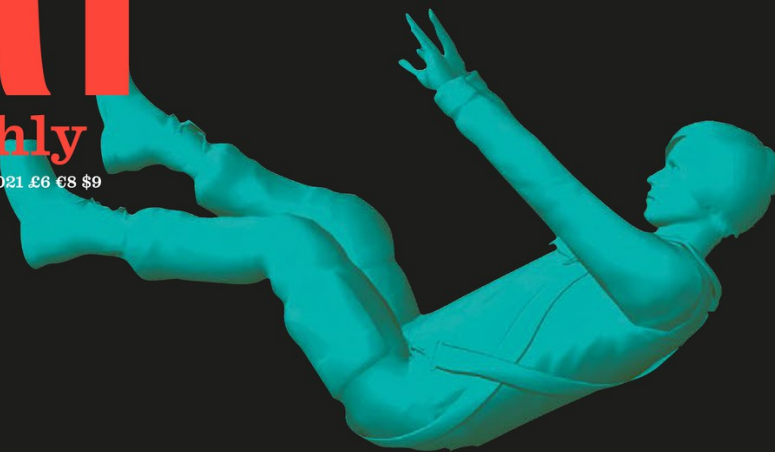


ART

Monthly

No. 451, November 2021 £6 €8 \$9



Hiwa K

Interviewed by Chris Clarke

Remote Working

Saim Demircan

Crisis Communications

Chris Hayes

Adam Farah

Profile by Larne Abse Gogarty

Remote Working

Citing recent exhibitions by artists including Park McArthur, Patricia L Boyd, Jason Hirata and Ghislaine Leung, Saim Demircan finds that the necessity of working remotely caused by the pandemic has not only given rise to new ways of producing but also of thinking about issues such as accessibility, labour and authorship.

At the height of the pandemic, amid on-and-off lockdowns, continually changing quarantine protocols and travel restrictions, artists, faced with the prospect of making exhibitions from a distance, found ways to get around being physically absent. Over this past year, some adapted to ways of working remotely in response to such constraints, while in the case of others their practices already implicitly question accessibility, labour and authorship. Artists such as Park McArthur, Patricia L Boyd, Jason Hirata and Ghislaine Leung, for example, address issues of social and virtual alienation rather than identifying with the seemingly newly scripted role of making an exhibition without being present. Their recent work re-evaluates the position of the artist within what, traditionally speaking, constitutes site-specificity in exhibition-making, while also negotiating – from today’s perspectives – the effects of the pandemic on both the producer of art and audiences for art.

What does empiricism mean when you’re not physically present or how does an exhibition appear when you cannot see it ‘in-person’? Moving past certain ways of conceiving presence as articulated by the likes of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, such questions become acutely relevant in these increasingly common situations. The parameters of display, which have usually been defined by proximity to an artwork, have also been radically altered by viewership, not least through the development of online viewing rooms and virtual renderings of spaces or extensions of institutions and galleries. Park McArthur’s audio guides, which examine spatial architecture, real or imagined (as was the case with ‘Project 195’ at MoMA in 2019), are but one response to the effects of distancing. Last August, the artist made her exhibition ‘Kunsthalle_guests Gaeste.Netz.5456’ at Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland remotely from the US (Reviews AM441). Having already visited a year prior

to confirming the show, she spoke with members of staff at the Kunsthalle in the wake of the pandemic, as well as reading about the construction of Kirschenfeld, the district in which the museum is located, as a way to get to know Bern by proxy instead of spending time there as originally intended. From these conversations, McArthur wrote a script for an audio guide that was hosted on the institution’s website. It became the crux of the exhibition, as it was available to listen to from afar or at the Kunsthalle. The audio guide’s narrator directs the visitor/listener through the Kunsthalle’s galleries and ancillary rooms from the entrance hall to the courtyard outside, finally detailing where one can take public transport away from the venue. Mention of relocated objects and artworks installed throughout the building also synthesised both physical and virtual space. Yet it is the evocation of haptic sensations that effectively interpenetrate this divide, from the texture of bas relief stone sculptures to the stillness of air in a room or whether windows are open or closed. The physical description of air movement is perhaps most redolent, given the preventative measures which were put in place to counteract the spread of airborne disease.

