

Edited by Stephanie Buhmann

**LOS ANGELES
STUDIO
CONVERSATIONS**

SIXTEEN WOMEN TALK ABOUT ART

**THE
GREENBOX**



SHANA LUTKER

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NEAR ATWATER VILLAGE

IN ADDITION TO YOUR ARTWORK, YOU ALSO RUN AN ART JOURNAL IN LOS ANGELES CALLED X-TRA.

Yes. It's a contemporary art quarterly founded in 1997. X-TRA is collectively edited by a group of artists and writers (including me), but I also serve as the Executive Director of the non-profit that publishes it, overseeing the public programming and the business side of things. X-TRA is very artist-driven – a lot of the writing is by artists – and each issue contains reviews, artists' projects historical essays, and conversations.

X-TRA IS CERTAINLY A FANTASTIC RESOURCE FOR ARTISTS OR ANYONE INTERESTED IN THE ARTS. WAS THE ORIGINAL IDEA BEHIND THIS PUBLICATION TO FILL A VOID IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART CONVERSATION ON THE WEST COAST?

I wasn't there when it all started, but, yes: The group that founded X-TRA wanted to empower the artists and writers of their growing art community, with an aim to contribute to and diversify the criticism coming out of Los Angeles. And it is important that it was (and is) run by a collective, there isn't one

person setting the agenda. That's where the journal came from and it continues in that way. It's now the longest running art journal in Los Angeles.

DO YOU FIND THAT YOUR WORK WITH X-TRA HAS IMPACTED YOUR STUDIO PRACTICE AS WELL? HAS WRITING, AS WELL AS THE REGULAR CONTEMPLATION AND EDITING OF TEXTS INFLUENCED YOUR WORK IN ANY PARTICULAR WAY?

My work at X-TRA is a good balance to my studio practice. What attracted me to Los Angeles was the openness of the art community and the fact that different generations intermingled. X-TRA was a way to continue that multi-generational conversation after graduate school. The artists that started the journal are still involved and a big part of what I do now is to organize free public programs, bringing people together in dialogue. I'm sure there are ways that all of this feeds into the studio, but more generally, I feel strongly that this kind of work is a big part of being an artist; to be in dialogue with the community. Some people fulfill that through teaching. I do it through X-TRA.

SEVERAL OF YOUR WORKS HAVE INCLUDED ASPECTS OF PERFORMANCE AND YOU HAVE WORKED WITH ACTORS AS WELL. PERHAPS, YOU HAVE SOUGHT AN ACTIVE DIALOGUE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE.

Yes. I want viewers to be active, their brains whirring. With time-based performance, there is an arc to this engagement: from beginning, to end. Moreover, the feedback is immediate. If the audience laughs, you hear them (and they hear each other). Sculpture is slow, simmering, lying in wait for the viewer. The performances are more demonstrative on my part as well. Language is employed directly, not associatively. I impart actual information, details (sometimes even "facts"), but I do this without drawing conclusions or making judgments. I am more of a reporter than a pundit.

YOU RECENTLY HAD A SHOW AT SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES

PROJECTS [A.K.A. PUBLIC OPINION, NOVEMBER 18, 2017 – JANUARY 6, 2018]. DO YOU PREFER WORKING TOWARDS AN EXHIBITION OR DO YOU RATHER SEE THINGS NATURALLY DEVELOP IN THE STUDIO UNTIL A BODY OF WORK BEGINS TO CRYSTALLIZE?

For better or worse, I am very deadline driven. Once an exhibition is assigned a deadline and a space, everything comes together. Before that, I work more abstractly: make rough sketches, read, conduct material tests, make mockups. Until I know where the work will be exhibited, I have a hard time finishing anything. It's not exactly that my work is "site-specific," but I address spaces very specifically. The space has so much influence on a viewer's experience and interpretation.

DO YOU THINK ABOUT CURATING THE MOVEMENTS OF YOUR AUDIENCE IN THE SENSE THAT YOU ENVISION THE VIEWER WALKING THROUGH YOUR EXHIBITION AND ENCOUNTERING YOUR WORKS IN A CERTAIN WAY, FOR EXAMPLE?

