it works, but it's something that I'm shying away from now. It's refreshing as hell. I actually look forward to coming to the studio now.

RS: Sounds like you were punishing yourself on purpose.

JB: I was.

RS: Were you raised with some sort of repressive religion?

JB: Well, I was raised Catholic.

II . The Shmutz

RS: How do you start these new paintings?

JB: There's a long period of just groping around. I usually have some kind of source material to work off of—a drawing or a found image—but this ends up getting buried in the process. Most of the painting happens on the floor, then I'll pin them up periodically to see what they look like on the wall. I work on both sides of the painting, too. If one side starts to feel unmanageable, I'll turn it over and screw around with the other side. That was something that just happened out of being a frugal guy, I guess. But then, because I am working on unprepared canvas, I get this bleedthough. The oil paint will bleed though to the other side, so I get this sort of incidental mark.

RS: Is that a lot of what you see here? Is the incidental mark?

JB: Yeah, I mean, I could point it out. Like on this one [pointing], that kind of pinkish triangle to the left is bled through.

RS: The purpose of priming a canvas is to prevent it from doing that, from…
JB: Rotting.
RS: Is that a worry of yours?
JB: I don't lose any sleep over it. As long as they're OK during my lifetime. Maybe someone else will have to deal with it.

RS: Do you just like the look of raw canvas?
JB: I like the way it looks, and it feels more like drawing to me. The raw canvas looks like paper to me. Like newsprint. With a primed, gessoed canvas I feel compelled to fill the whole thing in. You lose some of the drawing…
RS: There's also just this atmosphere of—
JB: Shmutz.
RS: Do you let this shmutz dictate what you paint? Do you riff off of accidents?
JB: The shmutz—the accidents are important. There's not a lot of really direct drawing in these things.
RS: "Direct drawing" meaning you have an idea and then you try to make that idea?
JB: Yeah, it's more about conjuring something over time, rather than having… you know, thinking, Oh I'd like to draw a pony here, and then just going for it. And living with it.
RS: Do you think about these new works as pure abstraction?
JB: No, no. I don't think of these as abstract paintings.
RS: So they're figurative, to you?
JB: I mean, I can just pick out, you know, a face, a bald head, a beard, and then a sort of hand with a finger point ing down. And over here we have, like, a sort of purple head regarding this guy with a blue cock, and then a sort of hawk nose, you know? [Laughter] That's just, uh, yeah…

RS: I think it's great to hear you say it bluntly like that. The language is pretty dumb-sounding, but the image "guy with a hawk nose" can become something magical.
JB: Hawk nose…
RS: Do you think when you look at other people's abstract paintings you can also see figuration in there?
JB: It's hard not to. You know, you look at a Rothko: there's the cloud and the horizon line, the ocean… it's hard not to pick these things out.
RS: "Pareidolia," it's called.
JB: It's a disease? A syndrome?
RS: You got a problem, man… [Laughs] No, it's the phenomenon of seeing, for instance, the man in the moon, or faces in clouds. But I think it can work with anything. This wall here—
JB: No, I think I might be afflicted.
RS: Sometimes when I'm looking at art, especially abstract stuff, I notice my eyes feel different, foggier. Ever notice that?
JB: Oh, yeah. I have noticed that. When I'm looking at a painting, my own painting or anyone's. You enter into a kind of light trance. It's strange. Your eyes glaze over a little. There's a subtle shift in consciousness.
RS: How many hours a day are you in the studio?
JB: It depends. I just come in as much as I can. I'll go

through a concentrated period of painting, and then I'll take a month off, or something like that. I don't want to treat painting like a job, and I don't have any assistants, so no one is expecting me to show up.

RS: When you make art now, does it feel like it did when you were drawing as a kid?

JB: No. When you're a kid it just comes naturally. It's just for fun. As an adult it's just, y'know, more involved. I have adult responsibilities. You read the paper, and all this kind of shit, and it ends up making it a dire situation. It's not just play.

RS: Did you go through a period where your drawing was a lot more refined and controlled?

JB: Well, in school I learned to draw from life. Figure drawing.

RS: Were you good at that?

JB: I was OK. I'm a pretty decent draftsman. But… there's this sort of skill purgatory that most of us are in. I can't draw like a child, and I can't draw like Rembrandt. I'm in the inbetween. You reach a certain skill level, and then you just work with your limitations. If I just sit down and make a natural drawing, it looks like something one of those guys on the boardwalk would draw. You'd be riding a skateboard with a huge head…

RS: You had a career laid out in front of you.

JB: You could do worse.

III. Dicks and Swastikas

RS: I saw a show of yours, not so long ago, at the Journal Gallery. It was all these very small scrawled drawings. And it seemed like the other end of the spectrum from the monochromes, like you're just displaying this totally mindless kind of art, right?
JB: Yeah, those drawings happened not in the studio but kind of around the kitchen table. They're more like doodles than finished, beautiful works on paper.
RS: Right, but you still show them as if they are. I mean, you present them in a nice frame.
JB: I just had this backlog of stuff sitting around. I kept trying to draw in the studio, and it always ended up feeling a little forced. Finally I thought, Why don't I just show this stuff I'm making that seems to be happening kind of naturally?
RS: Would you place these little doodles alongside your paintings? Or are they something different?
JB: Well, drawing is so direct. You can make a drawing in a minute, or thirty seconds. With drawing, the stakes are so low. It's a good place to generate material. If it's no good, you just throw it out and move on to the next one. The paintings

I kind of suffer over, but the drawings… it's easy. Sometimes I'll get on a roll and make ten or fifteen good drawings in an hour. It's a good warm-up for painting. I don't sweat them. But the paintings are taking longer and longer to make.

RS: How long?

JB: A few months. I'll typically work on a group of paintings, maybe ten at a time. I'll work in spurts and just look for a while. The idea is to end up with something that is unrecognizable.

I don't like to look at a painting and be able to retrace the steps.

RS: Sometimes I'll draw on the subway, or in the car, so I get a nice, jerky mark I wouldn't have made without something external messing up my intention

JB: Yeah, there are all sorts of ways to glitch the system, to break your own patterns. I just saw a photo of de Kooning drawing with his eyes closed. He made all of those great little drawings in the '60s and '70s with his eyes closed.

RS: De Kooning seems like he makes drawing with his eyes closed and then go back over it to pulls something out of it. Whereas Cy Twombly just makes the mark and leaves it nasty and sloppy.

JB: I just love Twombly. You see a Twombly painting today, and it still looks so fresh. It's like bathroom-stall art.

RS: Is that something that resonates with you—bathroom

art?
JB: Yeah. I like to see what someone who doesn't draw does draw when they draw. It's always the same stuff. Dicks and swastikas. I've been paying attention to graffiti, too—tags and that sort of thing. It's funny. It's just visual background noise until you start to engage with it, and then you just realize that it's everywhere.
RS: Or even the collages people make by tearing up advertisements in the subway. Once you pay attention to that and really look at them, it's more exciting than a lot of work in galleries.
JB: If someone says, "Here's a wall, do whatever you want, the cops aren't going to come," then it's always a piece of shit. It's just terrible. I like it when they have forty seconds to throw it up.

IV. Art at the DMV

RS: How do all the accidental marks—the shmutz—on your paintings happen?
JB: I work on them flat. I walk on them. They pick up paint and whatever else is on the floor. I like them to look really filthy.
RS: There's a sort of philosophy in filthiness, right? Like if you're letting the work be messy, you're accepting messiness

rather than fighting against it.
JB: I suppose, yeah, it reflects the mess that we're in.
RS: I wasn't really thinking, like, political overtones…
JB: Well, let me tell you, these are political paintings!
[Laughs]
RS: At the same time, you maybe aren't very controlling,
but you do sweat over these paintings.
JB: I think these are well-crafted paintings, you know. Craft
is just attention to detail. A well-crafted painting doesn't
have to look… Like, Ellsworth Kelly is a great craftsman,
and you can see it. It's obvious because the paintings are so
pristine, so beautifully finished, but Twombly was a great
craftsman, too. Even though he was smearing shit.
RS: Maybe you're not drawing dicks everywhere in your paintings,
but on some level you're still trying
to get that same kind of impulse.
JB: Yeah. The regression thing keeps coming
up with my work and… I'm not even
sure if I'd argue.
RS: When you say "regression," what do
you mean by that?
JB: Well, I guess the straight idea… I don't
know. Avoiding adult responsibility and
adult themes? Engaging in base primitive
behavior?

RS: Can you point to some regressive artists?
JB: Picasso, Pollock, Dubuffet… I mean, the whole enterprise—art-making in general—would probably be considered regressive, frivolous behavior. We should probably all be working on some new kind of bomb! Something respectable.
RS: What sort of stuff outside of the conversation gives you your visual kicks?
JB: Just anything—anything that's around. Record covers, comics, illustration.
RS: Do you look at much outsider art?
JB: I do, yeah. William Hawkins—I think William Hawkins was a great painter. I was at the DMV recently, and there was this fucking great painting on the wall by somebody. It was not charming like folk art or children's art. It's what I've been looking for recently. Teenage art, I guess it is. Just bad drawing.
RS: Where else would you find this kind of work?
JB: I look for it. I mean, I could show you some examples—a friend just gave me a great book that's just all these Xeroxed punk-rock flyers, and there's a lot of it in there, some seventeen-year-old kid drawing a guy on a skateboard with a Mohawk. I remember being very taken with punks. With the way they looked.
RS: Were you a punk-rock kid?
JB: Yeah, I was interested in punk rock when

I was a kid.

RS: I was interested in punk rock.

JB: [Laughs] It was an interest of mine…

Were you?

RS: Yeah.

JB: As you can see, there's a lot of source material here. I can't paint all the time, and I'm here a lot, and I can't draw all the time, so I look at books. There's an absurd amount of time spent just looking.

RS: What would you say is the ratio of looking to actually painting, in the studio?

JB: It's embarrassing. Maybe ten to one.

RS: Which of your paintings have you loved most?

JB: The ones that I really love the most are the ones that made me deeply uncomfortable to begin with. When I'm working on a group of paintings, there will be one or two that appear to be ahead of the rest, and then there are one or two that seem hopeless. These hopeless ones always wind up being the best, because you don't really care about them. You can push them over the edge.

RS: Their badness becomes an asset.

JB: That sounds about right. If you look at art all the time, after a while you just get burned out on the good stuff, and then you have nowhere to go but down. That's where I'm looking. The stuff that's really been turning me on these

days is—I guess you'd just call it "café art." It's usually a painting of someone playing a saxophone. Like that. I love the idea of making a show that is just unacceptable. Something so bad that I would have to leave town.

Vincent Fecteau

I visited the artist, Vincent Fecteau at his home in San Francisco, a city he has lived for his entire career as an artist. His walls feature selections from his art collection, which includes many well-known artists (B. Wurtz, Peter Saul) but for me, the standout work was an ecstatic finger painting by an little-known artist named Tomiko Ishiwatari, a patient at a local long term care facility where Fecteau serves as a volunteer art teacher.

Fecteau takes pleasure in resisting the conventions of the contemporary art life — where he lives, what he looks at, how he thinks and when he works. Born in the town of Islip on Long Island, New York, Fecteau majored in painting at Wesleyan University, but quickly walked away from two dimensional media. Even now, he doesn't draw, even as preparatory work. He needs the tactility of sculpture and prefers the slipperiness of the 360 degree object, unable to be fully perceived from any single perspective. Fittingly, he spent several years working as a floral arranger.

As an exhibiting artist, his work began with his architectural collage — diorama-like depictions of haunted, domestic interiors. Quickly, he began making his sculptural work: compact, evocative

forms he builds up slowly, mostly through layers of paper-mâché. In all his work, he embraces the impermanence of humble ingredients and has maintained a remarkably consistent scope for three decades. Using shoeboxes, found photos from thrift stores, and wicker baskets, he uses "easy" materials to create the illusion of solidity and makes the kind of bold, modernist gestures that are usually cast in heavy metals. The work appears tight and austere, but for him, the process of making it is torturous and emotionally draining. To maintain sanity, he keeps his production level low: usually no more than eight works every 18 months.

Fecteau and I spoke in his studio, a bedroom-sized space in the basement of his home. When I arrived, the room was tidy and bare with two large work tables and little else. He had recently sent his newest body of work (dark, monochromatic, almost gothic-looking sculptures) for a spring show at greengrassi in London, and other than some drippings on the floor, there was no sign of art. This seemed to please him. "An empty studio," he told me, "is the best time in the studio." — Ross Simonini

RS: Living in San Francisco, you're separated from the art world. Was that a choice?

VF: It wasn't initially, but I don't think I could live in New York now. Growing up on Long Island I always assumed I'd eventually live in Manhattan, but when I moved there for a summer, to intern for Hannah Wilke, I couldn't handle it... It was just too much for me. Sometimes I even think this city is too much…

RS: You came here straight here from Wesleyan in Connecticut.

VF: Yeah. I've lived here since 1991.

RS: Do you have an art community here?

VF: I do. There are a lot of great artists here.

RS: It's significant that you stayed in the Bay Area. Most artists can't have a career here. They leave.

VF: I was able to do it because I got early support from people outside of the Bay Area: Hudson [gallerist, Feature Inc.] in New York and Cornelia Grassi in London. I have plenty of friends who have left, because it can be difficult to show outside of San

Francisco if you live here. And it's very difficult to have a sustaining "career" if you don't show outside of San Francisco.

RS: The Bay Area creates singular artists — Bruce Conner, David Ireland, Lutz Bacher…

VF: When I first moved here, I came to do AIDS activism with ACT UP. And then I realized why San Francisco was so appealing: It was a bit off the radar, which interested me, it was close to amazing natural beauty and it had a high tolerance for freaks and difference of all kinds. I worked for Nayland Blake for a while but I wasn't even sure I wanted to be an artist. Honestly, I'm still always looking for the thing that will be more suitable for me than being an artist.

RS: Has anything come close?

VF: For several years I've been volunteering with an art program at a local hospital and rehabilitation Center in San Francisco which I find very rewarding.

RS: What would that job be?

VF: I don't know… psychiatric nurse? Or something like that. I had no idea I was interested in that kind of work until I started

spending time at Laguna Honda. The art program I work with is more of about facilitating the making of work than teaching it. I'm really interested in art that needs to be made and the artists, that despite sometimes sizable obstacles, make it. For some of these artists, there's no bigger "goal" than creating. They may not care about the finished product or even think of these objects as art, but they are completely and totally engaged. I think for some people with compromised communication abilities it becomes their primary way of expressing their internal experience and engaging with the world around them. It's inspiring.

RS: Do you feel that way, making art?

VF: Sometimes I do… sometimes… But there's so much outside noise that can get in the way when art making starts looking more like a "career". I actually think the job of the artist is to try to protect the "real" or "true" creative act from all the other stuff.

RS: What's the real part?

VF: [long pause] I don't know.

RS: The thing you can't talk about.

VF: Yes. Maybe. I find it almost impossible to articulate. If I understood why, maybe I wouldn't have to make anything. Sometimes I find it helpful to think of the work as simply evidence of an intention, or a desire, or an impulse. The end result is not that important. Maybe it's that impulse that is the real or true part.

RS: Does your process start with a feeling or —

VF: Always a feeling… I'm completely interested in one's intuition and the unconscious. My experience of my mind is that it's an incredibly chaotic place. Although the end result, the sculpture, is finite and very specific, that's not my experience of the making of it. Which might be why I don't really have strong attachments for pieces after they are finished. I don't necessarily recognize them. That said, they must somehow always feel "true" in the end. I've thrown away stuff even after working on it for months because it starts to feel false.

RS: Do you throw away finished work?

VF: No. If I show something, it is finished, and I accept it for what it is. It would feel dishonest to deny this thing that I once felt to be true. As embarrassing as it may be, it's still true. Things don't always turn out "great" but that's kind of irrelevant.

RS: Greatness is a small sliver of the human experience. It would be a shame if that's all art could really depict.

VF: I recently went to Amsterdam and saw the Van Gogh museum for the first time. I was so inspired to see all the missteps and experiments, the complexity of this relatively short artistic life. Of course there are those amazing moments but also many things that were full of difficulty and struggle and even failure.

RS: Have you ever shown work you thought was a failure at the time?

VF: No. Not at the time. In hindsight of course… but I'm way too self conscious to do that... I know they're not all perfect, but I believe they are good enough so as not to be completely humiliated.

RS: Do you feel humiliated when you show?

VF: Always.

RS: Every show?

VF: Yes.

RS: Me too. I hoped it would go away.

VF: I think it gets worse. For me, the desire to be recognized, to be seen, is inherently embarrassing. This last show was very painful. The work in the studio happens over a long period of time in almost complete privacy and then, all of a sudden it's on public view. And I'm on public view! It's shocking.

RS: But it has to be done?

VF: I fantasize about having a regular job, where I don't have to obsess about what I do when I come home. It's much less about "talent" than having a drive or obsessiveness that won't let up. It takes a real intensity. Every artist I know is intense.

RS: And all this psychological noise is impossible for a non-artist to understand, probably.

VF: There's that scene in Close Encounters of the Third Kind when he sculpts the Devils Tower out of the mashed potatoes and the wife and kids are looking at him, freaked out, and crying. And he says something like, "I know Daddy's been acting strange recently… I'm sorry… I can't help it… It's really important." That scene really resonated with me. It's the best description of being an

artist that I've ever seen in a film. And that's what it's like: you're doing a ridiculous thing, you don't know why, but you have to.

RS: Is your work dealing directly with that conflict?

VF: Yes, I never really feel like I have a handle on the situation. I experience the process as flailing, searching blindly in the dark, hoping that something starts to make sense. When it does it usually comes as a surprise, like it didn't come from me… and then I know it's finished.

RS: It's a funny idea, that an artwork has to feel alien to you. It has to be not you. You'd think the artist would feel like the object should ultimately be a pure expression of their self, but it's the opposite. It's about erasing yourself.

VF: In a way, but of course it's still really you. You can run but you can't hide.

RS: Right, it's actually about discovering some new nook of yourself.

VF: That's probably what it is.

RS: You seem to be working with these abstract materials, and yet the materials you use are so modest.

VF: Well, on the one hand, it's just the mashed potatoes. You use what's in front of you. And I like that these little things already exist in the world. I like the idea of the grand gesture that's made with the most humble stuff.

RS: It's easy.

VF: And it's, relatively, easy. I'm not interested in fighting a medium. Some artists find meaning in the technical process. I don't. It's hard enough. I'm interested in the why something is made more than how. The sculptures change constantly, sometimes almost violently, so I'm not really thinking about engineering or construction.

RS: Has your work ever fallen apart after an exhibiting?

VF: No. I mean, the collage works are made with magazine pages… so those are light sensitive, but the papier mache seems pretty stable.

RS: Was the collage your first work?

VF: Yes. I was interested in all the references already packed into an art directed image and as a material it was readily available. But I think spatially, so although I started with collages I was soon arranging them in space. I used foam core because it was easy and cheap and then whenI wanted to make the forms larger and more complex I started using paper mache.

RS: The work looks like such a consistent development throughout the years.

VF I don't think about "development". I don't believe in the linearity of that kind of thinking. The thing I was looking for 25 years ago, is the same thing I'm looking for now. In the end, I think we are relatively simple beings.

RS: Do you think in terms of improvement?

VF: I've tried to stop thinking in terms of "good" and "bad" when working. I'm convinced that the only relevant judgement to make is whether or not it's "true." I'm never going to get beyond my brain or my abilities. My job is to embrace that fact and dive in.

RS: You feel that you are the same person you've always been?

VF: I think my essential self is the same. One can change of course, but I think what is at one's core is consistent. A truth? A spirit, maybe?

RS: Do you see older artists coming to a greater understanding of themselves in their work?

VF: I'm not sure it's an understanding as much as acceptance and maybe celebration. There's a lot we can do with what we have. It's beautiful thing to embrace and celebrate one's limitations.

RS: Do you tend to like artists if you like their work?

VF: Not necessarily. There are definitely people whose work I liked but have been disappointed when I actually met them.

RS: Does that seem like a contradiction, if the work is an expression of their interior?

VF: Not really. There's another step involved which is that of the viewer. For the viewer, it's all about them. What I respond to in a work might not have anything to do with what the artist thought they were doing. I think who the artist is becomes irrelevant at a certain point.

RS: You mentioned the word "spirit." Is art sacred to you?

VF: I think about art and religion a lot. I think they are very similar. I'm very interested in what it means to have "faith". I grew up Catholic although I don't consider myself religious in any typical sense. I think the problems with religion, like art, come from the institutions that are created around them. These institutions were established with the intent of protecting but eventually end up compromising that very thing they were trying to protect. I think both faith and art are simultaneously, maybe paradoxically, both incredibly fragile and resilient. And, ultimately, indestructible.

Pope.L (2013)

In the late '70s, the performance artist William Pope.L famously crawled along 22 miles of sidewalk, from the beginning to the end of Broadway, Manhattan longest street, wearing a cape-less Superman outfit with a skateboard strapped to his back. In varying fits and starts, the performance (titled, The Great White Way) took 5 years to complete, with each installment lasting as long as Pope L. could endure the knee and elbow pain (usually around 6 blocks). It is among forty-plus "crawl" pieces he has performed in his 33 years of work as an artist.

