

INTERVIEW WITH PARK MCARTHUR

Katie Guggenheim: *Your exhibition includes large-scale sculptures made from foam, several works made from paper, and a series of ‘Contact’ pieces – trays piled with disposable medical items and prophylactics. The show is titled ‘Poly’, which is a reference to the materials that you’ve used. Could you explain?*

Park McArthur: ‘Poly’ is a linguistic root meaning ‘many’, as in polymer. It is the linking of many units – potentially individually bounded things, linked together. I wanted the show title to allow for a leaning on the social and to emphasise the many rather than the singular. ‘Poly’ is part of words like ‘polyurethane’, which is what the large blocks of foam are, and other types of plastic are polymer plastics, like the medical equipment – the catheters and tubing. There are also organic polymers in the lotions and creams – these things called barrier creams, which are used on sores and skin. The title, *Poly*, seemed like a way to think about the organising of units – there are always many present – and also about the materials.

KG: *Everything in the exhibition, from the enormous blocks of foam to the items in the trays are all mass-produced, they are all one of several. The paper works feel of a slightly different order, because, although they form a series, each piece is very different. They include polymer powder too. How were the paper pieces made?*

PM: They were made by a paper maker named Radha Pandey at the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio. She took on the project because she was open to the experimentation of combining super-absorbent polymer powder with paper pulp, which involved getting the binding and sizing right and ratio of pulp to polymer. At the Conservatory they have the capacity to make really large pieces of paper because they have huge deckle boxes, which are wooden frame boxes where the pulp is poured and set, and it’s then carried over to a table where it can dry flat. They had fans on the papers for weeks to dry them because the polymer turns into a gel and retains a lot of liquid. When they were being pulled out of the deckles the papers retained so much water and were so heavy that five people had to carry each piece. As they dried they got lighter and thinner and the polymer emerged in this blooming, crystalline form. These works were made over a three-month period, because there was only so much flat surface space to dry and because there also needed to be a lot of people on hand.

KG: *So the polymer messes with the process of making the paper, and elongates the drying time, but the resulting material is also unstable and keeps evolving. Since they’ve arrived at Chisenhale they’ve yellowed and over the weekend the polymer started to swell.*

PM: Radha said depending on how thick the air is with water they will 'relax'. It's called cockling, when the paper has this bumpy, wavy effect, and they might relax more into that or they might constrict. The heaters will dry out the space a lot too.

KG: Yes, it's normally pretty damp in the gallery, which can affect paper particularly. We don't have museum conditions! So I was interested to see what would happen with your paper pieces, especially as they are superabsorbent...

PM: When you make new work for an exhibition you're making it as the show is opening, or through the duration of the show, really, and it feels interesting to think about how the work changes. I've recently been involved in two large group shows and in those cases I felt much more insistent on having a work be installed to my specifications. But this install at Chisenhale makes me think of my own inconsistencies and how I approach control or openness. When a work has already been made, maybe a year or a month ago, there's some kind of imagined fidelity or ideal conditions under which the work would be shown. But when the work is becoming itself as part of an exhibition I feel much more open to something falling over, or failing in some way, and that being a really helpful or compelling part of the work.

KG: I suppose then the paper pieces here are still works in progress. This is the first time you've made them and you haven't used these materials before.

PM: They're like cheese or something that's supposed to get more yellow and stinkier! The other title I came up with for the show was *Damp*. When we came over here our friend said that everyone talks about the damp. She had to move house a couple of times because of the mould and the damp so I was thinking about that. There's a John Donne poem about dampness that's really sexy!

KG: The paper works have a few things in common with the foam works, apart from the fact that they're both made with polymer. Although the paper is handmade and the foam is readymade – the largest size available wholesale –, the paper is the largest size that could be made at the workshop. And, like the paper, the foam is also unstable, to a degree – it deteriorates and reacts. Could you talk about the relationship between the paper and foam pieces?

PM: The size of the paper is also a 'found' size: it's the size of a single bed. I feel like the scale of the paper and the foam is linked and not only through this readymade quality – the foam could be sliced down to a twin size bed and there are foam beds that would be the same size as the paper. Even though this is acoustic foam and it wouldn't be used for that purpose I feel like that connection is there.

KG: *Yes, it's acoustic foam, not furnishing foam, so it's really dense and it absorbs sound. When we were installing and the technicians were moving the blocks around, they couldn't hear each other when they were lifting from either side. You could also feel the deadening effect when you walked between two blocks. You experimented with positioning them around the door, to act as a buffer between the acoustic space of the hallway and that of the gallery. How do you think that these qualities are working now that the blocks are grouped in the corner?*

PM: They are both visually and sonically dampening just a corner rather than the whole space. I guess they're not doing anything less than they would be doing in any other position, it's just that a visitor won't be going through or around them. You can be next to two of the four sides of the blocks.

