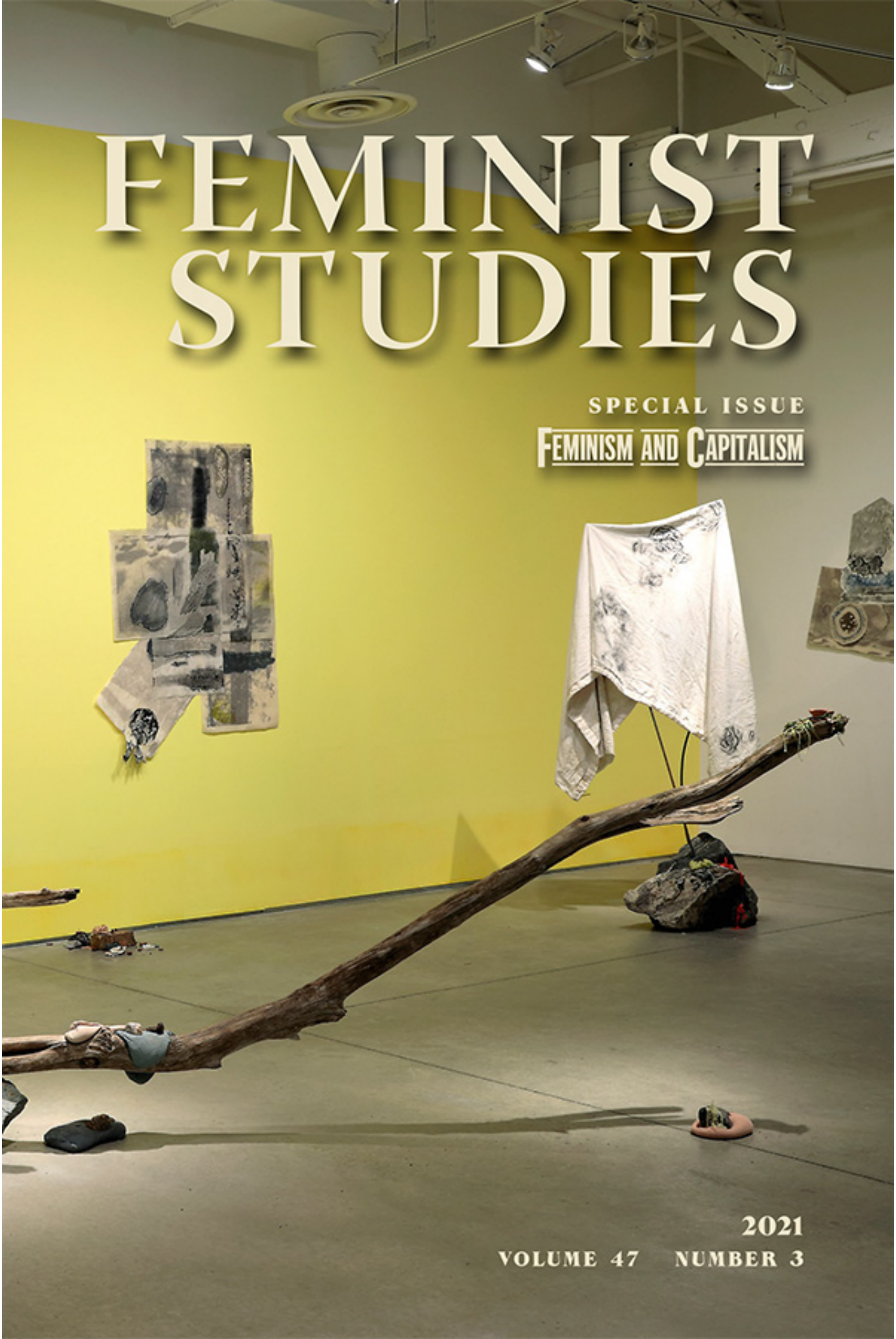
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LILY COX-RICHARD AND SUSAN RICHMOND

Fieldwork: Lily Cox-Richard in Conversation with Susan Richmond

In June 2020, Lily Cox-Richard, assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts, and Susan Richmond, associate professor of art history at Georgia State University, initiated a series of online conversations in anticipation of Lily's upcoming solo exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, MA. The show was originally slated for early 2021, but will now run from March 2022 through January 2023. Their conversations frequently, inevitably, turned to the volatile events of spring and summer in the aftermath of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers.