The pictures of the defamed superhero dragging himself through the business district are among the clearest and most iconic images in Pope L.'s oeuvre, but for him, the documentary image isn't as essential as the actual experience of exhaustion and self-imposed shame that come along performing the work. For this reason, the 57 year old artist often invites participants to collaborate with him, organizing large group crawls and interactive installations that require viewers to contribute traditionally African-American materials (hair picks, soul records, etc.). This coming June, with the help of local citizens, he plans to pull, by hand, an eight-ton truck 45 miles through the streets of Cleveland for 72 hours straight (with alternating teams). It's a follow-up to his piece,"Blink" in which volunteers pulled an ice cream truck, lit up with projected photographs of the city, from 6pm to 6am, in a post-Katrina New Orleans. Such performances live in the space between the work of a shaman and that of a community organizer, mobilizing locals and attempting to heal society through abstraction of grand themes such as labor and identity politics.

Other classic Pope L. performances have included Eating the Wall Street Journal, which he did on a toilet, to allow the paper to pass through him, transformed, and his copyrighting of his personal slogan: "The Friendliest

Black Artist in America©." He also makes photographs, sculpture, writings, and paintings, often using a variety of white-food-based materials: RediWhip, mayonnaise, flour, milk. His new book, 'Black People are Cropped' was recently published by JPR Ringier and chronicles his fifteen-year, ongoing drawing series called "Skin Set" - a project with a poetic and absurd perspective on human skin color. The book contains his bright crayons scrawlings of pseudo-stereotypes - "Red People are Boner Cosmic" and "Green People are Shitty," and a philosophical essay-poem on sociology."Blackness is a lever for me to talk about otherness," he says.

In the spring, Pope.L will have an exhibition he describes as "an ambiloquy, a discourse on ambiguity" at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, his current home. In December, I spoke to him via email, at his request, and later, on the phone. - Ross Simonini

ROSS SIMONINI: Is your work a form of activism?

WILLIAM POPE.L: When people use the word activism today it sounds like after-ism—something you do after, reactionary, back-sterism, something you do backwards. The space I create in my work for others is more formalist, like, "change the world" or "change the frame on that painting."

SIMONINI: Do you want to change the world?

POPE.L: I think that corporations and states have actually co-opted that phrase. I guess that phrase would be connected more to the ’60s. And I think, initially when I was using it, maybe 20 to 25 years ago, co-optation wasn’t as clear or formidable as it is now.

You have to respond to your times. But I think that phrase is connected to the idea of art transforming anything or the idea that radicality in small things is a revolution or the concept of being able to make a life less onerous by offering opportunities to that life.

SIMONINI: Is this what you mean when you say you want your work to be "socially responsible"?

POPE L.: Obama charms when he speaks of social responsibility, but in the art world today it's not sexy. A sexier phrase might be social networking. What is the difference between social responsibility and social networking? Well, the former requires that you show up, and the latter requires that you might have to buy an app for showing up.

SIMONINI: How did your thinking about "The Great American Way" change over the five years it took to complete?

POPE L.: One of the problems with time-based endurance performances like my crawl works is they have this marvelous creamy nougat center operating inside the performer and this space is unfortunately not available in the images and mythologies that surround the work. So, typically the surface of the work becomes the life of the work. Most folks only get the neatness of the feat. How many miles? How much pain? How many people said or did not say this or that? I am not interested in that.

SIMONINI: Did you enjoy crawling through the streets? Do you enjoy making the work in general? Or is it not about enjoyment?

POPE L.: No, I did not enjoy crawling. Overall, I enjoy making work with others. I enjoy the small moments of revelation that are only possible in the company of others. I enjoy making a clear puzzle. I realize more and more that making is un-making. To make something is to un-do it. To make something is to make it less mysterious, that is, in the process of removing a veil, one of many. You gain more intimacy but it may not be very pleasant.

SIMONINI: Why did the crawl pieces change from solo crawls to group efforts *[such as the crawl to the Abyssinian Church in Portland, Maine on October 5, 2002]*

POPE L: From its very earliest beginnings, the crawl project was conceived as a group performance. Unfortunately for me, at that time I was the only volunteer. Sharing the pain, as it were, allowing the experience of public prostration in motion to be public in a larger way, across more than one body, created a stronger argument for the work as a means not just an anomaly. The work's initial strangeness as a solo activity made it more attractive to the art world because it took on a more object-like character, more personal and maverick. But for me, it was always just another convention. And gloriously so. What is more conventional than crawling?

SIMONINI: When you mobilize a group of people, as you will be in your upcoming "Pull!" performance, are you trying to transform these people?

POPE L.: Do I think you can change people by enlisting them in pulling a truck by hand 45 miles when it would be so much easier to drive it? No, no, no. And, sure I create the opportunity, but people do the changing themselves. So, is it change that's going on here? Or something that was always there but was just looking for a place to light?

SIMONINI: Why pull a truck?

POPE.L: Well, it's a 1987 GNC step van. It's a kind of all-purpose vehicle that's still in use by, for example, UPS. It's sort of a workhorse and I think it's symbolic of a certain backboned industrial use. And what we're going to do with it is we're going to basically treat the surface of the truck with writings. We're doing all kinds of research about employment within the state of Illinois and Ohio and we're gonna actually post job opportunities for people.

SIMONINI: How would you describe the situation of Cleveland these days?

POPE L.: Well, I think they're fighting against an image problem, countering the self-image of "The Mistake on the Lake," as they talk about it. There's a sense of malaise in the city. I think Cleveland is about a kind of constant sense of having to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That, of course, is the sense among many American cities. But I didn't want to only have a bootstrap project. I wanted to have a project that was also going to be very practical, because what we're doing is in response to a lot

of the talk about employment problems in the city and the quality of the jobs. So we're going to actually pay people to pull.

SIMONINI: You're making jobs.

POPE.L: The pulls have been based on volunteerism. But what I found, for example, in New Orleans, where we did the first pull after Katrina and the oil spill, was that people who would like to be involved in a project like this cannot because they're looking for work. Or because they think in some way it's anti-work. You know, it's art.

SIMONINI: Right.

POPE.L: It's also, I think, a very material, formal issue in terms of, What do you do with the capital that you have? Do you use it to create some kind of visual, formal interpolation, that has its own raison d'être? For example, let's say, bringing people into a project who maybe could not otherwise participate. So I see that as a formal choice. I know it has social implications as well, but I also see it as a way of shaping the visual life of the work. Because that means, if you spend that money to get people involved in the work, you can't then spend it on—I'm not going to say, "decorative," per se, but the visual effects that you're going to achieve are going to be in proportion to that choice.

SIMONINI: Would you say that a viewer has only truly experienced one of your works if she has participated in it?

POPE.L: That's an interesting question. Some people, for example, are interested maybe in what it looks like: how many people participated? Did people like it? Did people not like it? But I believe in questions like, how did the work interact with the community? You know, what were some of the discussions that came up in terms of the creation of a work? Were some of the choices you made based on feedback you received from the community regarding what kind of work they wanted? It's not that the work is gonna be a slave to the community, but some works are much more porous to community opinion than others.

SIMONINI: Do you think about this community-based work as being within any kind of lineage?

POPE L.: Perhaps with what some of the constructivists in the '20s were thinking about, in terms of a desire to create works that have to do with the fabric of what people do every day, specifically, labor. It also connects with fluxus. George Maciunas [fluxus artist] was very clear that art had to do with labor. That's why he was involved in real-estate activism [Maciunas transformed several, ramshackle loft buildings in SoHo into live-work "Fluxhouse" co-ops]

SIMONINI: Do you feel like any of this work is autobiographical, or do you think it's not important that you be viewed as its author?

POPE.L: I know in art there are these tendencies to want to disappear the author, but you are the driver of this thing. It's just like a small corner store: to say that I am not important to the work in terms of being the one who wakes up and opens the store

in the morning and closes it in the evening when no one wants to —I mean, that would be silly and, actually, inaccurate to disappear myself. What is important is to try to bring as many of the participants as you can, and actors and performers, if you will, into the work to put pressure on your own participation, so that one day, perhaps, I will not be as operative in it. But in most cases, practically speaking, that's not currently in most of the models I know, that's not possible, because of practical reasons, in many cases. I mean, even if, theoretically, you want to totally disappear yourself, I think the problem would be: Can you?

SIMONINI: How were you introduced to performance art?

POPE L.: My earliest performances were in undergraduate school. They came out of making a set of works called communication devices. I was attending Montclair State University *[Montclair, New Jersey]*, but back then, I believed that the work had to have an answer, had to possess an answer, had to have it in its grasp like a real object. And I thought all I had to do was make enough of these things, these performances, and I'd find the answer. Of course, I was wrong.

Pope L. (2018)

At this year's Whitney Biennial, Pope.L exhibited 2,755 slices of bologna. He pinned the meat with a grid of photographs on the walls of a large pink and green cube and allowed its greasy orange juices to dribble down the walls and pool in gutters around the cube's perimeter.

Over the three-month exhibition, the meat festered and the smell grew increasingly putrid, filling the museum's galleries with the undeniable sense that something in the air was off.

Pope.L has a way of destabilizing his viewers. He calls everything into question— institutions, perceptions, cultural conventions, identities—and he does so by provoking us with absurdity. As he sees it, the bologna in the Whitney installation (titled Claim [Whitney Version]) represents flesh, and the number of slices is a reference to some percentage of the Jews in New York City. It's a comment on multiculturalism, and yet he purposely distorts the statistics, intentionally destroying the integrity of whatever statement he seems to be making.

These kinds of gestures are what have made Pope.L a slippery artist since the '70s, when he began performing on the street. He refers to himself as "the Friendliest Black Artist in America," and omits his first name (William) when exhibiting.

He seems to eschew style, and instead experiments freely with a variety of materials and approaches, from abstract painting to writing to appropriative sculpture. He rarely settles into any clear political position, though the work often suggests what he calls "socially responsible" activist impulses, sometimes even philanthropy. Recently, he bottled and sold questionable, possibly polluted water from Flint, Michigan, to raise money for the city.

Likewise, Pope.L treats the concept of race with poetic nonsensicality. His best-known piece is a performance titled The Great White Way, in which he donned a superman costume and, over a period of nine years, intermittently crawled along the twenty-two miles of Broadway in New York City. Likewise, his ongoing Skin Set drawings are scrawled aphorisms on skin color: Black people are the window and the breaking of the window and Purple people are the end of orange people and Orange people are god when She is shitting. In these drawings, he seems to mock the whole idea of racial reductionism, and opens up a vast, ambiguous space for humor and interpretation.

The following interview—my second with Pope.L—was conducted through email correspondence over several months. His responses are written with the freewheeling, contradictory energy of his art, with both stuttered emotional reactions and carefully parsed explanations. Before we began, he

sent me a contract that declared that he "owns all copyright and intellectual property rights to all his writing," which, of course, includes everything you are about to read.

ROSS SIMONINI: Why do you omit your first name when you work as an artist?
POPE.L: It's a professional thing, I think. The more you are out there in public, the more you need to be conscious of that. I don't like to be conscious of my public-ness. Takes too much energy. Going by my family name puts my split right out in front. Somehow that calms me.
RS: Do you consider your art self different than your private self?
PL: Yes, each is a variation on the meme of me.
RS: When you perform do you feel you have to become a different kind of person? When you crawled up Broadway, what state were you in?
PL: In? In? Become? The state of "in" in the flesh of becoming… I don't think I become anything or am "in" anything, per se. While performing I simply focus a part or parts of myself to deal with a task. All the other parts of myself remain "in" there. If there is an art to performing, it's the managing-the-selves thing. But I suppose, yes, I do transform—in a way—from one state, cooler, to another: warmer or hotter. I become, as you

might say, this other person: this more focused, more vulnerable, more generous yet more limited and narcissistic person.

'Cause the task is the only thing I want to do, that I need to do. In life the tasks are seldom so singular; the script is much more variegated, with layered shifts required and one's performance—well, it has to be messier and more disjointed to be successful—what does that mean when one is just living? When I was crawling up Broadway there was no unified state except… except perhaps pain and uncertainty, which is weird, 'cause I always knew where I was going.

RS: How does this state relate to the painting state?

PL: Painting is uncomfortable in a different way than, say, crawling, or just straight performing. These days a painting takes me a long time to make, and because of the nature of my studio life I paint in front of other people a lot. Painting as a process, at times, can be excruciating 'cause the way to "go" in making a painting is, at least for me, always clumsy, unmarked and blinding, even when I think I know what I am doing. However, the pain I experience in painting is more psychic, intellectual, and social than physical, which is perhaps why I write when I paint, even if I am not using words, I perform as a writer. It's scribbling as a crab-like act of creativity.

Writing as a verb anchors me in a fiction of communication and teleology—that there is a hither and a yon, an inside and an outside, a here and a now and a there and a then. Painting

hamstrings writing via the clumsiness of the practice itself, its penchant for physicalizing as much as possible, then claiming the physical things like paint or shape or edge only mean what they mean or that they must! mean something not physical at all, something impossible to physicalize, like beauty or purity or transcendence. But all this is very productive in a kooky non-intuitive sort of way. Writing through the brain of painting brings in interesting baggage. Why and how helpful? Because the space of writing is largely in the head, and the space of painting, like performing, is mostly in the body, and their tension together, the one I'm interested in, where they cohabit, is in the world. So there is that.

*

RS: I see you are teaching a class called Writing for Performance at the University of Chicago. Are your performances usually supported by writing? If so, what kind of writing are we talking about? A script? A story?
PL: In the syllabus I changed the name of the course to Writing and Performance. I just did it. Well, I changed it 'cause the course-list title, the title you cited, suggests I am privileging writing over performance or vice versa. Ahh! The politics of titles. 'Cause you see, here at THE University of Chicago, where I am employed, text is king. However, I believe—and it's me who

teaches the fucking course—I believe Writing AND Performance is a better title. It's clearer—more on the mark concerning what really happens when text and image get together in the world. The course is about the tension in performance between text and non-text. Most performances I make involve some sort of language-thing, OK, but usually that's intertwined with some sort of image-thing as well as a feeling-thing. The feeling thing, the tone thing, is the most difficult to pin down.

RS: Does the feeling thing usually come at the beginning or the end? Or is it always different?

PL: Truth is, the feeling thing doesn't always arrive, especially in visual art. Or it comes in bits and pieces that don't hang neat together. And it comes at different times even when it does arrive. When I am doing music, I find it comes sooner and clearer and I know its arrival with more certainty. Of course that "ease" can be a lie. In visual art, the feeling thing is almost always reluctant. At least with me it's always the same thing—it's always a reach, a strive, seldom a grab. But in music, it's the thing you don't need words for to get at what you're after. Yet frequently you need the words to get at something more than feeling—but what could be more than feeling? Not feeling anything at all. And what does to get mean in this context? To get means "to possess," "to understand," "to arrive at without seeming to consume," 'cause access just happens, right? It just appears; it's so!!!! immediate. But it's it's it's not! It's not! It's not! Yet it feels

so unencumbered. How could something that feels so free cost anything? Tricky thing—feeling. Intimacy is sleight of hand in visual art. It's almost impossible for it not to be. Yet if you didn't feel it in the first place, you couldn't art it later. It's part of the craft of art that the soul can feel so direct yet require puppetry. Even the crawls I did had this problematic. As Wittgenstein said, "What pain?"

RS: Are your performances usually supported by writing?

PL: All performances I make are supported by conceptualization but not all works show the language-crafting on their sleeves. I like that. I like that. That that that! That some require the overt flesh of words and others only "allow" the viewer to write the script. Of course, I frame the "allowance" within the parameters of the performance…

In grad school, I definitely privileged text over image. It was an oversight. Youth! A friend of mine, Lydia Grey, asked me why I privileged text over image. I blamed it on the father of conceptual art Joseph Kosuth. No, no. I didn't have a good answer at all. And that bothered me. At the time, she and another friend, Mary Jane Montalto, had been introducing me to the work of theater director Robert Wilson. I liked Wilson 'cause sometimes he'd run

a scene nonstop for an hour or more with no text at all—even so, he was always suggesting aspects of discourse that I associate with language—for example, story, character, history, dialogue,

place—he did it mostly through his use of costume, setting, duration, and pacing. Looking at his shows, it was fascinating to witness someone suggesting so much reference but using so little language as text. Early Richard Foreman was similarly "empty" but much more blocky and static. Much of Wilson's stage was familiar to me from other sources—I knew the glacial slowness of Beckett, the object-oriented sculpt-wordplay of the art avant-garde, but in Wilson's world, timing was more important—basically he created syncopated atmospheres. What drove them? It was a lot like a music video—music was the color propelled by the contrapuntal.

RS: As a performer, do you think in text?

PL: As a performer, I do not think in text—I kind of try not to think. Kind of. At least not text-think. Muscle-think, OK. Placethink,

OK. Feel-think, OK. Or situation-think. All OK. But very little text-think. I sometimes speak text when I perform, but it's still not about the text. It's about using the text as an instrument

to create a moment or scene or achieve a task. Now, as a maker, a creator of the work itself, I definitely think more in text. However, when I was younger, I would have said, "Yes, as a performer I think in text." But even then, even then I knew intuitively that that was not true but I had no other way to express it at the time—it was easier, safer, and more hip to just say, "Yeah—my shit come from language!"

RS: What's your reading life like?

PL: I like to read but I get impatient with it or with myself. It's not that I want reading to be an image or a movement or even transparent—I want it to be functional even if it's nonsense or opaque. I want it to do something—to perform. These days much of what I read is either because I have to or because I absently grab from an ever-growing pile of all-the-things-I-want-to-read-but-never-shall.

Lately, I found something that checks several of my boxes—it's functional, it does something, it's fresh, and I can consume it in small doses and return to it without losing the entire thread. It's stuff on the theory of ignorance. It's a 2015 book called Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies, edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey. A bit expensive but worth it. One of its key ideas is that ignorance can be theorized and has value, for example, in science experiments which use double-blind testing. Or in the law, which, at least symbolically, characterizes itself as blind. An interesting figure that pops up here and there in the book is Donald Rumsfeld, former secretary of defense, with his notorious unknown unknowns. But what is most interesting about the material is its treatment of ignorance as both inevitable and a tool, a resource. Basically, new knowledge always produces new ignorance, which is not necessarily always a deficit. Non-knowledge sensitizes us to

new opportunities. In addition, knowing the limits of one's knowledge is just as important as knowing the reach of one's knowledge.

RS: The series of Skin Set drawings seems to explore non-knowledge, body knowledge.

PL: Rather than a series, I think of Skin Set as a set; which is an open play of terms: artworks framed by a will to voice, to breathe—a fluid bunch of stuff, really, under continual revision based on the bit-by-bit inclusion of new members as the work becomes over time. Skin Set is most physical in that it is limited by my breath, my death. Hmmm. That sounds too romantic: the dead artist and his body of work sort of thing… Hmmm. What would happen if my death perpetuated my body of work instead of impeded it? How would that happen? In some ways artists have been perpetuating themselves for years via museums dedicated
solely to their shit—sort of like presidential libraries—or, more recently like their corporations, nonprofits and foundations. I wonder if the ultimate success of Warhol will be his foundation? So that one day the only thing young artists will know of him is his mechanism. Is that something to aspire to?

RS: Are you preparing for your death as an artist? Is legacy important to you?

PL: No, I am preparing for my death as a person but but but so far it has not gone well. Bottom line, I am not ready to die.

Recently my gallery sat me down at a special lunch to talk about estate and artist foundation shit. A chill wind. They meant well. The meeting was cordial. At first I thought it was going to be some kind of intervention, and in a way it was, but I did not expect—hmmm—that I would feel—

RS: You're selling bottles of contaminated water from Flint, Michigan, as a fund-raiser. Besides raising money, what is your interest in distributing bottles of contaminated water?

PL: I visited Flint recently with Alivia Zivich and Daniel Sperry from the art gallery What Pipeline, and Eric Dutro, an independent
photographer who lives in Flint. We talked with people as they drove up for supplies at a distribution point run by the state of Michigan. We were told by several people that they cook and bathe with the same water I want to bottle. Is the water safe? Well, that's not 100 percent clear. It's a scary situation. My interest in selling contaminated drinking water goes beyond Dadaist hoo-ha. Beyond the gesture. Or maybe Flint is ultimate Dada. Either way, all the monies we raise from the sale of Flint water go directly to supporting the people of Flint in their struggle.

Art-wise, the aesthetics in this work are in the immaterial: vulnerability, community, and a sense of connectedness. The citizens of Flint were ill-served by the folks who governed them—the city, the state, and the federal government. In 2015, the EPA said their new water supply was safe, but it was anything

but safe.

I am selling Flint's polluted water because, as weird as it may sound, their water has become a very important part of Flint. The water is an object lesson and a reminder that Flint is not the only city in the US with serious water issues. Just down the road, people in Detroit, until recently, were losing their homes because they couldn't pay their water bills.

RS: Do you see any problem with equating art and social activism? Have you found that the activist impulse competes with the art impulse?

PL: Art. Activism. Activism. Art. They aren't the same, but maybe they should be. I mean, should art improve the quality of people's lives in a meaningful way? Fuck yeah. Should activism blow our eyes, ears, and minds? Fuckity fuck yeah. So there's no problem.

RS: Your work is thick with ritual. What rituals are important in your life?

PL: Making my bed every morning.

RS: Do you look to historical rituals for insight?

PL: I probably look to "the mistake"—you know, making mistakes as a tradition. And of course mistakes do not necessarily mean failure. It's that ignorance-theory thing again, perhaps.