Yes, I think about how people will enter and move through the space, how the sculptures address them. In a space that I know well, like the gallery in L.A. where I've done a number of shows, I aim to address the way visitors move through the galleries, disrupting expectations. For example, with "a.k.a. Public Opinion", the work was presented on a long 48-foot plinth diagonally bisecting the main gallery. One entered the gallery from the front door and could only access one side of the room, leading into the second gallery. From the second gallery, the visitor could reach the back half of the first gallery through another door. Viewers who re-entered the installation from the second gallery then felt that they were "behind" the plinth and on display for those just entering, almost as if a part of the work.

IS IT MORE COMFORTABLE TO USE A SPACE THAT YOU KNOW WELL OR IS IT MORE INSPIRING TO USE A SPACE YOU'VE NEVER WORKED WITH BEFORE?

It's definitely more comfortable to be in a familiar space, but that's not necessarily a good thing. The discomfort of a new space can be healthy. I'll notice details of the space, such as a window placed off-center, and then I might use the installation to draw attention to it. I don't want to overemphasize this element of site-responsiveness, because the things I make are autonomous, and can be installed in different sites. But when works are re-installed, I tend to reconfigure them in consideration of the new space. The long plinth, for example, would not necessarily have the same dimensions or placement in a new museum; the scale or shape would need to shift to fit in the space, to have the same kind of effect.

CONSIDERING THIS, HOW MUCH ROOM IS THERE FOR SPONTANEOUS DECISION-MAKING? EVEN IF YOU KNOW A SPACE VERY WELL AND CONCEIVE OF AN EXHIBITION FOR EXACTLY THAT ENVIRONMENT, YOU DO NOT GET TO EXPERIENCE THE WORKS IN IT UNTIL THE DAY OF THEIR DELIVERY. DO YOU STILL ALLOW YOURSELF TO MAKE DRASTIC DECISIONS AT THIS POINT OR DO YOU FOLLOW YOUR PREPARED PLANS?

I generally come to install with a detailed exhibition plan, and then try out a few different possibilities. I'd say 95% of the time, the installation ends up being very close to the first plan.

AT VIELMETTER, THE SECOND GALLERY FEATURED A SELECTION OF NINE FREESTANDING STAINLESS STEEL PIECES THAT WERE ARRANGED IN A GRID. I WOULD DESCRIBE THEM AS SILHOUETTED VESSELS.

Yes. These sculptures were drawn from the 1923 Charlie Chaplin film, *A Woman of Paris*. Each of the shapes were taken from vessels found in the backgrounds, from of the set. I watched the film many times. Each time a vase or bottle appeared on the screen, I would take a screenshot. I then made drawings from these stills, working the shapes over and over again until they started gaining more anthropomorphic characteristics.

EVEN THOUGH THESE SCULPTURES ARE MADE OF STAINLESS STEEL, THEIR INHERENT REFLECTIVE QUALITY PROVIDES THEM WITH A FALSE SENSE OF TRANSLUCENCE AS WELL. AS A RESULT, THEY APPEAR LIGHT.

Yes, the steel is mirror-polished, reflecting the environment. In the gallery with white walls, parts of them almost disappear. It was an amazing effect that wasn't 100% anticipated.

WAS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU THAT THE AUDIENCE KNEW WHERE THE SHAPES CAME FROM? DID YOU REFERENCE THE SOURCE MATERIAL ANYWHERE?

While I don't think the viewer needs the source information to "get" the work, I want those who want to know more to find it. In this case, the titles cue the viewer: each work is called, "A Woman of Paris (xx:xx)", with the time code of the moment it appeared in the film. The objects are rather unimportant in the context of the film, but have now stepped out and come into their own.

NOT ONLY HAVE THEY COME INTO THEIR OWN, BUT THEY HAVE TAKEN ON AN ICONIC PRESENCE AS WELL. YOU HAVE GIVEN THEM A PODIUM AND LIFTED THEM UP ON A PEDESTAL.

