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Art as Tool, Riddle, Problem, Absurdity, Desire: A Conversation with Jess Perlitz

By Laurel McLaughlin

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Laurel McLaughlin: I heard you give an artist lecture recently at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon about your practice, which includes site-specific installations, sculpture, performance-like objects and events that focus on questions about bodies, public space, and object relations. Your lecture was fascinating for a number of reasons, but I was especially intrigued by the term "embodied sculptures," that seemed to deviate from a certain kind of performance practice that I was initially seeing in your work. It made me consider the ways in which performance, as a liminal medium, generatively elides with other media, crossing over into other terrains of media, alternative knowledge, and desire.

First, you mentioned that the work you made in Philadelphia from 10 or 15 years ago still holds relevance in your practice today. Could you tell me about your practice during your MFA at Tyler School of Art?

Jess Perlitz: I graduated from Tyler in 2009 and it's true, I still feel very connected to the work I was making then. The work has obviously changed though—particularly because the way I am asking questions has changed—and because I've given in to some things. For example, a big driving force for me in grad school was problems of art: what can it do, what can it actually change, who is it for. It makes sense to me that I was so focused on that.

Before I went to Tyler, I had started a non-profit art collective to run art classes in old age homes (in Toronto, Canada where I'm from). I was also running an art project as a company, making custom t-shirts based on a quirky exchange I cultivated with a questionnaire. In a loose way, without consciously realizing it, I was thinking about art as a tool and wondering what purpose art might serve and what my role as an artist should be. I went to graduate school because my explorations of those questions were leading me further from my studio and closer towards administration and facilitation. And there was something about making objects that I missed and though I definitely couldn't justify it, I believed in it nonetheless. That still holds true today in fact. Anyway, those concerns that led me to graduate school then threw me into conversations about art and public spheres, social practice, and institutional critique. And that's what much of the work at that time revolved around. The problems generated the work. What I found, though, is that in the end it was neither a generous nor a generative way of working for me. It started to feel like I was creating riddles to solve. Once I gave into some of the problems of art, things got more interesting again.

A Rainbow Every Other Day, 2008
Poster, fabric, bucket, body
8 1/2" x 11" poster, 3' x 2' x7' rainbow

The poster was posted on notice boards and every other day the artist was a rainbow, leaning forehead against the wall, always in a different location, no movement for the 25 minutes.

LM: You showed a work that you made during your MFA, *A Rainbow Every Other Day*, 2008, in which you inhabited a rainbow through a costume, with the help of a poster that indicated when you would be enacting this gesture. The performances each lasted 25 minutes in different locations. The word "inhabit" feels important here, rather

than “embodied,” as you set a time limit, and the poster announced the performance. The parameters of the work were made visible and I’m curious how these parameters co-created the work as well. Was this your first project working within a structure such as this? Had you made costumes before? And do you distinguish between “inhabit” and “embody” here as I’ve done?

JP: It’s a good question. It reminds me of a similarly simple but beautiful question I was recently asked with regards to my work about the difference between a prop and a prosthetic. I think I want the work to do both things—what I mean is that I think about embodying something as being about giving it form… whereas when I think about inhabiting something, I think about situating myself within something as a way to render it (more) human. When I was a rainbow every other day, for example, I think my act of inhabiting a rainbow was an attempt to render human the complication of a strangely complicated symbol we use. At the same time, while a rainbow can actually mean many different things and that was a central part of it, I was also trying to embody hope. Every couple years since that first rainbow piece it seems that I conflate my own body with an object. I’ve been a rainbow, a bridge, a wall, a disco ball, a rock… it’s become an important part of my practice.

LM: Here, your body, within the architecture of a rainbow, acted in a way that was asynchronous with surrounding bodies that passed or encountered you. This intervention seems especially important within the context of a college campus, where students are often rushing towards goal-oriented ends, while simultaneously, and perhaps subconsciously, being surrounded by conflicting desires of all kinds. Did you intend for this gesture to resonate in this way?

JP: I think that with a lot of my work, conflicting desires are exactly what I am wanting to contend with. When I was a rainbow, I wanted the oddness and the absurdity of my action to disrupt the way we move through space, and in some small way to also disrupt the many ways we become consumed by productive measures. In making a symbol of hope human, by embodying it, I felt like I was also then pointing to failure and fear and loss. My ideal is if work can be really simple but at the same time, hold the asymmetry of the various ways we come to make meaning.