I call mistakes ritualistic 'cause the most essential, stupid, and important mistakes rely on repetition for their impact. We are attached to what escapes and ensnares us. People are hardheaded. Perhaps this is why the most fucked-up mistakes describe our

most essential histories. In this way our rituals become tied up in time. Personally, I find social welfare, the way we do it here in the United States, has provided me with a lot of insight. My family was on welfare for a long while. I didn't really understand the system in a deep way until my mom went to jail and we had to "simulate" her presence in order to keep receiving the checks.

RS: Your work is often described by its smell, and this is connected to your use of foods like bologna and peanut butter. What does smell activate for you?

PL: Smell, or odor or the olfactory, is sculptural—so imagine an installation that begins at the nose and pirates every cell in the body. I imagine smell as the movement—or performing, if you will—of molecules from one thing or situation into and out of another. Some of the molecules enter our body and our consciousness and accomplish a kind of access I could never obtain on my own. Smell keeps the focus on the moment and is not experienced as historical. At the moment of impression, smell is all presence. Even when it reminds you of something else, the initial encounter is in-your-face physical. Even so, memory or history or the cheesy whiff of ideology is never far behind. We always want to make smell into something else 'cause it is so obdurately itself. Things decay 'cause they always have, but it is also true that things decay a little differently today than they once did. For example, the drastically reduced breakdown of plastics or pesticides and genetically

modified foods. We smell different today and our deaths must also smell different.

RS: How did you arrive at bologna as a material?

PL: The first thing I do is I don't call it bologna. I call it baloney.

Mika Rottenberg

In the wordless film, *Squeeze* by Mika Rottenberg, a factory is abuzz with activity: one obese woman conducts electricity through meditation, a middle-aged blonde lady spritzes a wiggling tongue with water, a chubby woman is squeezed for mystical orange powder, a man harvests rubber trees, two groups of international workers appear to transcend space and time, hundreds of lettuce heads endure violent dicing and a few disembodied butts sweat. All this happens, it seems, to produce a cube of worthless, rotting trash.

The product is dull, but the process of its creation - the art of its labor - is a phantasmagorical spectacle. Repetitive tasks, production lines, the transformation of work into physical objects - these are the elements of Mika Rottenberg's surreal, industrial films - *Mary's Cherries*, *Cheese*, *Tropical Breeze,* and the recent performance-film combo, *Seven*. To view her work, viewers follow strange interlocking chains of Rube Goldberg-esque logic until, sometimes, a magical hiccup allows for a moment of the impossible. Sounds of struggle, the creak of a straining floorboard and long, slow camera pans heighten the mood.

The actors of Rottenberg's films are laborers. They don't *act*, per se, but carry out a series of simple, physical tasks. She chooses people who advertise their bodies as sites of extreme production -

bodybuilders, the highly flexible, the very long-haired - and almost all of them are women. For this reason, her work is often seen through a lens of feminism, though its preoccupations are wider and less pointed than feminist ideology and include Marxist connotations, a variety of soft foods, bodily fluids, and all varieties of fetish.

Rottenberg's films show in galleries and museums (Bilbao Guggenheim, Whitney Biennial, Nicole Klagsbrun gallery) but not in theaters, an environment she considers too uncontrolled for her current work. Often, she builds a small structure to serve as a viewing room, and usually, its mood and elements parallel the film it houses. Some viewers wander in and out as the films loop continuously and others find themselves hypnotized by the artist's absurd logic, from beginning to end.

I. Behind the Scenes of Reality

RS: For you, what's the distinction between an art film that would show in a gallery, versus a cinematic film that would be screened in a theater?

MR: The most immediate thing that comes to mind is the whole ritual of going to the movies. You're going from the ugly "real world" and suddenly everything transforms: the carpet is brighter, the lights are brighter, the popcorn machine. You are being

prepared to enter a different reality. In the gallery, it's more straight up reality, you are not asked to forget about your physical body. In the film theater, you are asked to escape.

RS: You often make spaces, little sculptural houses for your films to be seen within the galleries. Is that a form of escape?

MR: Yeah, they're video installations - I build my own 'mini theaters' for most of my videos. I think about it as taking advantage of the fact I can control the shape and architecture of where my videos are being screened, making the way you experience them a part of the narrative. In contrast to movie theaters, I try to make the viewer more conscious of their own body in space, rather then forgetting where they are. They usually provoke a sense of claustrophobia and slight discomfort. I guess it's my way of not letting the viewer completely be immersed and escape into the screen, into another reality. In 'Squeeze' for example, viewers went through a maze-like corridor with a stained, dropped ceiling and gray office carpet - like you are going behind the scenes of reality - then you encounter the small black box where the 20 minute-film was projected, but you are a bit disoriented. I wanted to evoke this feeling of going through a portal into another reality, where things seems very familiar yet don't make much sense. I build these viewing spaces as a way to deal with the problem of the format in galleries.

RS: What do you mean by that?

MR: Galleries are not structured to show works with a beginning and end, so maybe it's not an ideal place to show time-based work, or maybe it makes artists rethink and reinvent the format. In most cases the loop makes more sense in that context. It changes the way you edit and the narrative structure, because an audience can come and go at any time. Although my video installations are not as comfortable as movie theaters, and the technical equipment are not as advanced as in the movies, the sound and the light are very controlled and considered. One thing that's key for me: the size of the projection. That's one thing you can control in a gallery situation that you can not control in movie theaters. It's a big difference if you see something FROM twenty feet or five feet, especially when the work is of a more sculptural or visual nature, rather then story based.

RS: Because of the looping and because you can't expect people to sit and watch the whole thing, you can experiment with pacing a little, whereas cinematic movies always have to keep the viewer's attention.

MR: Yeah, it's a challenge for me to keep someone's attention - not to have them leave. Unlike in a gallery, in a theater it's a given that

people will stay, unless you really bore them - then they'll walk out. So I try to get someone to stay for the entire loop, but without *forcing* them to stay. One main reason why I like the format of the loop and exhibiting the work in a gallery is that my work is more based on space rather then on time. So for me, I think the key thing is that it's more like you're witnessing a space, an architectural structure. In "classic" films, you're revealing the narrative through behavior in time. I think I'm revealing the narrative through space. What gets revealed is the space, rather than a storyline. The story is about the space or about materials and not about, say, an emotional drama.

RS: Could another word for the space be sculpture? Because it seems like some of these film sets are sculpture.

MR: Absolutely. It's not just that the sets are sculptural, the motivation is sculptural.

RS: And why do you think film is the way to show the sculptures, as opposed to a photograph or an installation?

MR: These spaces can't exist in reality. I use film as one of the architectural ingredients. So I use editing as a building block, or as the glue. Maybe it started because I didn't have money to actually build the spaces I wanted to describe, so I had to use "movie

magic" in order to realize them, but it immediately turned into one of my main interests- to create spaces that can only exist in time, as films. If they were real spaces they would collapse - logically and physically - they do not obey laws of gravity and distance, and that's why they are films and not 3D sculptures.

RS: Is cinematic film something you're interested in?

MR: For sure, but I'm ambivalent about actually *making* a feature, although I think I will at some point soon. The video part in "Seven", my most recent performance piece in collaboration with Jon Kessler, is in some aspects the most cinematic work I've done because the performers are not confined in contraptions, the course of events gets triggered by people mainly walking in vast landscape, rather then movement of materials, although the main plot is still about materials: core samples from the African soil and "Chakra juice" extracted from live performers in New York. The idea of making a full-on feature film scares me but fear always functions as a huge motivator in my process. And the most important thing is that I think I have a good idea for a movie: it's about treasure hunting . I just have to find the right writer. I need someone that will help me turn my sculptural sensibility into narrative film. It will still be guided by materials and will circle around a physical space.

RS: How so?

MR: If you think about it, IN the most simple romantic comedy, there is always a cause and effect, right? But the cause and effect is not material-based, it's behavior-based. But in my videos the cause and effect is material-based. It still creates a narrative, but instead of, this person did that and then this person does that, it's, this material spills here and then that happens.

RS: Like a Rube Goldberg machine.

MR: Yes and no. Yes because of the cause and effect, but no because unlike in his drawings, in my work things don't obey physical logic, causal processes violate expectations of space and time, and maybe most important, there is a psychological and sexual level that does not exist in his work at all. In the feature I will someday make, I want to make things happen because of people's behaviors and fate, but materials and magic play a big part.

RS: How would you say making art films is different from making feature films?

MR: The process of making it. It's a lot more free from what I understand the process of filmmaking to be. You don't have a producer really that sits on you. The budget is smaller so there's

less stress. I'm not trying to cater to everyone. It's obvious that we're making an art piece, that we're not going to try to *make* a wide audience understand.

RS: There's a certain like low-fi quality to video art or gallery films, but yours look have the look of a cinematic film.

MR: Yea, maybe. But because technology is getting cheaper many art videos looks less sloppy, and a lot of young artists are getting really good in using software like After Effects and Final Cut, for example, so there's this new look emerging, maybe more medium-savvy. So the low-fi quality of some art videos becomes a stylistic choice rather them a given.

I work with a really good cinematographer, Mahyad Tousi, and he's always pushing to get the best technology affordable. But I want to keep a hands-on feeling to it, and I don't want it too epic or clean. So there's something about a homemade quality I'm trying to keep. The props and everything in it is not so perfect and looks homemade. I want you to feel the hands behind it. The hand is never removed all the way. But I have access to technology and people that know how to operate it - like the Canon 7D with amazing 35 mm lenses, so I can get closer to the look I want.

Honestly, though, it is something I have a hard time with, because I don't like to over-dictate a cinematic "look." I'd rather pot the ingredients together - the performers, the set, the camera the light etc.- and then step back and letting it create itself, including mistakes and glitches - those end up being extremely useful when I edit.

RS: You started with painting. How did that lead to film?

MR: Yeah. I have a short attention span so I need things to change and move, so painting wasn't so satisfying after a while. And movement really controls someone's experience. So I think that's how I came to film.

RS: It's funny to hear you say you have a short attention span because your films have a repetitive pacing, almost like exercise, as if the viewer is falling into a trance.

MR: I think, if you compare it to other video art, I go very quickly. I think I want to please the viewer. I'm not torturing someone to sit for four hours and watch.

II. Cheerleader

RS: You use non-actors mostly, right?

MR: Yes, I find most of the performers online, advertising themselves, 'renting out' their extraordinary skills or physics.

RS: Why do you choose who you choose?

MR: I'm interested in issues of alienation and ownership. Most of my performers alienate parts of their bodies in order to commodify them. For example, TallKat- a 6'9" tall women from Arizona, rents out her tallness. I hire her as a factory worker that operates part of a machine in the video "Dough," which exploits her tallnesss. This brings up interesting issues for me and make the whole thing dynamic and more playful. Also - I don't want the performer to act. I choose people because their specific personalities or bodies would fit the requirements. So instead of trying to shape them into the video I try to find someone that would just fit, to work into that role. And then they don't really need to do much besides just be.

RS: Do you direct them?

MR: I think I'm more of a cheerleader than a director. I give them tasks and then yell encouragements. I try to create a situation where their body will have to react rather than act. I create the

situation where it's obvious what they have to do. What are the tasks? What's the conflict? And then they'll automatically just behave a certain way that will serve the narrative.

RS: What were your paintings like?

MR: My first instinct was to do these three-dimensional collages. I was never satisfied with just an illusion of space. It's a little bit like what videos are. It was a flat space that I would put objects onto. But I was never really comfortable with the space that sculpture takes, and the maintenance and I wasn't satisfied with *just* painting. It was always something about the gesture or how I put the painting together that was more interesting to me than the actual painting.

RS: You still make drawings, though. Do you feel like they connect in any way to what you're doing with film?

MR: They connect. Because I do them both, so they're both mine.

RS: *(Laughs)* That't true…

MR: They're like flow charts.

RS: They do look like that.

MR: But I don’t really think about how one can serve the other. They're independent.

RS: Have you been making those for a long time?

MR: Filmmaking takes forever, and I need some kind of quick daily practice. I want to do animation one day. I think that would be where they would really connect.

RS: Do you remember when the painting-to-film transition happened?

MR: I used to use a lot of source material for the paintings and I lost it all in an airport - all my slides and everything.

RS: You lost all of them at once?

MR: I moved them all at once. They were in a single bag and I lost the entire bag.

RS: Was that devastating?

MR: No, it was good because it pushed me to start doing what I really wanted to do.

RS: Were you in school?

MR: I was at SVA [School of Visual Arts in Manhattan] in the sculpture department and someone had a VHS camera, which actually took the coolest, super saturated images. It was this big VHS camera and you put in the tape and you shoot and you play it immediately. I had a little puppet theater - all these mechanical animals, horses I got at the party store, these fingers and cherries. I'd stage small sets and do some kind of *moving* - not really animation, not really stop-motion. So, that's how it started. Then I did my first video installation. One day I'm gonna do it again because I still think it's a good piece.

RS: Can you describe it?

MR: As you go into space and you see a girl with two pony tails drinking from a straw, but she has a hole in her nose and a tail of a horse coming out of her nose - kind of like a "ponytail" - and it wiggles, and then as you go look behind the screen it's the tail of a mechanical horse running inside, facing a small monitor with POV of running in the jungle.

RS: So there's a sculpture coming through the movie screen?

MR: Kind of, in the sense that you have to go behind the screen in order to complete the piece. So it's a 360 experience rather then viewing a flat space, it makes you break that frontal space, and be a more active viewer. At that time I kind of took over their sculpture department and turned it into my film studio and they didn't really like it. *[Laughs]*

RS: How did the film, *Cheese* come about?

MR: It started from discovering online this product from the late 1800s developed by the Seven Sutherland Sisters. It was a hair fertilizer, hair tonic, and like a cure for baldness.

RS: A snake oil almost kind of thing.

MR:Yeah. They're supposedly the first American supermodels and celebrities. They grew up in a poor farm by Niagara Falls. And overnight made a million dollars in 1886, which is like a billion dollars today. Crazy life stories - seven women with floor length hair.

III. Freaks

RS: Are there any feature films that you feel have influenced you?

MR: Well, I love David Lynch. I'm a big fan. For me, he is someone who really blends Hollywood filmmaking and independent filmmaking, like really deconstructing the film structure and approaching it like an art piece but coming up with a product that's for the general crowd. Or not a general crowd, but a lot broader than the art crowd. I also used to be into Svankmajer, the animator. He did the *Conspirators of Pleasure*. I'm forgetting big influences. I love like Charlie Kauffman movies. One day I want to write a script and he's the writer I'm waiting for. Me and a million more. I love Kubrick, too. Wish there where more films made by women.

RS: How do you feel about screens?

MR: I don't like screens so much. I like projections more than screens. I like when the light hits something rather coming from the back of something. I like when you can see the light - the way the light works. It feels less manipulative, more organic. The light is projected onto a surface. And with a screen, it's a lot of little lights projecting.

RS: With projection, you have the dust floating in the air, the little artifacts of film...

MR: Yeah, because it is a reflection of the light and when you have those touch screens, those flat screens it's not a reflection of anything - it's a lot of little pixels that create an image.

RS: Do you not enjoy watching movies on computers?

MR: I hate that. But I do it. I mean I watch it on my iPad now. But I don't like it. What really bugs me is the color on these light screens. It's just too cold. I don't like the finish. I don't like the texture. It's too smooth. The actual screen is so shiny, and has its own physicality that takes over the image. Again, that's the nice thing about art video - you can always control the way people see it. With a movie there's a lot more letting go. You release it to the world and people watch it on their iPhones.

RS: Control is really a big difference between the two.

MR: I think every artist is a control freak. Because, as an artist, you're trying to control and create a new reality. You have to want to control the world, otherwise you just let reality be. You want to manipulate reality, even if it's just by documenting it, and that makes you a control freak.

Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas

Two years ago, Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas started making sculpture. Since then, she's shown all sorts of evocative, hoarded detritus at spaces such as Performance Space New York, Queer Thoughts, Karma International in Los Angeles, and Current Projects in Miami. That last show was a gentle but nasty solo (her first), which mostly included objects found in Miami — used mattress, old door, vacuum cleaner — slightly adjusted, and arranged like a community of the damned.

Raised in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles, Serpas found the first incarnation of her creative voice in activism. She moved to New York to attend Columbia University and to get involved with the fashion industry, briefly working for studios and modeling for magazines. Quickly, she found her way to art, and after a single sculpture course, began to exhibit. Once she graduated, Serpas left New York and spent six months back in Los Angeles for a period of intensive surgery, which she financed through her gofundme.com "Gender Affirming Surgery Fund."

I first encountered Serpas through Instagram, which she used to chronicle the progress of her gender transition and post

her new art, and to which she largely attributes her quick entrance into the art community. We met in person at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, where she had been working for two weeks.

We listened to the destabilizing video installation by Jacolby Satterwhite and looked at a PDF of Ser's first, upcoming poetry collection, *manic pixie dream cuck*. She was putting the finishing touches on it. The book is all chronological iPhone notes from her four years in college, many written while riding the subway, scared. One consists of only the line: "the present in drag me to hell."

The following interview was conducted over a series of emails. The grammar and syntax has been largely preserved.

Ross Simonini: How does Instagram function for you as an artistic tool?

Ser Brandon Castro Serpas: mmmm, ok so instagram was like my guiding light in college because i was a gnc [gender nonconforming] freak-o on campus only a year after i was a suspicious hood looking paisa person on campus vis a vis getting arrested twice on grounds and getting hospitalized

and handcuffed other times, not too polar experiences mind you, and instagram gave me a space to vent, i guess also similarly to facebook etc but you know less personal maybe? i love how detached it is while still letting you flash every morbid detail of your day to hella people.

artistically i have found many a friend through instagram, most notably those artists types who don't post their work at all and post about their lives only and when they do post about their lives it is a super zoom in on a part of their sleeves missing like a button or like some grout on the floor that they really like the texture of then they go off into some monologue about their day or how they miss kylie minogue. i really love that i'm like ahh yes you are an artist you live your virtual life artistically these posts are all swatches. i think i tried to do that too early on along with plenty of narcissism on my part, in a large part an effort to prove i wasn't some disgusting looking freak (thanks colonization), angled selfies really saved a bench! sometimes the best part of my dreary student days, i would not have gotten through undergrad without instagram.

RS: Why were you arrested?

SBCS: one was a profiling incident spring freshman year when i was coming home late at night from le bain [a club] in columbia's harlem neighborhood because i didn't look like the typical student and had a little weed on me (it was expunged the following summer 2014, i paid the lawyer with my check from a whitney internship lollllll) and another was because i got blackout drunk and was reported by school security, i was restrained because i was trying to go back to my room while obviously intoxicated.

RS: Does social media affect how you see your identity?

SBCS: social media makes me realize that at once identity politics only go so far// can be bought up readily but also reminds me that whatever my identity is it ain't shit if i'm not backing up work or people i care about irl, i think social media has like destroyed my notion of what it means to have an identity, which i garnered through irl community organizing in highschool with orgs like the coalition of boys and men of color in los angeles, which i mean obviously pigeonholed me lol but yeah like, social media has made me constantly question why i would want to go on about my identity on social media.

also maybe its made me a little averse to mestizx nationalist politic i've seen cropping up everywhere that's mostly cis led, and definitely wary of anyone trying to pile me in with cultural producers that label themselves latinx chingonx etc [gender-neutral alternative to Latino/a, etc.] because for the most part i see a trend of some of these folks also trying to co-opt a native identity/narrative that maybe they feel can save them from the ravages of being lumped in with the anti black masses when they are actually not doing too much to combat anti blackness in their own communities.

RS: For you, do your objects reflect your identity, or do they stand on their own, apart from you ethnicity and gender?

SBCS: not my identity, my skin flakes spit and blood when it gets to that, never me as a person, last year in my senior thesis i was told that my body and what it did was very much a part of every piece i was presenting, that they could see the movements and "violence" of the gestures, in fact they wanted to see it, they wanted me to make video work of me in the studio, like ahhh that dude who dated bjork [matthew barney] and other cis artists, i was appalled, i think most cis audiences only want to see gender non conforming artists making "identity" work, want to see a gender non conforming/trans body on a stage essentially, i detest that, i

think my work stands on its own in that i craft a narrative for each piece like a line of poetry, most millennial poets are narcissists, you always get a chunk of whats going on with them, but just a chunk if they're adept, i hope with every piece i am only giving a chunk that can only be traced back to my imaginary and storytelling capability in regards to what i was going through at the time, like a diary entry, you can't ascribe the entirety of a person to a diary entry, and you damn sure shouldnt get your kicks thinking you get to see me in my work, youre looking at my labor and a tidbit of a story i was down to disclose. now with all that, you cant separate the art from the artist, but im not making art, im stringing along a narrative that will probably be collected in the future to tell a larger story, but never my body, that's off the table.

RS: When you look at art, do you consider the identity of the person who made it?

SBCS: no, unless they're presenting a narrative with figures that can be understood as other to the artist in regards to their race gender class etc, in which case i inspect it for a time trying to understand what makes their life so mundane they can't fill their body of work with their own lived experiences.

RS: You said most millennial poets are narcissists. What's your relationship to narcissism?

SBCS: i think narcissism is a survival tool for a lot of people, am i a lot of people, yes i am! i just wish it was less work to deflect looks you know, people project their stress onto each other a lot in public, in new york more so than any of the other limited number of places i have been, i sop it all up, sometimes a good angled photo and positive feedback from people i don't know and people i know all too well gives me a little shield of sorts from my empath days, and i need them oh do i need them! otherwise, fuck the work it takes to accomplish that in the midst of trying to deflect the cis gaze the cis gays the male gaze and the male gays!