They came out of the shadows and it's their time to shine. Ha. This ties in to the plot of the film as well, I suppose. The film became part of my research because of one scene described by a Russian critic in a take-down of Surrealism. But I became entranced by the whole film, largely because of the way it depicted the culture of the time, the opulence contrasted with poverty, the characters' self-awareness.

WERE MOST OF THE VESSELS YOU FOCUSED ON PART OF THE DECOR IN THE WEALTHIER HOMES?

It's a mix of the fancy restaurant, the woman's opulent apartment, the bachelor's mansion, the poor artist's home. The vessels appear in all of the domestic spaces, and are quite prominent in the restaurant scenes too.

TO ME, THEY ALSO SERVE AS ANCHORS. THEY EMBODY A SENSE OF CONTINUITY AND CONSISTENCY. THEY ARE BYSTANDERS TO THE ACTION.

Yes, exactly. I often think about objects as being witnesses to events. In this case, the vessels were witnesses to the rather dramatic story. Perhaps they were affected by this, changed.

THE LARGE INSTALLATION THAT WAS SHOWN IN THE FIRST GALLERY, AFTER WHICH THE EXHIBITION WAS NAMED, ALSO MANIFESTED AS A COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS.

Yes. I often show groups of individual works clustered together. Sometimes the objects are very similar to each other, repetition with difference. As a result, it becomes difficult afterwards to extract a singular piece as most important. They rely on each other. The work in the main gallery, “a.k.a. Public Opinion”, is comprised of 319 leather gloves and dedicated to working artists in Los Angeles. Each one is stamped with the initials of an artist and reflects the particular shape of that artist’s hand. I collected artist’s tracings of their hands and from those, I made the pattern for each glove. I suppose part of my strategy is to undermine the certainty of the singular whole. A collection of objects welcomes multiplicity. Each one is unique, but they are encountered together.

WERE THESE ARTISTS THAT YOU KNEW PERSONALLY AND HAD A RAPPORT WITH, OR DID YOU COLD-CALL PEOPLE?

I did both. I sent out an email asking artists to send me tracings of their hands to over 1,000 people and posted on Facebook and Instagram. The request was to “working artists in L.A.” I didn’t question anybody who sent me a drawing, whether they were an artist or not, because frankly that’s not my decision. I know many of the artists in the group, but not all. And there’s a range from well-known artists, such as John Baldessari or Catherine Opie, to young art school students. This is an ongoing work, or at least it has the implication of that. It’s not meant to be conclusive or

assign value to those who are in the group – it was an open call, and it remains open, to be continued. And each participant is honored in the same way, following the same process of translating the drawing into glove. The gloves were made in different colors of leather, and the colors were randomly chosen.

IN OTHER WORDS, THERE’S NO HIDDEN COLOR CODE THAT INDICATES AGE OR GENDER FOR EXAMPLE.

Correct, and artists were not able to request the color. It was assigned by chance, a Surrealist game of sorts.

STILL, THE OVERALL PALETTE APPEARS SOMEWHAT RESTRICTED.

Yes, in part the palette probably reflects my taste, and in part what was available – there are not that many colors of lamb-skin available at the leather distributor. I’m often very specific about palette, but in this case I had to give up some control. The distribution of color in the grid was generated by chance when the sewer selected the leather for each glove.

DO YOU CONSIDER THIS WORK A GROUP PORTRAIT?

Yes, definitely. I had an idea for making a sculpture comprised of a giant pile of gloves for years. It is part of the Surrealist fistfight series, *Le “NEW” Monocle: The History of the Fistfights of the Surrealists*, that I started about six years ago. I sketched out a version of this piece for a proposal in 2014. However, what became the heart of this work – the dedication of each glove to an artist, using their hand as the pattern – came to be in late 2016 after the presidential election. I was shattered, and confused about the role of artists in politics and society. I felt like I needed to reach out to people and make connections. I made the gloves as an offering of community, a symbol of our willingness to stand up for ourselves, to raise our hands. But embedded within is the recognition of the futility and inadequacy of this gesture – the gloves are clownish and somewhat silly.