KG: *I feel like they have a latent or potential energy where they are. We're not feeling their full effect but we sense that they have power. They even look a bit like computer servers! The rest of the show is very open and there's lots of space but they're so densely packed – they have a different energy.*

PM: They do. Just because we can't feel what they're doing, it doesn't mean they're not doing it. I think it's really interesting for any exhibition to always exceed the experiential... certainly to exceed the visual, but also the experiential. Any artwork is doing all that it is doing, even if we're not able to receive all that it is giving out. This fact has to do with the five senses (and beyond). It is also a consequence of personal understandings of art, what art can do, and, as Andrea Fraser helps ask: what do we want from art, or, what we want art to do?

KG: *You mentioned some of the plastic medical supplies, which feature in the 'Contact' pieces, but could you say a little bit more about these works?*

PM: They are a series of stainless steel trays sitting on low plinths. They could be eye level or hip level so hopefully in some ways they are available and certainly reachable. The contents are often overflowing so you just see an edge of a tray at certain points. Some of the trays have condoms and dental dams and powder free gloves. Other trays also have powder free gloves and different kinds of catheters and plastic cups and disposable straws. Another one has creams and bandages, condoms, heel cups that are made out of gel and foam to protect the heel from pressure after long hours in bed.

In making these works I started with the dimensions of the stainless steel tray and in addition to deciding what contents went in which tray, we just tried to put as many things as possible in them. A lot are leaning and cantilevered and balanced, and they might fall over during the show and everything will have to get stuffed back in. The trays might lose the form that they begin with.

Sometimes the individual tear-off condoms have been taken out of the boxes and sometimes they are left inside of the boxes. So the boxes themselves provide a serial, uniform, stackable sort of architecture within the tray, which can be linearised and made very neat, or kind of dumped. When I was thinking about these works last fall I thought I could make the *Contact* pieces in the way that the grid worked with *Ramps* [twenty temporary access ramps, made or purchased at McArthur's request in order for her to enter and exit buildings by wheelchair, exhibited at ESSEX ST, New York in 2013]. I was thinking about the tray as a kind of floor space and it was interesting to think about how things fit together. It was better to show the squeezing of the contents, rather than an even ordering of them.

KG: *A lot of the contents relates to the point of contact with or between bodies. You mentioned the heel cups, which relieve pressure between the heel and the surface it's resting on, so they absorb pressure. But other items work as a barrier at that point of contact, like the condoms, dental dams and gloves. What does 'contact' mean for you in the context of these works?*

PM: The title of the works came from talking with my friend Jeannine Tang about some of her thoughts on social relations, or social spaces where there are forms of care and interaction that are not necessarily monogamous. That's the other aspect of the title of the show, *Poly*. These relations are not long term, or bounded by the idea of a couple as the prominent figure for intimacy or care. Jeannine was talking about the use of the term 'contact' in an autobiographical book called *The Motion of Light in Water* by Samuel R. Delany [Arbor House, 1988]. He's recounting his experience of living in the East Village in New York City in the late '60s and having a partner but also cruising in New York. He talks about contact as the way that many people would be together for a fixed or limited amount of time.

KG: *Everything in the trays is disposable, which points to relations that are temporary or temporal moments, even. You've said that you want the contents of the trays to be replenished with things that are new and useable, so that there's always a potential use value. The work won't become an archive.*

PM: Exactly – this artwork needs to topple back and forth between the use and the idea. It is a tray full of latex gloves but if you needed latex gloves at some point, you should use them. For example, Mark and Jamie, the technicians installing the exhibition, used gloves from one of the trays to install some of the other work.

KG: *Could we talk more about the way the work is installed at Chisenhale?*

PM: I thought it was interesting to think about the grid of the ceiling. We pointed lights upwards to lift your eye up but also to look at the way the

space is already prefigured or structured to the white grid of the ceiling. The impulse was to allow for the display of something else, of the building itself. People talk about Chisenhale as a neutral space, hence its capacity to be transformed. I was also thinking about this infrastructurally. This has been such a fun install and that relates to the way that Chisenhale operates. There's an incredible amount of work that goes on that is not articulated – administrative work, structural work: all the work it took to wire the gallery for heat, for example – but that is how the building is able to present itself as this kind of maintained white space for the voice of the artist to appear. Lots of work is done to allow for that kind of appearance. How and why that gets characterised as 'neutral' is interesting.