Citing Anne Rorimer’s book *Kunsthalle Bern, 1992* on Michael Asher’s installation (of the same title) at the venue as one notable example where an author wasn’t present when writing about an exhibition, McArthur was aware while making her work of how often art history is constructed and reinterpreted despite physical distance. Yet her work remains subtly in dialogue with the historical influence of Asher’s exhibition beyond the reference to its title; whereas Asher’s 1992 work *Kunsthalle Bern, 1992* namechecks the institution itself, a generation later McArthur’s work calls attention to its audience. By using the Kunsthalle’s website as a space for her exhibition, the artist’s own absence potentially aligns McArthur with an audience that, as the text for the show reads, ‘has always included people who do not travel to Bern, Switzerland’, which, especially in the light of travel restrictions, covered a majority who were unable to.

As such, access is crucial to ‘Kunsthalle_guests Gaeste.Netz.5456’, with MacArthur boosting the Kunsthalle’s public Wi-Fi connection, and which also lends the exhibition its title. Here, the internet becomes invaluable for the audio guide to function as an artwork (as well as a necessity for the artist to work remotely). The artwork is determined by



Jason Hirata, *Four Framed Portraits*, 2021, 'From Now in Then', Fanta-MLN, Milan



Park McArthur, *An alternative view of the main gallery emphasising the grand room's symmetrical layout and open doorways. A small portion of the large glass ceiling is visible at the image's top edge and clusters of museum benches in black and unpainted wood are positioned around the room*, Kunsthalle, Bern, 2020

its place of display and the audio guide also extends the boundaries of site-specificity by being online since the atemporality of virtual space ostensibly appears to provide almost limitless admission to McArthur's exhibition.

By reinserting physicality into the ways in which art moves or circulates when not solely reliant on presence – in this case, interpretive materials that constitute the already received experience – McArthur's project considers how 'being physically present in an exhibition space is a question of access', as Camilla McHugh noted in her review of the exhibition for *Flash Art*. What the artist perhaps posits here is how much this accessibility extends the capacity of public-facing institutions to enable changes to exhibition-making in the fallout from the pandemic. Indeed, what, in the long term, will be the effect of the hybridity, or the blending of virtual and physical space in ways that incorporate new, digital-based viewership alongside established bricks and mortar models of gallery attendance?

If 'Kunsthalle_guests Gaeste.Netz.5456' focused on how art is experienced through its own mediation by utilising the necessity of working from a distance, for Patricia L Boyd, being absent from her exhibition 'Hold' at Kunstverein München earlier this year presented the artist with similar challenges. Chief among these was wrestling with the contradiction that she was making a show about how spaces are occupied (the title of the exhibition also implies intimacy). Interestingly, the reliance on communications technologies to install her exhibition had one of the biggest impacts on proprioception. The staff at the Kunstverein constructed a makeshift surrogate for the artist that involved a camera mounted on a tripod at eye height with a live-feed connected to a private

YouTube channel, enabling Boyd to view the installation in real time. She and the exhibition's curator, Gloria Hasnay, used a combination of messaging and phone calls to assemble her show (unlike McArthur, Boyd relied on a proxy to get a sense of surroundings). As the artist herself noted, however, this way of working also inadvertently infantilised the artist because Hasnay was in control of the tripod's movements. It also placed Boyd in the position of surveying her work while passively monitoring the labour of the technicians; a separation that placed the artist outside her show (looking in) with those installing on the inside (being watched).

Boyd's absence partly informed the choices about the display of works, decisions she might not necessarily have made in person. For instance, *Untitled*, 2021, is a long wooden bench that she had moved from the Kunstverein's foyer into the middle of its largest gallery, the Grosser Saal, almost bisecting the length of the space. The dichotomy between its removal and reappearance (presence) is credited as 'relocated bench' in its material description, which appears twice in the list of works (both in the foyer and the Grosser Saal). Practically speaking, however, Boyd was presented with the problem of occupying a large volume of space by selecting already available pieces to show, because she had originally intended to make new work while in Munich. Moreover, the bench – not least for its size and shape – represented the absence of sociability, since the artist was told that, amongst other uses, people would often dance on it at afterparties. Without an exhibition opening, the presence of *Untitled* in 'Hold' contained this absence, as well as a history of bodies collectively celebrating, underpinning the yearning for physical contact at a time when social gathering was abruptly replaced with social distancing.