Everything Fought For, 2010
Wood, stucco, paint, optical viewer, manual water pump, East River water
15' x 5' x 11

Installed at Socrates Sculpture Park, the climbable structure was located on the edge of the East River (NY). Equipped with a manual water pump, viewers could pull water up from the river in front of them and dump it down the facade of the sculpture. The optical viewer provided a magnified view of the Manhattan skyline.

LM: Other works of yours grapple with the myriad contours of how meanings are communicated to audiences. In particular, I'm thinking of your site-specific works, such as *Everything Fought For*, 2010, and *There Are No Enemies*, 2011, and the interactive spaces that they engender for audiences. Could you discuss how you position interaction in the works and how it shapes meaning; and then, if and how this relationship interacts with their sites?

JP: It's hard for me to think about any sculpture as separate from where it is located, understood on the scale of the body, affected by the issues of how and why we encounter them. Those seemingly simple questions are discussions about lived experience and examinations of power, and are things I think about with all artwork.

I think that in a number of my own site-specific works, particularly where interaction is a direct part of it, the shift from a site-based knowledge to an experiential one is a tactic for making experience part of the content. Sculpture is a good tool for thinking about how we lay claim to space. Sculptures that are vantage points give viewers a clear sense of control or ownership over the space around them. Objects that people can climb, move, speak with, or look through makes their participation and agency part of the work's content. One of the problems I've encountered though is that the way interactive artworks ultimately end up functioning can be slippery terrain—easily co-opted by user satisfaction and falling into existing social, emotional, and political frameworks rather than challenging them. My initial interest in giving viewers a way to play with the work now sometimes feels like an uncomfortable bedfellow with contemporary capitalist marketing tactics and the emergence of empowered

consumers. My earlier work, like the two site-specific works you're asking about, spawned a question I like to think about: How does an artwork that is meant to be interacted with exist when it isn't being used? As a result, I've also become attentive to the pageantry of it all, interested in how modes of interaction and meaning-making fall into the symbolic and why, and equally interested in what an artwork might be when there isn't a body there to complete it.

LM: In your work, it seems as if there is always a conscious triangulation among the object, viewer, and the meaning in-between—something that many take as a given, but which you appear to mold and shape. In this way, your works strike me as performative, or at least operating on the fringes of the slippery medium. Could you discuss how that "performativity" and consideration of meaning for audiences figures in the works that conspicuously involve your own body, such as *Rotating Disco Lump*, 2013, in which you embody a disco-ball, and *Mud Breathes Better Than the Buried*, 2017, in which you pile 100 pounds of clay on your head?

JP: I think the initial impulse to put my own body in the work came out of how I understand sculpture and physical space on the scale of the body. In the participatory and interactive works I had previously been making (and to which I sometimes still return), I was asking everyone else to put their body in the work. Turning myself into a disco lump that rotated slowly for an audience, or, lying on the floor with many pounds of clay on my head, continually forming, deforming and reforming some semblance of a face, became ways for me to grapple with my role as the artist and my viewers' expectations—distilling the call for interaction/participation down to being about a desperation for connection rather than some kind of theatrical representation of experience. Sculpture gives us a way to think about objects and the space around us as always being in relationship. It offers a way to consider how we perceive and experience, control and surrender, produce and struggle with space. I think *how* something is made can be just as important as *why*. Sometimes the "how" is about the process of making and the materials. But "how" can also be this triangulation you're noting. It can become part of the content of the artwork when it is considered to be about the actual mechanisms at play in our seeing and experiencing—the various structures that ascribe, produce, or define the meaning we seek to find.

LM: Those works that you just discussed took place within the space of a gallery, without the conscious performative limits that *A Rainbow Every Other Day* operated within—but perhaps they had other subliminal limits. As viewers, we might not always read the restrictions within which we function, both in art spaces and non-art spaces. You mentioned a story in which you first realized how space operated around you—a childhood memory that I'm hoping you can relay once again, and then relate to how you conceive of your sculptures, embodied or static, within public space.

