

CANCELLATIONS

GHISLAINE LEUNG AND NOAH BARKER
IN CONVERSATION



London based artist and writer Ghislaine Leung speaks with Noah Barker about her recent works, material parity, constitutional critique, and her upcoming exhibition at Chisenhale, London.

NOAH BARKER

So we're at a strange chess table in a modernist park above Houston in Manhattan. Maybe we can start with play? There's a line in one of your text works, *_190813*, from 2015, "Playing in order to be seen to be playing. You play so well it seems exactly like playing to *you*."

GHISLAINE LEUNG

Sure, there's a general notion of play in relation to artifice or movement that, for me, historically relates to suspension, a cancelling out and creating a void or hole. I've written a lot on these kind of transitional moments, on falling, being in two states and in none. The quote you reference is excerpted from a longer text, *Approximations* included in the new collection of my writing *Partners* (2018). It came out of these transcription exercises I had been doing which produce this very literal form of writing, a sheer, weird mass of text. And a lot of my practice starts with this kind of material hoarding, trying not to prejudge. It's a way of removing of my own defensive bases for verification, my own self-policing, to work with more material parity.

NB

I pick up on suspension as a condition, perhaps it's parallel to play or its meta-genre. And in mind I have two notions: prevention and levitation. These seem to coincide in the fall, or rather a just-before moment.

GL

Yes, prior to the ground, through the hole. The relationship between dissonance and consonance is quite important for me. To make a hole in something there has to be some material for that hole to be made in, which is a subtractive mode, it's contingent. So in my work there is the hoarding and then there is the editing, the removals. I love what the writer Mary Robison said about being a subtractionist not a minimalist.¹ Minimalism invokes precision, a certain economy, whereas subtractionism removes, it leaves these dirty looming tears. It's editorially analogous to moving image.

Above - *155 : 230 / 135*, 2018, *Group Show* installation view at Gaudel de Stampa, Paris, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York
Opposite, top - *58 : 96 / 49*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York
Opposite, bottom - *Partners Book Launch* installation view at Cell Project Space, London, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York



NB
If you're creating these holes and their circumstances or material, then the reception seems to be what is held in suspension. But the scene of this "you", the reader, losing track of what is and is not one activity or its representation is very interesting. It recalls the desire for something like a reflexive framework, I'm thinking of a film in a film or the play in play, essentially a modernist apparatus to build in critical distance.

GL
I feel that we can never get far enough away to attain critical distance. I'm not sure that mode of reflection is what is needed right now, sometimes it feels like the equivalent of holding a mirror to a narcissist. I'm more interested in what it is to be too close to see something. Much of the efficacy of systemic forms of hierarchy is held in certain assumed and enacted structural neutralities, insidious and hidden in plain sight; from neoliberal values to the banalities of content provision. I'm interested in working with these strange, default materials that claim to be neutral and these removals that are in fact highly contingent; with how they are constituted and in turn constitute. I've been rolling the phrase constitutional critique around in my mouth for a few years now. I mean constitutional in terms of both the legislative and bodily, how these structures are written and embodied. And I mean critique in an immanent sense, my doubt and own position inclusive. Maybe that is where suspension comes in, and loss too, in terms of a critique it's less reflective than diffractive, diffraction implying a bend from the singular to expanded.

NB
I take this constitutional rather than institutional directive to manifest in ways whereby aesthetic decisions aren't made to illuminate institutional limitations but to express legislative standards. I'm thinking of your recent work *58: 96 / 49* (2018) that features a children's playhouse purchased in the place or city of the exhibition and tape on the walls marking the lowest legal ceiling height allowed by that municipality.



1. Mary Robison by Maureen Murray, BOMB, Oct 2001. See: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mary-robison/>



Above, top, from left to right - *Pictures*, 2017; *Push to Shove*, 2017. *The Moves* installation view at Cell Project Space, London, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York
Above, bottom - *Push to Shove* (detail), 2017, *The Moves* installation view at Cell Project Space, London, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York
Opposite, top - *Public Sculpture*, 2018, *Local Studies* installation view at Reading International, Reading, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York
Opposite, bottom - John Knight, *One Inch to a Foot*, 1971. Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

GL Yes, exactly. I'm always trying to work across different scales and seeing what happens if you go from 1 to 10 to X/Y. So the playhouse is one scale, a child scale, and then the mandatory, regulated, governmental type of scale for the domestic space, that's another, and then the other element is the gallery itself, the hanging height, which is itself a presumption of bodily height. So both the dimensions and title are variable *155 : 230 / 109* (2018), *58 : 96 / 49* (2018); not only do the specific materials and measurements change, but also the unit of measurement, from centimetres to inches. This was a way to expand binaries of scale, where multiple scales touch both the numerical and the social. And I feel personally invested in that and, in non-singular identities. I love this kind of Jef Geysian materialist short circuit, it relates back to the holes I guess. *Push to Shove* (2017) plays with precisely that, it operates a number of scales which are partially obscured: physically it is a model for and of nothing. Whereas with *Pictures* (2017) the moment you enter that black rubber space you are literally in the picture, and too close to see it. So it's far less about making visible than rendering palpable.