Jason Hirata, 'From Now in Then', installation view, Fanta-MLN, Milan

For the installation *Incubator*, 2021, Boyd sealed the floor-to-ceiling doorways to the furthest space of the Kunstverein with two large, thick planes of glass that had been perforated in the middle with a circular pattern of holes through which one could feel a breeze of air from the next-door gallery's open windows. This architectural intervention reinstates physical sensation in the space, creating another point of contact that might else be revoked through remoteness, no less significant given the dyspnea, or shortness of breath, that many of those with Covid-19 suffer. In both McArthur and Boyd's exhibitions, air – 'the all-pervasive yet imperceptible substance required for existence', as Rorimer writes about Asher – is acutely felt. Indeed, it is this sensation of moving air that has the closest associations beyond touch, or the definition of feeling in 'purely somatosensory terms' that these works activate. Indeed, in an interview with artist Dora Budor published in *Mousse*, Boyd relates how she kept asking the curator 'how does it *feel*?' as a way to get closer to the sensation of installing in real time, concluding that this feeling was 'a temporary lending of another person's bodily senses and their own particular idiom of perceiving'.

Changes to viewing physical space impacts one's mental experience of that space, and this invariably altered and impeded Boyd's perception while installing

her exhibition. Viewed on screen, the diminished scale and limited movement meant that when the artist was finally able to visit her own show she described the experience as one of being in a simulation. This revelation is suggestive of how absence continues while one is present. In claiming 'the installation shot sans figures' as an 'icon of our visual culture', Brian O'Doherty memorably denoted the veneration of empty space in his book *Inside the White Cube*. 'You are there without being there,' he goes on to say; an insinuation that reads like a ghostly rebuke of Fried's claim that Minimalism always requires an audience.

While McArthur and Boyd dealt with their own remoteness directly through the specifics of how and where their exhibitions took place, recent work by Ghislaine Leung and Jason Hirata took a more self-determined approach that was no less personal in nature. One could say that Leung's work has an inherently remote outward appearance. Over the past several years, the artist has developed what she refers to as 'scores': instructional guides that regulate the choices and placement of certain commercially available or prefabricated objects, such as the horse carriage, foam puzzle flooring tiles and children's blackout curtains which comprised her show '0465773005' at Cabinet in London earlier this year. Devised as a sustainable way of working for the express purposes

Perhaps the absence of the artist commits a final act of anti-objectification, eschewing the prerequisite in the art world to be 'everywhere' at all times.