RS: Do you read poetry?

SBCS: i don't, i actually don't read that much period, ahh well not book form, i eat articles up, well at least of late. the only poetry books ive read have been hannah black, manuel arturo abreu, rindon johnson and ahh maybe a few other friends but yeah, my adhd is out of control!

RS: Is ADHD a struggle for you? Would you rather be more focused than you are?

SBCS: yes absolutely, i wish i could be an academic or researcher like, that would be amazing, but retaining information with study in that way has always required me to biohack via caffeine adderall tunnel vision etc, things i am not willing to do at this moment in time because they heighten several symptoms of my anxiety disorder.

RS: How would you describe your anxiety disorder? Does it influences your art?

SBCS: my anxiety disorder is like, a guardian angel that really hates me and can smell my shit from a mile away, it is ever present and mad as hell, it just wont leave me alone, and ive gotten better at fighting it off lately, but it like activates a few different sore points across the abundant fields of my paranoia when one thing goes wrong, like a domino effect.

just yesterday i started a new job and the location turned out to be the block where i was assaulted by the nypd years back and by the end of the day i was feeling dysphoric as hell, anxious about work, the viability of my stay in the city, and my friendships, bam just like that, kickstarted bad day emanating from an initial bad feeling linked to a memory linked to a place. when i get anxious i fidget with my fingers

toes, my whole body, getting unnaturally anxious with caffeine elicits these same body tendencies for me, so in the studio i activate this body anxiety and let it play out with my hoarded materials and objects, my anxiety becomes my work, like that movie "death becomes her," i love that phrase, anxiety becomes her (my work), probably also related to death though, go figure.

RS: What's your writing process?

SBCS: i drink like green tea, and well its different i haven't really had a writing practice in almost a year because my schedule changed after i graduated last may, but it used to be important for me to be on public transit, feel like i was being watched, and for me to be a little caffeinated or inebriated, particularly on my commutes to and from school, which were an hour last year because i was commuting from harlem to bushwick daily. i really haven't found a similar way to replace this method, i wrote a piece for my friend adelita in an uber pool a few months back and that worked, like maybe on my way to work and back now? oh also listening to loud music, right now to write this i am drinking a colt 45 and listening to body mods by lsdxoxo, i find it really important to feel a little out of it because otherwise i am expending more energy watching my surroundings like a hawk for any sign of well

you know potential transphobic attack, once i'm able to unclench for even a second the words come pouring, and theyre discombobulated, its perfect! i rarely edit, it feels very freeing and nice.

RS: For you, is it important where your materials come from?

SBCS: yes! i only work with things that have been loved worn and stained! i dont think i can ever be an artist that orders clean materials online with a super clear idea before hand, for me the materials either you or other people hoard have to communicate a little something in hand to surface contact, i wont say the materials speak to me but i will say that when i get to project onto materials my visions for them i want them to project a little something back onto me via dirt and debris is all! a little back and forth.

RS: So, for example, can you tell me about the materials in the *pay to cum* series?

SBCS: ahh ok! so those fabrics are from my hoarded fabric stash which includes materials from donna huanca, womens history museum, avena gallagher, hari nef, gogo graham, serena jara and more friends who have given me pieces over time when they needed to downsize, its very important to me

that those fabrics were loved and worn, so much so that i knotted them initially into a huge triangle tarp that i left in my former backyard to rot for weeks last january, that i then made the audience at my section of the crumbling world runway sunday session [at MoMA PS1] lay on for the duration of my performance, after this i affixed the fabric to two children's bed posts i'd found months before and kept next to my own bed as well as to a lawn chair i also found months before.

RS: Is art making at all connected to your work in activism?

SBCS: its not at all, community organizing is something i stayed away from for the duration of college because i was worried about falling victim to anti gender non conforming/ trans violence from talking to random community members on the street/ public transit etc because thats how i used to work before beginning my medical transition, making work lets me hide and be present at once.

RS: You've mentioned fear a few times now. For you, are your objects an expression of fear?

SBCS: i want to say that the objects i make are totemic, that i get to trap my fears in the work i make, that i hope i am not

coopting totems, that i probably am, that thats fucked, that how could i, that let me look up a synonym, ok vessel, they are vessels for the things i fear most! which is a lot funner to do with furniture than fabric and clothing for me as of late, maybe because i get to bring my physicality into the work by tossing bookshelves and mattresses and stoves and couches around, that is such good cardio, i get a lot of anger out but am also exuberant, its all the things! the objects are a snapshot of me looking my fears in the eye and knocking them over, but just my eyes! like in the eye zoom kill music scenes in kill bill, thats me in the studio! "revenge is never a straight line." —hattori hanzo.

Gladys Nilsson

Though her masterful watercolors and occasional collages, Gladys Nilsson has spent five decades constructing her own fastidious world. It's friendly place with the manic energy of cartoons and the chromatic flow of abstract expressionism, and over the course of her career, it's remained remarkably consistent. Nilsson became known as an artist in her late twenties when she began exhibiting as a member of The Hairy Who, a group of young Chicago artists (including her husband, Jim Nutt) who all shared the influence of comics, surrealism and art brut. In 1973, she was among the first women to have a solo-exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Now, at 78 years old Nilsson continues to exhibit internationally and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

RS: I've read that all your work starts with drawing.

GN: Yes, since my primary medium is on paper, using paper as the support vehicle. I do a drawing underneath the watercolor. Most of them are watercolor on paper although from time to time I from time to time segue into a different kind of material used, but typically it's watercolor on paper. So yes, underneath a watercolor has been formed and shaped and erased and redrawn until I arrive at exactly the image that I want to use, and then I start thinking

about, concentrating on the color and the paint application. It's two different steps. I don't draw and then paint, draw and then paint, like maybe one might do with something else. My method is to get the drawing set, and then concentrate on the color application.

RS: And when you're making the drawings, are you telling yourself stories about what the drawings are depicting?

GN: Yeah there is a narrative that normally goes through it. As I've been getting older I've been thinking back, reflecting more and more on my childhood growing up, what kinds of things I was seeing at that point. I can remember certain get-togethers where the women would be doing one thing over here and the men would be doing another thing. Just the kind of dynamics in that social group. Me and my cousins were first generation Americans in a reasonably big family. All of the adults in the family were immigrants from Sweden. They were very much old world, having come here from the '20s and '30s. It still was an Old World Europe transforming where they lived and how they lived here in America. So it really is basically thinking back on certain things that are very vivid in my mind with the women in the family, who were all very strong, very silent and who I admire, more now than I did as a child, of course. Children don't admire much.

RS: Was this in Chicago?

GN: No, they lived in the southwestern part of the state over near the Mississippi. So for whatever reason, all of that family, my family, aunts and cousins and uncles, there was a huge migration that went on in the '20s and the '30s to settle along that area. And then my mom and dad managed to meet in Chicago because my mom got a job working in Chicago and they met at The Swedish Club. Since my mom's family was in this other area, we would visit quite a bit when I was a child.

RS: Is Swedish heritage something that figures much into your life and art?

GN: Not really. It just is a fact of what was. I don't really think about it. It doesn't really have any direct bearing, I don't think. My work doesn't look like it came out of Ingmar Bergman movies. It's something I haven't really incorporated. Although for a while in the early 2000s, I really started thinking about immigration. My parents passed away, not at the same time, but along in the early 2000s, so I got all of these old family photos, and realized that any immigrant that takes this giant leap of faith from what they're used to and leaping into the New Land, and the New Land was a lot tougher than now, although there is still toughness involved, I just started thinking about how they came over on a boat, went over to

Ellis Island, which was at that time very difficult, I have no idea how difficult it is now, but just the whole general idea of immigration of any person — I did a series of things based on that idea.

RS: Do you use source materials for your work?

GN: Yeah. I have huge amounts of art books. Currently, I'm working on a series of things that have been using atypical drawing and a lot of collage work. The collage work I'm getting out of an old, a long time-unused art history book and art books that I'm clipping out, so a lot of things are based on, are historical images. I also have a wall of photographs that I have some old family things on, and a lot of times I look directly across at grandparents and great-grandparents in their poses. So there is a combination of a certain kind of antiquity whether it goes back a long ways or is just back around the turn of the century. I mean, the previous century. (Can't say that anymore and have people know what you mean.) But they all reference classical paintings from fifteen-something, or a Greek statuary, bits and pieces of art history, that are blasphemous, actually, cutting apart these art history books that one respects and reveres.

RS: Is it because you especially enjoy that classical work?

GN: Oh I like it. It's great fun. And for me, fun is good. If you aren't having any fun doing something, then why bother?

RS: In general, do you think making art is fun?

GN: Yeah. I like what I do, I get a great deal of satisfaction, like in the collage work, out of finding the exact image that's needed in a specific place to complete the idea of the drawing. When I'm doing my watercolors, I get a great deal of satisfaction out of the manipulation of the paint. I know exactly what I want to do and how to do it. And after you do it, it's just very pleasing.

RS: Do you have much relationship with illustration?

GN: No. Not at all.

RS: What about abstraction?

GN: Well, there are some things that happen in areas of colors that can be very abstract, and I think that holds true with a lot of painters no matter how far back you go. I was walking through the museum of the Art Institute the other day with someone and we were looking at work and looking at certain aspects of Rubens that we were pondering in the museum, looking at just passages, not just images but you come up and you look at passages and how

paint was applied, and the same holds true if you look at Sargent watercolors—how pigments and brushstrokes work can be very abstract and you pull back further and it comes together in an image. So there is a kind of quirky quality that paint surfaces can have.

RS: You were quick to say no to illustration. Is that something you feel strongly about?

GN: Yes. I will admit there is a certain narrative quality, but not all narrative work is called illustrational. I don't think about illustrations. I don't read books with illustrations anymore. When I was growing up, there was *See Dick Run* and *See Spot*. It's a specific look that not all figurative and narrative work has. Since I don't think about it, I don't know. That's the touchy point between art and craft. And that's a very touchy point. Are people who work with clay and ceramics craftspeople or artists or artisans? There are a lot of touchy fine lines that you waste a lot of time thinking about. I'd rather waste my time cutting up things with my books than thinking about nomenclature.

RS: Do you ever waste time?

GN: Pardon me?

RS: Do you feel you waste very much time?

GN: No, no! I don't waste very much time at all. That's why I just said, I don't want to waste my time thinking about that kind of definition or descriptive feeling. I'd rather do something else.

RS: Do you read much?

GN: Yeah, I do, I do. I read mystery thrillers, fiction. I don't read much non-fiction. I read fiction a lot. I never shortchanged reading time, which is generally after breakfast, after lunch, on trains riding downtown and so on. Very valuable time. You get a lot done just sitting on a train, reading.

RS: Yeah. You live in the suburbs, right?

GN: Yeah, Wilmette**.** Northern suburb of Chicago.

RS: Would you say that that has affected you much?

GN: No, because by the time we moved here, even though we've been here thirty-nine years, my work was, in terms of sense of personal direction, was very formed so that there was just development of imagery. The suburbs offer you quiet when you want quiet.

RS: At what age do you think did your work solidify?

GN: I think it solidified pretty much in the early- to mid-‘60s. And that was really development of what materials one is using, and how one is shaping and forming the drawing path. But the imagery and the kind of imagery and the interest of imagery and the kind of invention of scenario that I like in my work, was already there at that point.

RS: How would you describe that imagery?

GN: What do you mean how would I describe it? You mean the difference between a 1966 watercolor and a 2012 watercolor?

RS: Yeah, sure.

GN: Well the drawing and the invention of figures is more refined. Figures are a little bit more gentle than they were, I think, whenever that may have happened. But they were pretty blocky, maybe, cruder, not drawn with as much finesse as I tend to draw now.

RS: Would you say you’ve been working to depict a certain world, or a certain place at all?

GN: Yeah, I think so. No matter what or how it might shift and change in terms of locale—are you inside a room or outside a room, does the room just disappear and just become one big shape? I think it is a continuing involvement of a world that is my own.

RS: And are you still teaching?

GN: Yeah, I still teach one class in drawing, a multimedia works on paper class at the School of the Arts Institute. I really like seeing this solving of problems that students do when you give them the same situation of things to do, over the course of, say, twenty years, and they are basically approaching it the same manner as someone did twenty years ago, and students here are very similar to the students in another state, and so on. It's a certain (and I'm sure when I was a student it was the same kind of thing) searching and moving through certain material and ideas and things. Forming yourself.

RS: Do you have any sort of general thought or philosophy of teaching that you try to impart as a teacher?

GN: It deals more with personal invention and use of various materials and exploration that perhaps they wouldn't have the chance to do in another class.

RS: You started off teaching children, right?

GN: Yes, very early on in the early '60s. I had a class at the Hyde Park Art Center. I can't even remember if it was a painting class or a drawing class. They had materials and they did stuff. It was on a Saturday, a typical children's class at the time. Children of a certain age are absolutely fearless in terms of doing stuff and in terms of how freely they put marks on the paper. Then their parents interfere and say, "That's not nice, you should draw a tree like this," and begin to interfere with certain creative processes that most children have naturally all along, so it's kind of interesting to see both things happening, and then trying to keep a certain freedom alive in terms of what kids are doing. There was a lot of thought, when I did some pickup teaching work in Sacramento when we lived out there in the college. I began to think that the kids were more interesting at the Hyde Park Art Center than they were by the time they reached college, in terms of expressing themselves, if you know what I mean.

RS: Would you say that child-like approach to art has at all made its way into the way you work?

GN: Well, children's art in general, there's a certain interesting thing about it, or about naïve or untrained art. There's a need to put something down regardless of if you actually know *how* to draw something—that part is very interesting to me, that the vast desire to put down a thought is more important than the skill level that one might think is needed, that it's the emotional connection that's most important.

RS: I read that you and your husband (the artist Jim Nutt) rarely talk about your work with each other.

GN: We've been married coming up on fifty-three years now, and we're probably still together because we don't talk about each other's work. We admire each other's work, that's a given, that we really like each other's work. We just don't voice it, other than, "Oh, I like that." That kind of thing. And that kind of surprised a lot of people with a number of artists in Chicago. We didn't sit around and discuss art. We might say, "Oh, I saw this great show at a museum or gallery," and maybe say why we liked it and recommend to go and see it, and then proceed onto other things.

RS: Is that because in general you're not someone who likes to sit around and talk about art?

GN: Yeah, exactly.

RS: As you said earlier, you said you think it's a waste of time to philosophize about it and whatever.

GN: It's just something that really doesn't interest me. I'd rather say, "Well, I saw a really great play and it was just really interesting how these things get put together" rather than to say, "Well, I'm working on this and that, and so-and-so is working on this and that, and we should talk about how great meanings of life are, in terms of art." I mean that's too deep, that's not any fun. It all goes back to fun, you know. You gotta have fun.

RS: You mentioned Chicago Artists. Did you feel very connected to the Hairy Who as a group?

GN: Oh, we were very connected. We didn't sit around and talk about our work, but we ended up being very connected and we still are. Each one's work interests the other, and we go about our business and see each other once in a while and catch up on stuff, but we are connected. It wasn't just press forming—well, names of the general overall Chicago Imagists wasn't anything we thought up. I don't think any artist or any group, unless they themselves call themselves something, comes up with the name of what they are.

RS: Would you say having children affected your work in any particular way?

GN: No, not really. I was always very focused in terms of…well, what I had to do was just figure out the timeframe in being able to do what I needed to do to proceed in the studio. I wasn't going to give anything up studio-wise. I have a very, very strong sense of direction. My sightlines are straight ahead. I'm very strong that way.

RS: You didn't slow down.

GN: In terms of the studio and creativity. There's nothing that I'm giving up. The older you get…I think when you begin to ponder any creative person who is older, whether you're a musician, composer, writer, artist, dancers—well, dancers are limited to physical but then they go on to, maybe, choreography, and so on—most of any creative being's most exalted work happens when they get older. They keep growing. Things just keep blossoming, it doesn't stop. Well maybe some things do. But generally it just keeps moving, and great things happen.

Yto Barrada

When I met Yto Barrada, she immediately clarified several misconceptions that the artworld tends to hold about her. For one, she is primarily known as a Moroccan artist, but this, she explains, is misleading. In fact, she was born in Paris and has lived in New York for five years now. Also misleading, she says, is the frequent description of her as a photographer and filmmaker. She did study photography at the International Center of Photography in New York and has made several films, mostly personal, slightly whimsical documentaries, such as Hand-Me-Downs and Faux Depart. But her work also includes a vast spectrum of curious, anthropological-looking objects, colorful installations of forts and rugs, and stacks of her idiosyncratic research. And yet, despite her resistance to generalizations, it is undeniably true that most of her work points to Tangier, the city where she has spent most of her life.

In recent years, Barrada explored such subjects as urban planning, textiles, museology, toy making, poster art, and paleontology, each of which are clearly evident in the corresponding artworks. For her 2015 exhibition, Faux Guide, she purchased and exhibited a Moroccan Dinosaur fossil at a Parisian Auction House.

Before becoming an artist, she studied history and political science at the Sorbonne in Paris, and her work is certainly touched by a political view, though she tells me that this is another interpretation she tries to resist.

In conversation, Barrada speaks in a rapid series of digressions, dropping anecdotes and quotations, many of them from semi-obscure artists from the twentieth century. With me, she moved from French ethnologist Thérèse Rivière to actress Barbara Loden to geology to weighted blankets to actor, Gary Cooper. She follows her intuition from one interest to another.

The first works of Barrada I encountered were her "Plumber Assemblages" (2015), a collection of sculptures on a pedestal at the Sharjah Biennial. These are curious, winding configurations of piping, worn and rusty, screwed together in useless ways. They stand several feet tall, and fill a room like a gang of junkyard robots. They look, at first, like folk art, and in fact, they are re-creations of objects commonly found in Tangier, made by plumbers to attract customers.

In 2005, Barrada founded the Cinémathèque de Tanger, an independent "world cinema" movie theater and a nonprofit film archive of documentary and experimental film in the city's historic Casbah district. Through this project and her art, she has presented a prismatic view of Morocco, always through new mediums, disparate fields of study, and varying political perspectives.

Since moving to the States, Barrada has stepped back from her duties at the Cinémathèque but continues to serve as the president of the board. Her current studio is a small, officelike room, with desks and a kitchenette, in the Clinton Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn. Textiles hang on the walls. Cabinets overflow with research and flea market finds.

The afternoon I arrived, she was dyeing fabric with natural pigments in a pot on the stove. She showed me stacks of similarly dyed fabrics, none of which were intended for a particular project yet. She introduced herself as shy to me, but over the next two hours, she put on an energetic performance of an interview, during which she donned a hat with a preserved rat affixed to it and a necklace made of metal piping. Despite being visibly sick with a cold, she was in constant motion, driven by a compulsive enthusiasm for her material. At one point, she piled her chair with photographs, papers and toys until it became unusable, and she took a seat on the floor.

ROSS SIMONINI Are you drinking iced coffee?
YTO BARRADA Yeah. Wanna share?
SIMONINI No, thank you.
BARRADA Because I'm sick? Are you germaphobic? *[laughs]* Everyone here in the States is so germaphobic.
SIMONINI Well, I just can't drink coffee. That drug makes me crazy.

BARRADA Yeah, that's why I like it.
SIMONINI You said you were almost going to cancel this interview.
BARRADA I'm just so busy. I'm preparing for shows, and I'm leaving for a few months, and I needed to clean up the house. Instead of packing last night, like I should have, I sharpened every one of my children's pencils and crayons, and then ordered them by color. I felt so happy, and I went to bed.
SIMONINI How old are your children?
BARRADA Almost three years old and eleven years old.
SIMONINI How do you manage being a parent and artist?
BARRADA I don't manage it at all. You fall in love, it eats your brain, and you're exhausted. It's the same thing. You just do it. More chaos. More love. You don't sleep for two years. Launching the Cinémathèque was like having another child for ten years. I had no business plan. I didn't know I needed to raise a million Euros to build it. I didn't know it meant that twenty people would be counting on me every day for instructions. I can't even take care of myself.

But if you don't think too much, one thing leads to another. Ten years later, when we were moving to New York, I heard "what are you doing? you're leaving Tangier? All your work is about Tangier! How are you going to work?" I'm talking about people very close to me—curators, gallerists. "You're going to make another kind of work? Are you sure? After forty? You're going to

be so tired." And yet your survival energy, even for work, is amazing. You do different things.

SIMONINI And, for you, the Cinémathèque was like a child.

BARRADA When I was running the nonprofit, I was not able to do much of my own work, for political reasons. I didn't have time, but I also knew the rule that you can't say or do anything that puts the organization in danger. You can't be negotiating in the morning with Governor and "spitting in his soup" in the afternoon. I never insult anyway, but there's some work of mine around urban development in which I criticize this and that—so I couldn't do that work. And that tension was hard. But it made me develop other forms, and I was very prolific in my head. The fact that you're blocked can be wonderful. It's like breaking your right hand and learning to write with the left. Constraint is productive, like with the Oulipo guys. And children are a constant liberating restraint.

SIMONINI The biggest?

BARRADA You have to be fatalistic. It's the only way to survive. Distraction by disruption, and disruption by distraction. That's life. But I also steal work from my kids. I have folders of it. Their art is made with no doubt.