NB There's a simple correlation between the *155 : 230 / 109* (2018), *58 : 96 / 49* (2018) and *Public Sculpture* (2018), the project you engaged in with the Reading Toy Library for your exhibition *Local Studies* at Reading International. There was this maquette-ized version of our social and consumptive spheres. The library circulates toy versions of name-brand vacuums and laundry machines for children. We've already shifted to a more philosophical and historical notion of play, but certainly these toys blur the line of leisure and work and consumption at an early age.

GL For sure, there are these manufacturers that specialize in replica brand utility goods, Casdon and Theo Klein. They make toys with this double brand status. Though I'm less interested in children playing at working than fetishes around roles and standards, efficacies and productivities. With *Local Studies* I wanted to work with the existing library materials to fuse something like the reversible in Michael Asher's work and the permanence in John Knight's.²



Reversibility has a temporality that reverts back, where as permanence is held via the contractual collection where rights are established. So for *Public Sculpture* (2018), I introduced duplicates of various Toy Library items to increase their collection, which is currently being ravaged by privatization, and these were shown in the Reference Library, with their standard Toy Library large laminated paper and rubber-band tags, next to where they keep all the microfilm and plays. Once accessioned to the library these objects have two sets of rights, they can be individually loaned for children and collectively loaned for exhibition. And when they are loaned for exhibition there is then a fee that then goes again to the library. I wanted a circulation; reversible-permanent-reversible-permanent-reversible. I like to think of it like a kind of perverse engineering—thinking here on Klossowski's *The Living Currency*³—a perverting rather than inverting or reverting the terms of opposition, so it isn't so much about a linear telos of proprietary provenance.

NB

It reminds me of a Weiner statement: "TAKEN FROM HERE TO WHERE IT CAME FROM AND TAKEN TO A PLACE AND USED IN SUCH A MANNER THAT IT CAN ONLY REMAIN AS A REPRESENTATION OF WHAT IT WAS WHERE IT CAME FROM." It's Smithsonesque. Weiner resorted to language as a mode of preservation, negating the temporality of materials. In this case the permanence of the language is being contrasted with the concept of the mutability of an object or material from itself to a sign, but also the phrase is quite open. Your framework is more complex though, I can't imagine the work, whether the contract or the additional toys circulating as the collection to homes or exhibitions ever constituting a single representational status.

GL

Totally. It's like Barthes's pleasure of the text in that it circulates. This is writing's eroticism. It is Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic, the Erotic as Power*.⁴ I'm interested in writing work but not necessarily my work being writing. Though Hanne Darboven's writing crushes me. I want to come closer to a score or an informal system of music. I'm a big fan of Lee Lozano's pieces in that sense,

2. John Knight in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, "On Place: John Knight," *Mousse* 59, 2017.
3. Pierre Klossowski, *La Monnaie Vivante*, 1970, trans. Daniel W. Smith, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Also an extracted translation by Reena Spaulings here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150530041154/http://www.theclaudiu-sapp.com/2-klossowski.html>.
4. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic. The Erotic as Power," 1978. Out & Out Pamphlet no. 3, also published as a chapter in *Sister Outsider*, 1984, The Crossing Press.