TO ME, THERE IS ALSO SOMETHING TENDER ABOUT THIS WORK, WHICH IN PART IS DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE GLOVES OFFER A

FORM OF PROTECTION FOR EACH ARTIST'S HAND, A MOST CRUCIAL TOOL IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

Yes, and we need this protection now more than ever! Some of the tenderness is also in their unique shapes: the gloves are made in the simplest way possible, using the artist's line from their hand tracing. They more closely resemble drawings than actual gloves. Each one is just two pieces of leather sewn together, and the scale of the gloves was increased to 150%. Each artist's hand was blown up to be bigger than life.

IN THAT, THEY RESEMBLE THE VESSELS IN THE EXHIBITION. YOU ARE PROVIDING THEM WITH AN ICONIC QUALITY. YOU BRIEFLY ADDRESSED YOUR SURREALIST FISTFIGHT SERIES, WHOSE ORIGINS DATE BACK TO 2012 WHEN YOU WERE A RESIDENT AT THE CITÉ INTERNATIONALE DES ARTS IN PARIS.

Yes. Most of my work, since 2012, belongs to that series. In 2012, I was struggling with what do to next. It became a much bigger existential problem that might be part of my artistic process. I began reading a biography of André Breton and found myself making all kinds of notes, putting post-its on every page. I suppose I found some solace in Breton's dedication to Surrealism, his clarity. After finishing the book, I looked back at all my notes. What stood out to me were these fistfights; I had marked eight fistfights, covered in the newspaper at the time (not your average bar brawls). The fights distilled something about the Surrealist movement, the fight to define the meaning of the word Surrealism. They were fights about language, fights about ideas. At the moment someone lashes out – when a fist hits another person's face – there is a unity of the mind and body: ideas exceed the mind and overflow into the body. That is sort of beautiful, but also, with a little distance, we know that fistfights are foolish, childish, macho.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAVE SOME ADMIRATION FOR THE POETIC MOTIVATION FOR THE FIGHTS, BUT NOT FOR THE FORM THESE DISPUTES ENDED UP TAKING.

Yes. Or rather, I simultaneously have both admiration and disdain for the motivation and the form. Surrealism itself is an exploration of how to express or access the unconscious, in language and object. Inextricable from this task is its inherent failure, the impossibility of seamlessly translating the unconscious into language – so much is lost. In the case of the Surrealists, the fistfights are physical expressions spurred by artistic ideas. The fistfight is also an excess, the idea and the passion exceed or supplant language. Another facet of the fistfight that interests me is its narrativization: there is never only one version of a fistfight. **WHILE YOU MIGHT ARGUE THAT THERE IS AN IDEAL PERSPECTIVE FOR VIEWING A PAINTING, FRONTAL AND FROM A CERTAIN DISTANCE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE SAME DOES NOT APPLY TO SCULPTURE, INSTALLATION OR PERFORMANCE. THE LATTER NECESSITATE THE CONSIDERATION OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES BOTH DURING THE CREATIVE AND SUBSEQUENT VIEWING PROCESS.**

Yes, exactly, the consideration and acknowledgment of multiple viewpoints is central to sculpture. I love when there's a little surprise waiting on the other side of an object, an unexpected perspective. Many of my works incorporate mirrored surfaces or backdrops. It's almost too obvious, but I like to think it works: the viewer sees herself looking at the work, and each view is unique. Or, for example, with the long plinth of "a.k.a. Public Opinion", the viewer is positioned either in front of or in the back of the sculpture, activating and heightening the viewer's awareness of their position in relation to looking, and reading the work. I am also interested in the discomfort or surprise of seeing your own reflection in the work, and the way the self-image implicates the viewer – as if the work is saying: "I see you, you are a part of me." **YOU ONCE SAID THAT THE CORNERSTONES OF YOUR WORK ARE DREAMS AND NEWSPAPERS. DOES THAT STILL APPLY?**

Yes, I think so. What I love most and is most anxiety-producing about newspapers is their impending daily arrival: there's no

stopping the news. And whatever is in the paper is true – on that day. Tomorrow, the story might change, evolve, be retold. Think back to the 9/11: the event itself changed over those first days. It was re-shaped as reporters gained more information and perspective. It's a bit different now, as stories break on the internet, and are constantly updated. But in print, the story is fixed, for 24-hours at least. Dreams share a lot with newspapers: they also get delivered each morning. Both are ephemeral, here today and gone tomorrow. The dream is more slippery, never fixed... and never culpable.