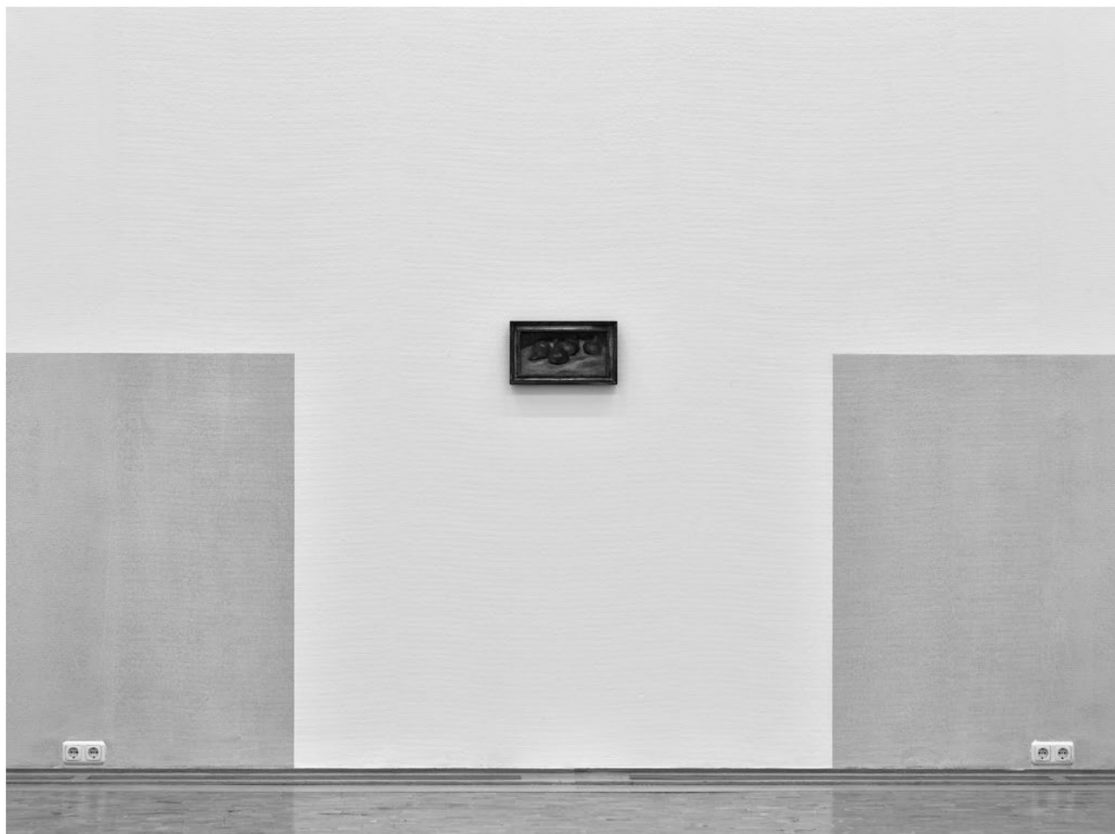
of exhibiting, Leung's directives recognise that context as already half the work of making a show. This self-imposed form of artistic labour supposes a detachment, or distancing of the artist from their artwork given that the scores can be executed by the exhibitor organisers themselves. Yet, simply handing over instructions belies recognition of others implicit within the making of the work. In this respect, Leung's scores delegate accountability where referred authorship cannot be easily established within, say, the bureaucratic framework of an institution or the private gallery salesroom.

Of the three scores in her current show 'PORTRAITS' at Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, for which the artist was also unable to be physically present, the instruction for *Browns*, 2021, is to paint all the available walls brown to standard picture hanging height. Here, the rough application of a neutral colour on the museum's walls reveals past usages, highlighting the numerous imperfections that are the result of previous installations that came before hers, effectively foregrounding the cyclical temporality of exhibition-making and the layered accumulation of work. Like McArthur and Boyd's architectural interventions, *Browns* also makes visible a connection to a historical lineage unique to the physical structure of a certain place – in this case, the manual labour involved in displaying art – contradicting the degree of objectivity that is implied by distance.

Similarly, for Jason Hirata's exhibition 'From Now in Then' at Fanta-MLN in Milan earlier this spring,

each of the three works that the artist included are accredited to paid professionals, such as the painting company Edilmanca, which executed *Painted Square*, 2021, on the floor of the gallery, or NCC Milano Services, which supplied the artist with a car service for *Car*, 2021. Hirata already knew he wasn't travelling to Milan even before pandemic-imposed travel restrictions came into force; the conditions for executing his work meant that he did not have to be physically present to produce it.