Susan Richmond: In July 2020, several Confederate statues on Richmond's Monument Avenue were removed by the city. You were there when they dismantled Stonewall Jackson. As you shared with me, it took several hours and culminated in a dramatic lightning storm and a bell ringing at the nearby First Baptist Church. What do those commemorative spaces along the Avenue look like now?

Lily Cox-Richard: I wish we could visit Monument Avenue together. It feels alive, changing every day. Most of the bronzes have been removed — a few pulled down by protestors and the rest by the city — so just the

massive plinths remain in the traffic circles. Only the Robert E. Lee statue is still in place, now covered with graffiti and banners. The area has been informally named Marcus-David Peters Circle in honor of a young Black man killed in 2018 by Richmond police while experiencing a mental health crisis. It has been transformed into a community space, claimed not just by protesters but also by people sharing food, printing T-shirt designs, and dancing. There's a basketball court set up and community gardens in raised beds. At night, Dustin Klein and Alex Criqui have been projecting images of Black liberation and portraits of people who have been killed by police on the plinth at night. There are memorials, teach-ins, and protests. It has also been a site of ongoing brutality, with militarized police harassing, tear-gassing, and arresting protestors.

Richmond: You also described how white supremacist groups tried to clean the Lee memorial and the other empty plinths of the anti-racist slogans and imagery they began acquiring over the summer.

Cox-Richard: Some small groups seem committed to cleaning the monuments. They attempted power washing them, and some have been painted with racist graffiti. Now that most of the figures have been removed, someone has resorted to rolling on thick, beige paint, literally attempting to whitewash this history. Their efforts seem to have an opposite effect by creating a fresh surface for another round of anti-racist messages. It feels essential for the plinths to remain in place and continue to receive layers of paint—they still function as monuments, but without the Confederate generals on horseback, it is a conversation rather than a controlled (and glorified, white supremacist) narrative.

None of the ideas generated through years of task forces and panel discussions could be as effective as what we are seeing now, in this reclaiming and renaming of space. Whatever happens next, it must be driven by justice and the *healing* of Black pain, not the comfort and generational wealth of the property owners along Monument Avenue.

Richmond: In the summer of 2016, you made a trip to Big Bend Ranch State Park in Texas, where your curiosity was piqued by the sight of a wrecked trailer lodged in a steep ravine. You did some research and discovered that it stemmed from a fatal 1985 accident. You also learned that anything left in a national park technically becomes "historic litter"

after fifty years. I can't help but feel that this is an apt moniker for the Confederate statues.

Cox-Richard: Wow, that's an interesting way to think about them! My understanding of historic litter is that a visitor cannot remove or throw away older trash from the park, not because it needs to be consecrated or celebrated, but because it is useful for understanding the park's history. As Richmond's Confederate monuments were removed, they were taken to a field within the city's wastewater treatment plant. I know the site because it's adjacent to the start of the Richmond Slave Trail, which traces the arrival of enslaved Africans in Virginia and the subsequent downriver slave trade, from port to market, ending at a historic burial ground and sacred site commemorating Gabriel's Rebellion. It's strangely comforting to me to know that the bronzes of the Lost Cause are laying in dirt, covered by blue tarps, where city sewage is processed before it's returned to the river, and the closest historical marker describes the horrors of chattel slavery. It's fitting, as historic litter, to just set them aside for a while, to see what needs to be learned from them.

Richmond: There is the adage about depriving future generations of learning that seems relevant here. While I fully support taking down the statues, a part of me also wants to retain some sign of their existence, at the very least, to remember the urgent political moment of their demise. Worldwide, both the official and unofficial removal of racist and colonialist monuments is a meaningful gesture. The fact that the Lee memorial is still intact, however, is one reason why radical acts of placemaking are currently happening in Marcus-David Peters Circle.

