

THE PLASTICITY OF CARE

Installation artist Park McArthur treats access and dependency as negotiable social concerns.

by Ariel Goldberg

OPENING SOON
Work by Park McArthur in the Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Oct. 13, 2018–Mar. 25, 2019; “Project 195: Park McArthur,” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct. 27–Dec. 16.

ARIEL GOLDBERG is the author of *The Estrangement Principle* (2017), a book examining the social aspects of “queer art.”

VISITORS TO Essex Street gallery in New York in August 2013 encountered a locked gate and laundry drying on a chain strung across the entrance. Soaking wet clothes were hung over the sidewalk each morning. Passersby sometimes removed items, which were replaced the next day. The intervention was conceived by Park McArthur as her first project at the gallery. She called it *During the Month of August ESSEX STREET will be Closed*. If visitors, unable to enter, went to the gallery’s website, they found a PDF of “The Measure of a Society,” a 108-page report from 2012 by Clarence J. Sundram, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s special adviser on vulnerable persons. This text, which details how public services have shrunk in scope or have come to do harm to the people they were meant to benefit, operated as a conceptual framework for the suspended clothing, alluding to histories of buildings where practices of care have either been erased or distorted into dehumanization at the hands of the state. *During the Month* looked like a tenement’s abandoned laundry or a store’s forgotten merchandise—an ambiguity suggesting the collapse of

private and public space. With the gallery closed and clothes left to dry outside, viewers were reminded just how little they know about what goes on inside buildings.

In her sculpture, writing, and sound art, McArthur reveals the intimacies that undergird functional infrastructures. Whether working with collaged text, quarried stone, pilled pajamas, absorbent polymer powder, or signage, she manipulates objects by relocating them from their original context to create new ways of thinking about autonomy and dependency.

Last year, for her solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, McArthur mounted square and rectangular aluminum panels, often stacked on top of each other, on a tall white wall. Among these objects, she hung five framed 8-by-12-inch photos, showing a picnic table from multiple angles, shot as McArthur circled it. The juxtaposition drew a comparison between the weatherproof aluminum and the more vulnerable wood of the picnic table, its maroon paint faded from exposure to wind and rain and scratched with initials.



View of Park McArthur's installation *During the Month of August ESSEX STREET will be Closed.*, 2013, chains, hangers, clothes, and water.

All images this article courtesy Essex Street, New York.

The aluminum panels are from *Softly, Effectively* (2017), a group of sculptures McArthur designed using the guidelines issued by the United States Department of Transportation's "Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices" and had fabricated by a manufacturer of industrial signs. McArthur also created the work's seductive title from adverbs used in the manual to describe how traffic signs should communicate with drivers. While she follows regulatory guidelines for the size and materials of her signs, McArthur does not add words and numbers that would direct flows of traffic. Her signs are blank, so the viewer's attention goes to the welding and the bolts that hold the aluminum panels together. Some signs are sandwiched, as if face-to-face in a closed dialogue between unwritten directions. McArthur's exclusion of commands reverses the traffic sign's treatment of its audience as a coherent whole, opening up new possibilities for movement. Faced with bare metal, one might welcome a void: one could go anywhere—or nowhere.

Empty signage also appeared in McArthur's contribution to the most recent Whitney Biennial. Her sculpture

Another word for memory is life (2017) challenges the systems by which value is bestowed upon historical and cultural sites. In New York City, signage denoting sites of interest must be a sheet of aluminum one eighth of an inch thick, with rounded radius edges, painted Pantone 469, a shade of brown. To honor the history that has been erased by development in the Meatpacking District and the Chelsea Piers, the neighborhoods near the Whitney, McArthur produced signs that meet all official requirements but have no words. The absence of designated sites of interest poses the question of what art and lives are missing from the area today, or pass through it eliciting not commemoration but hostility: many of the city's trans and queer youth of color are harassed by police in these neighborhoods. Two of the four blank brown signs were installed behind the Whitney's ticketing desks, directed at the cars driving uptown on the West Side Highway. The other two hung behind the station for viewing Jordan Wolfson's virtual-reality work, which meant many viewers experiencing that piece would stand in front of McArthur's brown metal signs without looking at them.