Hirata's apparent distance, however, supports his own attempts to de-emphasise himself as the sole producer of his artwork, much like Leung does with her scores by leaving room for interpretation. *Painted Square* acknowledges the authorship of the commercial painter and is conditional on the perspicacity of the gallery owners, who choose whether it goes on the wall or on the floor, what colour it will be and how to install it. At Fanta-MLN, the gallerists decided the work should be painted on the floor because it had remained untouched since the venue launched in 2015. Given that the floorspace was also slightly longer than a square, *Painted Square* left a strip of unpainted floor that – like the negative space left by Boyd's *Untitled* – highlighted traces of the gallery's previous use. Yet rather than erase his own authorship, Hirata reinscribes it through others, repeating a dependency on the staff employed by the institution or gallery, whether curators, guides or technicians. If, in Hirata's case, production *is* the work, then the artist never truly escapes or evades their own subjectivity. One might be reminded of the instructional works and



Ghislaine Leung, 'PORTRAITS', installation view, Museum Abteiberg



Ghislaine Leung, 'PORTRAITS',
installation view, Museum Abteiberg

scores deployed by Fluxus and conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt, John Cage and Lawrence Wiener, who also refrained from writing themselves out of their work. In this sense, one could think that Hirata is, in fact, overtly present since he draws attention to his own absence.

Furthermore, the works exhibited in 'From Now in Then' provide a service to both the gallery and visitors to Hirata's exhibition. *Painted Square*, for instance, gives the space a makeover – the smooth grey colour epitomising a bona fide gallery floor. *Car*, on the other hand, took visitors wherever they needed to go after seeing the exhibition, and similarly expanded the parameters of the exhibition itself, or the gallery as the exporter of aesthetic experience. Both these works require presence and a physical point of contact to function, while a third piece, *Four Framed Portraits*, 2021, draws attention to distance, in this case national borders that have always caused travel restrictions. Consisting of cropped passport photographs of the three gallerists, and one of Hirata himself, the piece was a further acknowledgement that all four people were involved in producing an exhibition – or at least its ideation – like a team of equals. Here, the artist's relationship to others is again reincorporated into the work, which, like Leung's, speaks to the identity of place not through institutional critique but through portraiture.

Both Leung and Hirata acknowledge the work of other people in their own work within 'the networks and infrastructures that are necessary for the production of art' (see Dave Beech's feature 'Workless Art Work' in *AM448*). How they, together with McArthur and Boyd, interrelate with the frameworks in which they show is perhaps indicative of a changing

relationship to the materials of display that has been accentuated through working remotely. While the use of certain media can be seen as characteristic or representative, broadly speaking, of conceptual or minimal practices, these examples interrupt, spatially or architecturally, infrastructural codes and policies of display. Would we have noticed the functionality of the bench in the Kunstverein's foyer if it hadn't had been moved, for instance, or have paid attention to the electrical outlets that Leung's mushroom-shaped nightlights, *Shrooms*, 2016, are plugged into in a given gallery space?

In her essay 'Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique', Marina Vishmidt points out that infrastructure 'works because the preconditions of its effectivity are neither visible nor relevant; these jut out when the infrastructure breaks down or if an element is isolated from the whole'. Rather than a straightforward critique of infrastructure that can be fixed or repaired, such as in Maria Eichhorn's 'Das Geld der Kunsthalle Bern' at Kunsthalle Bern in 2001 or Gerry Bibby's 'Combination Boiler' at London's Showroom in 2014, in which these artists mended faults in the respective institution's facilities, working remotely raises questions around the labour of installation. Indeed, Hirata's *Painted Square* even presents a problem for the gallerists: that it is a unique work effectively means it can only exist in one place at any given time, potentially meaning that the gallery needs to remove it when the work is shown elsewhere.

Ultimately, however, one of the biggest questions posed by remote working is whether site-specificity always requires the physical presence of the artist. The answer it seems would be no longer – or, at the very least, as practitioners, we need to reconfigure an artist's involvement in an exhibition and what might be expected of them. Perhaps the absence of the artist commits a final act of anti-objectification, eschewing the prerequisite in the art world to be 'everywhere' at all times. In these artists' works, the proxy becomes an extension of the artist themselves, sometimes as prothesis or even substitute – 'temporary borrowing', as Boyd describes it. As such, while remoteness insinuates distance, whether geographically or emotionally, they all display approaches, material inclinations and their corresponding connotations that are far from impersonal. The different subjectivities, past experiences and emotional intimacy with the object, institution or gallery say otherwise. In short, remoteness in its current form can bring forth closeness.

Saim Demircan is a curator and writer based in New York and Turin.