

STAGING AFFECT



BY SABRINA TARASOFF

For a moment, think of the fiction of Jane Bowles, which carries an affect as detached as it is attuned to reality. This strange languor makes the real feel formless or abstract, perhaps precisely because the stories reenact a reality that is all too real.

As Don Adams notes, her “innately allegorical fiction is an effort to reveal the perfect reality of the world by prophetically creating the future, rather than mimetically preserving the present.”¹ A certain disinterest sits on the surface of her prose, which provides the eerie sensation that despite its sophistication and simplicity there is something disaffected, unnatural, or staged about it. This is best represented in her short story “Camp Cataract” (1949), in which a relationship between two dysfunctional sisters unfolds at a vacation retreat that one of them has disappeared to. Going after her sister, “Sadie” finds herself among cabins and canoes penned with a sharpness that touches on the preternatural—a prop-like effect Christiane Craig noted as the “inertia of imaginary objects.”² This finds its zenith in the camp’s gift shop, where meaning is solicited from the cheap sentiment of tchotchkes and souvenirs that reflect Sadie’s own artificial perception of the world; when paying for her finds, she is faced with an “incongruity she [cannot] name” in the vendor’s pale blue eyes against a terra-cotta-painted face.³ The sudden gap in reality transforms an excess of emotion into its opposite—a dissociation made ever more baffling as she disappears behind the “deafening roar” of a waterfall.

There is an indulgent relationship with the space of the stage in Bowles’s work, which lies in her arrangement of elements that break apart an otherwise dreamy, irreducible facade. As Craig suggests, her “exercise of the will is attention”: Bowles uses scenography to pull focus *through* the imaginary and into the real.⁴ The cabins and canoes, gin-soaked patios and leisurely pensions in her work are pictured at a distance, inert and untouchable, and this creates the effect that the landscape is somehow enlivened from reality. Bowles created spaces between what was witnessed and the ability to grasp it intellectually, a strategy as seductive as it is eddying, and which granted her work its oracular status. (Here, one might consider Samuel Beckett as contrapuntal: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” Three elements to create a stage, and to support a plot while it waits for itself to happen.)⁵ Such scenography alludes to events yet to unfold, and in its unsettling, equivocal inertia teases out meaning from lines, colors, shapes, and arrangements. This points to what is beyond meaningful resolve, as do the hats and shoes in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and moreover places the pictorial, the descriptive, into a context where it is always in question.