Faced with bare metal, one might welcome a void: one could go anywhere—or nowhere.



Two photos from *Overlook Park 1-5*, C-prints, 8 by 12 inches each.

Much of McArthur's work is attuned to the construction of exhibition spaces as white cubes that have profoundly altered the landscape they are built on. Her newest work, for the Carnegie International, is a sound installation for the courtyard of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. McArthur dispatched Knut Olaf Sunde, a Norwegian composer, to record the process of quarrying Larvikite rock, the lustrous stone used to build the museum. For her SFMOMA show, McArthur displayed two black granite bricks from the staircase of the old building, which had been recently renovated and expanded. In *Designation*, another piece for that exhibition, the artist hung three surplus maple floorboards of the kind that connect the floors of the new and old buildings. She displayed the verso sides, exposing the planks' rough underbellies and tongue-and-groove edges.

MCARTHUR IS concerned not only with the materials used to construct the art spaces she shows in, but with how those materials arrive on-site. Since 2014 she has been working with rubber from truck and bus tires recycled to serve as loading dock bumpers. For "5 Sculptures," a group exhibition at Essex Street this past winter, McArthur installed a nine-foot-long cluster of three bumpers, titled *Passive Vibration Durometer Facts 6*, and an eighteen-foot-long group of five bumpers, *Passive Vibration Durometer Facts 7*. Positioned four feet from the ground in keeping with the bumper manufacturer's guidelines, with their elements alternating in vertical and horizontal orientation, the two bumper sculptures appeared from the street as a continuous line, even though they traversed the divide between the gallery's upper and lower levels. For viewers inside, the works seemed to be placed too high or too low for comfortable contemplation. The gallery had no trucks or ships threatening its walls, but even so the rubber masses represented the anticipation or memory of repetitive, harsh impact without complaint. By installing *Passive Vibration Durometer Facts 7* according to the manufacturer's specs, at bumper level rather than eye level, McArthur highlighted the drastic shift in context from loading dock to art space. As an extension of this readymade, the press release for the show included the manufacturer's description of the bumpers' performance, extolling their ability to "withstand years of punishment" while protecting trucks even from "consistent pounding and abuse."

Polyurethane Foam (2014), a sculpture whose title names its primary material, comprises a pair of large blocks, each nearly seven feet tall, one pink and one turquoise. These foam blocks retain handwritten numbers from the manufacturer, which are usually shaved off when the blocks are cut into cushions for institutional furniture, such as hospital or prison beds. The plastic wrapping is pulled down at the base, like pants around ankles. McArthur first showed these readymades at Portland's Yale Union gallery, coupled with *Files* (2014), a five-hour sound installation made with Alex Fleming that combines surgical instructions for spinal fusion, promotions of health care robots, and news reports on a prison's mistreatment of its inmates. The foam buttresses the audio piece's references to attempts at technological state-administered care, both adequate and failed. The huge, soft chunks offer the metaphor of support in its unshaped form.

Bobetta (for Beverly), the installation of granite blocks shown at SFMOMA, is dedicated to Beverly Buchanan (1940–2015), whose work McArthur first encountered in the Whitney Museum's artist files. After years of researching Buchanan, McArthur co-organized a retrospective for her, "Ruins and Rituals," with Jennifer Buris at the Brooklyn Museum in 2016. Buchanan's work includes site-specific cast concrete sculptures in Georgia—unmarked memorials acknowledging the ravages of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the related economic and racial discrimination that still plagues this country. Buchanan



Softly, effectively,
2017, aluminum,
126 by 72 by
1½ inches.

was inspired in part by demolished buildings of post-industrial New York and New Jersey, where she worked as a public health educator before moving to Georgia in 1977 and pursuing her art full-time. Buchanan often placed works in sites where they would go unnoticed. Some of the pieces welcome deterioration—for example, *Marsh Ruins* (1981), submerged in the shoreline of the Marshes of Glynn in Brunswick, Georgia. Following Buchanan's example, McArthur references social infrastructure in seemingly abstract sculpture.