Lily, this is a much larger conversation, but one that relates to projects you've done around problematic sculptural histories. Notably, for *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* (2010–14), you engaged with the now-unfashionable, neoclassical artist Hiram Powers (1805–1873), whose figurative work advanced colonialist ideologies about race and gender.[1] You've also explored the historical trope of the monument through pointedly

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1. See Nicholas Hartigan and Joan Kee, "Lily Cox-Richard: On the Powers of Taking a Stand," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2013): 78–83; and "Alex Potts in Conversation with Lily Cox-Richard: *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 15, no. 2 (2016), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/summer16/potts-in-conversation-with-lily-cox-richard-the-stand-possessing-powers.

anti-monumental contexts and subjects. You've been drawn to locations and material histories of the mundane, including a poorhouse cemetery, a recycling center in Philadelphia, and an old jail in Texas; you've turned to objects such as woven baskets, lightning rods, and bricks to think about the value of everyday labor and its products. What unifies these projects is your interest in exposing what is typically overlooked, if not actively suppressed, by dominant value systems and institutional inequities. Through objects and installations, you bring seemingly minor or peripheral elements into focus, shifting perspective to imagine alternative relational structures.

Cox-Richard: Yes, I'm always most interested in the less visible and often overlooked things — the physical supports and the cultural infrastructures — that hold up what are considered to be the more important elements.

Richmond: In some instances, you've directly controlled viewing access to your work in order to draw attention to institutional frameworks or barriers. In others, you've simply prompted viewers to drop their line of vision, to contemplate what lies at or even beneath their feet. I'm thinking specifically of your site-specific installation *Fruiting Bodies* (2011) at the Poor Farm in Waupaca County, WI. What did this project entail?

Cox-Richard: The Poor Farm is a nineteenth-century facility built as a county home for the poor and houseless. Now, it's an experimental space run by artists Brad Killam and Michelle Grabner. For *Fruiting Bodies*, I cast hundreds of mushrooms in aqua resin and installed them in rings around unmarked graves in the adjacent cemetery. The project references the "fairy rings" produced by a network of underground mycelium that begins with a center, a rotting log. It expands outward, eventually generating the ring of fruiting bodies, or mushrooms, while the center dies off. In thinking about cemetery sculpture, the purpose is to make a monument for an individual or family unit, with a permanence that distracts from the ephemeral living and dying processes. Instead of pulling attention away from the decomposition and growth happening beneath our feet, I wanted to engage it. Rather than commemorate individuals, I focused on this example of an institution that, while riddled

with abuses and exploitation, was one of the first attempts at a local, government-funded social safety net in the United States.

Richmond: The modest scale of the mushrooms rings is an evocative representation of the residents' humble return to the earth. We typically conceptualize cemeteries as a series of discrete plots, but *Fruiting Bodies* reframes the space as more relational, interdependent, and, without getting too morbid, thriving. You've since done several projects involving mushrooms. What initially piqued your interest in this subject?

Cox-Richard: I foraged with my Uncle Bobby for years, and my interest and knowledge about mushrooms have slowly, steadily deepened over the past decade.

Recognizing mushrooms feels like magic, and it demands a shift in perspective. Once the pattern of a particular mushroom — the shape, color, tree affiliation — is legible, it can become visible at a distance, sometimes even while driving at 45 mph. I've made a lot of U-turns for mushrooms. Other times, those patterns are difficult to tune into, like when I know black trumpet mushrooms are close by because I can smell them and feel them, but they aren't revealing themselves to me. But then I walk uphill instead of down, stand in the creek bed, or wait for the sun to shift behind a cloud. I often find black trumpets when I'm crouching down to take a closer look at something else. If I see one, then hundreds become visible. We give lip service to seeing things from a different perspective without physically doing it. Mushroom foraging, getting low, has informed a lot of my work.

Richmond: On that note, let's discuss *Cistern* (2016), a cast concrete sculpture based on the five-gallon buckets used for mushroom cultivation. Rather than looking down, for this work you have us looking up, specifically by stacking the elements on adjustable jack stands from floor to ceiling, forming a "triumphal" column.

Cox-Richard: This is a common way to grow oyster mushrooms if you're somewhere in between an amateur and a professional: get several five-gallon buckets, drill holes in the sides, fill with sawdust, inoculate, and stack to save space. When I first saw this method, I was struck by

how fantastical it looks — clusters of mushrooms bursting out of reused plastic buckets. From that, I imagined a new order or style for columns. It's not just mycelia that interest me, but mycologists, and specifically, their faith in mushrooms' power. For example, mycologist Paul Stamets recognizes the disastrous condition of the environment and seems genuinely hopeful that the damage can be mitigated, by mushrooms of course. A triumphal column dedicated to mycologists' hopes would acknowledge these relationships, not just stand for its own celebration, so *Cistern* extends to the ceiling to offer its support.