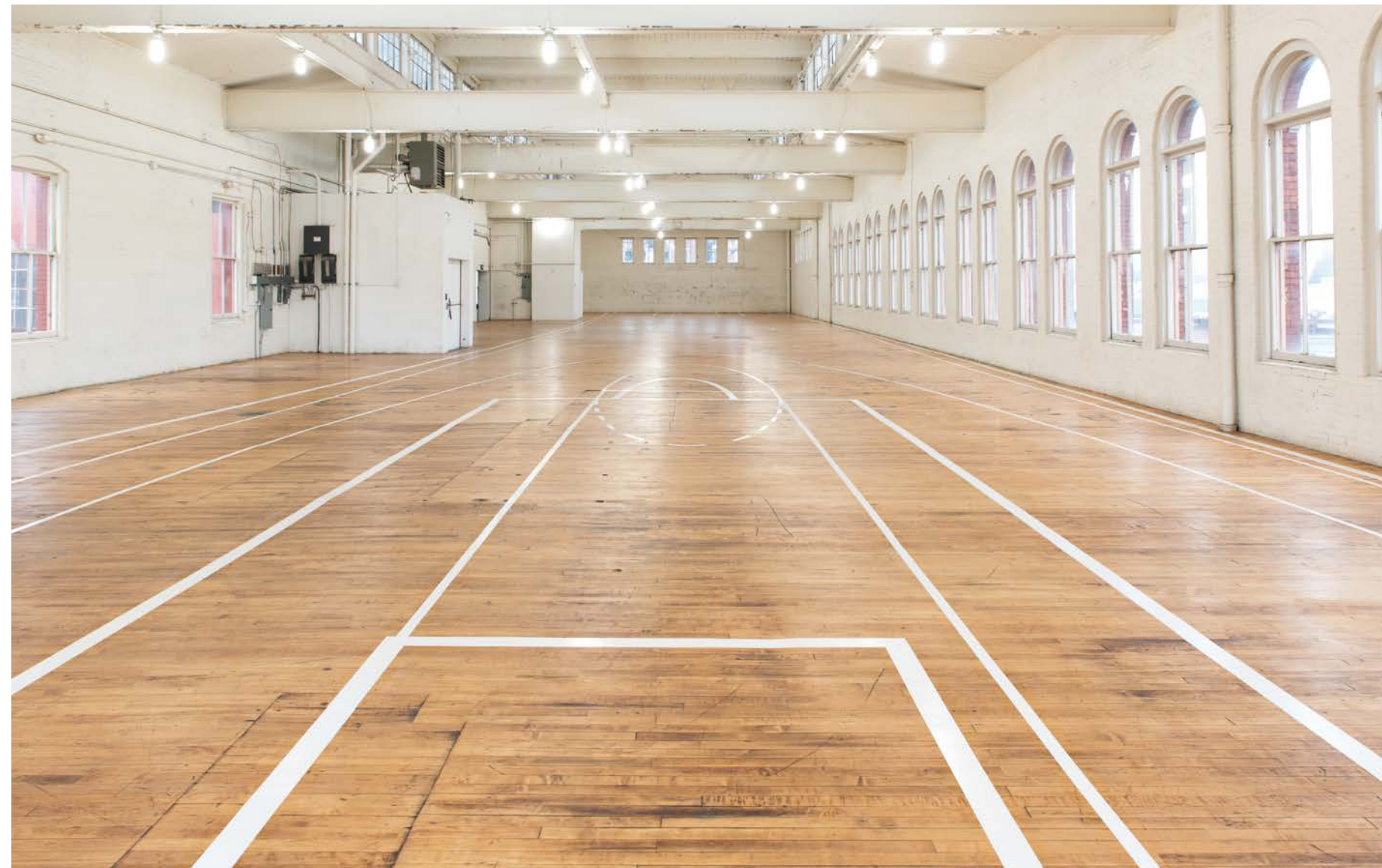
Bowles nails the theatrical-in-prose by penning a *mise-en-scène* isn’t far from the reticence of sculptural practices that seem “so revelatory in [their] reality,” as Adams writes on Bowles, “that [they] makes our own look fake, calling into question our most basic assumptions.”⁶ Here, the viewer must intuit unfolding relationships between objects or elements within as they are reenacted in tactility, scale, and form. This does not do away with gauging cultural signifiers, but refocuses attention on how form carries out its context outside of signification. Though undoubtedly a flattening—of an idea or construct, mood or scenario—this takes a distance from the flatness that pervades the present (read: social media, blockbusters, and prolific, empty abstraction) by making attention and presence a prerequisite for its full comprehension. Just as the fictive demands a depth of vision, Delphic insofar as ambiguity can serve as a space for future fantasies, art can also take on space with a propositional *attitude*. At that, what is staged can be left to its own devices. Like attending an opera without understanding a word of its language, one finds meaning in the intensity of tone, in body language, in a scrolling subtext that flashes in front of your eyes. As a shift in register from art that operates in parallel to the knowledge economy, value is reattached to the experience of being in situ, to the immanent drama of form, an experience of the bewildering gaps of reality.

So what of affect as art’s reason-to-be? What of a reality that is able to act out its context and still be moving? Not as recourse to modernism, nor any other -ism. Instead, it implies stepping aside to see more clearly, or, to reference Frank O’Hara, restore a state wherein



Jessica Stockholder, [JS 186], 1992. © Jessica Stockholder.
Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

- 1 Don Adams, “Spinozan Realism: The Prophetic Fiction of Jane Bowles,” *Janus Head* 15, no. 2 (2016): 85.
- 2 Christiane Craig, “Locked in Each Other’s Arms”: Jane Bowles’s Fiction of Psychic Dependency,” *Quarterly Conversation*, <http://quarterlyconversation.com/locked-in-each-other%E2%80%99s-arms-jane-bowles%E2%80%99s-fiction-of-psychic-dependency>.
- 3 Jane Bowles, “Camp Cataract,” in *My Sister’s Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).
- 4 Christiane Craig, “Locked in Each Other’s Arms.”
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove, 1954).
- 6 Don Adams, “Spinozan Realism,” 86.