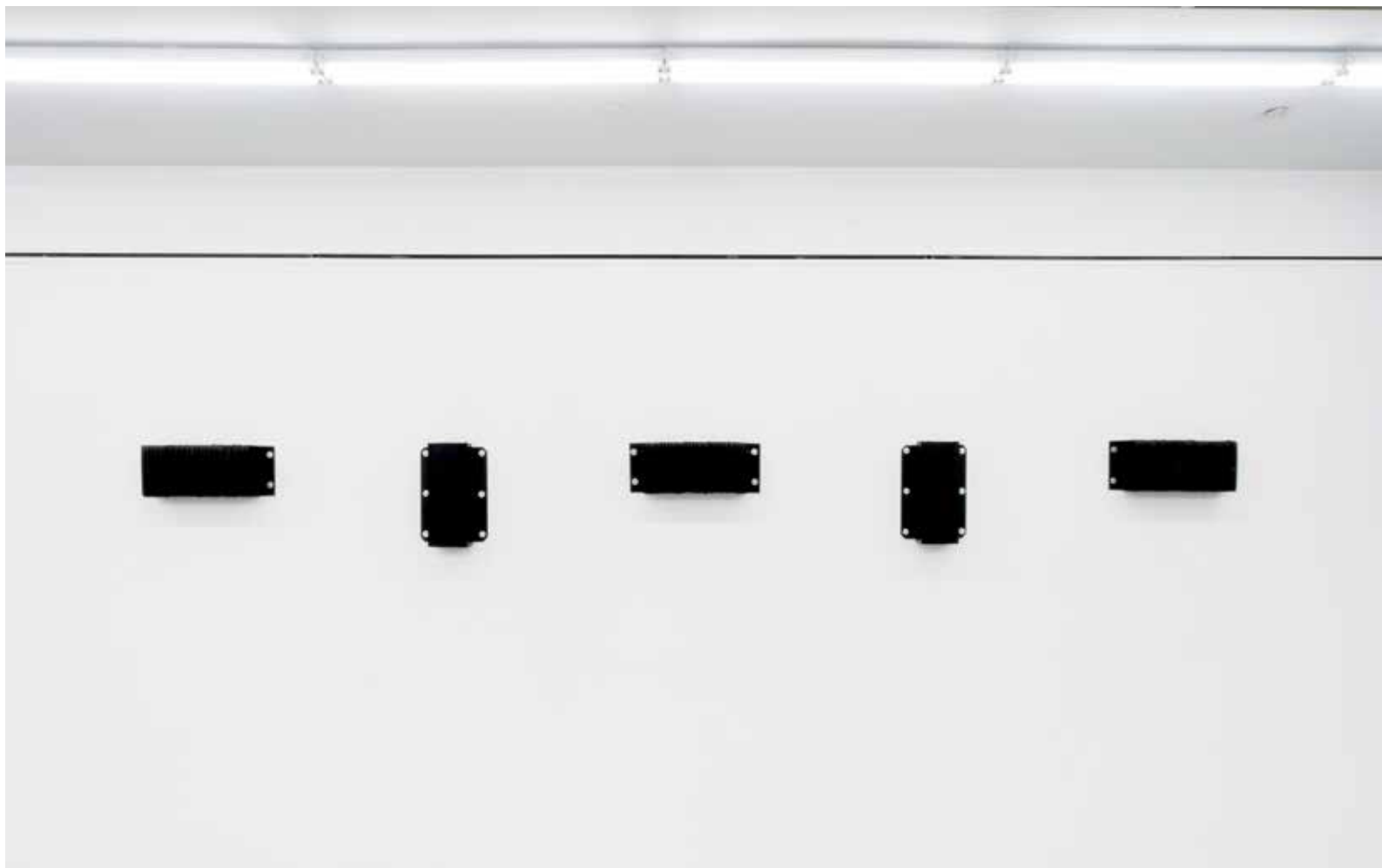
McArthur also shares Buchanan's dedication to maintaining close relationships and documenting her work and process through extensive correspondence.¹ Constantina Zavitsanos is a frequent collaborator and friend of McArthur's, whose work "deals in the material re/production of debt, dependency, and means beyond measure."² For a month in 2017, Zavitsanos and scholar Amalle Dublon made the empty gallery and office of New York's Artists Space—then in an interim period between directors—available for free use on a first-come-first-served basis via an ad on Craigslist. *Available Space*, as the project was called, exemplified Zavitsanos's commitment to redistributing resources at the disposal of art organizations—an interest that dovetails with McArthur's exploration of infrastructures of support.