SIMONINI Is making art a childlike endeavor for you? You have a work called *Play (Lyautey Unit Blocks, 2010)*.

BARRADA My mom was a therapist and took care of a lot of broken kids. She had limited time for us. So we were good and we

had solid grades—and we didn't play. I can't even play with my kids now.

SIMONINI Are you incapable of play?

BARRADA I don't play cards or games or sports. I only play in the work, by inventing rules and then trying to cheat on them.

SIMONINI It seems all of your projects are about inhabiting a system of rules, and working within that for a moment. Your interest in geology, for example, produced the work, Faux Guide.

BARRADA I went to geology because I wanted to move away from naturalism. I was sick of being associated with Moroccan contemporary politics. It was a lazy journalist-curator reduction of my work. So I thought, OK, prehistory.

SIMONINI Do you feel like all your work is connected, despite the very different fields you address?

BARRADA For me, there's no separation between the work, but it all takes different sizes and shapes. I want my work to be autonomous but also to be linked to my other work, and other people's work, and to culture. Here, let me show you. *[She stands, puts on a necklace made of thick pieces of clanging, metal pipes.]* This is what I mean about culture: the organization of a plumber's workshop in Tangier. A plumber has tons of these necklaces. This is how he organizes his tools on the wall, hanging on strings. I just cleaned it and made it pretty. It was almost perfect, but, as an artist, I had to intervene. It's like an object of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, the Dada Baroness.

All my work explores strategies of survival, of resistance, in conditions of constraint. The constraint can be oppression or domination. In *The Smuggler* [2006ck], I filmed an elderly woman inventing a strategy to hide clothes in her coat while she traveled, so that she could sell them. How do you express yourself under domination? People use "hidden transcripts," a term that comes from anthropology and refers to the secret languages of resistance. Ways to communicate that the bosses won't understand. Whistling, for instance, can be one. *[She brings out a white binder filled with research on the history of whistling.]*

SIMONINI Do you always organize your ideas in folders?

BARRADA I'm a historian by training. I studied history and anthropology, so my methodology comes out of that. For years, I didn't have a studio, just an office. I only started wanting a studio when I was a visiting artist at UCLA and the students had incredible studio spaces. The paper! The office supplies! I love office supplies. I love drawers full of pencils and boxes, because I never really worked in an office.

SIMONINI What jobs have you had?

BARRADA I worked only short-term jobs, for little money. At a newspaper, I wrote obituaries for people before they died.

SIMONINI What's going on for your Performa commission?

BARRADA I resist discussing projects while I work on them, and yet, every time I make the effort to talk about it, it gets clearer. I should tape these interviews for myself. I often bluff in interviews,

but even that is helpful. I actually have to ask the Performa curators to come here once a week. And I pull things out for them.

SIMONINI So what's the idea?

BARRADA In 1966, my mother was part of a program sponsored by the US State Department to bring Africans "future leaders" to America. She was a twenty-three-year-old sociology student, and a socialist, and she wanted to visit factories and study labor socialism and meet the Black Panthers. The program's escorts, the people showing her around, were feeding the group American heartland propaganda. So she went across the country–New York, Pittsburg, Los Angeles, Seattle, and she is a total nightmare—protesting. That story is my backdrop for the Performa piece.

After that program, my mother helped briefly with a Montessori School in Morocco—lots of work with shapes and colors. I'm filming my Mother's story using Montessori toys, for Performa.

SIMONINI What else are you busy working on now?

BARRADA I have a show at the Barbican [Centre in London] in February. The center started with social justice intentions, and it integrates housing, music, dance, and schooling. I'm working on a piece for the Curve, which is a very strange wall at the back of the museum. It's ninety meters long [approximately 300 feet]. I don't know what to do yet, but it's a very special place.

SIMONINI How does this early, uncertain part process work for you?

BARRADA I have to find an idea and a form, but they don't always meet in a direct way.

SIMONINI Right now, what's your idea?

BARRADA I'm thinking about the earthquake of 1960 in the city of Agadir in southern Morocco. I collect material on that earthquake in notebooks. Disasters, their aftermath, reconstruction are interesting to me.

SIMONINI And what's the form?

BARRADA For this idea, it's the house of Barbapapa. He was a French television cartoon character from the '70s. He's pink and shaped like a giant water balloon. He has a wife and eight kids, and all of them are different colors. His name means cotton candy in French. *[laughs]* He takes different shapes to solve problems. One time, he made a house that looked like a troglodyte house and I'm thinking of that. I might make it out of papier-mâché. For me, it comes out of a childhood memory, which is always helpful for working.

SIMONINI So you have this earthquake and this house . . .

BARRADA But they haven't met yet. That's OK, though. I like to follow my instincts.

SIMONINI How did you arrive at these ideas in the first place?

BARRADA Freely associating. It's like going to the shrink. I'm the daughter of a psychotherapist. I can't do this at home, but I can do it at work. So I thought of body shapes then papier-mâché then

Edwardian Victorian tables made with mother of pearl, and then troglodyte housing.

SIMONINI Like a collage.

BARRADA But I like it to look tight. The back can be a patchwork, but the front should be one clean piece. It doesn't have to be too clean, but I don't want the process to do the storytelling. I want it to look as natural as possible. Like two bones that you fix together. It's still a fragile zone, the place where you put broken pieces together.

SIMONINI Your studio is filled with all kinds of objects. What's the impulse behind your collecting?

BARRADA Safety. I've moved a lot in my life. I went to twelve different schools. Maybe I wasn't allowed to take anything with me, so now I'm carrying everything. *[She shows me foldable chairs, toys, a childhood loom.]* Maybe it's a survival strategy. It's a way to build something, with a lot of everything.

SIMONINI Where do you find these things?

BARRADA *[sits on tiny chair and plays with the toys]* Flea markets. I'm not looking for treasures. This isn't about work. I'm just happy to have these things. Maybe one day, because of a project, I'll look back at them, but that's not why I buy them. If you look into all my cupboards here, all you will find are these things.

SIMONINI So generally these objects don't lead to art?

BARRADA The object is an experience in itself for me. It doesn't have a place or a value. I don't buy a thing to make art of it. I should, but that's not my way of thinking.

SIMONINI Why should you?

BARRADA I should, because I have a family to feed and I should be smart. *[laughs]* But it's within my freedom and my ethics to do the opposite, to be a totally irresponsible adult.

Anna Halprin

At the age of 95, the American dancer Anna Halprin continues to create new work, give weekly workshops in movement, and grant PhDs in the Life Art programme she developed at her Tamalpa Institute in Marin County, California. Along with her contemporary, Merce Cunningham and her students Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, and Yyvone Rainer, Halprin is one of the undeniable pioneers of avant-garde dance. Her radical improvisation and stubborn resistance to cohesive style results in work as diverse as Circling the Mountain (1985), in which she organized mass, tribal dancing against murders in her community, and Dancing my Cancer (1975), a violent, costumed work illustrating her use of movement to heal her own cancer.

Since the 1960s, Halprin has documented many of her ideas in writing, and her Dancing as Healing Art, a handbook of multimedia exercises to be used by art teachers, dancers and therapists. With her husband, the architect Lawrence Halprin, she developed a method of visual scoring her work, which has lead to the recent series, "Scores about Nothing" in which the subject of a dance can be as trivial as the zipping of a sweatshirt. She has spent a lifetime actively dismissing the boundaries between segregated disciplines (art, dance, medicine) and nationalities. The Planetary Dance, a simple group score she created 36 years ago, is an annual

attempt to create spontaneous gatherings across the world through mass, synchronized movement.

In the winter of 2015 I visited Halprin's studio in the California redwoods and attended one of her introductory dance courses - three hours of walking, crawling, shaking, and physically responding to Halprin's anecdotal teachings on physics and biology. Afterward, I followed my teacher across the vast performance deck, up a steep hillside of stone steps, and into her modern cabin of a home, where we spoke about her legacy over tea.

Ross Simonini: What is your daily movement practice?

Anna Halprin: I swim, I do hula-hoops. [Laughing] I do a hundred hula-hoops a day because I want to get that part of my body moving, and I swim for endurance, to get the limbs going. I have a very analytical practice, but I don't dance as a daily practice because that's too familiar. I want to do movement that is more physical, more based on the physical aspects of dance.

RS: Do you think about normal daily tasks as part of that?

AH: I feel that understanding the objective mechanics of the body is the basis of movement, and that's endless. Most dancers are very stylistic. You know, they either are *this* style or *that* style. And I feel

that as an artist-performer, and that in order for an audience to be able to empathize with you, you have to use a language that's universal. It can't be stylistic. So my philosophy of teaching is: where people understand what they're doing internally, it will help them as an artist. I always use drawing. I always say, 'Now draw an image of what you've just experienced.' Or, 'Now, we do vocal work,' and I do scores that get people to use their voice, so they become more musically inclined. I do creative writing, so they learn how to be poets. That's what's so exciting to me about dance, is that our bodies are an instrument, and because of that, we become multi-dimensional artists. I try to use dance as the base, but reach out to all the other art forms. That's why I get so specific that *this* is the movement you're doing, and *this* is why, and *this* is why it connects. You're a part of nature.

RS: What does that mean to you, being part of nature?

AH: For years, I would never use the word 'spiritual.' Everybody always, in dance, will talk about the 'spiritual.' And I would say to myself, I don't understand what they're talking about. I don't even know if I'm spiritual. [*Laughs*] Then suddenly, in my later years – I'm 95 now – I thought, well maybe it's because we're really all connected. You know Chief Seattle's speech? His line that 'All things connect.' I always loved that. But I never knew why I loved it so much, and then I thought, well I finally understand how we

are connected to the natural world. Maybe that's spiritual. Maybe that sense of being connected to everything in life is like your body is integrated. You move one part of your body, you could feel it down in your feet, because every part of your body is connected. I know that scientifically, but maybe that's spiritual, I'm not sure. I know that when tai chi practitioners move *[reaches hand forward], they* can move out as far as they want to go. And then they bring it back to their centre. We didn't talk about the centre today, but there is a definite spot in your body, and it is the centre where all energy flows from. The Chinese know that. It's in their philosophy.

RS: Tan Tien. The Cauldron, they call it.

AH: But then I thought: where is the centre*?* In nature, it's the horizon. But that's on the outside. Where is it inside? There were scientists over at UC Berkeley experimenting with LSD [WHEN?] and they wanted different artists to take it and see what happened. There weren't many dancers in San Francisco at the time, so they asked if I would do it. And I said, 'No, I don't want to.' [*Laughs*] So many of my friends had gone nuts. Terry Riley was a wreck for a month. We were scared to death. We had to have somebody with him all the time. He was totally insane. The scientists pleaded me, and I finally said 'OK, but only if there's a doctor here.' So I took the stuff, and nothing happened. Nothing! Your colours are

supposed to become vivid, everything's going to just be spectacular. Nothing happened. So everyone got bored – they all left, except the poet, Michael McClure who decided to stay with me, and he kept talking to me, and my tongue started to swell because I didn't want to talk. And then all at once, it was like a bolt had hit me. [*makes sudden BAM! sound*] And I fell to the ground. My teeth felt like bone. I could feel behind my eyeballs. And then suddenly, I felt the red spot. I felt all its rays and energy just flowing in all directions. Like a sun. That's what the Chinese philosophers called it. The red spot. The centre.

RS: And where did you find yours?

AH: Go from the navel down to the tip of your sacrum, and in your imagination, make a diagonal line between those two points, then put a red spot in the centre of that diagonal. We didn't do that today in class because that takes more time.

RS: Did that end up having an effect on your movement practice?

AH: Totally. When I work with people over time, we go into depth over all the different aspects that I understand about the body's mechanics. I went to a state university and had a teacher there that was trained as a biologist. I had to do human dissection for a year. I'm 17 years old. I'm going to study dance, and I walk in the

studio, and there's a skeleton. I thought I'd gone to the wrong place. That's how I learned to appreciate movement.

RS: The Feldenkrais Method works that way too.

AH: Moshe Feldenkrais was my best friend. Brilliant. I checked things out with him, because I don't know enough about the nervous system, and that was his specialty. I learned a lot from him. Did you notice how, in the class, when I got you on the floor, how slowly I worked? He worked like that – so slowly. Because he internalized. You see, most dance people externalize. They teach from style, from how it looks.

The opposite of Feldenkrais was Ida Rolf. She would just pound into you. Force your muscles to do something. Then of course by the time she finished, they just got worse. They just *ugh* [*makes disgusting limp/gargling sound*]. They argued all the time but she and Feldenkrais were very good friends. He used to say, 'If she had studied with me, she wouldn't have died so soon.' And then she would say about him, 'If he had studied with me, he would be a different person.'

Feldenkrais really slowed you down, got you inside your body so you really experienced something that's real for you; it's not somebody else doing something *on* you. I like to tell people what to do, but not *how* to do it. That's when I use the word 'improvisation.' People understand that word means you do what

you want to do. I try to give a basic approach to some essential principle, and tell you to create your own experience around that movement. No matter what that is. I don't teach them a pattern because everybody's so different. Each person has their own imagination, their own life experiences that affect how they image things. I think what I do now has taken me a lifetime to systematize. It's important because it creates commonalities between cultures, it allows African-Americans to be who they are, and it allows Asians to be who they are. It allows each race to express their cultural heritage. I think that makes people healthy. I discovered I had cancer through an image I drew. I drew a dark image in my abdominal and I drew a dark area in my pelvic region, and I couldn't figure out what that was, what it was saying to me. So I thought I'd better go to a doctor because it's trying to tell me something. And that's how I discovered I had drawn my tumour. I thought, *wow*. They removed the tumour, and the doctor said to me, 'Well, you're cured now. But let's make sure that for the next five years, you stay free. Because it could spread.' So I said to him, 'It's funny because I may be cured, but I don't feel healed. I discovered I had cancer through my dance. Maybe I can heal it through my dance.' I had a recurrence , so I said, 'Give me a month.'

RS: To try and heal it on your own?

AH: Yes. I worked *every day* on a healing process, and the tumour disappeared.

RS: How'd you work on it?

AH: By then, I understood the relationship between imagery and how it was communicating to you, so I said, 'What I'm going to do is I'm going to take one part of my body at a time, and I'm going to spend a week working on all the movement possibilities and what's happening in the joints, what's happening in the muscles, the dynamics, when you intensify or relax, how the dynamics are making you not just feel – feel is sensorial – but what is the emotion behind it? How is it related to something in your life? I feel angry. What are you angry at? Well, it was during the Nazi regime. The Nazis were in power at that time, and I was so *angry* at anti-Semitism, because I had experienced that prejudice my whole growing-up life in Illinois. I wasn't allowed in my friends' houses because their parents didn't allow Jews in their house. And as a kid, I could never understand it, but it made me sick—that I had a friend in school, but I couldn't go to her birthday party. It brought all that up for me. I realized that was still in my body, that anger, and that that was creating the flow, the natural flow of energy in my body, and it was getting stuck. It was literally making me sick in my stomach. And I still, right now, whenever I have any illness, it always makes me a little sick in my stomach. That's what's

happening right now. The penicillin I'm taking is making me sick in my stomach. That's the expression: I'm sick in my stomach.

RS: Do you continue to use movement to heal?

AH: I do visualizations every day. I have images.

RS: When you say visualizations, are you drawing, or is it picturing things in your mind?

AH: I do both. But drawing is more effective. And you don't have to be an artist. Some of the drawings are very crude, but they're strong because they're real. I've been trying to analyze colour. Why people use certain colours, and what that colour has to do with where they're at. For example, a lot of times people use green and orange. Why? Well, when I look out here, I see green is the colour of growth. Orange is the colour of sunset. Yellow is the colour of the sun. Blue is the colour of the sky.

RS: The drawings that you do – do they have a connection with the visual scores?

AH: Scoring is something that Larry [Halprin] developed. It's a wonderful process. That's a whole subject in itself.

RS: Did you develop this system together, the two of you?

AH: A little bit. He has this intellect, and I don't have that. He's able to organize, intellectually, information. Essentially, a score is an activity in space, over time, with people. Those are the four elements you need to create any kind of an event or a product. He uses it all the time. What he got from me was, I started a process of workshops, and he said, 'That's interesting! That's what I ought to do when I design! I ought to get people that I'm designing for, I ought to get input from them. And then create my design from the resources I get from the people I'm designing.' So he got that from me. And I got the system of *The RSVP Cycle* from him. So we worked together fine and had a good relationship. We were married for 70 years. 70 years. Isn't that a good one?

RS: Are you still making scores for new dances?

AH: I have a score called 'Parades and Changes' that I did at least 20 years ago and is still being done by people in France and in Poland, and I did it in Israel. It's a score that is so flexible you could take sections of it out and put new sections in that are more appropriate for the place you're doing it, for the time you're doing it. That's probably the best score I've ever done because of its ability to adjust to every situation.

RS: What is your definition of improvisation?

AH: An improvisation is an open score. It tells you what to do, but not how to do it. You just have resources. Do what you want with them. Sometimes a score can have the activity very open. Sometimes it can be very closed, like with the Planetary Dance. For instance, it says run in a counter-circle, run to the beat – that's very closed. However, you have choices that will allow for your differences. Young people love the vigorous run. Because it's a big circle. And it's a vigorous run. But then in the next run, the space is smaller, so it's more like a jog. And the next circle says walk. If you're tired, you walk. And in the final circle, if you feel like you've had enough, just stand still and clap to the music. That is a closed score, but it has open elements in it. There's a whole technique to scoring and what scores are appropriate for what situation. You know, they teach choreography and it's a real study, like learning music composition. I don't teach choreography. But scoring has the same discipline. It takes a lot of knowledge and experience, but it's a completely different process. It's more participatory, inclusive. Everybody has the talent to score at any age. Not everybody has the talent to choreograph. You have to be special to be a good choreographer. Very, very special. I don't know any choreographer that I would want to study with. I don't want to do somebody else's thing. I want to do my own thing.

Matt Mullican

"Why do we do it and how do we engage in it and what's the vocabulary of it and what is the depth of it?"

Before public performances, Matt Mullican is relaxed by a hypnotist, placed into a deep trance and asked, "What would you like to do?" When he steps onto the stage - "a white void," as he describes it - he is no longer Matt Mullican but "that person," a dissociated, abstraction of the self. Performances are often similar to one another and usually include crying, drawing, cursing, shaking, vigorous rubbing, squirming on the floor, compulsive speaking, and lots of self-derision. The point for Mullican, is to get far enough away from Matt Mullican that he begins to understand the phenomenon of himself.

Where this sort of preoccupation is usually associated with psychologists and philosophers, Mullican is squarely an artist, disinterested in academic pursuits and analytical theory. In addition to his "Under Hypnosis" performances, he blows glass, paints signage, designs computer software, and draws stick figures - a wide scope of media and methods Mullican connects through his exploration into the "projection of identity." His work gained attention in the '70s, after he graduated from CalArts and began constructing his own cosmology and conducting performative

experiments on a cadaver - yelling in its ear, sticking his hand in its mouth, etc . He is often associated with a group of artists called the "Pictures Generation," and is, above all, a post-modernist with a persistent interest in the basic human response to symbols and meaning.

In 2011, after seeing Mullican lecture on a virtual urban environment of his own construction, I requested an interview through his New York gallery, Tracy Williams Ltd. Several months later, when he made a trip from his home in Germany to Manhattan, we spoke in the Lower East studio he still keeps, among a roomful of his abstract cartography. *-Ross Simonini*

I. The Passenger

RS: When was the last time you were in a trance state?

MM: *[closes eyes]* Don't mind if I have my eyes closed. It's just easier. I do that if I have to concentrate.

RS: Okay by me.

MM: I was in Newcastle. They had an MRI machine and they read my brain in a waking state and in a trance state, to see how it changed. So I had a hypnotist, a very good one, and she put me into a real deep trance and I was led into the MRI machine. It's

pretty druggie. A lot of times when you're in a trance, there's very few physical cues that you are in a trance. Your subconscious acts on it, but you don't realize you're acting on it. So as far as you're concerned, you're wide awake - you're normal. But this time, I was aware of the trance. She touched me. This was the first time any hypnotist had touched me. She was brilliant. She picked up my right arm and then dropped it *[demonstrating]*, just in the whole rhythm of what she was trying to do for me. So, that was great. But when I was put into the MRI machine, I was saying "fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you" - that was what my brain was doing. That was the art. It was just because that was the person I was in. And so that was the last time I was in a trance.

RS: You were aware the whole time?

MM: The whole time, you're aware of it. But I believe, your consciousness is not - you're aware of it and still your unconsciousness is higher, has its own agenda, and it will do what it does, and you're unaware of that.

RS: So if your consciousness is leading you in daily life, during hypnotism your subconscious kind of takes over that role?

MM: It could. I mean, when I talked to a doctor, I asked – I said I was doing this work with hypnosis and – this was at a party – and

she says, “Oh, were you a passenger?” And that is really a good way of seeing it. It’s like, you are a passenger. You’re in your body. You’re in your brain. You’re awake. And you’re watching yourself do these weird things. You’re just going along for the ride. And I remember the first time I gave a performance - this was at The Kitchen in ’78 - I was a five-year-old character. So I was a child. But in my brain, I was thirty - and I was talking to myself. “This is weird.” “Look at this.” “Look what I’m doing.” I was chattering in my head.

RS: There's a duality.