Top - Lutz Bacher, *The Secret Garden*, 2016, *The Secret Garden* installation view at Yale Union, Portland, 2016. Courtesy: Yale Union, Portland. Photo: Leif Anderson
Bottom - Lutz Bacher, *KMS*, 2016, *The Secret Garden* installation view at Yale Union, Portland, 2016. Courtesy: Yale Union, Portland. Photo: Leif Anderson



Guillaume Maraud, *Untitled (a serie from 'Untitled 3')*, (23.10—5.12.2015, PARIS), 2015, *The Last Days of 23.10 - 5.12.15* installation view at Édouard Montassut, Paris, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Édouard Montassut, Paris



Jessica Stockholder, *Kissing the Wall #5 with Yellow*, [JS 125], 1990.
© Jessica Stockholder. Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

the visual elements of an artwork “keep the surface... high and dry, not wet, reflective and self-conscious.”⁷ (The New York School is exemplary in locating affect from observation.) What O’Hara suggests is a botanizing of experience, the “imaginary inertia” infused into a body, wherein it is through direct observation, rather than explanation, that one can access a world beneath what is given.

Undeniably exhausted by the increasingly emptied networks of art, the claustrophobic enclosures of joke-on-joke-on-joke, such a shift in register would probably demand a total coup d’état of theory. Not an abolishing, but a reordering that would consider what knowledge materials and their tête-à-têtes can impart on us as viewers. **Such stagings mark some of the more significant moments (to me) in recent art history: Marc Camille Chaimowicz’s *Celebration? Realife* (1972); Louise Lawler’s *Birdcalls* (1972); the divinatory lozenges of Roni Horn; Jessica Stockholder’s “Kissing The Wall” series (1988). That such affective encounters are craved is entirely understandable, as art’s alienation steadily increases with the pressures to perform in prescribed ways and disaffections beneath misguided values and economies.**

The digitalization of experience only exacerbates this by creating false feelings of inclusion, wherein self-promotion and dead-end discourse on the web become a standard for evaluation. However, others seem willing to explore the relationship one has to a proposition, such as what an emotional response might mean—felt in the serpentine romanticism of Guillaume Maraud’s *The Last Days of 23.10–5.12.15* (2015); Cally Spooner’s intimately estranged choreography *On False Tears and Outsourcing* (2016), or much of Lutz Bacher’s recent work. Though very different in approach, encounters between these artists are delightful to imagine. There is a common thread found in the movement from “intellectual attention” to what Simone Weil referred to as “superior attention.”⁸ The focus is on form that feels semantically irreducible, though simply poses information in relation to its environs and assemblages—whether these be light kisses, tea, and disco balls or nascent, opera-length spheres with all the seductive demure of debutantes.

Lutz Bacher gives herself up as a test subject in *Do You Love Me?*—a book of meandering transcripts of conversations with friends, family, artists, curators, and writers, all of whom were invited to discuss how they felt about Lutz-as-person versus Lutz-as-artist. It is hardly surprising that under such conditions, a self and its sobriquet would diffuse, taking love and work down with them. By posing the question she surrenders a portion of the self for public scrutiny in a context where she was necessarily going to be entwined with her work. What is loved about Lutz becomes a matter of what she produces, what she does, and how she operates. Of course, “Do you love me?” is never asked out loud. Throughout the course of the conversation the question is only ever implied; love becomes no less than the product of her labors, which are then imagined, desired, and judged through oral history. The reader is left imagining how the relationship between Bacher and her deputizing others unfolds, and moreover where, lending from objects of her own making to envision possible contexts. In conversation with Lia Gangitano:

Lia: The gaps!
Lutz: Oh, the gaps! Oh yeh
Lia: Oh I never really thought about that
Lutz: It wasn’t really a deliberate thing but then I got it at some point
Lia: I just thought it—I didn’t get it⁹



Jessica Stockholder, #363, 2002. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris / Brussels

⁷ Frank O’Hara and Donald Allen, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 497.
⁸ Christiane Craig, “Locked in Each Other’s Arms.”
⁹ Lutz Bacher, *Do You Love Me?* (New York: Primary Information, 2012).



Huh? What? The conversation moves quickly to the sound of a piano to Ruscha's gaps to surplus stores where Bacher finds all her Abercrombie. A quick pairing of three objects situates their conversation, and in that performs the same sleight-of-hand magic of her exhibitions. Lured into the streams of conversation, the reader risks missing certain elements in favor of the overall effect. For example, the sound of a piano paired with its visual appears six years after the date of the interview in an exhibition at 356 S. Mission Rd. in Los Angeles. The baby grand appears to be playing itself; an illusion procured by a recording of it being tuned placed inside its body. Bacher arranges instinctively—"like Oh I think we need this in here"—only to procure that Hollywood magic.¹⁰ (At 356, the "self-tuning" piano was put into counterpoint with *Magic Mountain*, from which the exhibition took its title, the sculpture's audio foam peaks drawing the eye to an "incongruity one cannot name" between the softness of the material and the suggested sharpness of its form. Such is the tactility of gaps.)