Richmond: I like how you intentionally bring disparate histories of making into conversation with one another. The people, things, and labor of DIY mushroom cultivation provide a quotidian alternative to both the heroic scale and subject matter of the triumphal column. It challenges our expectations for what and how a monument "commemorates."

Cox-Richard: There's also something queer in the modularity of *Cistern*. You can crank down the jack stands, unstack the buckets, move them around, add another bucket for a taller space: it's flexible. But it's also a monument that can be dismantled and not ruined in the process. So, you can unmake it without destroying it.

Richmond: *Cistern*'s queerness may not be immediately apparent to viewers insofar as it isn't iconographical. But I would agree that there's something queer in the ability to arrange its modular parts and its relationship to the history of sculptural commemoration. It presents what Sara Ahmed might call a queer orientation to that past, one that doesn't reject so much as redirect its path.[2] There's a similar reorientation structuring *Wattle and Daub*, a work you produced alongside *Cistern*. It consisted of plaster casts of woven baskets that you recessed directly into the gallery walls. You inserted them both low to the floor and close to the ceiling in a way that undid their conventional function. I'm intrigued by how the casts' placement exploited the structural similarities between

2. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

woven baskets and the lattice of wattle and daub construction. Can you talk about how you conceptualized this installation?

Cox-Richard: I like how baskets' woven structures consist of fibers that are alternately inside and outside, producing a surface that is, literally, both interior and exterior. I wanted to exploit and expand on this structural logic. By embedding the basket casts in the walls, which I also skim-coated with plaster, I was interested in how they could claim space differently. When recessed, a basket that can be held in two hands is no longer a discrete object. Does the basket then stop at the edge of the wall or does it become integral to the building's framework? The baskets' concave forms remain accessible, yet they are also all surface, refusing to function as containers or even usable wall niches. Simultaneously, the gallery walls no longer act as neutral spaces of support or display. I also embedded baskets in the gallery's large front desk to call attention to that space as a site of underappreciated labor, which too often recedes into the background of the gallery's operations. The desk itself became a plinth to navigate.

Richmond: There's a suggestion of growth happening in *Wattle and Daub*.

Cox-Richard: Yes! I envisioned the baskets as a system that had infiltrated the building, as if the architecture had been inoculated and the fruiting bodies manifested as baskets. The individual parts are modest in size, but we can imagine that they are part of a system so expansive that the edges aren't discernable.

Richmond: You draw out compelling morphological relationships between eclectic artifacts, concepts, and natural phenomena that prompt us to make associations that might otherwise be unintelligible. There's a rejection of linearity to this approach that rubs against conventional (and often hierarchical) forms of knowledge production.

Maybe this is a good place to discuss work you've started doing with kudzu vines. You sought out and participated in a workshop with Nancy Basket, a Cherokee weaver based in South Carolina, who inspired you to

think about this plant as something other than a destructive, invasive species.[3] How did she shift your perceptions?

Cox-Richard: Nancy has a very tender relationship to kudzu, and it shows in her weavings, which feel like a conversation with the material. I learned so much from her in just one day and feel fortunate to have stayed in touch. She teaches workshops around the country and said that on occasion, people ask her not to bring kudzu to use as material for basket-making. Remarking on how misunderstood kudzu is, I remember her saying, "Look, it's not Jesus. It can't resurrect!" The xenophobia implicit in framing kudzu as a foreign contagion is comparable to calling the novel coronavirus the "China flu." Maybe non-Indigenous Americans should take more care in our language around "invasive species," too. Kudzu's growth rate of up to a foot a day is often described in terms of some aggressive takeover. By contrast, Nancy regards the vine's new growth in terms of "waving hello" and "reaching out for a friend" to connect.

It would take years for me to develop the facility and relationship with kudzu that Nancy has. I'm still thinking through how I'm working with it. I started making some funnel forms and then began using tomato cages as armatures, initially because I was quarantining and I had some handy, but I like the forms and the ridiculousness of training kudzu on a trellis. 2020 has certainly taught me something about letting go of carefully crafted plans and attempts to control.

Richmond: The materials you use, whether concrete, plaster, or kudzu, are always very carefully considered, and not just formally. You want to understand and engage with the various histories of a material's use and value.