MM: And yet, my body was acting. It was like, “God, look at your feet! They don’t look like your feet. Your body’s really weird. Look, why did you do that?” All this stuff was happening. You’re kind of two people at once, and there’s a back and forth. But I think we are different people in different places. We’re really contextually driven, I think. Like you’re different with your mother than you are with your sergeant, if you’re in the army, for instance.

RS: You're switching social roles.

MM: I’m highly suspicious of the whole thing, and it doesn’t bother me when people say, “Ah, he’s not in a trance” and being a “fake” has been a subject in some of the pieces I've done.

RS: Could you tell me about one of them?

MM: It was like having the angel on one shoulder, and the demon on the other. It was almost a mother figure, saying how great you are, and how wonderful, and then the daddy figure was saying. "you're a shit, and you're an asshole, and you're a fuck, and what are you doing, what are you trying to do up there, you're an asshole up there, you're a fake, you're not real."

So what I was doing was rather than being hurt by the audience, I was buffering that relationship by projecting my idea about what they were thinking about me. And I was going to beat them to the punch.

RS: Right.

MM: So if they thought I was a shit, I was going to say I was a shit before they could. So then they couldn't hurt me. And that really got heavy. That was a tough one, because it's so funny. There's a lot of funny things that occur, but it's brutal. The brain is not "on" or "off." It's like a million parallel universes. And they're all together, and your ego and what you consider to be "you" jumps around in there, and sometimes you're aware of why you're jumping, but most times you're not. You know, why do you do certain things? I mean, it's just like "why are my hands together like this, and what's

the history of that action?" I'm trying to understand that subconscious language, that vocabulary.

RS: What's the performance experience like for you?

MM: When I go out on stage, it's bright white, and it's empty. It's total emptiness. There's nothing there. It's like a void, a white void. And that's how I feel. And when I go on stage, I basically always will go around the room, like a caged animal. You just go around the cage, and I respond to it and it's just kind of physically getting acquainted. I'm rubbing my cheek against the wall, and my hands and my arms, it's a funny sensation. And then it just starts to go from there.

II. It Cannot Not Happen.

RS: How would you describe the way you act on stage?

MM: These different behaviors that come up. The autistic behavior, the schizophrenic behavior, the compulsive behaviors that occur, the sense of Parkinson's—the shaking that I go through - that, this, this rhythm, that occurs, and the Tourette thing - this kind of swearing, this continuously swearing, this 'fuck you shit face' that goes on, trying to be the nastiest, nastiest person - where is that all coming from? And when I go into the trance I'm

going really deep down, where the filters are off and I'm just floating around in my head, and I'm going into these—letting myself go into this place where I generally try to protect myself from? We don't want to act that way.

RS: You don't like "that person."

MM: And there's a backlash to that. So, now my kids are so highly aware of my character, they see me acting like this at home and they'll point it out to me—'oh you're acting like that person.' And I will see myself doing that, and that's something I was never like that before.

RS: You're saying the performances and hypnotism are bringing this out in you. You're becoming that person.

MM: But I'm fine, I'm a waking person, I'm a normal person now. I'm not—if I give a lecture, you'll see that I give it with my eyes closed or, you know, I'm in another place. But I'm interested in this, this autism. Not that I am autistic—but then I'm acting like I'm autistic. My motivations seem to be very similar to an autistic person's. Total insulation. Singing and memorizing and counting and alphabetizing.

RS: You'll put down the masking tape, too. I'll notice that you tape off an area during performances.

MM: Yeah, and I was really happy with putting the transistor radio to my head and putting it to static. And it could just be a relationship to the audience, that I cannot handle the fact that I'm in this dual reality that I'm in, and in a relationship to the audience, that I put blinders on to the audience—that I cannot see them. I asked the person in Geneva, "So what did the audience think?" and he just said, "autism." They all thought I was autistic.

III. Taking Out the Game

RS: What's the intention behind the hypnosis?

MM: That's a big question. I really started around 1971, '72, and this is right on the heels of conceptual art, minimal art, really objectively-based art. And I was just looking for room to breathe, because everything was so closing down in the art world. You could only do certain things. The etiquette was so powerful, of what you could do and what you couldn't do. As a younger artist, I wanted to go against the etiquette. So I wanted to not deal with the paper, nor the paint, nor the photograph, but I wanted to deal with the subject matter. So I did these drawings of a stick figure, and I

named him Glen, and he was in a studio, a fictional studio, and did all this stuff in that studio. He pinched his arm, and he closed his eyes and, you know, I did five hundred drawings of him doing a lot of different things.

But really what I was trying to do was to prove that he was alive - that the stick figures lives. And it was about going into the picture. So rather than say the picture is a physical object, I was saying it's a psychological object. It's not so much about it being there; it's about what I see when I look at it, and how my body changes when I look at it. For instance, I did all these drawings of pornography, where I just traced from porno magazines, intercourse and blow jobs and whatever else, and if I show it to a teenager, they'd get a hard-on. So it was about - the picture becomes powerful, and you're entering it. You become part of it through empathy. And in a sense that's what I was after – the stick figure – I was interested in when the stick figure pinches his arm, where is the pain? Where does that pain exist? Do I feel when he pinches his arm? And that's the same pain that you feel when you see a photograph of someone getting a hypodermic in their arm, or a needle or when someone is hit hard in the movies, or if you go to a boxing arena and see people beat each other up. There's this visceral kind of relationship that you have to it all.

RS: Is that not empathy?

MM: That is empathy, and I was interested in it. And, when you get down to it, this is kind of like when my son plays video games - he is so inside the game, his body is moving. He has no awareness. I could see his body moving all over the place as he was in the game. And hypnosis is like just taking out the game. And there he is. He's moving around. Hypnosis is, in a sense, taking the media away and seeing what's left over. That is the empathy without the structure.

MM: How would you say this related to acting?

MM: When I got to theater, that was like the world frame, but then I thought, well, what if the actor believes they are who they are portraying. And this seemed like super-theater to me. The first piece I did was at The Kitchen, and I hired three actors to play details from "An Imaginary Life," which is a piece that I wrote in '73, and it was like - there must be 250 statements, and they acted out about thirty of them in front of an audience.

RS: Were the people hypnotized?

MM: Oh yeah. I hired hypnotists, and then I became this so-called control freak because I was controlling them, and it felt like, kind of 1984, Gladiator, some psycho-drama thing that people were witnessing. It just seemed very odd. And then at that point, after I

was accused of all these bad things, of manipulating people to do my stuff, I said I would only do it myself, and I would not have actors doing it. So the next performance I did, I had myself do it.

IV. Drink Coca-Cola

RS: I've heard you use the term, "projection of identity," and I wonder what that means.

MM: It's not your full identity that you're projecting - it's just an aspect of your own identity. That's how advertising works, you know?

RS: Right.

MM: I remember sitting with a friend of mine – this was in the eighties – and we were at the Spring Street Coffee Shop and we were at the counter, and he ordered a Coke, and he said to me, "God, I haven't ordered a Coke in years. Why do you think I ordered a Coke? How weird is that?" And then I pointed in front of him. There was a Coke machine. And on the Coke machine it said, "Drink Coca-Cola." And I just pointed to it, and then he hit his like "Oh my god." Because we assume that we are in control, that the objective world will always win out, but it's not his whole identity. It said, "Drink Coca-Cola"; he just acted on it

I always talk about "that person." That character that I become. It's not a single person, but it's *that person*. It's not a he. It's not a she. It's not a young. It's not an old. It's that person. It's a person on the street that you do not know.

RS: This is who you are when you're hypnotized?

MM: When I go through a magazine, for instance, I cannot help but identify with that person. I don't mean to. And it's not my whole psyche that's doing it; it could just be some minor little fly, but it's still happening, and it happens whenever. You can't help it. You just do it. It's like blood pressure. We do it continuously. Whenever we see someone, whenever we meet them, there's a huge kind of agenda, of how we contextualize who we're meeting, and we empathize with them, and we figure out who they are and what they're doing, and it's a kind of a self-protection thing that occurs.

RS: How does your work connects to fiction, to the novel? Is Glen a fictional character? Is *that person*? Or is it something else?

MM: It's as if you took any character and you basically took the story away from them but you kept the empathy to that character. You kept that part of them, and then you just displayed them. That's pretty much what I do.

RS: How is Glen different from, say, Raskolnikov? I mean, if you took away all the words from Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov is no more.

MM: Yeah. He's gone.

RS: But Glen's still there.

MM: That projection, that magic thing that occurs when you physically are so engaged that it affects your body, when it affects your mood. And Glen is in a sense that, that ah, what's the word?

RS: Avatar?

MM: Yeah, avatar. You as that character. That is who Glen is.

V. Empathetic Reality

RS: A lot of your work is about symbols - your flags and drawings - but does anyone understand what they mean?

MM: I use these symbols that are so abstract that there's no way people are gonna understand them. Some signs everyone understands, we think. I did a flag in India and it was the symbol

of the world. The World Bank has the same sign. But I've used it in my work for 30 years, and so what happens is that, uh, this tailor does it for me, and he presents it to me, but it's sideways. It's not the world sign. He didn't see it. Brilliant tailor, but he did it wrong. And I didn't tell him what the top and the bottom were, because I assumed he saw what I saw. But he didn't. He didn't see it as the world at all, he just saw it as a nice, decorative thing.

RS: A pattern.

MM: Just a pattern. And that was kind of interesting for me. So, when you get into my cosmology, which is so subjective, who's to say a target is the sign for heaven? Or that the man turning into the target is the sign of God? No one's gonna know that. If I have that on the outside of a building, people are gonna see a target. It's very strong-looking. I have a banner that's in Antwerp, and it's seen by masses of people on the highway. Not one of them knows what it means. I mean, they don't have to know, necessarily.

RS: So then what is its function for you?

MM: Well, it functions for the people that know it, for starters, and then it functions as a graphic image, it becomes abstract, so it becomes a visual-physical phenomenon that's up there. So it'll act as that and then if you want to, you can find out what it means, if

you want to go into it, you have that option open to you. But it's not gonna only work if you know what it means. When I go to the Egyptian wing of the Met, I have no idea what most of the stuff is. Most people don't.

RS: The hieroglyphs.

MM: Yeah. Or a map of Paris. *[points to a map on the wall]* I mean most westerners would understand that's Paris. But I'm sure that if you showed that to a lot of people, that they wouldn't even know that that's a city.

RS: So you're talking about abstraction, maybe? The symbol, the symbol of a place or space.

MM: If I make a drawing of a plank that is five hundred yards away in a virtual field, I could *feel* this space. I used to call it an imaginary universe, or a fictional reality, and then eventually when I started to work with computers, they called it virtual reality. Now it becomes this empathy that I'm dealing with. That's the word now. Empathy is a catch word right now. It really is. I mean the brain and empathy are so hot. You go to the bookstore and you see all these books on it. It'll pass.

VI. The Role of the Artist, with big, giant quotes around it.

RS: Is your personal cosmology a belief system?

MM: No, it's a model. It's not a belief but that model started with beliefs as a child. When I was a child I believed that before I was born, I chose my parents, and that I was on a conveyor belt, and that they were there and I saw their names and I, and I went down a chute and went into my life.

RS: The industrial revolution cosmology.

MM: It's a cartoon. It's a Warner Brothers, where you see Bugs Bunny before he was born on a conveyor belt - it's like that. And then, that fate controlled my life, he was watching a TV set.

RS: He?

MM: He is fate. Fate was pulling on a lever and saw me and controlled my life by pulling on the lever in a certain way. And that was Fate's control panel, and I believed that as a child.

RS: Death also seems to be a big part of your work.

MM: I did a performance with a cadaver in '73 at Yale University where what I did to the cadaver is what the stick figure did to

himself. So, I slapped the cadaver's face, I pinched the cadaver's arm, I yelled in the cadaver's ear, I put my hand in his mouth, I dealt with the senses, I was going the opposite of how they were treating the cadaver, which is a body. So I was going into the head.

RS: It doesn't sound like you're interested in truth about death, but your perception of it?

MM: The truth of the sign, yes, but not the truth of death or Fate. I would never say what death or God is. How could I? If we both decide that pole *[points to a pole]* is God, and this is actually a sacred place and then we start convincing our friends that that pole is God, and then it somehow grows and it becomes a whole social thing where we have meetings every Friday night about this pole...

RS: Sounds fun.

MM: …and then the cosmology exists as a social phenomenon. So until I convince someone that my cosmology actually is the truth, which I never would want to, then it's not gonna be real, it's gonna be a fiction. And it's fine for that. I am a postmodernist. I'm not so concerned about the cosmology being real or not. I want the debate to occur.

RS: It's about the cosmology itself, not about the truth behind it.

MM: It's the difference between post modern and modern. I think modernism has something to do with this idea of the goal, the end. That modern compass that was so clear. I think everybody that was doing what they were doing in 1967 – they knew that they were doing important things. This was consequential. They were making consequential art. Whereas now, we can make a lot of money, we can have big galleries, but I don't know if everyone's so convinced about how important what they're doing is doing. People say, 'What's the point of making the cosmology if you don't believe in it?' I say, 'I believe in believing.' So I have that one step away.

RS: That's the postmodern step.

MM: Yeah, that's the step.

RS: What are your feelings on classical philosophy?

MM: I graduated in the bottom tenth of my class. My education was not fabulous. Whenever I give a lecture, at the end of my lecture, there's inevitably a couple of people wanting to know about this philosopher and that philosopher and how much did they influence my work - Kant or Foucalt or Derrida.

RS: Mind-body stuff.

MM: So I get attacked by a student saying, 'You should really know that backwards if you're doing the work you're doing.' Ah, I say, But I don't. I've come across their ideas in the culture.Those concepts are not invented. If there's actually some truth in what they are saying, something that has to do with the nature of reality, then someone else could understand this without knowing about those philosophers.

If I am working in philosophy it's a really primitive philosophy. When I go into a trance state, and I'm doing what I do in front of an audience, and I'm going into it, I'm objectifying my own psyche. Like a found object. I'm distancing myself from myself. I'm trying to understand what art is. I'm trying to understand picture making. Why do we do it and how do we engage in it and what's the vocabulary of it and what is the depth of it? What's the surface like? I'm doing something which is so traditional. The role of the artist, with big, giant quotes around it. The artist as the channeler, as the person who has the hand on the ground who can tell you if it's going to be a good spring or a bad spring.

Terence Koh

The following conversation was conducted outdoors in the early morning in Muir Beach, California. It is one of many conversations between Koh and Simonini, who have both recently located from New York to Northern California.

Terence Koh: I saw honeybees in your garden this morning. It's a good sign when honeybees are around. The ecosystem is healthy enough that it's able to support them. They seem happy.

Ross Simonini: How do they seem happy?

T: It's an important question, whether you can feel what an insect feels. It's unexplainable. Some kind of vibration emanates from them. I think it's from observing them for the last three years, working on the Bee Chapel projects.

R: Is it how they move?

T: Everything. It's how they congregate, how they're flying around, how close the moon is to the earth. Also the time of day, the weather, the seasons, and then that indescribable vibration — I think it's just there if you let it be. There's nothing that separates me from the honeybee. We're just forces of energy and vibrations, so you can, if you wanted to, just tune into that. Bee time.

R: Time is an important material for you. I noticed your Instagram post the other day suggested we should all get rid of clocks.

T: Let's burn all the clocks on Earth now. Then we will realize all this time we are already inside time. We go about most of our daily lives believing we are outside of time. We see clocks and we see them as separate from us. We know it's eleven, twelve or something right now and we know that around dinner time, at eight-ish, it's dinner time. We separate it into little, linear blocks, which is one part of it as well, but we tend to forget time can also be spherical.

R: The prison of time.

T: If the whole world decided we're just going to work for two hours a day, to meet our basic food and shelter needs, and then the rest of the time we would devote to love — it's completely possible. I truly believe this can happen. Why don't we do this? Why we couldn't just all slow down as a whole species? Instead of all these wars and sufferings, like all these Senators debating over the health care rules, and TVs and dramas. Why are we devoting so much time into all these different things instead of the fundamental things? Like having food that we grow, that we planted as seeds and we saw grow up. And we protect it from aphids and we have to build fences because there were deer and then you eat it and then you poop it out and you compost it as well. It's a whole system.

R: Your recent show [*sleeping in a beam of sunlight* at Moran Bondaroff in Los Angeles] seemed like a way of living in that system you just described, right?

T: Yeah, that's right. What interests me are the idea of living systems and the idea of wholeness. What are the basic things that we need too be completely alive? To see the different seasons but also to make seasons with poetry and dance and eating and killing aphids, if it's an ethical choice, and pooping as well. That can all be mixed up as one togetherness.

R: Did you poop in a toilet or did you compost?

T: I compost.

R: On the roof?

T: Yes. I lived in the gallery for six weeks without leaving the gallery and went off the grid. The only system that we took from the main system was the water supply. Everything else, like the power, was from solar panels and pooping was into a bucket on the rooftop with a little box over it and a toilet seat. It actually felt very pleasant.

R: Did you use sawdust?

T: Yes sawdust. I'd never pooped in a compost toilet before. But after the first few days, when you're pooping outside and you're waking up in the morning and the sun is just coming up, you see the sunlight hitting the tops of the trees and the birds are chirping and the honeybees are just kind of getting up and

buzzing around and a waft of wind is blowing through your butt cheeks you go, why don't we all poop like this as well?

R: How did the concept of time affect your life in the gallery?

T: A rhythm just happened naturally. One notices that the gallery windows faces east, as that's where the sun wakes up. We slept in the front windows by the gallery area and we set up a bed over there and we brought Garrick [Koh's partner] and Skeleton, my cat, as involuntary volunteers - they are part of my family as well.

R: And Garrick had a café in the gallery where he cooked.

T: That's right, GG's Cafe. A little dream of ours has been to set up a little cafe, art gallery, print press and massage parlor. This space used to be the gallery's crating room, and we opened up the ceiling for the skylight and stairway to the Bee Chapel garden upstairs. During gallery opening hours, when Garrick was around, he would be cooking stuff for either the gallery staff or people who just happened to be visiting. A cafe also becomes a public spot, a political spot. We would devote nights to music and political discussion.

R: You never left the gallery, right?

T: Correct. I stayed within the parameters of the gallery from January 28 to March 11. I wanted to do this so that I could attune myself with the building's systems and attune myself with the bees in the Bee Chapel as well. The gallery became home.

R: And this was a way of investigating a kind of cycle of time?

T: I remember observing the plants growing up. At the beginning of the show the vegetable box was little baby seedlings and at the end — it was actually funny that I didn't eat most of them because I got attached to the vegetables and they were so beautiful to look at. Did you know that broccoli is just unopened flowers? And we were in bee time because I could sense them waking up even when I was downstairs in the gallery. And there was pee time as well. You had to climb all the way up, pass a fairly vast gallery, and then climb over another barrier, and then pee into the ivy between two buildings. There's so many ways to perceive time.

R: And you didn't let anything leave the gallery space. No waste.

T: I didn't throw out trash for the show. I made a Trash Mountain in the gallery, which is this accumulating pile of trash that got higher and higher as the show progressed. I got artificial flowers as well, like roses, and I planted them on Trash Mountain. I don't know how my mind thinks but it was also Ego Mountain as well. I got out all these Sigmund Freud books and they were all hidden amongst the mountains. So you would see *Civilization and its Discontents* or *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. But then on the very last week I decided to set all this kindling at the very base of the mountain, and all these matches as well, and then all these dried mission fig branches so one single match could set off the whole exhibition on fire.

R: But it didn't.

T: I decided not to light it.

R: And the whole show was powered by solar energy.

T: Not the whole show but as much as we could. It's very important that one generates one's own power.

R: That's your plan, right? Once you get to a place where you can be permanent.

T: Well we are looking anywhere around the coast north and south and up and down and here and there for a quiet sunny plot of land on this Earth so we could, as Gary Snyder said, "Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there." Build our own home. We designed a system of modules that can be built as time and money allows so that eventually all the modules would form a ring with a courtyard in the middle. We will plant an apple tree at the center. Start a garden and grow as much food as we can from the land. And part of the land is devoted to marijuana so that we can make marijuana chocolates and products to fund all our other projects, like the printing press and cafe. It's important that I figure out some sort of income so that I don't rely on the sale of art for my living expenses.

R: Isn't that the same thing though, in a way? You're still selling something, one is marijuana, one is art.

T: Yes, it is, but marijuana is universal.

R: Cannabis is more egalitarian.

T: Anybody could come to our shop and buy a box of chocolate weed that's affordable.

R: You could sell art that way too, though.

T: That's fair.

R: All of this seems to me like a really strong move towards self –sufficiency on your part. The bees, weed, plants.

T: You use healing herbs in your work, as well.

R: Yeah, and for the same reason, I think. Sovereignty. The idea is that we stop thinking about health as helpless emergencies, where you have a problem and you to go to the doctor because she is the only one who can fix you. The rest of the time we all just zone out and don't think about health at all. That's western allopathic medicine. Whereas with herbalism you're constantly evaluating health, becoming sensitive to the fluctuations and

micro-sensitivities of your body so that you can be maintaining a state of health and preventing the sort of acute problems that require you to be dependent upon a doctor.

T: And the whole pharmaceutical industry.

R: Last night, we all had Four Thieves vinegar on our salad, which has all these different herbs in it; itwas something that they made during the plague to stave off disease. It was a staple in the kitchen.

T: Exactly.

R: But part of this kind of sovereignty is staying in one place for a while, which is not the way most people in our generation have lived, including you and me. We're just hopping from one place to another so we never really get to know the nuance of the area we're in. And it's all because of technology.