KG: *It takes a lot of work to maintain the appearance of almost nothing! That's also true of your decisions about the installation. You've made subtle adjustments to things like heat, light and acoustics. Even gestures like opening the doors. We sometimes take the doors to the gallery off but you've kept them and opened both of them. And the heaters, which we brought in for the installation period, have been kept for the exhibition. I like that the heaters suggest the memory of the installation process: people working in the space and the decision-making that went on. The heaters suggest the presence of bodies, like a lot of the work in the show. The lighting too: for example, one of the things you said you like about pointing the lights at the ceiling is the way they then also light people in the space, not just the works. You've used almost everything about the infrastructure of a neutral space, where the infrastructure isn't really that noticeable at all. Maybe some elements will only be noticeable to people like me who work here.*

I wanted to ask you about the terms 'absorption' and 'expulsion'. These words came up again and again when we were working on the show: when you were talking about the materials you've used and then the objects in the trays as well. Could you say a little more about how you understand the relationship between absorption and expulsion?

PM: This also relates to my thoughts about infrastructure. I was thinking about the invitation to an artist from an institution: about how work is made or realised between the invited artist and an organisation, and then also between the people and the funding bodies that support the organisation in order to make the work available. These are ongoing thoughts and questions for me.

KG: *We also discussed absorption in terms of materiality and flesh. I'm curious to know more about what you mean when you talk about absorption and flesh?*

PM: Flesh is something that is more basic than the organised human form, or body, and also prefigures the idea of a subject, both in the political sense of the subject and the philosophical sense. There is an essay called

Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe by Hortense J. Spillers (*Diacritics* Vol. 17, No. 2, 1987) where Spillers talks about *being* through the economies of slavery. She talks about the radical availability of flesh in the context of the slave market: that you can be aside from your family or any set of social relations – you're picked out and taken – and that you're actually really available through your own flesh. She has said that another word for that feeling is empathy. I'm still stuck on what she means by that. It's so unexpected.

In addition to how Spillers talks about flesh, I'm also thinking about how to deal with pressure sores and wounds and the way that skin is talked about in medical terms. Once you get past a layer of skin, it's flesh, like the fleshy part of an open wound. And then I wanted to think about how pressure is also a socially organised set of relations: the kind of pressure that makes people leave their home countries and move to another. I wanted to think about pressure – and absorbing and expelling – in terms of things cited within the body, and in a certain material like foam, but also on the level of the hundreds of thousands or millions of people expelled and absorbed through various kinds of social and economic regimes.

If we can look at and experience these things in a haptic sense within the site of an exhibition, through certain materials, maybe this could resonate with how we think about some of the most massive forms of movement and social change... and this notion of flesh. I don't think that this is necessarily directly available in the show but these are things maybe that are felt.

KG: *Absorption is a loaded word in art historical terms, and particularly because of the 'Michael Fried text Absorption and Theatricality' [University of California Press, 1980]. Fried talks about absorption as an idealised state of viewing in which the viewer is completely consumed by the work of art. He's talking about 18th Century Salon painting, with figures who are absorbed in activities like reading, so the subject of the art work is absorption, but the viewer also becomes completely absorbed into the image so that they are no longer conscious of their body as a separate entity. He talks about this in opposition to theatricality, which he had written about before as a self-consciousness of the viewer. There's not necessarily a direct relationship, either affirmative or otherwise, between Fried's position and your thoughts on absorption but it's interesting to think about his ideas in relation to your show, especially as your work has a visual relationship to Minimalism and Post-Minimal sculpture.*

PM: These Salon paintings: they might show proximate, potentially intimate spaces of leisure time or a familial setting. These aren't the grand subjects of history painting, even though they are the ways that history is made. They are closer to the way that we talk about interiority. On the other hand, is it possible that these types of scenes would not be universally absorptive to all viewers in the way that Fried suggests? That their absorptive capacities might be more culturally defined?

KG: *That's interesting. The time that Fried's text was written, and first being read – the late '70s and early '80s – is also important in this regard.*

PM: Yes, wouldn't the work of postcolonial cultural theory put some of the claims about what it is to be absorbed by a work of art into relief? Fried was writing at the same time as Homi Bhabha. I haven't read Fried's book, but from what we're talking about... it's interesting that he is asking for absorption to only be this act of travelling into a space that's either accessible or inaccessible to the viewer as a space of identification. It seems like postcolonial experiences and theory would be able to specify something about the way that works.

In this exhibition I'm thinking about absorption materially as much as a psychic or intellectual space that Fried might be talking about. As these forms absorb, they also resist: in the dampening process and the permeability certain effects don't get fully incorporated. Expulsion is also about the space of exhalation or exile or exegesis.