Cox-Richard: Yes, materials come with their own cultural baggage and previous lives. Sometimes I approach this research in more traditional ways. Still, in thinking about ideas of material agency, I was eager to learn from Nancy and her relationship to plant fibers as well as specific weave patterns and techniques she has developed.

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3. See Nancy Basket's website, 2012, http://nancybasket.com.

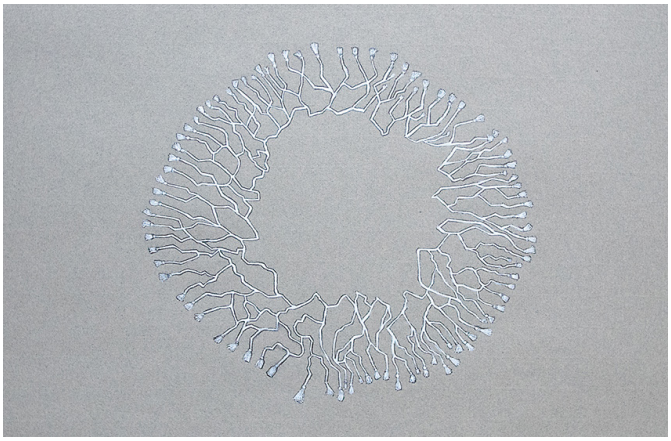
View toward Robert E. Lee Monument,
Richmond, Virginia, September 1, 2020.

BELOW
Lily Cox-Richard, *Fruiting Bodies*, 2011. Cast aqua resin; height: approximately 5 inches; diameter: approximately 30 feet. Installation view, The Great Poor Farm Experiment, Manawa, Wisconsin, 2011.

OPPOSITE *Fruiting Bodies*, detail.

CENTER
Cistern 1, detail.

OPPOSITE
Lily Cox-Richard,
Cistern 1, 2016. Polymer concrete,
epoxy putty, polystyrene, jacks;
109 × 15 × 15 inches.



TOP
Lily Cox-Richard,
Wattle and Daub: desk, 2016.
Gypsum cement; 42 × 96 × 45 inches.

CENTER *Wattle and Daub*, detail.

BOTTOM
Lily Cox-Richard,
drawing for mycelium rope splice,
2010. 25 ½ × 19 ¾ inches.

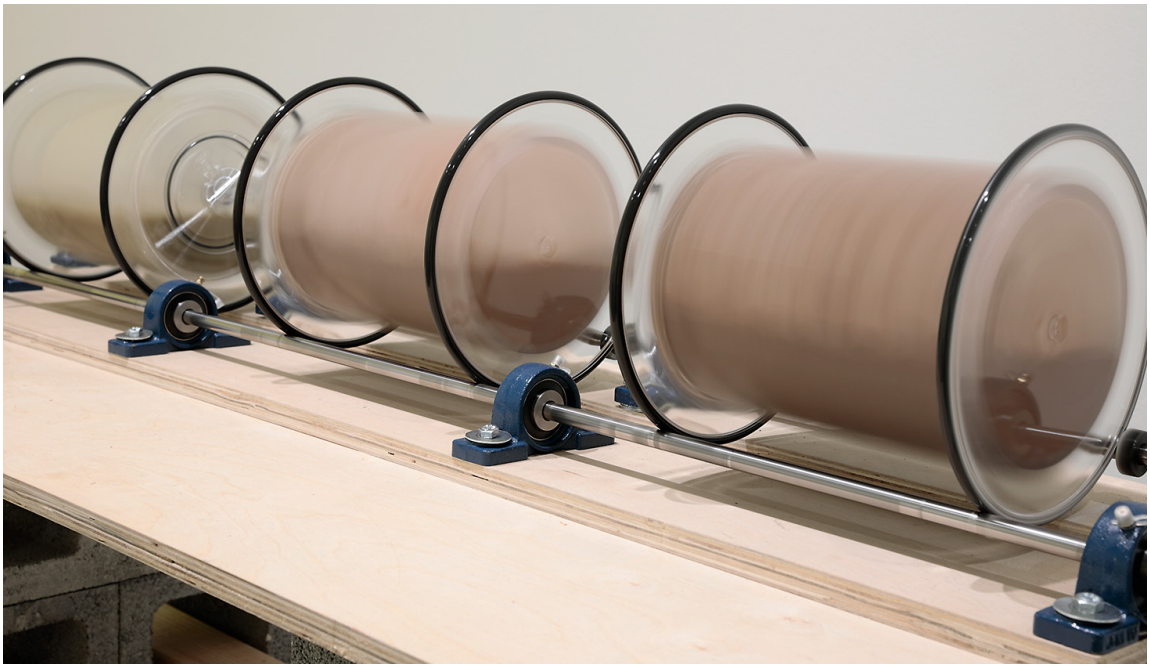
CENTER
Lily Cox-Richard,
The Stand
(Possessing Powers),
2010–14.
Plaster, dimensions variable.
Installed at the
Hudson River Museum, 2014;
with Hiram Powers,
Eve Disconsolate, 1871, marble, 77 × 20 inches.