T: Technology and civilization are happening much faster than we are moving spiritually. We also go into different bubbles as well, because in our Instagram bubbles we all have these perfect, beautiful images.

R: You just started Instagram (@kohisland).

T: I did. Two weeks ago.

R: You came out of the exhibition and one of the first things you do is get on Instagram.

T: People always want to tell stories. The first caveman, when he discovered the shadows made interesting patterns, when they were having a campfire in a cave and they made silhouettes, they told stories. I think Instagram is just a different way of telling a story, except that this time there's likes and followers. I would like Instagram better without followers or likes. They give you a little adrenaline, a little serotonin so that you constantly check your phone. As you press down with your finger on your iPhone, that little love thing pops up.

R: Are you trying to get to a place where you don't need technology?

T: It's not what I envision yet. Me and Garrick still buy things on iTunes and watch stupid movies.

R: Do you want to totally expunge that from your life?

T: I don't know. Because I think about the Nearings. Helen and Scott Nearing, and they were as perfect as humans could get. But then you think about Alan Watts, he wasn't perfect. He accepted all his imperfections — his drinking, his weed smoking. He wasn't striving to be perfect because it's not possible to be perfect, except if you were Scott or Helen Nearing.

R: The way you talk doesn't seem to be toward art, it seems to be away from it. Do you want to get away from art with a capital A, and closer to the Nearings, who just lived artfully? I know you just visited David Ireland's house on Capp Street.

T: Yes. It was the first time I had ever cried in a work of art, because of a work of art. In a sunny spot in one of the rooms on the second floor. Thinking about it now I think it was so soon after the Bee Chapel home show where the gallery was the work was the home. Similar emotions. Connections of trees and

time. This question as about art and life. It's both so simple and so hard. We're both thinking about it all the time.

R: It's *the* question.

T: Why collectors would want to like spend money on art when the most amazing cloud is passing right this very moment? Or if you just took a moment to see this single end of this piece of grass you could stare at it for six days. Don't eat and just stare at the single piece of the end of this grass. That's more amazing than any piece of art I can ever produce. You could be taking a poop in your accountant's office and the fascination of the flush of the water, billions of drops of water into this blackness of a plumbing system.

R: Just pure curiosity.

T: Fascination and wonder, which is what art is. But the thing is, anybody could do that. Can I read that quote that we saw in the book last night?

R: In *A Course In Miracles*? Sure.

[Simonini and Koh search the house for the book.]

R: Here it is, by the window. I should say that you opened this book last night, at random, and pointed to this line by pure chance.

T: "Time is indeed unkind to the unholy relationship. For time is cruel in the ego's hands, as it is kind when used for gentleness."

Richard Tuttle

Last spring, I spent a long, edifying Friday with Richard Tuttle in New York. In the afternoon we dined at a fine Italian restaurant in Midtown and surveyed a potential space for one of Tuttle's future exhibitions, talking all the while. In the evening, I accompanied him on his weekly ritual at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which included eating pastries, drinking espresso, studying the map of exhibits and proceeding on a long, rambling tour through the galleries, guided by one of the great eccentric personalities of contemporary art.

Tuttle began showing his work in the mid-'60s, at the age of 24, and quickly became a significant contributor among a generation that included artists as diverse as Robert Smithson and Agnes Martin. While some of Tuttle's early, spare work builds

upon the precedent of Minimalism, his art for the last 50 years has maintained its own curious independence: defiant of trends in contemporary culture, poetic in times dominated by austere conceptual art.

Tuttle's quiet abstractions take the form of painting, assemblage, sculpture, and drawing, often simultaneously, as if such discrete categories never occurred to him. The philosophical category of importance to Tuttle is the object. The objects he constructs have employed a host of common materials—lengths of rope and string, strips of tape, balloons, pieces of plywood, lightbulbs. One material, fabric, has been essential to his practice since his earliest exhibitions at New York's Betty Parsons Gallery, where he showed works such as crumpled, irregular octagons of dyed cloth. His show earlier this year at Pace, "Looking for the Map," displayed an ornamental approach to fabric, which is also

seen in his sartorial sensibility. (At our meeting, he wore a psychedelic gold tie and a purple handkerchief tucked into his shirt pocket.) The works in the Pace show served as a series of studies for his very large-scale commission "I Don't Know or The Weave of Textile Language," which opens this month at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, filling the spaces with a rainbow of textiles, some made by Tuttle, some culled from international collections. The show will coincide with a major, five-decade retrospective of Tuttle's work, installed just a few miles across town, at London's Whitechapel gallery.

In our conversation, Tuttle's discussion of his work and his intentions for the dual-venue show involved frequent digressions, asides, references and exegesis. Listening to him speak can feel vertiginous and labyrinthine in a way that compliments his work. Questions are rarely answered. Topics are introduced and dropped

without explanation. The following is an edited version of our interview that attempts to retain the tumbling, digressive spirit of Tuttle's speech.

ROSS SIMONINI The last time we met, you told me that you'd been trying to "hold strong to the object." What does that mean?

RICHARD TUTTLE The object is important for looking. The eye, seeing the totality, is physical and spiritual—a lifelong development. I have a collection of glass objects. The eye is invited to go through, if it wants, or to stop. These are superb training devices. Objects can be made with embodied hands or disembodied hands. I like making things with disembodied hands.

SIMONINI What are those?

TUTTLE Our culture is anti-hand; it thinks it's better to work with your head. Everybody aspires to go to college, so they don't have to work with their hands, yet hands are a source of intelligence. You divorce yourself from a part of your intelligence without them. To work with disembodied hands is perfect; you have all the intelligence, but don't submit to the sentimentality that says handmade is more valuable. The "maker's movement" is not sentimental.

As a little kid, I saw my grandfather draw from across the room. I saw harmony between eye/brain, hand, and heart/spirit; I was astonished. People say there are just as many, if not more, neurons in the heart as in the brain; people talk about neurons in the intestines. Where does intelligence come from? I have not heard anyone talking about the hand having neurons.

SIMONINI Your recent Pace show was a series of studies for the upcoming Tate exhibition.

TUTTLE That show made me happy and excited about the future. [Pace founder] Arne Glimcher sent me an e-mail, saying that many people came into the show as grumpy New Yorkers and left happy. The show could turn you around.

SIMONINI How so?

TUTTLE If you made a list of great novels, symphonies and architecture, you could see the beauty of humanity, which is one of the hardest things to see right now. We're so critical, so competitive. We blame ourselves for ruining the earth. A theme in the Pace show was the beauty of people. Jacob Boehme, an early-Renaissance German mystic, wrote *The Signature of All Things*. It's nice to pass that book on; it's always been a kind of secret, generation after generation. His chief idea is that mystical presence

exists as a signature. Every time you see something, part of what you see is the signature, which is the beauty of man. I'm taking time with this, because the last time we spoke, we discussed Plato.

SIMONINI I read the Phaedrus dialogue on your recommendation.

TUTTLE Isn't it amazing? I'm reading the Apology. I thought recently, "The reason our ancestors began standing on their hind legs was to talk, to look in each other's face." It wasn't to pick apples. It was to be face to face, because dialogue is the glue of the social matrix. I'm also reading Sophocles. You have to read the original Greek. It's not hard. I just do two lines a day.

SIMONINI Very slow reading.

TUTTLE That is the difference from school. If I had studied the works there, with exams, etc., they would have given

me too much. I give myself one hour a day, so I'm always hungry. I can't wait for the next 24 hours to pass.

SIMONINI How do these works connect to the museum show?

TUTTLE Figuring out skin and structure, skin and bones. The key of the Turbine Hall project is scale. A seed wants to grow; it has growth potential. Sometimes I start a drawing on a piece of paper and can hardly keep it on the page.

SIMONINI Largeness isn't something I'd equate with you. Your work is generally focused and contained, and your drawings usually deal with the center of the paper.

TUTTLE One can distinguish between scale and size. Usually, we are happy with the issue of size—if it's small, it's small; if it's big, it's big. But scale is a question of the individual. Each person, everyone ever born, has a unique scale. They have it like a

unique fingerprint. You can decide to find your scale. The day you find it is a day you remember. It changes your life. Your parents may determine your size, but you determine your scale. Your creative dimension allows you to create yourself in a more significant way than how you are created by your parents. Life offers each of us that possibility. It's sad how few take it up.

SIMONINI Are you talking about proportion?

TUTTLE Human experience is a constant struggle between the real and the unreal. Every moment you are faced with trying to work out an acceptable relationship between the two. Art is almost by definition a working out of real and unreal; that is its value. The world is a place where size issues need to be worked out, and this involves all kinds of quantitative issues, which can be expressed emotionally or physically, in relationships with other people, etc. But the relations between the real and the unreal are negotiated

internally, where issues of scale come in. You don't want to waste your time looking at an artist who doesn't know their scale. The buzz around the Turbine Hall show is because the world knows me as making artwork of small size.

SIMONINI Certainly.

TUTTLE The reason I can do small size is because my scale can be small. Scale contains the issue of right and wrong, the moral and the ethical. I don't care if you kill your mother, if your ethics are right. Everyone wants their point of view to prevail, but it's so much better to have many points of view.

SIMONINI Can you distinguish between the real and the unreal?

TUTTLE Our brains are real. Mythology feeds the brain. Our souls are not real; truth feeds soul. We need mythology the

way dogs need to sniff. Their brains don't work without sniffing. Newspapers feed us mythology.

SIMONINI Is it sort of like the difference between sensory and extrasensory?

TUTTLE Western culture defines reality as concrete. Asian culture defines reality as the absence of the concrete, as absolute nothingness. Western culture drives Asian people out of their minds, and Asian culture drives Western people out of theirs. Maybe I can contribute the next, best definition of concrete. Eastern tradition has major achievements; Western does, too. So it's not about choosing one over the other. We have to figure out how to absorb and move on. When I speak about the real and the not real, the real is a sort of Western side. It's a stupid, thumbnail way of speaking.

SIMONINI Is art real or unreal?

TUTTLE Art is unreal; color is real. That's why painting is so fascinating. Color is real when you paint, but paint is not real. Paint is one of the great inventions. It can transport you from this world to the next. It's a major thing.

SIMONINI How did the Turbine Hall show come about?

TUTTLE Chris Dercon became director of the Tate Modern. I met Chris when he was 18. He was an intern at a gallery in the attic of an old building in Ghent.

SIMONINI What work were you showing then?

TUTTLE Notebook drawings. Those just showed at the Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont in Burlington [in an exhibition of the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel collection]. The notebook drawings were an attempt to solve the problem of the artist in democracy. Marginalized, because the artist cannot subordinate personality to demos—an artist can't really be a

member. The drawings came to be about how many could be made. There were probably 7,000. I threw most of them out. When I was moving, I took some of them to the garbage. Herb Vogel came to visit. I said to him, "The garbage truck's coming in five minutes. If you want those drawings, you can have them." So he, being a collector, went down and got them.

SIMONINI Do you often throw out work?

TUTTLE If it's a creative act, you can. But if it's out of ego or intellect, you suffer a lot.

SIMONINI How does this relate to the Turbine Hall show?

TUTTLE The realized piece will be a model of itself and itself as a model; I don't just want a blowup of a model. I'm working with a theater production manager on it. The problem is, I don't know the stuff I need to know. What I most don't know is

how the skin is attached to the bones. As you saw in the Pace show, ambiguity between color and structure was stated quite clearly and exercised as ambiguity—that's really hard to do. I'm thinking of the Steve Jobs biography I just read. He wound up in Silicon Valley after he went to Reed College. While at Reed, he sat in on a few calligraphy classes with Lloyd Reynolds—as did so many. That sense of design that Lloyd gave him led him into . . . I mean, we're sitting across the street from one of the most important Apple stores. Its design comes from those simple calligraphy classes at Reed. I know other people like that—their ability to absorb is phenomenal.

SIMONINI Will you make most of the work for the Tate show beforehand?

TUTTLE We've already been working two and a half years. Chris Dercon was director of the Boymans van Beuningen

Museum in Rotterdam during the time I made a show there. His strength is visionary, and I understand that my job for the Tate exhibition is (1) to understand his vision (2) to realize it and (3) to make a Richard Tuttle show—a pretty tall order.

SIMONINI Do you feel like you've synthesized all of those?

TUTTLE Not yet. My dream is to be myself in public. The only way I could survive growing up was to construct a persona; it had nothing to do with me. I was a popular kid, functioned in the world, but I lived in another place.

SIMONINI Your mind was separate.

TUTTLE Yes. No one to talk to. When I came to New York I met Betty Parsons. Henri Bergson was important for her; she could say a picture is an accounting of the visible world, but it's

also an accounting of the invisible world. She knew the invisible world, and I lived in the invisible world.

Recently, I had a high school reunion. I loved all those people, and they loved me. They wanted me to come. In the end, I didn't go. My friend called the next day. I said, "I have fought so hard to live in the world as I need to. I am never going back."

SIMONINI I didn't go to my reunion either.

TUTTLE My college reunion hooked me into doing a yearbook, because I had done the one for the class. I love books. I got dragged in, so I went, and everyone wanted to talk about playing Frisbee 50 years ago. These are smart leaders of America. We have inner lives; inner lives are destroyed, replaced by outer lives. My work is food for the inner life—I want someone to make something for my inner life.

The first day of kindergarten, my drawing was rejected by the teacher. Now I've studied a bit of child development, and I see that my drawing was at genius level, which the teacher wasn't able to grasp. Not only did I not receive praise for a drawing that was important to me, but I was marginalized, punished. I have never trusted a teacher the rest of my life. That's good. One of my lines is, "If Aristotle can't be your teacher, you have to teach yourself." When I speak at art schools, I say, "I'm not here to teach how to be an artist but to say, as best I can, what it's like to be an artist." They are eager to hear.

B. Wurtz

My introduction to B. Wurtz was modest square of raw canvas, barely clinging to a wall by two loops of thread. Stitched to its surface, hung a pair of blue socks and the ancient Greek maxim, "know thyself." As with most of Wurtz's art, the object was untitled and part of a series of variations. It's materials were unassuming and ephemeral, and yet its affect was provocative and lasting.

On paper, Wurtz's work can usually be described in a sentence or two (see above) and this fact has always given his objects the whiff of conceptual art, but when a viewer is confronted by the art itself, theory feels utterly impotent. All his humor, references, debris, and whimsical adornment seem to deflect any possibility of reduction, leaving the viewer standing before nothing more than a naked object.

Wurtz began showing in the early 1980s, immediately after graduating from Cal Arts at the age of 32. Over five decades, he has worked with a consistent and somewhat narrow vocabulary of around-the-house items - the sock, the plastic bag, the coupon, the shoelace. As modest as they are, he cares about these objects, and as time has gone on, the art world seems to care about them too, with significant shows and press growing more frequent each year.

One fall day, I met Wurtz in lower Manhattan at his home and studio. For several hours, he toured me through a collection of his

artworks, which had been spread throughout the houses' four stories and tucked away among the tools, closets, bookshelves, and knick knacks.

RS: Why is most of your work untitled?

BW: I just rarely give titles. I like the pieces to be more open ended for the viewer. But they usually end up with nicknames. So the nickname for this one is "The Monument Sculpture." That's a big theme in my work—monumental attitude. Not necessarily in size but in attitude.

RS: I see the monument, but I also see the details. The brand names, the product designs. Do these matter to you? Like this can of beans – does it matter what kind of beans were once in there?

BW: It's certainly something I've thought about. Like, "Is it important that the found objects be things I use?" Because I've made works where I painted the backs of aluminum pans, those things that take-out food or delivery food came in. And I thought, "Well, is it important that they all be things that I ate out of?" I decided, "No, it's not important. It's a mixture." And, so I think that's where I tend to be. I kind of liked the idea that those cans were organic beans, which I ate - actually ate. But people give me stuff, too. Like I use a lot of plastic bags, and I thought, "Oh, should they all be bags I came across?" And I decided, "Nope, I'm gonna mix it up." I didn't want to get obsessive about that.

RS: Do the objects ever look like other things to you? A face or body or landscape? Or do you mostly want them to simply look like the thing that they are?

BW: I don't like to obscure what a thing is. I like that it has a use value and that it keeps that little history with it. I don't relate to the approach of some other artists who use found objects. I'm not interested in taking thousands of things so that the art becomes a spectacle where you don't really think about the thing itself anymore. I'm more interested in really keeping the found object's integrity, and then adding my formal arrangement. That's where I hope that something else comes into it. But I love what people see. If people see animals, I love it.

RS: Do you choose purposely modest objects?

BW: Yea, because an object's ordinariness gives me more of an opportunity to add something formally. There are a lot of found things that you could just put on a shelf and would be an objet d'art in itself. I can't really do much with that. It's already got too much of it's own personality. I would rather go for just a tin can, because it's generic. I can move it around and juxtapose it. I'm also not so into sculpture made out of kind of trashy, junky stuff and it still kind of looks trashy-junky. I know that's kind of an aesthetic now, but that's not what I want to do. I want to put the junky stuff together more selectively. I want the outcome to be very serious and hopefully elegant.

RS: I see some drawing on a canvas here. Do you do much actual drawing and painting?

BW: I do. This is actually a painting on stretcher bars! But, uh, when I was moving my storeroom, a pole from a bookshelf fell and tore it.
And I was really bummed and I thought, "Well, do I really like that piece anymore?" I tried to rationalize. I'm a bit obsessive and I don't like things to get damaged. But someone said, "Well, that's kind of an interesting rip." And with a situation like this, I always think of Marcel Duchamp and the large glass breaking. His patron collector, Katherine Dreier, she was moving it in her car and it broke. She informed him and he said, "Well, what could I say? She was so distressed. I had to just pretend it was nothing. You know, to try to save her anxiety." But as we know, he ended up thinking those cracks were pretty great.

[Moving to another room]

Here's another canvas. This is from a series I call "The Bread Paintings." It's another nickname—they're untitled - and I ate all this bread and I started saving the bags.

RS: Healthful bread.

BW: It is. I'm a health nut, definitely. I don't eat sugar. I like to eat organic things.

RS: And once you decided on bread bags as a material, did you choose each individual bag and color at random for the work?

BW: It's randomly chosen. I think I did some sketches for some of these, about how I might compose them. But once I had this formal structure with the bread bags and the fasteners, anything else that happened here was my freedom. I could pick whatever colors I wanted.

RS: Is that how you usually work with materials?

BW: Yea, so, another example is my pan paintings. Someone designed the bottoms of all those pans. Those patterns were already there. So I just got to choose whatever colors I wanted. That was where I got to play. I think, to me, play—the idea of play—is an interesting aspect of art. I feel this connection with making art to playing as a child. It's not that it's totally fun. There are decisions. There's agonizing over things that don't go right. But if it's not ultimately about having fun, in my mind then why do it? And I really like when something fails because then I have an opportunity to play around with it. I have something to work off of. Which is in a way why I think some people prefer to be a designer. Design is great because you're given a challenge to figure out.

RS: Does this approach make you fear failure less?

BW: Well I wouldn't put a work in a gallery and then decide it was a failure. I hope I wouldn't get that far. But I like failures in the studio.
Sometimes I have to stare at it for weeks, months. I even worked on a piece for at least a year. It was on the wall and I finally changed one small thing and it worked. My wife, Ann, is a really

good critic for me. I always listen to what she says—but she hated these pieces. Hated them. She said, "If those things came in the Sunday paper I'd throw them out." So I really thought about that. I stared at it and I finally decided that I disagreed with her. And I thought, "It's great that I got that reaction out of her." It made me think about what it must have been like for those people that freaked out at the Warhol soup cans.

RS: Has B. Wurtz always been the way that you've signed your work?

BW: It's been that way for a long time. I liked it, because it I felt like it was more important to see the work than to get caught up with a particular personality. The name makes it a bit confusing as to whether the artist was a male or female. Years ago some people came in to see my show and the gallery assistant overheard them say, "All she did was go to the hardware store!" which was a criticism. Well, it was interesting that I was considered female, of course, but also, to me, it's not an insult [*laughs*]. It's, like, "Yea I go to the hardware store. That's where the good stuff is." Who doesn't like hardware stores?

RS: Is it an "R. Mutt" reference?

BW: I think that was another influence.

RS: You talked about being health-minded a second ago. And when someone sees this work, it's organic, whole-grain bread and there's a lot of it, which means that you're probably eating this

food regularly. And that in itself tells the viewer something about the artist, even if the name is mysterious.

BW: It does. And that, to me, is an interesting way to find out about the personality behind the work. Because art is about someone making it. I always use Donald Judd as an example because I totally see a personality in that work. It's completely genuine. He *needs* to make that work. It's who he is. But I'm trying also to not mythologize myself, like Joseph Beuys.

RS: Why not?

BW: The work should speak for itself.

RS: You want to keep the whole enterprise as modest as possible. Everybody of all classes eats bread, wears socks, and these are your materials. But there's no denying that there's a lot of personality in that organic hummus lid. It points to the food-conscious consumer lifestyle.

BW: I just pulled that out of my bag of lids and I thought, "That's, like, really real." It's very much of the present moment.

RS: Would that change it for you, in ten years when someone is looking at it?

BW: It will be funny in the future. Especially when plastic bags are illegal, which they should be. I'm hoarding plastic bags now [*laughs*].

RS: You're celebrating the bag.

BW: I am recycling it, in a sense.

RS: But you're also treating it with respect, even though it's a conflicted object.