In *The Secret Garden* (2016) she switches register to sport, with Yale Union left mostly empty save for lines painted on a floor denoting the perimeters of a soccer field overlapped with those of a basketball court. Were the lines not stretched out of proportion to enigmatic lengths, taking meaning along with them, the coupling would be straightforward. Instead, the court unfolds in multiple dimensions, as a place of production, hybridization, and new sports prolonged by space-time. Suggesting the double vision of a sobriquet, two

preexisting games are conflated into a third form without a name, rules, or reference points. The only thing one can establish is the place it puts forth, *The Secret Garden*, which becomes a pseudonym in itself for a psychological place just beyond reach. The overlaps multiply, the simultaneous action between the lines suggesting—yes—a gap between a cultural place and its personal referents. This tension is literalized in the skewed perspective—the lines like the structured non-sense of Lewis Carroll's Jabberwock, which (whom?) according to Martin Gardner is proposed as a secret language from the future that grants access into a parallel realm for those who "get it."¹¹

As a blank stage with lines demarcating a potential scene, a potential of associations can arise—the courts leading slantwise to deeper substance. The affect of Bacher's soccer-ball field-court then lies in the oblique relationship between two things that are almost similar, but not quite, which then summons a spectrum of spatial propositions. (Elsewhere in the gallery, an excerpt from Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly" plays on a loop, continuing a theme of landscapes overlapped with music. Play on play on play).

Bearing in mind the space given to her work, the "nothingness" that surrounds the court, one must feel out what the few objects at hand solicit, and what kind of knowledge they call for. Each pairing is an improbable scenario, staged for effect, which places affect in a "conceptual opposition that always and everywhere promises and then frustrates meaning."¹² What do you get when you combine the dulcet strains of Roberta Flack and an invented sport? Does this refer to mass-produced emotion that is made readily available in popular culture? Or conversely, by virtue of the emptiness, not to mention the coupling of ideas, does it allow for us refill space with "indeterminacy, improvisation, negotiation and person-to-person exchange?"¹³

If the latter, then emotional response can be understood to confuse and matte meaning, such as a film score that emphasizes a particular mood to sway one's perception of a scene. This is not only in relation to the audio elements of Bacher's work, though they definitely add dimension, but also to questions like *Do You Love Me?* in which the interviewee's response sways our perception of Bacher, or how objects arranged into certain couplings result in a particular effect. In the Frances Hodgson Burnett book from which *The Secret Garden* presumably takes its name, a relationship forms between a child and the solitary and forgotten garden to which it is confined, whose overgrown beauty becomes analogous to the child's imaginative potential. Bacher's "garden" offers similar retreat: the field presented as a process put on display before its idea is fully formed.



Above, top - Roni Horn, *Well and Truly* installation view at Kunsthau Bregenz, Bregenz, 2010. © Roni Horn. Courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Above, bottom - Roni Horn installation view at de Pont Museum, Tilburg, 2016. © Roni Horn. Courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth



Jessica Stockholder, *Untitled (#381)*, 2003. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris / Brussels

Anecdotaly, Spooner's project emerged from a moment in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) where Bovary's lover Rodolphe ends their relationship with a letter signed with a false tear, a drop of water from his drinking glass. As a reenactment of emotion, it is easy to assume that Rodolphe was simply indifferent and needed a quick solution for his lack of emotion. Yet like Lutz-as-artist, Lutz-as-person, the doubled-over court, or the ambiguously formed choreography, the tear too is wholly blurred. It is hard to tell whether Rodolphe's gesture is pure performance, a class act, or if it could be considered as affect-in-rehearsal. On one hand, he does ask that the tear performs the emotional labor he can't or doesn't want to do, which makes it mechanical and indifferent, not to mention gives it that suspicious convenience that permeates all technics. It's clearly a fiction. But his inability to engage or muster an actual reaction from his body is paradoxical to me; in feigning emotion, he's also acknowledging it as a lack, and as an absence that needs to be filled. It caters to Emma's emotional needs, instead of just being indifferent to them. Rather than an "outsource," as Spooner considered the tear, it could by another name be considered a surrogate. The difference



Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, 1972-2008, Marc Camille Chaimowicz: *Zürich Suite* installation view at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 2006. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London