FOLLOWING PAGE
View of the James River from the south side
of Belle Island, Richmond, Virginia, 2019.
Photograph by Cox-Richard.

PREVIOUS PAGE
View of the riprap along the James River and Mayo Bridge, Richmond, Virginia. Photograph by Cox-Richard.

ABOVE
Library of Radical Returns (Lily Cox-Richard and Michael Jevon Demps), installation view of *walking with*, 2019. Visual Arts Center of Richmond. Photograph by David Hale.

OPPOSITE
Library of Radical Returns (Lily Cox-Richard and Michael Jevon Demps), *Rapids*, 2019. River water, silt, grit, riprap, bits of hand-pressed local clay, motors, hardware, acrylic barrels. Photograph by David Hale.



Stones polished in *Rapids*. Photograph by Cox-Richard.

ABOVE
Library of Radical Returns
(Lily Cox-Richard and Michael Jevon Demps),
Reishi mushrooms and text (intention for
tinctures), 2020. Photograph by Cox-Richard.

OPPOSITE
Library of Radical Returns, details.

The reishi and lions mane mushrooms in these tin
Library of Radical Returns dug clay. In the holler
in Chimborazo Park in the late 19th Century.

For an oak, pin oaks are fast growing, and s
This tree was a sapling when Richmond's electric
nourished by dense clay soil that remembers mo
This clay is old as dirt. It remembers the natio
William Mayo took the rock that marked Chief Po
This clay was the foundation of barracks turned
administered by a freedman's bureau with no re

Richmond hadn't been burdened by such concern fo
who approached by water – a pin oak's lifetime befo
shackled at the docks below.

Imagine what these trees have witnessed.

Year after year, the shad run in the spring, folks
above them leafing out, continued to grow.
from the inside.

When pin oaks were selected to line the crest, the park
dead by now. Pin oaks rarely live longer than 12
they might live twice as long? Was a future that e

Or, did other wisdom intervene

Lily Cox-Richard in her studio,
Richmond, Virginia, September 2020.

ALL IMAGES
are courtesy of Lily Cox-Richard.
Unless otherwise noted,
photography is by Sharad Patel.

Richmond: Your work has many parallels with feminist scholarship on human-nonhuman collaborations. In particular, you introduced me to Anna Tsing's remarkable ethnographic work on the matsutake mushroom. She describes her approach as a form of "multispecies storytelling" and a process of "thinking with" mushrooms.[4] I feel you're doing something comparable in your practice.

Cox-Richard: Wow, thank you! Yes, in "Strathern beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore," Tsing writes: "The radical potential of anthropology has always been this: other worlds are possible."[5] It's why so many of us have been reaching for Octavia Butler since the 2016 presidential election. It feels important that there are fields of knowledge that have been "thinking with" long before this corner of academia, from Black speculative fiction to Indigenous herbalism. I think radical potential exists in any creative mode and needs to be taken up with urgency. In *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown calls science fiction "the medicine of possibility," and "a way to practice the future together."[6] I think that's also why the moment when seeing one black trumpet mushroom makes hundreds of them visible is illuminating: it poses the question, what else is already here, and how can I shift my vantage to be able to see it? In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing contends that the forms, categories, and goals of research cannot be predetermined; we can't rely on the tools we already have. In order to know or build or even glimpse these other possible worlds, our methods and practices must be developed *with* the work and formed *through* interdisciplinary and interspecies collaborations.[7] In a similar vein, brown posits biomimicry as a model for social justice movements: looking strategically at natural growth and communication systems, like those of dandelions or starlings, for solutions to emulate.

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4. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), x, 38.
5. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Strathern beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore," *Theory, Culture and Society* 31, no. 2–3 (2014): 225.
6. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 37, 19.
7. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, ix.