BW: Maybe there's a better way to package stuff but in the meantime, it exists and everybody has to eat, and there's something kind of noble about that. It sustains us. I also just like plastic as a material. I remember when I was really young I was thinking plastic is just the most amazing invention. Like, who is to say that plastic isn't more valuable than diamond? It's certainly more useful.

RS: It doesn't seem as if your approach has changed very much over the last forty years.

BW: I've been fairly consistent, right? [*laughs*] Luckily when I look back at the whole span of stuff I don't feel like I just repeated myself. That's nice.

RS: How long have you been working professionally, showing and living somewhat off of your art?

BW: I never lived off my art. I've had various freelance day jobs all my life. I always thought it would be better to keep the day jobs just clearly separate from my art. I think it was probably good that I had to go out and work, because I was around people. It's kind of healthy, right, to be around people?

RS: Have you always shown your work?

BW: I've shown pretty regularly over the years but a lot of people never knew about it. I worked for many years kind of outside of what was really being done. And so, in a way I wasn't paid much attention. I think I was just a little out of step with a lot of what was being done, like in the '80s and '90's. I mean, I don't want to complain too much because I did exhibit and I had people interested in my work who I really respected, really smart people. And so I knew I was doing something right, but I just couldn't seem to get things going. It was frustrating because I wasn't one of those people that thought, "Well, I'm going to make my work and I won't have anything to do with that corrupt gallery system and those museums." But even then, it was still fun to make art. I was always getting something out of it. I just learned to live modestly and got used to things being a certain way.

RS: But now there is interest. Do you think there's some sort of new relevance for what you do?

BW: Yea, a lot of young artists relate to my work and in the last few years I seem to be getting more attention, which is actually, really, really nice. Though, its funny, when things change, even if for the better, it always throws us a little. Don't you think?

Georgia Sagri

Georgia Sagri's multifarious activities for Documenta 14 involves dozens of sculptures, a short film, a manifesto-like text, and a variety of performances, both in galleries and in the streets. All of these — collectively titled *Dynamis* — revolve around an approach to the body she has been developing for years, and which, for the first time, she attempted to transmit in a series of workshops over eight months to 200 people. This training manifests as something like a Dadist action, a dance rehearsal and an acting class with a group of participants she refers to as a "chorus" (ask in Greek theater). Pairs of people walk, run, hum, count, crouch, dance, yell, chant, and at the center is Sagri, a demanding, fastidious conductor who speaks in half-direct, half-ambiguous commands: "Concentrate on the breathing," she says. "Not on what you are supposed to be while you are doing this!"

At one point, the workshop was open to the public and audience members could engage in dialogue with Sagri. Her work has often encourages viewer participation, such as *Art Strike* (2013) performed at the Biennial de Lyon, in which audience members were brought, one by one, to stand on stage, until all the seats were empty.

Most of Georgia Sagri's work orbits around performance, and yet she dislikes the term, and attempts to stretch its parameters, especially those related to space and time. Many of her works take place over long unbroken periods. *Dynamis* occurred "simultaneously and in continuum" in both Athens and Kassel for six days in June, 2017. It spilled out of the walls of galleries and museums, a gesture of social, political engagement that continues from her earliest works such as *Polytechnic* (1999) and *The New Kind* (2003). Born, raised and still (sometimes) living in Athens, she has said of the city that "every time you go out for a walk there is a protest. It's impossible to not be politically involved."

Her sculptures, too, are performative. In 2011, she strapped plastic dog transporters under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in New York. For *Dynamis*, she created blown glass "scores" of the breathing and counting practices in her workshops.

In whatever medium, Sagri's work is often an intense sometimes darkly humorous exploration of the body, especially its place in contemporary capitalist culture. She often pushes her own body to its limits, usually through exhaustive, repeated movements - twitching, jarring facial expressions, screaming, crying - and to do so, she has drawn upon the manners of a used car salesman, Bruce Lee, ancient drumming rituals, and Apple iPod commercials.

For the following interview, I spoke, via Skype to Sagri, who was in Athens for the final days of Documenta 14.

RS: What have you been teaching in your workshops?

GS: The point of the workshops was to share my practice, which is primarily based on physical and mental exercises that I've been developing and practicing by myself in solitude for 10 years now. It was not an easy process, as it was the first time that I was actually sharing this very personal practice with others. I had to find ways to transmit, at the same time to observe how it effects other bodies and help those bodies to adjust on the training as well as to find individuals who would be willing to partake on a six days non-stop performance with me. In the opening of documenta 14 in Athens the workshop was open to public with a group of twenty that very few stayed to be part of the performance in June - during the opening of documenta in Kassel.

RS: Who took part in the workshops?

GS: Many different people. From artists, dancers, actors, sociologists, anthropologists, writers, musicians, singers and students of the schools of the arts from Kassel and Athens. Most of them were very enthusiastic and curious about performance art

and some wanted to go through the workshop to learn more about performance but also its relation and connection to their field off interest. For example dancers were very much interested of breathing exercises and many of them benefited from the training to realize basic mechanics of the skeleton, the posture and diaphragm. But it wasn't only for me to teach someone a fixed method, but to be able to continue developing.

RS: This sort of self-training, do you apply to every one of your performances?

GS: Exactly, because it is a training it has no end point, it can be a preparation for any performance but also it can also stay as training.

RS: And the workshop is a training for anybody interested in movement.

GS: In understanding their bodies, basically. Understanding their physical capacities, and their individual and unique characteristics that they carry. Because each person has a very specific unique capacities and conditions, the way we experience the world is very different.

It's almost like we try again and again to assume that we all, we are all on the same planet. No, we are not all on the same planet. This planet holds many different planets, many different organisms that they're really totally different from each other, and they're experiencing this place in a totally different way. So, the capacity for me is to be okay with that.

Most of the time, we're trying to adapt to something that we see and we try to mimic and the better we do this we think that we form our bodies and qualities. But the quality of each one of the organisms has its own conditions and its own capacities to exist and experience everything so I understand training as a way to abandon this idea of mastery – which is mimicking someone- in order to acquire and understanding the unique qualities that each of us carries, that is my opinion a taking care of the self. Which is also the base for me at least, the foundation, for the medium of performance. Or any kind of medium of using the body as primal material.

RS: Because you feel that, ultimately, mastery is just imitation?

GS: Because mastery has been the foundation of what we call "nation-state." Performing arts have been created to support the idea of representation through reproduction. The performer is

representing the citizen on stage, and the characters that support existing hierarchies and this in my opinion has already happened a lot. We have mastered performing. We have mastered reproducing figures but we haven't acquired tools and analyses and training of beings. Because when you have representation, you have also particular roles. So for example, in the theater, you have, still, the representation of the master, of the servant, of the woman, the man, the representation of the difference between animal and man.

What I'm trying to do with my work is to establish a field that doesn't have fixed roles. I'm starting from very basic things, which is understanding the mechanics of the body. Appreciating the variety of organisms. On the other hand of course because I'm working with this body, with my body I need to analyze and understand socially, physically, mentally—this body, my body. And in order to do that, I create tools, tricks, trainings for myself to go along with an activity that exposes very certain time and space parameters. So, the performance carries the qualities and the words and the languages of something anew. With performance, we assume that there is already a form that is presented. No, that's performing arts. What I'm trying to say is that with performance, we acquire the capacity to be ready to perform.

RS: How is that capacity achieved ?

GS: In the case for *documenta 14*, there was a particular trajectories that this piece was trying to grasp. It wanted to grasp how it is to create a sociality and to demonstrate the body in orgasm, body parts, organs that they were displayed in an exhibition space. They became declarations of a new body. And this action happened at the same time in both cities: Athens and Kassel. The piece was a priori taking place in the same field—even if it was happening in two different cities, the piece was constructed as it was happening in one place, in one field, in one space. It was a very difficult task because—and that's the reason why this training was necessary—the people that participated in the performance had to actually do this action for six days non-stop, they had to not only physically prepared but a way to just admit to themselves that they can do something that they not necessarily believe logically. It doesn't work for them logically. But then, it works for them emotionally. And when these two groups of people met in Kassel in the last day of the work, in the last day of the piece—they, they start crying, because they realized that they were doing almost the same movements—without me directing anyone, without me trying to impose any choreography. And they were doing the similar movements because they were coexisting in the same field of sociality, of space and time.

RS: And was all of this work orbiting around the concept of orgasm as a central idea?

GS: Orgasmic force is Dynamis. And dynamis was the central character. Dynamis, which is not exactly strength, and is not exactly power. The force that makes people transform, change their lives – personally but also socially. So, it's not the orgasm like the sexual intercourse. It's the orgasmic force. The force that makes people come together and change the course of their lives. The orgasmic force is the space and time where we can give to each other to understand our differences, where we actually understand what needs to be transformed. This is also the political or social moments that we understand as revolutions.

RS: This work was performed in the street. For you, does this make the work a form of social activism, where you're trying to engender some kind of social engagement?

GS: I will say that it is a training of emotional capacity that can be shared. And that capacity can create a field of understanding and imagining another way, another space, another time. A common time. The participants, the performers, and myself we tried to touch that moment.

RS: Are you breathing in prescribed ways for the work?

GS: When I'm using the performance as a medium, I don't assume that, "Okay. I'm breathing." I don't have it. It's a privilege. It's better to be a little bit more careful of this— of understanding our heartbeats, our breathings, our walkings, our gestures.

RS: You began as a musician.

GS: I was trained as a musician since 5 years old.

RS: Do you think of your work as rooted in music?

GS: My work is rooted in understanding score's function during the performance of a piece. That's how I got more interested in visual arts.

RS: What kind of music were you trained in?

GS: Classical Cello.

RS: The term "score" suggests music.

GS: For me, it was the opposite of musical scoring. I was observing the breathing, and I was giving it a reality in blown glass. The breathing was scoring me.

RS: A documentation.

GS: But this documentation - all of it is on the field of art. You know, we don't make tools to actually work. Some tools are also there to not work. [Laughs] Which is very good! Because we don't have someone to tell us, "Oh, it's not working."

RS: You think of your training as something that doesn't have to work, as well?

GS: Of course! Yeah. Of course.

RS: It's just something that you present, and then after that there's no intention with it?

GS: I don't present the training. I'm training. The training is to be trained. That's it. Like in music. To be able to make a note to sound, you need to work and train for many years. For some

people in some point, they have a sound. Others don't have a sound. That doesn't mean that they haven't trained. They have been trained. And that's the beautiful part. The beautiful part is that you train to make the sound, but it doesn't mean that it's going to sound. But the whole training, the whole calibration of the listening, the position, the everyday need to work on the sound to make it sound— that's the whole point. Not to make the sound. The way that I'm working is a process that doesn't have an end, it doesn't have a Beethoven.

RS: You seem to resist hierarchy in general.

GS: Yes. I'm really not very comfortable with hierarchies.

RS: But you embrace structure.

GS: Structure is not hierarchy. Structure is part of the creative force, creative in a sense— that from chaos, which is, you know, surrounding us. We try to make sense of it. We try to create a trajectory of our own path and our own understanding of what of this chaos is. That's not hierarchy. This is the base for creation. If I was assuming that everything around me is fine, I wouldn't have any need to make sense of it, to make something out of it. I'm

interested of the moment when the chaos takes form and materializes.

Jonathan Meese

Through sculptures, paintings, performances, videos and writing, the Berlin- and Hamburg-based Meese has built a nightmarish world of power-hungry European men. It's a place of crude, juvenile figuration and German military iconography. In Meese's paintings, which are at the centre of his work, colours smear and simmer together in an energetic maelstrom that is both brutal and chromatically stunning.

For the artist, his entire project is one great deadpan farce. Meese is aggressively re-appropriating the propaganda of the oppressor, draining any power that its language or imagery may hold. In this way, he sees his work as a denouncement of all ideology, political, religious or otherwise. He's creating a visual manifesto of anti-authority, of true uninhibited freedom. He wants to be like an adolescent rolling around in the mud and so it seems right that, for many years, his mother has served as his studio assistant.

To break down the systematic thinking around him, Meese embraces contradiction. In his 'dictatorship of art' he is not the dictator – art is – but the agitator, the trickster, the spectacle. During performances, he has worn a bicorne, fellated an alien doll, and given the Nazi salute, an illegal act in Germany for

which Meese was tried and acquitted in 2013. (‘Art has triumphed!’ he said in response.)

In February 2017, he called Donald Trump ‘the greatest performer on this planet right now, second only to myself’, a statement that manages to simultaneously mock and embody megalomania. His work is unabashedly slathered with his own image, and yet he is never the hero, always the fool.

Meese’s critique of German history is potent, but he’s also provincial in his interests. His painting clearly emerges out of German traditions, from the Expressionism of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde to the New Fauves of the 1980s, and many of the artists working in this same lineage – Jörg Immendorff, Albert Oehlen, Daniel Richter, and Tal R – have been his regular collaborators. If Meese has an ultimate goal, it seems to be the long-sought German one: the totalised, multidisciplinary artwork, the “Gesamtkunstwerk.”

For the following interview, I emailed questions and he responded in scrawled responses, mostly legible. The handwritten text, often stylised in all caps and punctuated by exclamation marks, echoed the same statements squeezed from paint tubes onto his paintings. In videos of the artist, he speaks mostly at the top of his lungs, and even on paper he seems to be

overflowing with the vehemence of a child playing an imaginary game of war.

Ross Simonini *How do you define ideology?*

Jonathan Meese Ideology is an invention of adult brains. Ideology is taste, not necessity. In nature there is no ideology. Children have no ideology. Objects have no ideology. Ideology is something that children are taught. Animals have no ideology, ideology seems to be only a need for adults. Every political system is ideological, so is religion, spiritualism, esoteric or self-fulfilment. Ideology consists of institutionalised thinking and behaviour. Ideology is always a devil circle of unnecessary activities. Ideology is never Art. Art is always totally free and absolutely contrary to ideological stupidity. Ideology is the worst obstacle against the future. Art destroys all ideologies. Art is the leader. Art overcomes all ideologies. Art says no to all politicians. Art rules. Art leads and Art takes over! The 'dictatorship of Art' is the leadership of evolution: ideology is always the enemy of evolution. Art is the sum of all evolutions.

RS *But do you think people can truly escape ideology?*

JM Jonathan Meese has always successfully escaped ideology by playing. Playing like a child is the answer to all ideological influences. An artist has to play away all ideological indoctrination. Artists have to keep away from all ideological

terror. Ideology is always the room of fear. Artists have to stay away from fear or even have to destroy these cynical rooms. In Art censorship is forbidden, especially self-censorship. Obedience to ideological concepts is deadly for art. Art is the future. Art is the room of future. Artists should work in their ateliers without disturbances. Artists should be hermetic! Artists should only trust in Art, not policies. Art is not another political system, Art is stronger than all politicians. Art is no anarchy. Art is Total Order. Art is the Total Order of the future. Art is the most radical future! (Art is Total Love. Art is Total Respect.)

RS *So isn't ideology just a natural human state?*

JM My mother and I fight daily over this question. She believes that ideology is inherent in human life. I think it is not. Children and babies are already human beings and do not need ideology… that need comes later. Why? Ideology seems to be a weapon of adults. These 'teachers' hammer ideology into the brains of the young, and I don't accept this. My mother violently disagrees and thinks that human beings need ideologies to survive in a hostile world. She is eighty-seven years old and experienced a lot of ideological movements. Jonathan Meese truly awaits a world without ideologies. That will be the evolutionary step of total radicalism into a world of total Art. The 'dictatorship of Art' is the guarantee for survival. Art has no cynical aspects. Art is always the future. Art is the master.

RS *How does working with your mother affect your process?*

JM My mother is a natural authority. I did not ‘vote’ for her! My mother is chief, chief of evolution. My mother is not a God! My mother evolutionises Jonathan! My mother brings order into my life and my atelier! My mother disagrees with my visions but in the end she knows that something new must evolve. Dispute is totally necessary for future! Art is dispute, not discourse. Art is mother ‘Earth’.

RS *Do you think education is possible without ideology?*

JM Yes. Education itself is never ideological as long as there is no message, indoctrination or other political or religious influences! The education that leads to future allows children to play and learn without ideology. Ideology is always the jail of the past. Art is total freedom. In Art all ideological devil circles are destroyed. Evolution shows that we are not the masters but the children of the future. Evolution is the teacher of Art! Art is the education of nature. Art is total metabolism! Art is the pressure of the future. All children are artists. All Art lovers are Artists. Nature is Art.

RS *Why do you capitalise ‘Art’?*

JM Art is not God. Art stands above everything else. Art is the sum of all evolutions. In Art nobody has to kneel down, nobody

has to pray and nobody has to make a pilgrimage. Art is no temple. Art is no holy ground.

RS *So why call it a dictatorship of art?*

JM The name ‘dictatorship of Art’ means the total declaration of total love towards Art. Art is like love, like friendship, like future, like mother, like father. Art is therefore not democratic but an evolutionary process! Art is, like the sun, a dictator, but an objective dictator, not an ideological one.

RS *Is visual art well suited to rejecting ideology?*

JM When people play, they serve Art, when people live in ideological systems and obey them, they are against Art. People have to free themselves from all ideological brainwashing! Ideology is the enemy of future. Ideological persons are brainwashed and brainwashers. Visual Art, like all Art is the guarantee for Evolution and Future.

RS *Do you think of yourself as working in the lineage of Joseph Beuys, who declared everyone an artist?*

JM Beuys became political in his later years. He suddenly trusted politics more than Art. Art is no political party. Art is no politician. Art survives. Politics vanish. Art is the counter reality. Art is the dreamland. Art is the anti-reality. Art is total future.

Art says no to all nostalgic governments. Artists never trust politicians. Artists should never follow ideology! Artists should work constantly in their ateliers. Artists should not believe too much in cultural networking. Artists should love lovely isolation in their ateliers. Artists are loners!

RS *Do you consider yourself a loner? What about your recent collaborations with Daniel Richter and Tal R?*

JM Normally, I am a total loner and love to work on my own in my studio. Daniel Richter and Tal R are very, very old and close friends, and I trust them totally, so cooperation with them is no problem. We are three captains whose ships meet occasionally on the high seas of Art. In these collaborations we are totally even but not democratic. We do what is necessary. In Art, real friendship is needed, but it takes a long time to develop. Art is family business! Art is the exchange of respect! In Art you need patience! Art is the chain of loners! Daniel Richter, Tal R and Jonathan Meese are children of Art and play Art. Art is the total game and Artists are toys!

RS *Is it true that you refuse to fly to exhibitions?*

JM Yes. I don't want to fly any more because I want to slow down, concentrate on my work in the studio and let the art travel. Art is not the artist. I am not afraid of flying. I just don't want to be available all the time and everywhere.

RS *Evolution and future are clearly two key concepts for you Evolution is an idea from science, which is of course its own ideology, and future is a construct. Aren't these adult ideas?*

JM Future is no problem for babies, animals or objects. Future seems to be only a problem for grown-up people, only ideological brains produce future problems. Children just play into the future. Future is no ideological construct for children or objects. Evolution happens without human interference. The only relevant question is: do we fear future or look forward to it? For an artist, future is the chief. An artist should never fear future. Evolution is Art. Art is Evolution. Evolution is future. Evolution is not revolution. We need people who serve evolution, not revolution. Evolution is not based on ideology. Revolution is always based on ideology. Nature needs no revolution. Only adult ideological brains produce revolution. Art is number 1! Art is the law! Art is the sum of all evolutions. Art is hermetic action. In art you don't illustrate nowadays, you play future! Artists should never react on political day-to-day developments. Art is stronger than politics. Artists should never behave like politicians. Artists are baby animals. Artists are not left- or rightwing! Artists have no political ideologies. Artists doubt reality. Artists deny reality. Artists cannot serve reality. Artists are radical dreamers.

RS *Why do you exhibit at all? Why work with the market or institutions or the Internet? Why not just play privately in your studio?*

JM Jonathan Meese is no monk! To work alone in your studio does not mean that you are not connected to the world. I am suffering from reality, not Art. I fight against all ideologies because I am not cynical. I am not a religious prophet. Meese cannot live in the woods just looking at his own navel. As an Artist you love Art and Art will change the world and rule the world. I love the total power Art, I know that only Art is the government of the future. I cannot hide away because this would only be self fullfilment! Art expands… Art is no lifestyle. Meese is no prophet but Meese takes responsibility! Meese sees failure and points at these wounds. I have to play against all Art enemies. Art is the most fascinating never-ending power of all. Art is the perpetual mobile. Art created everything. Art is the beginning with no end! Art is total Parsifal. Art rescues from reality!

RS *When did this anti-ideology position begin for you?*

JM No ideological adult ever injected the ideological juice into my brain. Meese's brain is too well-protected.

RS *Why do you wear an all-black Adidas uniform?*

JM Meese needs a uniform to protect himself against reality! I need a totally organised daily routine to be radical in Art. Everything in my life is structure, therefore I can totally concentrate on welcoming future. My home is my castle. My home is Art. Your home is Art. Everybody's home is Art. We need to be based in our own homes. Art is as close as the point of your nose. Art is not far away. Very important! I wear Adidas because the three stripes frame the body and protect it. I love Adidas because it is simple, effective, not so expensive and practical. 'Black' is a very neutral colour and the opposite of white. White is too holy for me and too delicate. To wear a kind of Art-Uniform makes life easy. Artists should be radical in Art, not in real life. Reality should be banned and Art should take over. Art is Art!