Many questions like Bacher's lingered around Cally Spooner's *On False Tears and Outsourcing* (2016). By many names, the project was a choreography stuck in rehearsals, in which Spooner's dancers explored forms of encounter sampled from rom-coms, rugby, and team-building exercises. These movements wavered along similar lines to Bacher's court by overlapping gestures that were inherently other in an attempt to discover points of intersection. Day to day, within a glass enclosure built into the lobby of the New Museum in New York, the dancers worked with one another to find a common choreography. It's important to consider this staging as being in development: the enclosure provided a space to dwell on what was still insecure, vulnerable, flimsy, indecisive, and anxious. **The movements served as a substitute for organic encounter, taking away all that is irksome about such situations, releasing instead that potential of associations rumored by Jean-François Lyotard. That is, with body language emptied of meaning, a site opens to an overflow of subtle, fragile, new meaning.** As opposed to a refined performance, or anything really that places its focus on finish, the choreography enhanced its own awkwardness, pushes its own moves beyond meaningful resolve. (The difference between a performance and its rehearsals is like that of Isa Genzken versus Phyllida Barlow: one is resolute, while the other is still ruminating). The interaction between the dancers—pushing and pulling, sprinting across a room, embracing ambiguously—equivocated failure and success, rehearsal and performance, yet most significantly did so by blurring the real and the artificial. Put on stage, Spooner's dancers reenacted Bacher's conversation. They tested the walls of their relationships for what they were, re-posing "Do you love me?" as a general query on how subjectivity shapes itself between bodies.



Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, 1972-2008, Marc Camille Chaimowicz: *Zürich Suite* installation view at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 2006. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London

is slight but significant: where one takes over to maximize productivity while reducing the gesture to its task-like basis, the other accepts to carry and hold as a gesture toward an indifferent or incapable source. In other words, the surrogate object carries meaning, which is not necessarily always empty. Emma finds her small comfort in his faux-pain; Rodolphe can retreat. From this angle, does it matter if the tear is a fiction, if its reception is genuinely felt?

Though taking distance from the clean (if not still provisional and imperfect) propositions of Bacher or Spooner, this might find its quirky apotheosis in Jessica Stockholder's series "Kissing the Wall"—those awkward reenactments of unrequited emotion, in which paint-covered night tables blow kisses by lightbulbs pointed at walls. Were the title not given as a clue, the "kiss" would still blow space into the scales of human relationships; the light, color, lines, and space in unexpected confrontations create meaning that is irreducible to both its constituent parts and its theoretical reception. The proximity to the wall and the connection of the light "staring" into its dead end is intimate—imaginary—and projects all of the bewildering, messy sentiments of a first kiss, a "blind" date, or a flirty look cast across a room.

Much of Stockholder's practice evokes empathy by similar meanings: quite literally by feeling the walls for what they are

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lewis Carroll and Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1960).

¹² Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art beyond Representation," *Angelaki* 6, no. 3 (2001): 126.

¹³ Cally Spooner, "Cally Spooner's Muse Music," Phaidon.com, January 21, 2015, <http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/january/21/cally-spooners-muse-music>.



Cally Spooner, *On False Tears and Outsourcing* – dancers responsible for delivering self-organized efforts to resolve difficult and time-consuming issues “go the distance” across multiple overlapping phases using appropriated competitive strategies and appropriated intimate gestures, 2016, performance at New Museum, New York, 2016. Dancers, acoustic panels, daylight bulbs, live radio and glass. Courtesy: the artist; New Museum, New York; gb agency, Paris; ZERO..., Milan. Photo: Luis Antonio Ruiz / Matte Projects