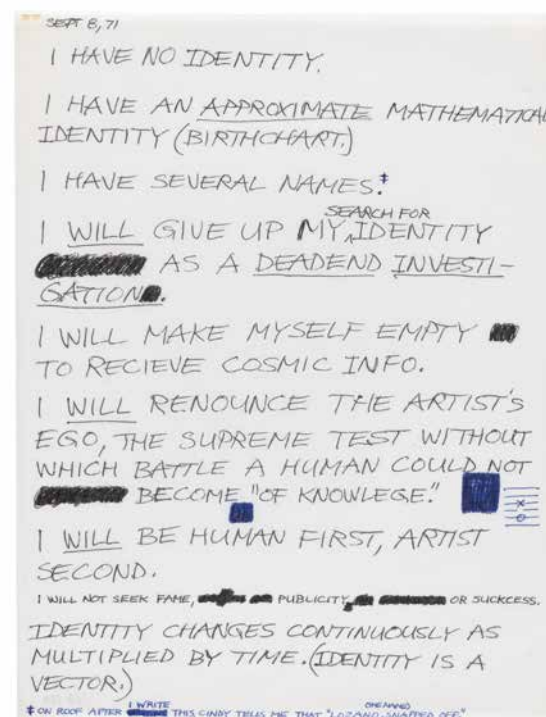
her rigorous dialling up of practice, a practice lived not consolidated. For instance I love this line from her journal, Sept 8 1971: "IDENTITY CHANGES CONTINUOUSLY AS MULTIPLIED BY TIME. (IDENTITY IS A VECTOR)". *Shrooms* (2016) comes out of that, context is half the work and so on; as a work it is contingent not site specific. It is, literally: Every visible unused socket within an exhibition to be filled with a mushroom nightlight and plug adapter. I'm not interested in making a work about vulnerability as much as the work being vulnerable, and I would include my own labour in that.

NB This premise of context being half the work we've spoken about before and I know from you that it comes from the Artist Placement Group. Barbara Steveni made it a principle of the group's organization.

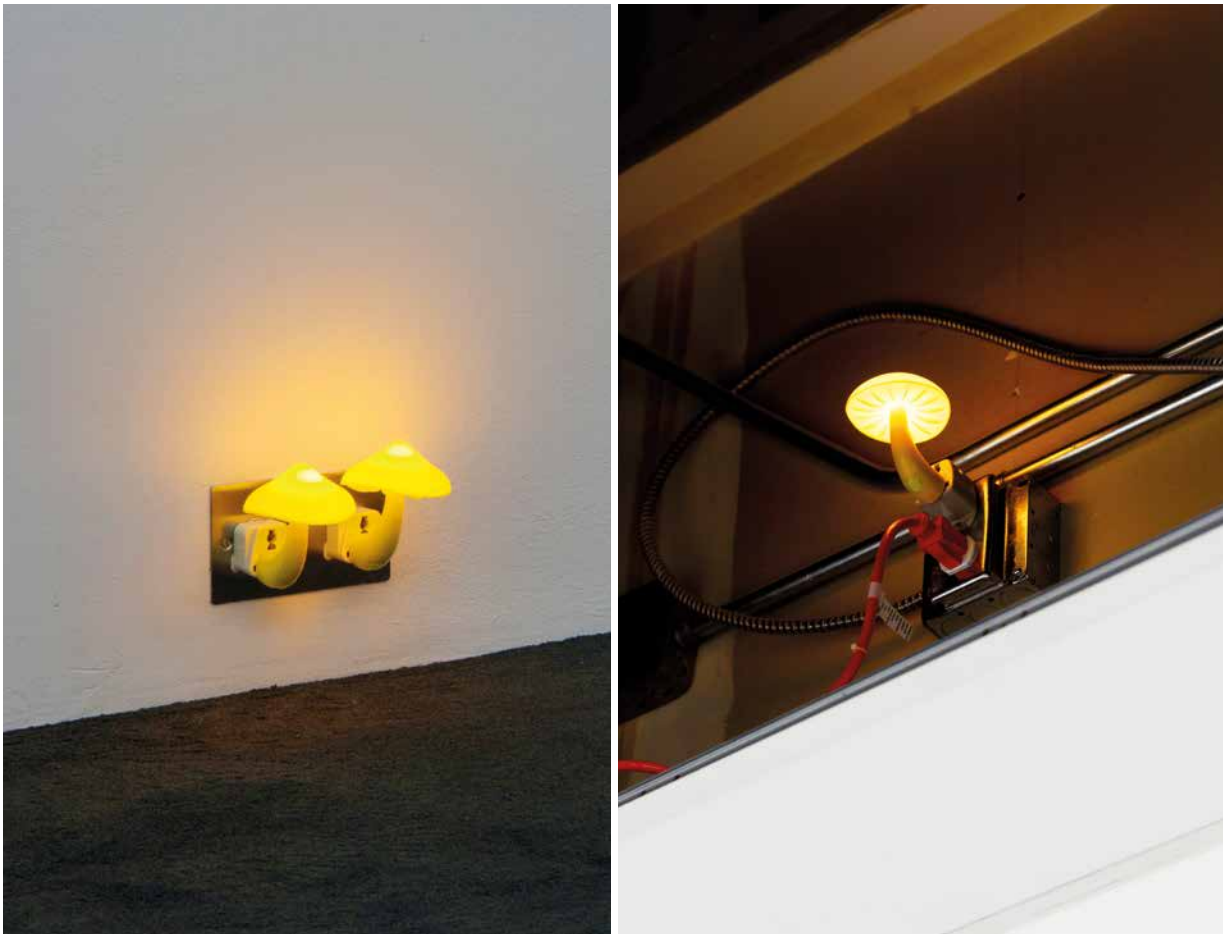
GL It is something I come back to a lot, because I come out of these intergenerational sets of questions that, for me, in terms of working with context and industry, are associated with APG and, in terms of production and distribution, are associated with the history of the London Film-makers' Co-op and Structural/Materialist Film.⁵ Maybe of note here, both are industrially focused, as opposed to institutionally aligned modes of critique, and this is something I am thinking about a lot at the moment, the contemporary place and historical deficit of support for forms of institutional critique in the UK. So those critical concerns with an egalitarian approach to materials, contingency, our contingency as artists, concerns with agency that relate to organisational models, are very present in how I work. It's a concern with how the prioritisation of verifiable efficacy rolls into accumulatory logics, and can slip from liberal to neoliberal.