KG: *You have made both explicit and implicit references to other artists' work in this show. Some of the more explicit references would be, for example, Tony Smith's black, monolithic sculptures; and Félix González-Torres, particularly with his takeaway pieces, and the way he dealt with the aids crisis and with sickness.*

*I feel like the work is really rich with these histories. But when we first started planning the show you were talking about Hannah Wilke's work. There's a particular quote of Wilke's you sent us that I really liked: 'I always use my art to have life around me. Art is for life's sake. Politicizing its precariousness pleases me.' ['Hannah Wilke', *The New Common Good*, May 1985] The formal links to Wilke's work aren't as visible now but this idea that art is for life's sake still seems important. Could you talk about these different artistic presences your work?*

PM: I don't really know how to make art. When we were in the gallery earlier, I was like, 'This is my ode to Martin Kippenberger' because the sculptures were in a corner with their backs out towards the gallery. Don't you feel at a lot of art shows that part of the pleasure of thinking and making and looking at artwork is that it's very promiscuous? I feel like there are always lots of presences of many people: you are a person working in a continuum of a lot of voices already present.

With the Hannah Wilke quote I was also trying to think about her later video works, the *Intra-Venus Tapes* [1990-93]. How she portrayed going to the doctor and receiving chemotherapy for cancer and experiencing her mom's illness and then her own; how what we expect to learn about terminal illness, for example, is not what she shows us in these video works. Some of what is shown is the extraordinary nature of everyday activities. For me, that's the place where art begins.

KG: *You wrote a really interesting essay, ‘Sorta Like a Hug: Notes on Collectivity, Conviviality and Care’ [The Happy Hypocrite, No. 7, Bookworks, 2014] in which you talk about a ‘care collective’ as a means to organise and describe your own care arrangements. You describe accessibility as social, which is an interesting way of thinking about all relationships and interdependencies as social.*

PM: I’ve done some workshops with my friend, the artist Constantina Zavitsanos, and we were discussing ‘access intimacy’ – an idea that a disability justice activist and writer named Mia Mingus has talked about. Part of access intimacy is an acknowledgement that the world is really inaccessible. From that acknowledgement you can find and make ways together to navigate the inaccessibility of the world in which we live. Mia Mingus’s concept has informed my thinking about access as a social process it’s not only architectural; it’s also relational. Having a BSL [British Sign Language] interpreter is a minimum way of having an accessible space, but there are lots of other aspects to accessibility that scaffold on top of that. On the other hand, if there isn’t a BSL interpreter there are ways that people who want to make the space accessible can figure out how to do that together.

So, making spaces accessible for one another is a relational and compositional problem. What I mean by accessibility being social is when social relationships are nurtured and not instrumentalised they are able to radically transform what we think of as an autonomous or independent figure.

KG: *You’ve included a copy of a letter in the show that was sent to benefit recipients last year to inform them of the closure of the Independent Living Fund [ILF], following the decision by the UK government to delegate care provision for disabled people to local councils, which have recently seen substantial budget cuts. How does the situation in the UK compare to the US, where you live, in terms of state provision of care for disabled people and the publicness or the privateness that care?*

PM: One of the first books about disability that I read was Michael Oliver’s *Understanding Disability* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). He talks about the ‘social model’ of disability. I think of the UK as the particular set of conditions that produced this idea – that disability is a set of architectural, political and economic situations that might disable someone more than another person, and is often mapped on to impairment, but that it is not always the same thing.

I went back to how I came to learn about disability studies and disability activism and thought also about how I interface with disability culture. There is a really long tradition of disabled artists making work in the UK, so, thinking about making a show here, I wanted to connect with people and look and think more about this particular context.

In the US there hasn't ever been something like the Independent Living Fund. How did it get started under Margaret Thatcher in 1988? How does seeking to conserve something that's getting cut delimit certain kinds of insistence or imagination for something even better? The ILF seems like a primary fundamental thing that could have been improved, so to have it taken away and localised or denationalised, is really dire for so many people. I don't know a lot about it but I am following this as someone who is asking how it relates to the US context too, where this kind of policy hasn't ever been in place, and doesn't seem like it is going to be implemented any time in the future.

***KG:** The inclusion of the letter really shifts the atmosphere of the exhibition. A certain idea of austerity seems to be very important to your thinking here. Could you explain what you mean by austerity?*

PM: When I talk about austerity I'm wondering what it feels like – in terms of how people are organising against budget cuts in the UK, but also in terms of what the pressure to absorb the government's decisions feels like in every day life. There's an increasing sense that if you're not able to fully participate or meet your own needs then it's the result of individual failings on your part, without any acknowledgement of the ways that legal and economical factors privilege or don't privilege members of society.

***KG:** Is it important to you that this feeling is articulated or questioned through the work?*

PM: It's a particularly internalised feeling and it's difficult to talk about. It's something I'm personally trying to think about within the show: the ways of making life possible for one another and how governing bodies indicate or create an ideal or measurable standard by which you either fail or succeed. This is a very specific construction of the self. In this exhibition I'm trying to not have the self or the individual be the measuring unit of a society, and point instead towards the polymer and the linking of many units together.

Park McArthur interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, January 2016.