JP: For me sculpture is about the articulation of space and how that is given form. My memory I think you're referring to is from when I was about six years old. There was a drip inside the wall in my bedroom. It was right by my head and kept me awake. I remember my parents took a plastic drop-cloth and put it over my bed and made a hole in the wall with a hammer to see where the drip was coming from. The small investigatory hole became bigger until they finally located a leaking pipe. Though it was fixed quickly, and the giant hole they made was patched and painted, the repair imperceptible, the room was never the same. I had never considered what a room was until that point. I hadn't thought about the room I was in as something constructed. I had never thought about what a wall was and that in the making of a wall, a room is formed. Suddenly I saw the space inside the room as being just as substantial as the walls that contained it. I remember looking at all the neighbors' houses differently, seeing them as play toys, just like a dollhouse. And though this was a phase I thankfully outgrew, for a period of

time following the drip in the wall, I would go to bed thinking my body was also somehow indeterminate. I would close my eyes to wait for sleep, and suddenly one part of me, like my hand or my leg, would start to grow, inflating like a balloon and getting bigger and bigger until it risked filling up and bursting the entire room, taking the rest of my body with it. It was only through extremely focused thinking, cutting through the panic, that I would manage, just at the very last moment before it exploded everything, to deflate the body part—*wooooosh*. I could get it to go down to the proper shape and size for one sweet moment of relief. But just like in a half-filled long balloon, when you squeeze the air out of one end, it just goes to the other. And so almost immediately a different body part would start to expand. Eventually, if I couldn't get the inflating seesaw to stop, I would have to get out of bed and shake my entire body down before getting back in to wait again for sleep. I think about this as an early memory related to sculpture. A sculpture memory. And it's key that it's about physical space but also how that's understood through the body.

Rock Moving Rocks, 2015
Poster, foam, flexible urethane, rock dust, casters, body
Variable dimension*s*

The artist was a rock that moved another rock across the landscape for 6 hours – the event took place in Portland, Oregon, beginning at the Hawthorne Bridge and ending at the Portland Art Museum.

LM: Keeping with space, public space differs depending on particular publics—of which there are many. You made many of the works I mentioned previously in Philadelphia and the next work I'll ask about was decidedly about the Portland landscape—in terms of art, history, and ecology. So, first, how was this shift coming from Philadelphia to Portland for you and your practice? And then, I'm curious about the work, *Rock Moving Rocks*, 2015, that you made for the performance event, *A Day in Paradise*, in which you walked, dressed as a rock and pulling another rock, from 5 SE Madison, south along the Eastbank Esplanade, west over Tilikum Crossing, to the Portland Art Museum, that accompanied the exhibition *Paradise: Fallen Fruit*. The exhibition interrogated myths of bounty ripe for the plucking, intimately associated with Oregon's settler history and imaginary concerning Manifest Destiny. Your work seemed to offer a retort to these colonial legacies, encountering the terrain differently—in fact, humorously. Could you talk about humor as a resistive strategy, which I think operates in many of your works?

JP: The shift from Philadelphia to Portland was hard. I moved for a teaching job at Lewis & Clark College so that situated and quickly immersed me in many ways, but the size, intensity, and multiplicities of Philadelphia are things I still miss. At the same time, there was something interesting about the dislocation that came with the move. It brought about an emptying out and being slightly removed from everything made me set up my studio with different intention. As for humor—it's something I get asked about often with my work but I don't know if I'm able to think about it directly. You ask about strategies. I associate strategies with being things you have control over and humor (for me) seems to come about more from a kind of emptying out that distills and brings into high relief a desperation for connection. I guess I think that for things to be funny there has to be some sort of untethering that happens. The natural order of things subverted, the understood abstracted, something found to be incongruous. I think that located in the act of untethering is a desire to be free. In part because of that, I think of humor as being opposed to and at the same time inseparable from pain. The word "pain" comes from the Latin *poena*, or "punishment," which implies a relationship to something outside of oneself, despite the sense of total isolation the feeling actually produces. Which may come from how we must grapple with the very solitary experience. Or it may be a simple reminder that the way we make meaning, despite our aloneness, is from relationship. When I turned myself into a rock, I got to be rid of history, collisions of public spheres, and my body for a while, but of course, we can never be free of that.

LM: Humor was also present in *Food Face,* a video in which you wore a papier-mâché and enamel painted ball on your head and proceeded to "eat a sandwich and cupcake," that doubled for eyes and a nose on the ball, and "drink a soda," that doubled for a kind of sugary finish to the work. Could you talk about the double co-creation of eating/making and then finishing/performing that was playful, but perhaps bordering on something darker? The audience laughed and gasped at the simple actions that worked against themselves but simultaneously created something new and unexpected. But I couldn't help wondering if the seemingly simple artistic gestures were indicative of, on the one hand, a non-hierarchical, and horizontal fumbling through the world towards meaning, but on the other, a sort of existential recognition in that we all face this seeking?