I have drawings that I made around the time I conceived of *Fruiting Bodies*, imagining a mycelial network made of spliced rope. I'm revisiting that idea and thinking about how it might make sense as a net that has no center, with the ends of the net-worked rope tied into tassels.

Richmond: Typically, a net without a center would be considered useless, its frayed structure failing to hold together. The mycelial network, however, allows you to imagine a different structuring principle and functionality. What might a net-without-a-center enable differently?

Cox-Richard: I've been thinking a lot about nets lately. I'm teaching a graduate studio art seminar this fall semester called *Nets that Work*, based on a phrase used by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond and in anti-racist organizing to think about bringing people together in order to shift power.[8] Not having a center, "big idea," or hub from which power emanates makes us more accountable to each other. Spliced rope is stronger than knotted rope. Instead of being bound together, it's a recognition of the ways in which we are interwoven. My hope for a net-without-a-center is that it could *hold* and not *trap*.

Richmond: That's a great description. Your conception of the net-without-a-center brings to mind Tsing's "latent commons," her term for collective actions that arise spontaneously, nimbly, and without prescriptive agendas or centralized authority.[9] This brings us back to the circumstances of this past summer. Both the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests, which have amplified the gap between the health and safety of some bodies over others, galvanized different kinds of "latent commons" across the United States. You've been engaged with mutual aid projects behind the scenes — tell us about that.

Cox-Richard: Yes, I wanted very badly to be on the front lines, to use my white body as shield, but I wasn't in a position to risk the COVID exposure that might come with arrest. It became a critical moment to reflect and figure out how to be active in solidarity and support. I felt

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8. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2018, https://www.pisab.org.
9. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 254–55.

particularly outraged by the indiscriminate use of tear-gas on protesters during a pandemic that causes respiratory tract infections and damages peoples' lungs. Before the pandemic, I started making teas and tinctures from medicinal mushrooms that I was foraging as well as researching their use to treat anxiety and depression. Several of the medicinal mushroom tinctures have antiviral properties and strengthen immune systems. So, I got in touch with local street medics to ask if they would be useful. From there, I got involved with preparing meals for front-line activists.

Richmond: An engagement with alternative systems of care and maintenance runs through your practice, but it's a theme that pointedly took shape in your recent collaborative project, the Library of Radical Returns. It was accompanied by the exhibition *walking with*, which opened in November 2019 at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. Your collaboration is rooted in the city's racial and colonial history.

Cox-Richard: The organizing and uprising happening in Richmond right now is focused and inspired — that's what should have the attention. But, yes, some of these issues are connected to my practice, especially the Library of Radical Returns (LoRR), a collaboration that Michael Jevon Demps and I formed last year. Michael moved to Richmond in 2018, about a year after I returned. Our collaboration began as daily walks, conversations, and meditations along the river we call the James, but which is also known as the Monacan and the Powhatan as it flows through the lands of the Pamunkey tribe. The city has shaped the river just as the river was central to the powerful Native American Nations and tribal communities it was stolen from. The river is why Richmond exists as a city, and it one of the first birthplaces of US Black culture. As a Virginia-born white woman and a Black man who had just relocated there, we felt an immediate connection to the place. We felt pulled to understand these histories and, as artists, this also became a material exploration. We've made rubbings on the banks, collected materials, and activated residues.

In our walks and our work, Michael and I were "walking with" ancestors while being mindful as ancestors of future generations. The river bears traces of histories that have been intentionally submerged. There is one spot in particular where several things converge: river pathways, the Richmond Slave Trail, a massive flood wall, I-95, and a

wastewater management plant. Here, the riverbanks are fortified by riprap, or large chunks of mined local rock, their presence a reminder of how Richmond's infrastructure aligns with the labor of colonization and slavery. At the same time, Michael and I noticed that the rock contains unakite and quartz, which are considered potent healing minerals. We wanted to hold these two narratives together, to think about the recuperative potential of the rock while remaining critical of its associations with enforced labor and violence. We created a rock tumbler sculpture, called *Rapids*, which we envision as a time machine that accelerates the river's power to shape stone. Only six months later, the idea of "accelerated turmoil" that we were playing with has an intensity I couldn't have imagined then.

Richmond: Prior to the exhibition, you and Michael also devised some participatory studio events for local communities, correct?