NB And at Chisenhale in London next year, what kind of structures are you thinking of working with, how do you plan to maintain the material parity that we began with?

GL Yes, I'm excited about this and about how to take that notion of material parity into the exhibition structure, in terms of the program and architecture, but most importantly by playing with how I work.



5. The London Film-makers' Co-op, or LFMC, was a British production and distribution cooperative for artists' moving image founded in 1966. It ceased to exist in 1999 when it merged with London Video Arts to form LUX, London. Peter Gidal's "Theory and Definition of Structural/ Materialist Film," *Structural Film Anthology*, Published by the BFI in 1976. See: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/theory_and_definition\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/theory_and_definition(1).html). Leung ran a programme Regrouping at LUX, London in 2017. See: <https://lux.org.uk/event/regrouping>.



So at the moment I am at the stage of hoarding materials to work with, inclusive of the existing architectural materials of the space and structure of the exhibition program. And I'm just starting to enter the editorial work, which is the area I really want to push in this commission. So I'm beginning to write a set of scores I will work through, with Chisenhale, as a way of parsing these materials. Some of these scores are very structural and literal and involve spatial alterations but others are much more personal ways I want to try to work, and to try to work with the organisation itself. What is important in the score, and this notion of a constitutional critique I mentioned, is this specific contingency. So editorially there is a subtractive structuring in how I work, but also in what elements of the work will be. For instance, I was really interested in working with active cancelling in sound as a really physical, bodily form of this, so working through that is the basis for one of the scores. I'll be making a basic edit of the sound materials and then working with EMPAC, The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center in Troy, New York on a spatial edit of sound elements in the autumn. What is interesting is what happens when you take active cancelling technology out of a closed system, headphones are where it standardly used, and bring it onto speakers. And so this isn't going to function correctly at all, but, materially, this is precisely what I want work through in the project; with what happens when you move out from an effective, individual, closed binary system to a more non-productive, bodily, common space. It won't so much cancel as cancel and clash, to move around.

Above, left - *Shrooms*, 2016, *The Moves* installation view at Cell Project Space, London, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York

Above, right - *Shrooms*, 2016, *A Few Open Systems* installation view at And Now, Dallas, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York

Opposite, top, from left to right - *Name / Vectors / Lovers Writes / Sticks / Ours and Mine*, 2016; *Shrooms*, 2016; *In the Pudding*, 2016. *The Moves* installation view at Cell Project Space, London, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York

Opposite, bottom - Lee Lozano, *No title*, 1971. © The Estate of Lee Lozano. Courtesy: the Estate and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Barbora Gerny

Artist and writer **Ghislaine Leung** lives and works in London and Brussels. Recent solo projects include *Local Studies* at Reading International, Reading, *The Moves* at Cell Project Space, London, and *078746844* at WIELS, Brussels; group projects include *YOUR WORDS IN MY MOUTH | MY VOICE ON YOUR TONGUE* at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart and *Hollis & Money* at ICA London. From 2017 to 2019 she will be in long-term collaboration with Netwerk Aalst on her project *VIOLETS*. Leung's collection of writings *Partners* is published by Cell Project Space, and she will be in residence at Triangle Marseille in August 2018. Her solo commission for Chisenhale Gallery opens in 2019.

Noah Barker lives in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *A room like any other* at Air de Paris, Paris, and *Redevelopment of a Soundtrack* at Eclair, Berlin. In 2017 he rereleased *Soundtrack for Development* on Berlin-based label ABCDLP, originally commissioned for Okayama Art Summit. Recent curatorial projects include *A Few Open Systems* at AndNow, Dallas, and *encore mode* at Lodos, Mexico City.