In a co-written essay titled "The Guild of the Brave Poor Things," McArthur and Zavitsanos propose methods for celebrating dependency in a world obsessed with individuality. Their language echoes Fred Moten's style of poetic theorizing, with revelatory declarations and deconstructions of aphorisms: "We are one another's means without ends."³ Passages of text alternate with a series of photographs showing segregated bathrooms from the early 1960s with signs for race and gender, a sixteenth-century court painting, and stills from a TV game show. Visibility, the authors obliquely argue, entails risk and contestation; "Camera One" and "Camera Two" appear as cryptic shot cues, as if to acknowledge both the reality TV tone of contemporary politics and the constant surveillance of public space in a time when cameras are used to control the horizon of truth.

Human connection appears as an alternative to mediation by image in performance scores presented as interludes between the essay's sections. *Score for Doubling Down* reads: "Find yourself. / Lose yourself."⁴ Since 2011, McArthur and Zavitsanos have been writing scores together that articulate the intimate nuances of caring for one another, a process that began with the Care Collective. This group

Another word for memory is life, 2017, laminated paint and laminated fluorescent on aluminum with bolts and aluminum bracing, two panels, 90 by 120 inches each; in the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017.





of ten people coordinated McArthur’s evening routine, engaging in convivial activities while helping McArthur transfer from her wheelchair to the shower, change into her pajamas, and get into bed.⁵

Inserted between all the photos and standard captions in “The Guild” are bracketed descriptions of the sort used on social media to make images more accessible to non-sighted individuals who use text-to-speech applications as reading aids. The essay concludes with a 1976 black-and-white photograph by Peter Hujar, which depicts someone reclining at the Christopher Street pier. McArthur and Zavitsanos provide information about geography and clothing, and finish by writing: “the person appears as gender non-conforming with light skin.”⁶ When looking at an image of someone and trying to choose words connected to identity, they hold space for language’s inability to fully translate personhood. McArthur and Zavitsanos embrace tentativeness in perception as a reminder that someone may appear one way but inhabit an identity that defies available means of description.

McArthur frequently probes given social structures, from language to buildings, while asking what systems of support are used to make these structures accessible. Her work is often difficult to notice or describe because she uses materials that are very familiar and easy to overlook. Seeking to connect the range of components she uses—from clothing to friendship to industrial raw materials—I recall her words

from a recent artist talk: “Accessibility often comes from social relationships.”⁷ One lives in relation to other people and their constellations of material realities, experiences, and perspectives. Consequently, one must sometimes talk about reconstructing a space in order to make it “accessible.” By isolating objects that guide movement through daily life, in their blank and unshaped form, McArthur prompts us not only to analyze extant systems but to imagine new ways we can “receive-give-need-want-care.”⁸ How can we conceive of care beyond static fixtures and repeated exchanges, as something adaptable to the subjectivities of the receiver or giver, always open to conviviality? ○

*Passive Vibration
Durometer Facts 7,
2018, five laminated
rubber loading
dock bumpers and
hardware, 20 by 218
by 5 inches overall.*

1. McArthur remarked on the connection between her work and that of Buchanan in a lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute, Apr. 5, 2016.

2. From a statement on the artist’s website, constantinazavitsanos.com.

3. Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, “The Guild of the Brave Poor Things,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Politics and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017, pp. 238.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

5. Park McArthur, “Other Forms of Conviviality: the best and least of which is our daily care, the host of which is our collaborative work,” with Constantina Zavitsanos, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Special Issue: Born in Flames, Vol. 23, Issue 1, 201, pp. 126–32.

6. “The Guild,” p. 249.

7. McArthur, in a lecture at the University of Washington, Mar. 10, 2016.

8. McArthur, “What is collectivity, conviviality, care?” in *Question the Wall Itself*, edited by Fionn Meade, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 2017, p. 179.