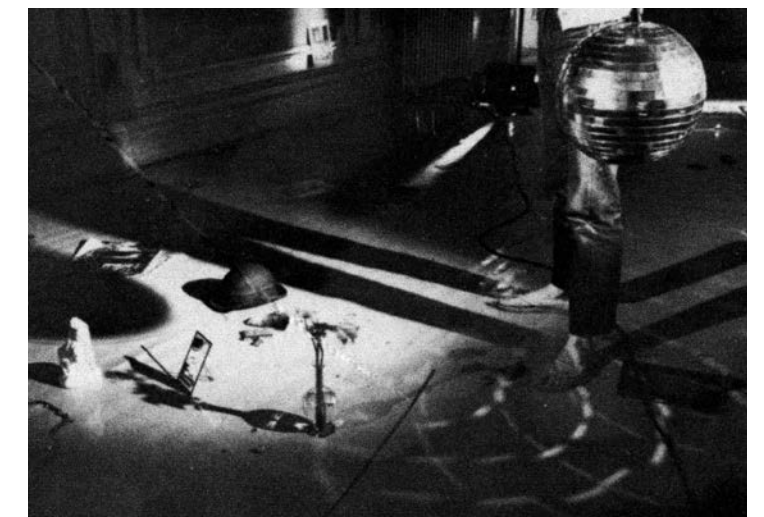
made of. In her own words: “Form and formal relations are important because they mean something; their meaning grows out of our experiences... of a particular scale in relationship to the world as we find it and make it.”¹⁴ What is staged is an encounter with space, wherein that inertia of Bowles’s objects is enlivened by imagining scenarios that Stockholder may be proposing. To keep a thread going, her works are fictions filled with gaps—art as *Mad Lib!*—that ask to be filled. This is not through words, although the titles certainly help, but by one shape leading to another only to end up somewhere unexpected. Granted, much of this happens in the studio; an idea appears in a certain shape, only to morph under the potential of associations, which arise in the process. The colors and lines, materials and objects, have to click, which adds to their relational quality. (Is not that the case in all love affairs?) In “Kissing the Wall”, a series continuously rehashed from 1988 to 2003, there is also the anticipatory quality of *mise-en-scène* wherein the exact “romance” these things are having is unclear. To be permissive, they perform a *pas de deux* not unlike Spooner’s dancers, the tabletop and the wall still hashing out their relationships even as they become PDA.

The beauty of all of this, such as that of the insouciant slant of the stage, lies in its ability to focus on the surfaces, as Lyotard writes, that make the mind “incapable of anticipating the meaning.”¹⁵ Without a directive that tells you to look at a thing in a particular way, the artwork’s “excesses” overflow its theoretical prescriptions, and make interpretation a question of affect. It puts into question what type of knowledge a pairing like Jessica Stockholder and Lutz Bacher might bring about outside of historical or cultural discourse. What is a kiss to a soccer field? Or better yet, what is a kiss *in* a hybridized field? None of this disavows theory (no use doing away with semantics altogether) but steps outside of its arsenal. As Simon O’Sullivan points out, these practices posit an understanding that one can “define affect as the effect another body, for example an art object.”¹⁶ Though there can necessarily be no answer, subjectivity is addressed with due diligence, put on display, and rehearsed.

Bacher, Spooner, and Stockholder also do so with a giddiness that doesn’t take itself too seriously, the uptightness of contemporary art released in favor of more exciting and productive tensions.

I am tempted to argue that it comes from positioning oneself on the sidelines, like Chloë Sevigny and her friends in *The Last Days of Disco* (1998): one can indulge in the excitement of being in an unexpected milieu without participating in its common prescriptions. Jessica Stockholder may have summed it up best: “My work often arrives in the world like an idea arrives in your mind. You don’t quite know where it came from or when it got put together, nevertheless, it’s possible to take it apart and see that it has an internal logic. I’m trying to get closer to thinking processes as they exist before the idea is fully formed.”¹⁷

Her point is loud and clear: an idea need not take precedent for an artwork to have an affective body. Standing in Bacher’s court, peering into Stockholder’s intimate moments, or walking into Spooner’s glass menagerie all suggest that it is the work’s scale and presence in relationship to your own that creates its affect. The court stretches to obscure lengths, the bright lights of the enclosure confuse day for night. “Information” or “meaning,” as you prefer, is teased from a formal structure. Surely a kiss signifies something, just as taking from rugby will gauge a cultural context. Nevertheless, looking through formal qualities and how they are arranged poses a distance where the “source” remains elusive and out of focus. Given this distance, the artwork knows something we do not. It removes itself from reality, simplifies, and flattens, only to be placed on a stage where it finds a recourse to attention, affect, and ideas outside of the textual. (Simon O’Sullivan: “So much for writing.”)¹⁸



Above, top and bottom - Marc Camille Chaimovitz, *Celebration? Realife*, 1972, *Inaugural Show: 3 Life Situations* installation views at Gallery House, London, March 29 – April 15, 1972. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London

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14 Jessica Stockholder and Klaus Ottman, conversation, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, <http://www.jca-online.com/stockholder.html>.

15 Jean-François Lyotard, “Critical Reflections,” *Artforum*, April 1991.

16 Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect,” 126.

17 Jessica Stockholder and Klaus Ottman, conversation.

18 Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect,” 127.