THOUGH WE CAN EDIT DREAMS WHILE RETELLING THEM TO SOMEONE, WE DO NOT HAVE ANY EDITORIAL CONTROL OVER THEM AS THEY OCCUR. WE CANNOT CONSCIOUSLY CONTROL THE PLOT LINE OR IMAGES WITHIN THEM. AS A RESULT, ONE CAN ARGUE THAT DREAMS ARE MORE REAL THAN STORIES, WHICH WE CAN CONSCIOUSLY SHAPE.

Exactly. I'd say the Surrealists certainly thought so.

IN A WAY, YOUR SURREALIST FISTFIGHTS SERIES ALSO RESEMBLES THE RETELLING OF AN EPIC DREAM, WHICH YOU THEN ORGANIZE INTO CHAPTERS.

Yes, I suppose all of the work retains a dream-like quality. Each chapter is centered on one of the fistfights, and the works grow out of the story and research. I investigate each fight, finding all the memoirs and newspaper accounts of the events, tracing the threads of each component to give political and social context. I visited and documented all the sites of the fights, and became quite fixated on the objects that were in the room when the fights happened – how might these witnesses been affected? After the history (or histories) are compiled, I can let my mind wander. Perhaps a dinner plate might bend like a drooping Dali clock, a glove might take the shape of the artist's hand who wears it, or a vase's silhouette might slowly transform into a human visage. The inspiration for the artists' leather gloves, for example,

is rooted in a fight between André Breton and that Russian critic, Ilya Ehrenburg, who wrote a slanderous piece about the Surrealists. (He used a scene from Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* to describe the Surrealists, which is how I landed on that film.) Breton confronted Ehrenburg on the street a year later, quoting back the dismissive phrases used to describe the Surrealists. And with each repeated insult, Breton supposedly slapped the Russian across the face with his glove. In this way, the glove became my weapon against criticism, a protective talisman for the artist's ideas.

THAT LITERARY ASPECT OF YOUR WORK FASCINATED ME. IT IS AS IF YOU WERE TAKING LOOSE THREADS AND WERE GIVING THEM THE STRUCTURAL ELEMENT OF A BOOK. IN ADDITION, YOU'RE WRITING ESSAYS, REFLECTING YOUR RESEARCH IN A WRITTEN TEXT.

Language itself is at the core of my work, and from that, storytelling. I sometimes think of the sculptures as words in a sentence. My sculptural shapes are often based on letterforms, and occasionally, letters dissolve into shapes. I have a series for which I made a font out of simple shapes, they were at once letters squares or circles. This collapse or overlay of language and object is always present. With "a.k.a. Public Opinion", the long grid of gloves reads like a scroll or a hieroglyphic tablet. And then there's the actual "real" writing: the chapter essays that guide the work. I am working on eight chapters in total. The exhibition we've been discussing marked chapter five. There are three remaining.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR WORK SERVES AS A MEANS TO ESTABLISH A PERSONAL VOCABULARY? ARE THERE CERTAIN VISUAL ELEMENTS FOR EXAMPLE THAT YOU WILL REUSE IN DIFFERENT INSTALLATIONS OR IS THERE PERHAPS A PRIVATE SYMBOLISM THAT IS DEVELOPING?

Maybe at some point, I will look back and answer yes to that question. As of now, I am not certain. Occasionally I am

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surprised by some repetition of an object or shape. For example, when I was working on the gloves, I was sorting through my archives, and I found many images of gloves and hands that I had collected over the years. I realized I'd been working on the gloves for much longer than I was conscious of.

IS THERE A PARTICULAR PROJECT THAT KEEPS LINGERING IN YOUR MIND, PERHAPS SOMETHING AMBITIOUS DUE TO ITS PARTICULAR SCALE OR THE SPACE WHERE IT SHOULD BE SHOWN?

I do hope to show the eight chapters of this series together and to publish the book. Sometime in the not-too-distant future. Three chapters were shown together at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2015. But it's my dream to present them all together.