JP: These are lovely observations. What else can I add? The soda I poured over my giant blank head was a sugary finish to the work, as you noted, and it was also tears. The video was shown alongside another one, *Ghost*, in which I move around an empty room in a ghost costume. But it's overexposed so you can't really see me. Both videos are explorations in which I am almost not there, toying with seeing and being seen, embracing and evading the burden of bodies, fumbling with my desire to be connected and felt.

Observer, 2017
Concrete gypsum, styrofoam, wood, paint
15' x 6' x 5'

LM: Could you talk about current works, such as *Observation*, 2017, a "monolith" sculpture appears to watch those entering the Lemelson entryway of the Pacific Northwest College of Art, that you recently exhibited in the exhibition, *Costumes, Reverence, and Forms* at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture at PNCA? Its presence, as an ambiguous arbiter of the space, leaves room for many possibilities and I'm hoping that you might share some of those with *Title* readers, and perhaps also tell us about upcoming projects that build off of this overarching conception of masking and self-definition that seems to permeate your recent work.

I think about that piece you're referring to (and there are a number of others I've made that are quite similar) as being a big *Wizard-of-Oz* like mask. As a functional object, masks are frequently worn for power and disguise and they are often as sacred as they are practical, as political as they are playful, as theatrical as they are projections of our likeness. And a desire to disrupt, usurp, or honor power is deeply embedded in the idea of masking. I am interested in how the masking, particularly in monumental form like *Observation*, becomes a way to think about concealment as a form of camouflage, something that is about both protection and control, and power and desire. This interest is also my preoccupation with the symbolic. Not about what things can represent but rather how the symbolic functions. Disguise and performance; shielding and violence; narrative and fragmentation—when I think about how these "monolith" sculptures that I make function, I think about how they so simply complicate the perceived purpose. They instantly render representation hollow and the emptiness can give us a way to think about how we make meaning and negotiate place.

In terms of future projects, I've got a number of things I'm looking forward to. I'll be making new work for the upcoming Portland Biennial, which opens at the end of August at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center. This summer I'm also doing a papermaking residency with c3:initative and Pulp & Deckle in Portland, Oregon. It will give me an opportunity to learn a new material. I'm curious if I can make a big moon object. Perhaps it's painfully naïve, but I was flummoxed to discover that "the man in the moon" is a culturally specific phenomena (that in other parts of the world people see other things). Frozen ancient lava flows form mouth, eyes, and nose and when I look up in the sky, I can't see anything but man's reflection. I think the projection of our own image onto everything we see, including foreign astral bodies, as a way to tell stories and seek understanding is filled with an odd mixture of hubris and humility.

This summer I also have plans to go do some clown training—something I've done periodically since graduate school as a way to think about sculpture (it has also helped me immensely with my teaching.) I think it's been critical in helping me forge new approaches to activating my work and behind the scenes it's been a really interesting way to think about the physical objects I make. Clowning embraces the absurd, but it is inspired by the world as we know it. It is a relational practice that needs the viewer. It materializes social relations and structures of power, all the while attempting to subvert understood order through an inversion of language and action.

Jess Perlitz makes work focused on considering landscape and the ways in which we define and seek to recognize ourselves within it. Grappling with how space gets articulated, her projects take many forms—traversing performance, sculpture, and drawing. The work has appeared in a variety of venues such as playgrounds, fields, galleries, and museums, including Socrates Sculpture Park in NY, Cambridge Galleries in Canada, De Fabriek in The Netherlands, and aboard the Arctic Circle Residency. Born in Toronto, Canada, Jess is a graduate of Bard College, received her MFA from Tyler School of Art, and clown training from the Manitoulin Center for Creation and Performance. Jess is currently based in Portland, Oregon where she is Associate Professor of Art and Head of Sculpture at Lewis & Clark College. Jess was recently an artist in residence at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, NE, and included in the 2019 American Academy of Arts & Letters' Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts in NYC. Her project, Chorus, is currently installed at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, PA as part of the museum's ongoing artists installation series.

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Forest University, and MAs in the History of Art from The Courtauld Institute of Art (2015) and Bryn Mawr College (2017). Her dissertation traces migratory identity formations and their dispersals within feminist performance situated in the United States and from the 1970s through the 21st century. She has presented her research at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California, Berkeley, and the College Art Association, New York, among others. Additionally, she has held research and curatorial assistant positions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Slought Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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