Cox-Richard: Yes, for one project, we invited participants to knead a piece of local clay in their hands while I shared an intention and Michael mixed sounds recorded from the river. The clay bits then went into the rock tumblers which, like hundreds of hands, smoothed the rocks and produced silt that we used to make prints and drawings. While it had been part of both our practices beforehand, this was the first time I had shared a written meditation publicly. It became an important element of this project as a way to share time and space in community, to tell the histories we were learning and prompt future imaginings.

Richmond: Were mushrooms a part of LoRR?

Cox-Richard: Yes! Near where we dug up clay for *Rapids*, I found reishi and other medicinal mushrooms, from which we made several batches of tinctures. While *walking with* was on view, they steeped in a dark corner of the gallery. The exhibition closed with a series of meditations and activations as well as an invitation for visitors to take what they needed, including materials, objects, and the tinctures. Michael and I conceived of LoRR as an exploration of shared energy, of lending without concern for eventual return, and trust that the energy sent out into the world will compound and create returns greater than any actual object being brought back.

We've continued to make tinctures and teas with locally foraged herbs and plants we grow, and we have been using the studio for various mutual aid efforts. The meditation for the LoRR tinctures prompted my thinking about how medicinal plants grow where and when they are needed. This summer, mugwort, an herb to work with for rest and dreaming, started popping up in gardens and parks just as people's energy felt depleted and anxieties were high. Most recently, this came home for me when I was bitten by a brown recluse spider. I learned that broadleaf plantain, the recommended plant medicine, was already growing in my yard. These relationships of proximity keep surprising me. Of course, looking for the cure in the vicinity of the cause is an approach to healing that spans many cultures and traditions.

Richmond: Does it matter to you whether this work is understood as "art"?

Cox-Richard: If I start thinking about how something works or doesn't work *as art*, it's an avalanche of other concerns and anxieties. It's not that it's not art, I just don't find it particularly useful to get entangled in that question because what feels important is: Does it help an exhausted organizer get rest? Does it boost a protester's immune system? If something can be happening in my studio that staves off burn-out, then that's what I want to do.

Richmond: I agree that it's not helpful to parse these distinctions. Everything that you're doing becomes intelligible as part of your practice. Many contemporary artists who make art and participate in mutual aid efforts regard them as intertwined, each drawing meaning from the other. Are these connections informing your preparations for the MASS MoCA show?

Cox-Richard: I've been working on a giant whisk broom made with materials salvaged from industry and waste streams. I'm focusing on ideas of stewardship and engaging Shaker craft and labor histories. There is so much emotional and physical healing to do, nationally, and this will continue to be hard on hearts and bodies. I want to be careful not to romanticize it, but I am interested in spiritual relationships to labor and thinking through ideas of vocation.

Richmond: Right, the whisk broom follows on your previous engagement with DIY labor such as mushroom cultivation and cottage industries like weaving and basketry, however, now you're placing more emphasis on the theme of healing.

Cox-Richard: Susan, I'm very aware that our conversations took place before the presidential election got into full swing. We are bracing for a lot more to happen before 2020 is over. COVID continues to spread, new footage of racist policing is shared daily, protesters are being murdered, and we are in a record-breaking hurricane season that hasn't even peaked yet.

I also keep thinking about fire. This year began with Australia burning and now California is on fire. The flames of flash-bangs and fires burned in protest. I'm also thinking about fires that flicker in votive candles at vigils. The fires that I would like to gather around with friends and process our week. Fires of co-conspirators, of hope, rage, and comfort. Quarantine times make gathering difficult, and I've been thinking about ways to do community across space. Coming back to the power of residue, I've been making fire pits to send to friends. I imagine that these big bowls in which fires have burned will then come back to me charged and charred to become part of something else. March 2022 feels very far away right now. Everything I'm making that's not grounded in the present feels speculative, and I guess I'm embracing that: functional objects to be used by others, not knowing how the energy they absorb will manifest in the generation of yet-to-be sculpture.

Contributors' dedication

Our conversation is dedicated to local and national Black Lives Matter networks, Southerners on New Ground (SONG), Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Richmond (MAD RVA), FEED Durham, and people working to ensure that the United States emerges from COVID with as many lives intact as possible. Thank you for insisting that we not return to the previous norms and for modeling possibilities for a more just world.